

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**

8
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Story
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Once Oboro was within arm's reach of us, he pulled a piece of paper out of his front pocket and handed it to Gold, who stood out the most in our group.

"We gladly accept it."

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My brief reunion with Oboro, which had been three years in the making, ended with me watching him escort Yotsuha out of my sight through my mask.



My real name is Light.
And if that really is how you feel,
then you have my word that you will get
the most perfect revenge on those who
betrayed you, Holy Princess Yotsuha.



“Oboro! You can’t escape us!”

All three of me yelled the exact same line, each of us wielding our own Prometheus broadsword.

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Prologue

The Onifolk Archipelago was the name given to a cluster of islands that lay west of the mainland, a good one-day trip away from where the majority of the other races lived. The islands had no dungeons or ancient relics, meaning adventurers rarely visited the nation, while their main industries were fishing and mining for precious metals, as well as exporting handicrafts, silk work, and porcelain. But since nothing about the Onifolk Archipelago really stood out, members of the other races didn't make a habit of traveling there. Likewise, the onifolk rarely ventured to the mainland, since they largely preferred to focus on perfecting their crafts, whatever those might be. In other words, the Onifolk Archipelago was an insular, isolated nation.

A castle in the capital on the main island was home to the Holy Princess of the onis, who was considered to be the highest-ranking person in the nation, though the position was strictly ceremonial and came with no authority to govern. At this particular moment in time, the young princess named Yotsuha was weeping in her bedroom, which was located in the far reaches of the castle.

"I don't want to die, I don't want to die, I don't want to die," Yotsuha sniffled. "I don't want to be a sacrifice. Why are they making me go through this? Please save me, mother."

Whenever Yotsuha appeared in public, she would wear traditional priestess garb, complete with an outer robe known as a chihaya. But seated as she was on a futon mattress that had been laid across a floor lined with tatami mats, she wore only a simple night-robe. Yotsuha's silvery hair would usually feature two bunches on either side of her head during the day, but as it was nighttime, her hair was fully down and unadorned. As was common for onis, two horns sprouted from her forehead, and while Yotsuha was known throughout the land for her magnificent beauty, the streams of tears contorted her angelic face into an anguished mess. Yotsuha did her best to choke back her emotions, but her wailing eventually woke up her younger sister, Ayame, who had been asleep on the futon next to her.

“Sister?” Ayame mumbled sleepily. She wore her hair in a short bob that was usually tied into a ponytail at the back, but much like her sister, Ayame slept in a simple night-robe with her hair down. Although the bedroom was pitch-black, she immediately realized Yotsuha was in tears.

“Dear sister, are you crying?” Ayame asked, rubbing her own eyes. “Are you hurt?”

“Sorry, Ayame. I didn’t mean to wake you,” Yotsuha uttered, busily wiping away her tears. “I just had a scary dream, that’s all.” Yotsuha flashed her sister a winning smile, even though inside, she was still shuddering. She was determined to shield her innocent sister from the hellish truth about their lives.

Ayame stopped rubbing the sleep out of her eyes and leaned over to hug her sister with a smile on her face. “I’ll sleep with you, dear sister. I’ll keep those bad dreams away.”

“Thank you, Ayame,” Yotsuha said, petting her sister’s head. “You’re very sweet.”

Ayame hummed as she wriggled up against Yotsuha’s abdomen in a show of sisterly love. She then crawled into her sister’s bedding so they could sleep together as promised.

“I love you, dear sister...” Ayame murmured as she drifted off back to sleep. “I’ll keep you safe...”

Yotsuha watched on silently as her little sister slumbered in her arms. She gave Ayame a squeeze, though softly enough not to wake her, and made a silent oath.

I won’t let anything happen to you, Ayame, Yotsuha vowed. I won’t let you become a sacrifice! I’ve made sure that Shimobashira and Oboro will help us, and what’s more, the Great Witch of the Tower has also promised to help us. Everything will be just fine.

The glimmer of hope provided by the Wicked Witch of the Tower helped to bring Yotsuha back from the brink of total despair.



The warmth emanating from her beloved sister, Ayame—her only blood relative in this world—soon put Yotsuha to sleep, the witch’s promise giving her enough peace of mind to gently doze off. Little did she know that Oboro, one of Light’s mortal enemies but someone who she trusted, was carrying out a task behind her back.



On the same night and at the same hour, Oboro was leading a group of human children to the tallest mountain on the main island. They were all slaves that Oboro had bought with his own money, and none could escape as they had been strung together like prayer beads, ropes wrapped tightly around their wrists. It was usually forbidden to set foot on the mountain, and sentries were posted at the base of it to enforce this law, but Oboro greeted them with a handful of money like he always did, and he and his child slaves were allowed to pass by the sentry post unbothered.

After they had been hiking for a while, Oboro and the slaves crested the craterlike summit, then headed for the large bog contained within. Because it was the dead of night, the bog looked especially spooky, and while the outer slopes of the mountain had been covered with vegetation, not a single blade of grass grew in this hollowed-out cavity at the very top of the mountain. The bog itself was exceptionally murky to the point that it was impossible to glimpse anything beyond a meter below the surface, even at noon on a clear day. The water gave off a stench of rancid blood, and the putrid odor hung in the air like a thick miasma.

Ordinary onifolk avoided this bog, believing its depths to be bottomless and that anyone caught in it would be doomed to sink into the morass with no hope of being rescued. Oboro was an exception, however. He drew his sword—a curved, single-edged oni island blade—and turned to the children he had led up here by a rope in his other hand. The child slaves were exhausted from the nighttime hike up the mountain, but when they saw the blade, they instantly found enough energy to flinch, visualizing what Oboro was planning to do to them.

“Somebody help!” one kid yelled out. “Mommy! Daddy!”

“Stay away from me!” cried another.

“I-I don’t care what you do to me,” a girl pleaded. “Just please spare my baby sister!”

“Big sis!” the younger girl wailed.

The children continued to cry and yell out the names of as many family members as they could think of, but Oboro’s expression was flintlike as their desperate screams washed over him, and he silently got down to work. He lacerated the legs and abdomens of the children, making sure that the wounds wouldn’t be fatal and that he didn’t nick the ropes in the process. And in fact, Oboro performed this maneuver so flawlessly, it suggested he had carved up children’s bodies in this manner many times before.

“Ow, you’re hurting me! Stoppit!” yelled a child.

“Help!” screamed another.

“No! I don’t wanna die!” a third kid shrieked.

Eventually, every child that was tied to the rope was too injured to remain standing, and as one, they collapsed into sitting positions at the edge of the bog. Once Oboro was satisfied, he shook the blood off his sword with a swift swing in a random direction, then heaved on the rope with his left hand and tossed all of the injured children into the fetid bog. Because his power level had surpassed 500 by this point in time, Oboro possessed more than enough arm strength to perform this feat.

The children screamed as they arced through the air, then landed in a part of the bog that was too far from the safety of the edge. The kids instinctively wriggled around in a desperate attempt to stop themselves from drowning, but due to their wounds, all their thrashing about succeeded in doing was to make them bleed out faster, tinting the water a carmine hue. Soon, their movements grew weaker and quieter due to their blood loss, then out of the blue, the children shrieked again in unison. Just when they’d thought they were on the verge of drowning, a giant creature lurking in the bog had swum up to the surface with its jaws wide to devour its fresh victims in one bite. Then, once the creature had finished gobbling the kids up whole, it returned just as quickly to the depths. A few seconds later, large ripples surged outward from the center

of the bog, much like what would happen if a meteor were to plunge into the water, but once the waves had lapped up against the edge, the bog fell silent again, its surface as still as a mirror once more.

“This should get me ever closer to attaining absolute power,” Oboro murmured to himself, finally showing a modicum of emotion after witnessing that whole scene. He allowed himself the kind of smile that belonged to someone who had spent months—perhaps even years—attentively raising a plant or a farm animal. But at the same time, the smile was dark, unsettling, and demonically grotesque.

Chapter 1: The Bodyguard Quest

A little while back, the Beastfolk Federation had put together an army consisting of human slaves alongside free humans they had illegally kidnapped just so they could wage war on the Wicked Witch of the Tower, aka Ellie, my deputy. I had been so thoroughly disgusted with their evil plot, I'd felt the urge to completely wipe out the beastmen army, and to do that, I got Ellie to use the mythical-class weapon known as the Walled-In World to trap the beastmen warriors in this souped-up containment field that none of the soldiers who had shown up for battle could escape from. I believed my team and I would then slaughter the beastfolk ourselves, but as chance would have it, their chieftains activated a pair of magical items that created rampaging vampire slimes that ended up sucking the blood out of all two thousand of the beastmen warriors who had been trapped inside the Walled-In World.

But although the beastfolk had basically killed themselves, everyone else around the world who heard about the massacre blamed the Wicked Witch for it, and the fact that the witch had managed to rescue every single human forced into military slavery along with all the hostages that were taken certainly didn't help her case either. This incident prompted the Demonkin Nation to call for an emergency summit to be held at the Principality of the Nine to address the threat posed by the Wicked Witch, and while the next summit wasn't supposed to be held for another few years, the other eight nations agreed to send their leaders to the snap gathering.

Princess Lilith of the Human Kingdom was scheduled to attend the summit too, and she had asked me to accompany her there as her personal bodyguard. She said it would be a rare and valuable opportunity for me to see the leaders of the Demonkin Nation and the Dragonute Empire in person, as well as members of their inner circle. Given how helpful this would undoubtedly be in formulating future plans, I readily accepted Lilith's offer.

There was one slight wrinkle, however: anyone assigned to provide security for a royal or high-ranking noble had to be A-rank, meaning my party—the Black

Fools—would need to complete a high-profile quest of sufficient importance before I could accompany Lilith to the summit. And that brings us up to the present day, where you would find my party and I escorting the Holy Princess of the Onifolk Archipelago. Right in the middle of the job, however, our carriage encountered an army of monsters.

“Sword Monkeys, Level 150?” I muttered after activating an SR Appraisal card. Whoever named these monsters had been bang on the money, since the simians had furry, bony blades jutting out of them where their hands should have been. According to the Appraisal, these hand-blades were sharper than ordinary swords, and the two-meter-tall monkeys usually attacked in troops. Sword Monkeys generally hid themselves away deep inside forests, rarely if ever being spotted on highways, but I figured we must just have been unfortunate enough to come across a troop that had wandered off course, and as our rotten luck would have it, these monsters viewed us as their next prey, screeching loudly as they attacked us.

“Sorry, guys,” I said to the Sword Monkeys. “But if you’re gonna attack us, that means I gotta actually act like a bodyguard.”

The Sword Monkeys poured out of the woods and surrounded my party’s carriage in the vanguard, cutting off all possible escape routes. Gold in the driver’s seat let go of the reins and hopped down to the ground, while I replaced him in his seat in order to engage the monkeys. I was disguised as Dark, a mage known for his ranged attacks, so it would appear odd if I’d attempted to take these Sword Monkeys on in hand-to-hand combat. I pulled on the reins to calm the horse before unleashing my attack magic.

“Windcutter!” I yelled, releasing thirty R Windcutter cards at the monkeys, who were rushing toward me, shrieking their lungs out.

The R Windcutter was a fairly weak magical attack, meaning one card wouldn’t be enough to slay a Sword Monkey, so to make sure I got the kills, I released thirty cards at once to make mincemeat of their abdomens. I’d purposely chosen the Windcutter cards because I didn’t want to scare the horse and risk it injuring itself by using a more powerful card. Sure, I could easily have healed the horse with another one of my gacha cards in such a situation, but it was better to just avoid suffering the injuries in the first place. Also, I went on

quests disguised as Dark to gather intelligence, and if I were to cut loose with my powers, I'd end up attracting too much unwanted attention. After all, I was here to build up my reputation, not to frighten people, so I hid my true power.

All done on my end, I thought. *I wonder how Gold and Nemumu are doing*. I glanced across at my two allies to see how they were faring on either side of the carriage. Of course, ideally, I should have stayed on the lookout for more monkeys that might attack me, but I was curious and it wasn't like I was completely letting my guard down, because I would have sensed if there was any threat making its way toward me. To my right, Gold was in the middle of killing a bunch of Sword Monkeys by bashing them with his shield, while he ran another few through with his sword.

"These rotters must realize by now that they stand no chance of besting us, yet they seem unwilling to give up, what?" Gold remarked. "They continue to needlessly attack us instead of the more sensible option of retreating. What their strategy might be, I cannot fathom."

Gold's right, I mused. *Who'd stick around after seeing their comrades get wasted so easily?* Sure, these monkeys were aggressively hostile monsters, not regular animals, but I couldn't help wondering exactly *why* they were so dead set on attacking us.

To my left, Nemumu was butchering just as many Sword Monkeys as Gold, though the ones still standing all continued to screech their heads off at her.

"Shut up, filthy apes!" Nemumu yelled, her brow furrowed with displeasure. "Either stop all that noise or drop dead!"

Nemumu was facing an untold number of monkeys, but she evaded each and every one of them like an elegant dancer, using her two daggers to slice off their heads as they leaped ineffectually past her. Despite the large quantities of blood spurting all around her, she was agile enough to keep even a single drop from landing on her, and even though she was totally surrounded by Sword Monkeys, Nemumu was fully in control of the battle. So much so, in fact, that she was even aware of what the four male oni escorts were doing behind us. As one might expect, the foursome in question had surrounded the Holy Princess's carriage to protect their charge, but all four were also ogling Nemumu as she

fought the monkeys. Nemumu found the monkeys loud and annoying, but she was particularly incensed by how the onis kept ogling her chest, thighs, and platinum-blond hair that swayed with her every movement.

I get that it's hard to take your eyes off Nemumu when she's battling, since they've probably never seen anyone as beautiful as her up here on the surface world, I thought. But what kind of bodyguard allows themselves to get that distracted?

Because the oni escorts' attention was firmly glued to Nemumu, they failed to notice that a bunch of Sword Monkeys were sneaking up on the carriage they were supposed to be protecting: the one containing the Holy Princess. In fact, I was willing to bet that the monkeys had concentrated their assault on my party's carriage up front in order to create a distraction so that this separate group could attack the rear carriage.

If that is what they're up to, these monkeys are pretty clever, I reflected. Generally speaking, the higher the power level, the more intelligent the monster, but as the Sword Monkeys were only Level 150, they normally shouldn't be capable of this level of shrewdness.

While these thoughts raced through my mind, I whipped out another magical attack. "Earth Arrows!"

I shot a bunch of Earth Arrows up into the sky from where I was on the carriage driver's seat, and because they packed more mass than the regular variety, the arrows arced down quickly and scored direct hits on the heads of the Sword Monkeys as if someone had pulled the arrows toward them on a thread. Due to multiple Earth Arrows hitting each monkey, their skulls were quickly ripped apart like overripe fruit, killing the monkeys on the spot.

The oni bodyguards finally noticed that Sword Monkeys had been sneaking up on the carriage they were supposed to be safeguarding and got spooked. While it was true that my party had signed up to protect the other bodyguards in addition to the Holy Princess, the total uselessness of these oni escorts made me sigh despite myself.

The Sword Monkeys attacking the Holy Princess's carriage appeared to have been the last of the horde as I couldn't sense any more of the monsters in the

vicinity, and our charge must have also realized that it was all clear, because I saw an oni girl—the Holy Princess, Yotsuha—step down from the rear carriage with the help of her handmaiden.

“Why the heck would such dangerous monkeys show up on *this* highway? I always take this route home, yet I’ve never seen them here until now,” Yotsuha noted. “So you guys are the Black Fools? Did I get that right? It must be your bad luck that’s rubbed off on us.”

Yotsuha, the leader of the Onifolk Archipelago, had decided to thank my party for defeating the Sword Monkeys by making fun of us. She had silvery-blond locks that reached way down her back, with two bunches tied up on either side of her head. She was rather short in stature, and even with two horns growing out of her forehead, she was pretty. But because she was the kind of girl who would make fun of people who had just saved her, my impression of her was that she was *extremely* haughty. Plus, her clothes weren’t the type you’d usually see on the mainland. She wore a short but elaborate-looking robe with long sleeves, and poking out underneath it was something that looked like a scarlet pleated skirt.

“Still, I’ll admit that you guys did pretty well. For humans, anyway,” Yotsuha continued. “Though you’re not better than my personal bodyguards.”

“Your Holiness, we beg that you do not make these snide comparisons between us and the human adventurers,” one of the oni escorts piped up.

“Indeed, you mustn’t,” another escort agreed. “However accurate your words may be, they could take offense to your statement, and as Holy Princess, you must do everything in your power to maintain your dignity and grace.”

While it might have sounded as if the oni bodyguards were defending us, they were in fact belittling us every bit as much as Yotsuha had. This all sprang from the general prejudice the other races held for humans, so I wasn’t so much incensed at the offhanded mockery as I was sadly frustrated by it. The same thoughts were also running through the heads of Gold and Nemumu.

“I would jolly well keep my gob shut if I were the one who had neglected my duties because I was too infatuated with this semideveloped waif,” Gold muttered.

“Hey! Who are you calling a ‘semideveloped waif’?!” Nemumu sputtered in similarly hushed tones. “And I was with you right up until that last part!”

Thankfully, the onifolk didn’t overhear Gold and Nemumu’s back-and-forth, and after the chiding from her bodyguards, Yotsuha stuck out her tongue in a playful manner.

“Oh, did that sound mean?” she said. “Well, sorry if I hurt your feelings. Didn’t mean to make you feel bad.”

I paused briefly. “No, we’re not really bothered by it. Anyway, we’ll start moving again once we’ve cleared these bodies out of the way.”

I quickly shuffled off to dispose of the dead Sword Monkeys. Even though the materials contained in the hand-blades would fetch a pretty decent price at market, removing each blade would have taken up too much of our time, so my team and I placed the monkey corpses in one big pile so I could burn them to ash with some random spell. *Finishing up this quest sooner rather than later will be much better for my mental health than earning a measly bit of extra pocket change*, I told myself.

Once I was done incinerating the bodies, everyone hopped back on their respective carriages and we departed once more for the Dwarf Kingdom port city. Our carriage remained up front, while the Holy Princess rode in the rear carriage. Gold was the one driving our carriage, and Nemumu and I sat inside. Her expression had softened a good deal from before, since she now had me all to herself in this coach, but that didn’t stop her from complaining about the oni princess.

“I don’t care if she *is* our employer, she shouldn’t have taken that attitude with you, Lord Dark!” Nemumu huffed. “Just give me the word, and I’ll manifest poison that will leave those onis suffering for three days and three nights before they keel over stone dead. I’ll leave no evidence that it was me who poisoned them, naturally.”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to pass on that option, since we won’t be able to complete our quest and get promoted to A-rank if the people we’re guarding wind up dead,” I pointed out. “But I appreciate the thought all the same, Nemumu. I’m glad you’re this angry on my behalf.”

My words seemed to leave Nemumu on cloud nine. “L-Lord Dark!” she exclaimed. Nemumu and I continued our pleasant conversation as our carriage rattled along the Dwarf Kingdom highway, and as we talked, I couldn’t help reflecting on how we came to be on this quest in the first place.



Once Mei had finished briefing me in my executive office on the bottom level of the Abyss, I took a good, hard look at what was written in the accompanying documents I was holding in my hands.

“Well, at least we now know what we’re getting into with our A-rank quest,” I said icily.

“Indeed, though it is certainly not quite what we expected...” Mei said, her expression just as grim.

Due to the Beastfolk Massacre—which was also being called the “Human Deliverance War” by the residents of the city that lay at the foot of the Great Tower—the demonkin had called an emergency summit, presenting us with an opportunity to have Princess Lilith crowned the new queen of the Human Kingdom. Lilith had invited my party to serve as her bodyguards at the summit, but only A-rank adventurers could provide security for world leaders, and even though my party, the Black Fools, had tried to secure that promotion by presenting recommendations from several nations at a Dwarf Kingdom guild, the guildmaster there had said that these official endorsements and our astounding track record were not enough to upgrade us. The unsavory appearance of yielding to the demands of certain nations was an understandable sticking point, especially if said nations were run by petty autocrats. But the guildmaster suggested a compromise: complete a quest that was worthy of getting bumped up to A-rank. Or to be more precise, complete a quest that the guild would be obligated to keep under wraps, but would still be high-profile enough to justify my party’s promotion. In other words, the quest didn’t necessarily need to be all that challenging. We could just secretly escort a high-ranking aristocrat, for example.

The guild contacted us a short while later, saying that they had found a quest that was supereasy but could still be presented as “high-profile” to any who

deigned to ask. And that quest was escorting the Holy Princess of the Onifolk Archipelago, who was due to return home from the Principality's School of Magic.

"So this princess takes time off from school several times a year to visit her homeland, huh?" I said, summarizing the report. "She already has her own set of personal bodyguards who have made this trip countless times, so my party's job is basically to follow orders and hang around as an extra layer of security. On the face of it, this quest should be a piece of cake..." My brow creased. "But who would ever have guessed that the princess knows Oboro *personally*? I mean, talk about a small world."

"Unquestionably, Master Light," Mei agreed, filling a teacup with tea and placing it in front of me on my desk. "It was completely unexpected that the employer of your next quest would have such a close connection to one of your sworn enemies."

I thanked Mei for the tea and took a sip. "It's incredible enough that I'm going to be providing security for *the* head of state of the Onifolk Archipelago, even if she *is* just a figurehead, but then on top of that, Oboro has managed to become all buddy-buddy with the princess after betraying me."

My team had conducted a background check on the Holy Princess, Yotsuha, as soon as we'd received word from the guild about the quest. This undertaking was made much easier by the fact that we had already been picking up bits and pieces on Yotsuha in the process of gathering intelligence on Oboro. But to fully explain what a Holy Princess actually was, I would need to recount the creation myth of the Onifolk Archipelago.

Long ago, an evil ogre god lived on the archipelago's main island and spent day after day chowing down on any oni it could get its hands on. This all ended when a maiden, saddened by the deaths of her kind, rallied the other onis to battle and weaken the ogre god so that it could be sealed away inside a mountain. That maiden was hailed as the first Holy Princess of the onis, and she vowed to live near that same mountain for the rest of her life in order to keep watch over the seals and make sure the ogre god would never reawaken. Other onis showed their appreciation for the actions of the newly anointed Holy Princess by becoming her servants, and before long, a social structure based on

this took root and formed the nation we knew in the present day.

At least, that was the widely accepted account of how the Onifolk Archipelago came into being. In any case, this explained why the Holy Princess sat at the top of the onifolk's social hierarchy. The ruling clan—or as they called it, the daimyo—that actually ran the government and controlled the army, however, was the House of Kamijo. Another daimyo, the House of Shimobashira, served as direct retainers to the Holy Princess, helping her to maintain her lifestyle and assisting her with religious ceremonies.

In other words, the Holy Princess held no real authority, meaning it was more accurate to describe her as the living symbol of the nation if we were being charitable, or as a mere cipher if we were not.

For some unknown reason, Yotsuha was, at present, a student at the School of Magic in the Duchy, the top educational institute in the world, and while attending this school, she had been exchanging letters with Oboro for the past three years, according to intel that had been gathered by my surface-world operatives. Somewhere along the line, Oboro had suddenly assumed a high-ranking position in the House of Shimobashira, and this development—along with the knowledge that she was writing regular letters to Oboro—caused some to wonder if Yotsuha had fallen in love with a commoner. Oboro apparently smirked in response to the gossip and allowed officials to review the letters, who determined the contents were innocuous, nipping the rumors in the bud (unfortunately, we were unable to find out what was in those letters).

My intelligence operatives had been doing their best to find out everything they could about the Onifolk Archipelago, but we still didn't know all that much about Oboro's activities as part of the nation's ruling class, nor why Yotsuha was attending the School of Magic.

“These onifolk islands are way out in the middle of the sea, and the people there keep to themselves, almost never coming over to the mainland,” I said with a sigh. “Their main industries are stuff they export, and adventurers practically never go to the islands, since there are no dungeons there. It's next to impossible to get any intel on the inner workings of this nation.”

“Our intelligence network is based mostly around work performed by human

merchants and adventurers,” Mei pointed out. “That would be a major reason why this archipelago is nearly impenetrable to our variety of espionage.”

Mei placed her hand on her cheek and sighed along with me. We did have the option of deploying some of Aoyuki’s surveillance monsters to the islands, but there was a good chance those monsters would be sniffed out by high-level onis, which would only make the nation tighten its security yet further.

With that in mind, we persevered with sending merchants and adventurers to the islands in order to gather some basic intelligence, such as the presence of powerful warriors, and we stepped up this form of intelligence gathering when we found out that there were possible Masters on the islands. As a result of this rather limited espionage work, we hadn’t been able to gather much exclusive intel on the Onifolk Archipelago, and we were finding the Dragonute Empire an equally tough nut to crack, due to its similarly secretive society.

Most of what we had been able to find out about the onis related to what Yotsuha did while attending the School of Magic. She had excellent grades and was very sociable, boasting a large circle of friends. During breaks, she went shopping for presents that she would send to her younger sister back home, while during school, much of her study was focused on sealing magic and related techniques. Occasionally, she suffered bouts of anxiety that could be attributed to homesickness, but other than that, there were no particular issues of note to report.

“Despite being the symbol of the onifolk nation, she seems like a pretty normal girl,” I summed up. “And I can relate to why she’s so sweet on her little sister.”

“Remember, Master Light, you must not dote on Miss Yume excessively,” Mei warned. “You must allow her some space for her own good.”

“I-I *know* I’m not supposed to baby her,” I said quickly. “After all, that won’t help her to grow up to be a halfway decent person.”

Mei felt the need to warn me about Yume because, in truth, I always pampered my sister in spite of myself, because, well, she had been through so much! But at the same time, I knew I had to set some boundaries, so I readily agreed with Mei.

I cleared my throat before swiftly moving on to the next topic. “Anyway, we know that Oboro sometimes joins the security detail that escorts Yotsuha back to her homeland from the School of Magic. We need to be fully prepared for the possibility that we might encounter Oboro while we’re carrying out our quest. We don’t want anyone lashing out at Oboro out of abject rage, after all.”

If such a violent incident were to occur, it would lead to the immediate termination of our quest, meaning my party wouldn’t make it to A-rank. Besides, the last thing I wanted was for Oboro to have a quick, easy death. I couldn’t stop a sadistic grin from breaking out across my face.

“We still need one more nation in our pocket before the summit in the Duchy, and the onifolk’s homeland is just as good as any,” I said. “Just like in the Dwarf Kingdom, I can still execute a well-plotted revenge on Oboro *after* making the Onifolk Archipelago our ally. All I need to do is complete this quest, get myself moved up to A-rank, then think about what I’m gonna do with Oboro. One thing is for sure, though, and that’s if he’s going down, he needs to crash and burn in the most monumental way imaginable.”

I smiled darkly as I sipped my tea and gleefully thought about how I would pay Oboro back for his betrayal. My ever-faithful maid Mei smiled warmly, then busied herself with brewing another pot of tea.

But things didn’t go quite as planned, since Oboro wasn’t actually part of Yotsuha’s security detail for this particular trip. In the face of this minor setback, my party refocused on completing the quest and getting our A-rank from the guild.

Chapter 2: Reuniting with Oboro

My party, the Dark Fools, and I first rendezvoused with Yotsuha and her security detail at the official Adventurers' Guild of the Dwarf Kingdom's royal capital. Once we'd finished introducing ourselves, we boarded our respective carriages and set out for the port city to the west. On our arrival, we would board a ship that would be waiting for us and eventually make it to the Onifolk Archipelago by nightfall. Ships that often traveled to the islands normally protected themselves from sea monsters by activating a force field around the vessel whenever one attacked, and crewmembers would either kill the sea monsters or flee while the force field was activated.

It was in the middle of our journey to the port city that we were set upon by Sword Monkeys on the highway, but other than this brief interlude, our trip was fairly uneventful. When we finally reached the port city, we bedded down for the night there, before making our way to the appointed ship on waking the next morning. Other than our vessel, there were cargo ships from the Elven Queendom, the Dark Elf Islands, the Demonkin Nation, and various other nations all moored up at the piers. Dockworkers used pulleys and other machines made of wood to unload the cargo. Many other ships took on cargo at this port with the intention of ferrying it to all corners of the world. In other words, this place was much like many other port cities in that it was buzzing with cargo ships, while passenger ships—like the one Yotsuha was due to sail on—were few and far between.

When we finally arrived in front of our ship, Yotsuha spun around and addressed my party with another mean smirk on her face. “Just to warn you, we *will* be traveling by boat to my homeland. Have you all been on a ship before?” she asked. “If not, you’d better take your motion sickness meds now, since I hear the human stomach is far too weak to stand even a little rocking of the boat. You’re meant to be the elite bodyguards of the Holy Princess, so it’ll look *really* pathetic if you get sick and start throwing up all over the place.”

“Lord Dark...” Nemumu murmured, keeping her voice deliberately steady,

though I could see a number of veins angrily pulsating on her forehead, which was the telltale sign that she was ready to end the life of this “stupid brat” if I would just give the word. But before I could make a signal to Nemumu to stand down, Yotsuha flashed another mischievous grin at the Assassin’s Blade, obviously enjoying the reaction she was getting from her.

“You seem to have gone red in the face, lady. Did I guess right?” she said to Nemumu. “Ah, just my luck. If you really do need to barf, be sure to do it away from me, could you?”

“Impudent brat...” Nemumu hissed.

“Nemumu, cool it,” I said, verbally stopping her before she could make another move. Gold had his hands up too, gesturing to the Assassin’s Blade to relax. The oni bodyguards stood ready to engage Nemumu if needed, which was only adding to the potentially explosive situation.

I stood in front of Nemumu and turned to address the Holy Princess. “Princess Yotsuha, I must ask you to refrain from any further acts of provocation against my party. We only wish to do our best to protect you.”

“Yeesh, you take this job way too seriously, kid,” Yotsuha said. “Anyway, you can relax. I already have all the protection I need. I only brought you guys along so the guild will owe me a favor. But I have to say, this is *hilarious!*”

Yotsuha laughed at length at our expense, before offering Nemumu an empty apology. “Sorry about all that. It’s just the way your anger flares at the drop of a hat is so adorable, I couldn’t help myself. I’ll try to behave myself next time, okay, lady?”

Yotsuha playfully stuck her tongue out again, which just went to show how unapologetic she really was. Of course, this only tipped Nemumu closer to the edge.

“Nemumu, m’girl,” Gold whispered into her ear. “We cannot afford to let this quest go begging just because you decided to get into some petty squabble with the princess. Swallow your pride for milord’s sake.”

“I *know!* I can handle myself!” Nemumu seethed quietly. She took a couple of deep breaths, then sculpted an icily composed look on her face.

“I also apologize for acting rudely toward you,” Nemumu said to Yotsuha. “I will endeavor to conduct myself more appropriately from now on, so I please beg your forgiveness.”

“Then I guess that makes us even,” Yotsuha replied with a smile. “Well, since that’s all settled, I’ll go wait on the ship.”

Yotsuha, her bodyguards, and her handmaiden promptly made their way up the gangway and boarded the ship, and we soon followed, since our quest didn’t officially end until we had seen the princess safely home on the Onifolk Archipelago. Nemumu’s expression was largely hidden from view behind her muffler, but her eyes were still filled with indignation as she glared at Yotsuha and her entourage.



Gold noticed Nemumu's attitude and admonished her silently by lowering his head and shaking it left and right. I chuckled dryly at my two partymates as I puzzled over Yotsuha's behavior. She was definitely expressing antihuman bigotry, but it all seemed to come off as kind of unnatural. *It said in the report that she didn't engage in any discriminatory behavior toward humans at the School of Magic*, I pondered. *In fact, she even has humans in her group of friends. In any case, the real bigots would be a lot more malicious in what they say and how they look at us.*

Ever since leaving my home village to become an adventurer, I had experienced all sorts of bigotry as a human "inferior," up to and including my betrayal by the Concord of the Tribes, so I could tell what *real* antihuman prejudice looked like when I saw it, more than Gold or Nemumu ever could. The act Yotsuha was putting on simply didn't pass the smell test.

It's almost like she's purposely pushing us away to prevent herself from getting close to us... I thought. I couldn't figure out why she would do something like that, so I gave up on it for the time being and led my party to our appointed cabin on the ship with that huge question mark hanging above my head.



There wasn't actually a whole lot to do on the ship once it had left port. My party wouldn't even be able to help out during any sea monster attacks, since the ship was protected by a force field at those times, and it was up to the ship's crew whether to stay and fight the sea creature or flee. There'd just be too many cooks in the kitchen if we tried to get involved as well.

As such, our job was basically to keep to ourselves in our cabin and stay quiet for the whole trip. It was a tight squeeze in the cabin in question, because even though it was designed to fit four crewmembers, this equated to having a pair of hammocks on opposite sides of the room to each other, all four of them swinging to and fro with the motion of the ship, and a desk with a chair under it against the far wall. I'd heard of hammocks before, but I'd never actually seen one, so I decided I'd have a little bit of fun by sitting in one of them and letting myself be rocked like a baby in a cradle. I could tell that Gold wanted to lounge

in a hammock too, but due to his heavy armor, he couldn't get into a hammock or sit down on a chair without damaging either of them, so he was forced to stand off to one side like an unwilling sentry. Nemumu also chose to stand, but this was because she felt that everything in the cabin was dirty, including the hammocks. It was a good thing their power levels were high enough to cope with a full day of standing in one place.

"Not only were they rude to you before, Lord Dark, but they even had the nerve to put you in this tiny, *filthy* cabin," Nemumu griped. "Just say the word, and I'll give that dumb brat, her bodyguards, and the crew of this ship enough nonlethal poison to leave them writhing in pain for the rest of the day and into the night. Do I have your permission?"

"Of course we can't do that, m'girl. Everyone will point the finger at us first," Gold explained. "Not to mention, that would leave no crewmembers to steer the ship."

Nemumu winced, knowing that she had lost the argument. "Fine, I'll just poison the brat and her lecherous bodyguards, then. They'll never know who hit them!"

"Yes, they probably do deserve what you have planned for them," I conceded. "But you have to remember they're still our employers. We have a duty to protect them, not make them writhe around in pain."

"You're so kind and benevolent, Lord Dark!" Nemumu exclaimed. "Then, how about I just give them a poison that will make them see some nightmarish hallucinations? Or one that causes abdominal cramps that will keep them in the restroom all day?"

"Nemumu," Gold said. "Exactly how many different kinds of poison do you *have* on your person, love?" The onis must have seriously pissed off Nemumu if this was all that was on her mind. I stifled a laugh as I watched the back-and-forth between my two partymates.

A few hours later, just as the sun was starting to set and we were getting close to our destination, I decided to head to the bathroom before things got really busy up on deck. Nemumu offered to escort me, but I found that prospect very embarrassing, so I politely refused and left Nemumu in the cabin with

Gold.

On my way back from the bathroom, I sensed a lone figure standing up on the main deck, and since these vibes felt rather familiar, curiosity got the better of me and I decided to go up on deck to confirm my suspicions. As I suspected, the Holy Princess, Yotsuha, had the deck all to herself, and she was standing at the bow, staring out at the western horizon. She was bathed in the glow of the evening sun, which seemed to make her look even more downcast from my distant vantage point. She didn't appear the least bit excited about returning to her homeland, looking more like a condemned criminal on her way to the gallows.

I know for a fact that the sunset doesn't make a person look that miserable, I thought. It might be in name only, but she is the top-ranking figure in her nation. Anywhere else, that would make her the queen. So why does she look so depressed about going back home?

She was giving off too much sullen energy for me to be mistaken about her mood. She suddenly turned with the intention of returning to her room, but when she spotted me standing in the doorway leading off the deck, she hurriedly reassumed her bratty teenager persona.

"Well, if it isn't Mr. Serious. What are you doing over there?" she called out. "Don't tell me you've developed a crush and you're out here spying on me. If so, like, ew? You're freaking me out."

"No, I just thought I'd get some fresh air before the ship got all busy preparing to come into port."

Yotsuha guffawed. "You didn't have to answer so seriously! Sheesh, you really need to lighten up, kid!"

When she finally stopped laughing, Yotsuha regarded me with a glow in her eyes that couldn't be attributed to the low-hanging sun. "You must be pretty good if you're able to take this test to be promoted to A-rank despite being human. Must be nice being such a skilled adventurer, surrounded by friends you can trust. I wish I was an adventurer like you and free to do whatever I wanted. I really envy you."

"Yes, I do feel blessed to have what I have been given, Your Holiness, but I'm

afraid my life isn't as easy as you suggest," I replied. "Since you attend the School of Magic, you must be familiar with the cruel bigotry we humans are subjected to by the other races."

I tried to be as nonconfrontational as I could, but it seemed Yotsuha didn't like my response and sniffed to express her disdain.

"Sure, but bigotry is all you have to worry about," she scoffed. "You don't know what *true* despair is like, do you?"

On hearing these words, I couldn't stop my eyebrows from twitching a few times. I was willing to admit that my life hadn't been the *most* tragic one imaginable, but that was an insanely low bar. I'd lost my parents as well as my village, and I was betrayed and left for dead by the Concord of the Tribes, the people I had believed in my heart of hearts were my friends. But I wasn't going to blurt all that out to Yotsuha, so I swallowed down my emotions and moved aside to let her walk past me and take her leave. Still looking put out, she stopped for a moment and left me with some parting words.

"As soon as we reach my nation, if I were you, I'd turn right around and leave," she warned. "The main island is home to a fearsome god who will eat you alive if you stick around for too long."

After saying her piece, Yotsuha went back down below to her cabin, leaving me to wonder what she had meant by this cryptic warning. *A fearsome god will eat me? Is she talking about that ogre god from their creation myth? But I thought that was merely a legend, a fairy tale...* I didn't feel it was important enough to chase after Yotsuha and quiz her on her words, since she'd probably only said it in an attempt to scare me out of spite. A few crew members started filtering out onto the deck to prepare for our arrival at the port, and I decided to return to my cabin since I didn't want to get in their way.



Guided in by the expert hands of its crew, the ship docked smoothly on the main island of the Onifolk Archipelago, and once the ship was fully moored, a gangway was dropped to allow Yotsuha, her bodyguards, and her handmaiden to disembark the vessel, while my party followed soon after. We stayed at the port city overnight, then took carriages to the capital the next morning. It was

our first time on the roads of the oni islands, but since we had been given fairly detailed directions before setting out, we managed to not get lost. As before, we were in the lead carriage while Yotsuha's carriage followed on behind, though this time, we didn't encounter any monsters or bandits on the highway.

We reached the capital's main gate as evening fell, at which point we switched the order of the carriages so that we could enter the city without any problems—Yotsuha was the Holy Princess, after all—bypassing a long line of carriages all waiting to be inspected. The oni sentries subsequently led Yotsuha's carriage through an entrance reserved for aristocrats, and we followed in our carriage. We had to show our adventurer cards to the sentries, but after a routine once-over of the carriage, they allowed us through without much fuss. Almost instantly, we encountered a group of oni soldiers who had come out to welcome the princess, presumably because one of the sentries had dashed back here behind the entrance to inform them. I immediately recognized one of the oni soldiers.

“Oboro...”

My former partymate was 180 centimeters tall, he had two oni island swords dangling at his waist, and his long hair was tied at the back of his neck. I could also see that his keen, hawklike gaze was trained on Yotsuha's carriage. Even though he hadn't moved from his spot, it was clear just by looking at him that Oboro was a well-trained warrior. My mind immediately flashed back to that horrific day in the Abyss, recalling the way that Oboro and the rest of my betrayers had tried to toss me away like I was week-old garbage.

“If none of you will kill him, I'll have the honor,” Oboro had said at the time. Now that the oni was before my eyes, the rage I had been suppressing deep down inside of me was on the brink of erupting like a volcano. Nemumu's reaction on seeing Oboro mirrored my own, and her eyes narrowed to murderous slits. Sensing trouble brewing behind him, Gold leaned back in the driver's seat and opened the small aperture that allowed him to communicate with the occupants of the carriage.

“Milord, Nemumu, let's try to all keep cool heads, shall we?” Gold whispered through the opening. “We can indulge in our ire once we have attained A-rank status, what? Otherwise, all of our efforts on this quest will have been for

naught.”

Gold was right: there was far too much riding on this for me to take my fury out on Oboro prematurely. First of all, if I *were* to kill him where he stood, he would be spared of feeling even an ounce of the despair I had felt on that miserable day. Taking Gold’s advice, I gulped down a few deep breaths to calm myself.

“Thanks, Gold,” I said. “I’m back to normal now. Nothing to worry about.”

“Good show, milord. Glad to see you’ve come back to your senses,” Gold said. “And Nemumu, you should stop taking your cues from milord’s emotions. A good underling knows how to give good counsel when it is needed the most, what what?”

Nemumu growled under her breath, for she knew she had no good counterargument to this. Thankfully, neither my dark energy nor Nemumu’s had leaked out of the carriage, meaning Oboro and the rest of the onis hadn’t noticed. We stepped down from our carriage at the same time that Yotsuha climbed out of hers.

“So, Oboro, you came to greet me,” Yotsuha said. She approached him and puffed out one of her cheeks in a cutesy-pouty way. “But why weren’t you an escort on this trip? There was so much I wanted to talk to you about.”

“I beg your forgiveness, my princess,” Oboro replied. “The time since your last stay was rather short and I had much work to attend to, so I asked someone to take my place.”

“If you were too busy, then I guess there’s no getting around it,” Yotsuha said. “But you’d better come pick me up next time. Then we’ll call it even.”

“Of course,” Oboro said. “I shall accompany you as your escort on your next journey.”

“Fine, I’ll let you off the hook. For now,” Yotsuha teased. “But only because you promised.”

Oboro was more than a head taller than Yotsuha, so she was forced to look up at the older oni the whole time they were talking. They looked like they could be close siblings, or perhaps even lovers. Once their conversation had

concluded, Oboro fired off some orders to the soldiers behind him, leaving Yotsuha to chat to her handmaiden. It was at this point that he finally noticed our presence—or rather, he noticed Gold, since he stood out the most in our group. Oboro strode over to us, though thanks to my SSR Fool’s Mask, he had no idea that I was his former partymate. Once he was within arm’s reach of us, he pulled a piece of paper out of his front pocket and handed it to Gold.

“I commend you for adequately providing protection for the princess. Your work ends here,” Oboro declared. “We will take the princess up to her castle, and we will also take charge of the carriages. Take that voucher I have given you to the Dwarf Kingdom guild on the mainland to prove that you have completed your quest. They will pay you the reward there.”

“We gladly accept it,” Gold said flatly. Oboro turned his back on us in a dismissive manner without even bothering to acknowledge my existence, and headed back over to Yotsuha, prompting their friendly chat to continue.

“We can’t be late back, or else Ayame will have fallen asleep and I won’t get to talk to her,” Yotsuha pressed.

“Of course, my princess,” Oboro said dutifully.

“I wanted to buy her a whole load of presents, but I had to come back right away, so there was no time,” Yotsuha said a little circumspectly. “I hope she won’t get mad at me for coming home empty-handed.”

“I promise she won’t,” Oboro assured her. “Your sister will be delighted just to have you by her side.”

Yotsuha smiled graciously at this response, and even though Oboro might have looked a little annoyed from time to time, he kept the conversation going, since he couldn’t afford to act harshly toward the Holy Princess. My brief reunion with Oboro that had been three years in the making ended with me watching him escort Yotsuha out of sight through my mask. A displeased Nemumu covered her mouth with her scarf, while Gold handed me the paper voucher in an attempt to change the mood.

“So, milord, what’s next on the to-do list?” Gold asked.

“Well, let’s see...” I thought about it for a bit. “Since it’s almost sundown, we

should find a place to stay for the night. Then we can even go on a tour of the capital tomorrow. Can't pass up this rare opportunity to see the sights, can we?"

I would have liked to use the opportunity to ask some questions and gather dirt on the place so that I could put together a revenge plan to use on Oboro, but I had to scratch that idea, since it would mean drawing too much attention to ourselves. But at the very least, we would be able to get a feel for the terrain by touring the city.

With that decided, we started searching for some lodgings for the night, making sure to head in the opposite direction to Oboro and his crew. *Too bad I wasn't able to talk to Yotsuha again after our little encounter up on deck, I thought. I wanted to know more about this so-called god that was supposedly going to eat me.* I wasn't really curious enough to run after Yotsuha and interrogate her on the subject, but at the same time, I had my doubts that I would ever get to speak to the princess ever again. I sighed, slightly worried that the warning would remain a mystery forever.

But surprisingly, we *did* get to see Yotsuha again not long after this little scene, and all because my party was soon to be detained for the suspected kidnapping of Yotsuha and her little sister, Ayame.

Chapter 3: To the Magistrate's Office

Yotsuha finally arrived back at her castle, still in full conversation with her close friend, Oboro. Once inside, the two parted ways, with Yotsuha going to her private washroom with her handmaiden to properly scrub off the grime that had built up over the course of her journey, while Oboro went off to speak to Yotsuha's security detail, who told him that no problems had arisen during the trip. Oboro ordered the bodyguards to hand in a written report in a few days' time, then dismissed them along with all the other soldiers who had escorted Yotsuha to the castle.

With her handmaiden's help, Yotsuha took her bath, then headed for her private living space. Along the way, an adorable, familiar voice reached her ears: "Sister dear! I've been expecting you!"

"Yes, I'm back, Ayame," Yotsuha said to her little sister. "Hm, you still have your dogi on. Does that mean I caught you in the middle of training?"

"Yes, I was training!" Ayame said excitedly. "I've been practicing *extra* hard so that I'll be able to protect my sister, the Holy Princess!"

With her short hair tied up at the back, Ayame smiled cheerfully at being reunited with her older sister. She was nine, which meant she was about the same size as Light's sister, Yume. She had on a traditional practice uniform known as a "dogi" that was worn by those who engaged in martial arts training, and it appeared that she had been practicing for the whole day before Yotsuha's arrival, since her face was drenched in sweat. Although Ayame did resemble Yotsuha when it came to her silver locks and her pleasant features, the younger sister exuded a much more youthful and vibrant energy compared to her older sister. Ayame loved to exercise and trained in a martial art unique to the oni islands every day.

Yotsuha smiled warmly at Ayame as she took out a handkerchief to wipe her sister's brow. "It's nice that you're trying so hard for my sake, but you can't stay all sweaty like this or you'll catch a cold. You'll make me sad if you end up lying

in bed sick.”

“Then we should take a hot bath together!” Ayame suggested.

“But I’ve just taken a bath,” Yotsuha protested.

“Oh, can’t we, dear sister?” Ayame’s eyes as she gazed up at her sister were as moist as those of a puppy that had been abandoned on the side of the road in the rain. Although Yotsuha tried her best to come home several times a year, the two sisters spent most of their time apart, and Ayame felt lonely in the castle while her big sister was away at the School of Magic.

Yotsuha disguised her guilt over this with a smile that was every bit as compassionate as it was resigned. “Oh, fine. I’ll take another bath, just for you.”

“Wonderful!” Ayame said. “This time, I’ll wash your back for you.”

Yotsuha giggled. “Well, in that case, I’ll return the favor by washing your back and your hair.”

“You’re so kind, dear sister,” Ayame said, her eyes twinkling with the love she felt for Yotsuha. The pair walked hand in hand to the washroom, engaged in earnest conversation the whole way.

After taking their bath, Yotsuha and Ayame sat face-to-face on pillows placed on the tatami floor and had dinner. Trays of food were set down in front of the two sisters, who were having a very pleasant time catching one another up on the events that had happened while they were apart. After supper, Ayame didn’t return to her own bedroom, choosing instead to sleep in her older sister’s chambers. Yotsuha happily assented to this and instructed her handmaiden to lay down two futons in her room. After changing into their nightwear, the sisters continued chatting away until it was finally time to go to sleep.

“In sword practice, everyone always says how gifted I am,” Ayame said. “I want to keep working hard so that I can one day become a real swordmaster who can protect you.”

“Thank you. I know you’ll be a strong warrior someday,” Yotsuha said, stroking her sister’s head tenderly.

“I certainly will!” Ayame agreed, beaming. “I’ll become one for my sake, for your sake, and also for the sake of my people!”

Most of the people on the Onifolk Archipelago who trained in the martial art that was unique to the islands were motivated to do so out of a sense of duty to protect the Holy Princess from the evil ogre god if it were ever to reawaken. Their job would be to defeat the malevolent deity if that day came, though it was fair to say that none *truly* believed the ogre god actually existed. To them, the ogre god was merely the designated antagonist in the nation’s creation myth. Ayame, however, was still innocent enough to believe the creation myth on the face of it, and because she loved doing physical activity anyway, it served as a convenient excuse to do martial arts training for the sake of her sister.

As the night grew deeper, Ayame’s exhaustion from all of that training eventually won out and she began to drift off into dreamland, prompting Yotsuha to carry her little sister over to her futon. Wrapped in her big sister’s arms, Ayame rubbed her sleepy eyes and made a final childlike request.

“I wanna sleep with you tonight.”

“You can be so clingy sometimes,” Yotsuha remarked with a smile. “But okay. I’ll be glad to.”

“Thank you, dear sister...” Ayame said, dozing. Yotsuha placed her little sister in one of the futons, then joined her under the covers. Ayame instinctively wrapped her arms around the older girl.

“Dearest sister...” Ayame mumbled in her sleep. Yotsuha stroked Ayame’s head, and the gentle body heat emanating from her kid sister caused her eyelids to droop as well. But no matter how long she kept her eyes closed for, sleep proved elusive. Despite the overland trip and the voyage across the sea taking it out of her, something was making her too excited to drift off.

A few hours later, while the rest of the castle and the capital city slumbered, the screen door leading into Yotsuha’s bedroom slid open soundlessly. The princess quickly noticed she had company and sat up in her futon. Despite being unable to see the figure filling the doorway in the darkness, she knew who she was addressing.

“Oboro, I was waiting for you,” Yotsuha said. “Is everything ready?”

“Yes, my princess,” Oboro replied. “We completed everything just as you requested.”

Yotsuha balled up both of her hands and pressed them to her chest, barely able to contain her excitement at hearing this news, but she knew that if she had squealed with the unbridled elation she was feeling, not only would it wake up Ayame, it would also alert her handmaiden and the guards. So instead, she allowed herself to shed a few tears of joy, which she immediately wiped away.

“Thank you so much, Oboro,” Yotsuha said, her head bowed in gratitude. “It was also thanks to you that we were able to get in contact with the Great Witch of the Tower.”

“Not at all. This is the least I could do for you,” Oboro said.

Despite his modesty, Yotsuha continued to view Oboro as her personal savior as she quietly slipped out of the futon. “I’ll get myself ready to leave. Oboro, please take Ayame, but be sure not to wake her.”

“As you wish, my princess,” Oboro replied.

Standing barefoot on the tatami floor, Yotsuha nodded her approval. “We’ll leave this castle and grasp the brighter future the Great Witch had forged for us.” And with these markedly upbeat parting words, the Holy Princess, Yotsuha, and her younger sister, Ayame, sneaked out of their home and stole away into the night.



The day after my party had completed the quest to escort the Holy Princess, Yotsuha, back to her homeland, we decided to go on a tour of the Onifolk Archipelago’s capital to get a feel of the place in preparation for hatching a revenge plot against Oboro. Of course, we *could* have left the nation right away and made a beeline for the Dwarf Kingdom to cash in our voucher at the guild there in exchange for being moved up to A-rank, but we felt we should take this rare opportunity to look around a nation that was normally so isolated. The first destination on our itinerary on leaving our inn was to go check out the castle that was home to the Holy Princess.

“I really liked the meals they served for dinner and breakfast there,” I

remarked as we headed for the castle. “My personal favorite was the dried fish. I wonder if those fish were freshly caught around here.”

“I would say so, old sport,” Gold said. “The chefs at that inn were quite skilled in general, but they really knew the best way to cook that dried fish. Just goes to show that being surrounded by water teaches you how to make the most of seafood.”

“It was fine as far as surface food goes,” Nemumu muttered. “But I wish they’d stop insisting on giving me large servings of rice and side dishes because I look ‘too skinny’ to them.” Nemumu clamped a hand over her mouth to keep a sudden bout of indigestion internal. Despite being given more food than she was used to eating, she still finished all of her supersized servings, since she thought it was bad manners to waste food.

“Very bad show, m’girl, you not being able to handle those hearty portions, what?” Gold teased. Nemumu was about to fire a comeback at Gold, but more gastrointestinal reflux forced her to cover her mouth again, causing the knight to fully unleash his trademark belly laugh. Gold had been given the same large helpings of food as Nemumu, but not only had he finished what was in front of him with ease, he had even asked for second helpings. As for me, I was able to avoid being overfed, since the inn simply gave me free dessert out of pity for the supposed burns to my face (which was the cover story I was using for wearing my SSR Fool’s Mask).

“L-Lord Dark, where should we go after we’ve seen the castle?” Nemumu asked. I noticed she had started keeping a hand close to her mouth due to her queasiness.

“I was thinking we might stroll around the castle, then walk down the main avenue to take in the sights there,” I said. “Also, if you’re not feeling too hot, I can give you some medicine.”

“Th-Thank you,” Nemumu said. “I’ll take you up on that.” I knew a little stomach problem wasn’t going to get in the way of our tour of the capital, but what was the point of keeping hold of a drug if you were never going to use it?

I released a stomach powder card and handed the summoned powder to Nemumu. She retrieved a cup from her Item Box and manifested some water

using a spell so that she could mix the powder into it and drink. Since we had done this all out in the open, more than a few passing onis stopped in their tracks to witness this spectacle. I didn't blame them, however, since Nemumu was more beautiful than any other women they had ever seen up here on the surface world.

"Hm?" Gold noticed that there were two onis approaching us, who were obviously not part of the onlookers. These onis were wearing the same outfits as the soldiers who had received Yotsuha and escorted her up to the castle. They were probably patrol officers assigned to keep the peace on the streets of the capital. The oni soldiers drew nearer, and after exchanging a few words among themselves, their gazes suddenly grew steely. They finally addressed us just as Nemumu finished drinking her medicine and was putting the cup back in her Item Box.

"Are you the adventuring party known as the Black Fools?" one of the soldiers asked.

"Yes, we are," I said, wondering what this was about. The soldiers looked at each other and nodded before placing their hands on the oni island swords they both kept at their hips.

"You are wanted for questioning," the soldier informed us. "We ask that you quietly come to the magistrate's office with us."

"For questioning?" I repeated.

"That's right," the soldier said. "We will discuss the matter further when we reach the magistrate's office."

While they might have "asked" us to come with them for questioning, it was plain as day that they weren't going to take no for an answer. Nemumu, Gold, and I looked at each other as all three of us tried to think up some reason why the police would want to question us, but we all drew a blank. Of course, we always had the option of simply refusing to cooperate—by force if necessary—but in all honesty, I was curious what had led to this turn of events, so I agreed to comply fully.

"Okay, we'll come," I said. "But we don't know where the magistrate's office is located. Would you gentlemen be so kind as to please lead the way?"

“Your cooperation is very much appreciated,” the oni soldier said. The two patrolmen bowed curtly and took up positions in front and behind us before leading the way to the magistrate’s office. They had nothing to worry about, though, since we weren’t going to run away or resist. For the time being, we all obediently followed their orders to the letter.

Chapter 4: The Case of the Holy Princess's Kidnapping

The magistrate's office turned out to be more of a garrison that housed sentries who kept public order, and when we entered, we were greeted by a line of thuggish-looking onis with their hands tied being led away by a soldier walking in front of them, with another soldier bringing up the rear, keeping watch. Since my party and I weren't criminals, we were taken to a different room on the first floor, which looked like a meeting room and had a view of the courtyard.

We seated ourselves at a wide table facing an elderly oni soldier who looked like he had seen years of service. A young soldier placed cups of tea down in front of us, flashed us a friendly smile, then took a seat at the end of the table to note down our responses. It went without saying that the young soldier stole a few glances at Nemumu, who was looking as pretty as ever and was feeling a whole lot better thanks to the stomach medicine. For her part, she expressed absolutely zero interest in him and had a noticeably irritable air about her, keeping her muffler over her mouth the whole time.

The veteran soldier didn't show nearly as much interest in Nemumu as his younger cohort, possibly due to his age, though he was affable enough when he launched into a bunch of questions he wanted us to answer. These included asking us what we had done after we'd parted ways with the princess, Yotsuha, whether we'd left the inn at any time during the night, and whether we had seen Yotsuha again after completing our quest. Since we had nothing to hide concerning Yotsuha, we answered all the questions put to us honestly and in full. The interrogator paused after the first round of questioning just as our tea was starting to get cold, so I decided to ask a question of my own.

"Judging from all these questions you've been asking us, are we to assume that something has happened to the Holy Princess?" I inquired.

"Uh, well..." The veteran soldier hesitated, though he shouldn't have been all

that surprised that we had asked, given the questions that were being put to us. He cleared his throat. “You must be exhausted after answering so many questions. Let’s take a break, shall we? I must warn you, however, that I *do* have a tendency to talk to myself during break time, so feel free to ignore me.”

In other words, he wasn’t at liberty to tell us what had happened in any official capacity, but he was perfectly fine with pretending that we had found out by accident. Through the veteran soldier “talking to himself,” we learned that Yotsuha and her little sister, Ayame, had disappeared from their castle, but neither the castle guards nor Yotsuha’s handmaiden had seen any suspicious characters entering the castle, and there were no signs of anyone breaking and entering, or of a struggle. The higher-ups had ordered a thorough search of the castle and the surrounding land, but Yotsuha and her sister were nowhere to be found. Naturally, the brass pointed the finger of blame at my party, since not only were we outsiders, but we were among the last people to be seen with the princess, and the soldiers had been ordered to detain us and make us confess. I physically cringed at how dumb these higher-ups sounded.

“They *do* know that in order for their suspicions to be correct, it would mean a small group of people who have never been to these islands before successfully managed to waltz into the castle and spirit away *the* Holy Princess, right?” I pointed out. “That would mean the security at the castle is shockingly weak, and the people in charge are a bunch of hacks who *still* can’t find the princess and her sister, even though they can’t have gotten far on this island.”

The veteran soldier chuckled nervously. “We grunts know perfectly well that you three can’t be to blame. But if the bosses say to investigate you, we have no choice. I’ve got a kid at home who’s about your age, so I can’t afford to stick my neck out and put my job on the line.”

“What a bally dreadful world we live in, what?” Gold said sympathetically.

Since it was technically still “break time,” the young soldier-slash-stenographer decided to lighten the mood by chatting up Nemumu. “So, uh, is the mainland full of lovely women like you? Are all the humans on the mainland as beautiful as you?”

Nemumu made a point of looking the other way, her mouth still covered by

her scarf. It looked like she *really* wanted to avoid being friendly with the young soldier so as not to encourage his advances. Since the last thing we needed was for the mood in here to sour, I jumped in.

“Well, we haven’t been to *all* corners of the mainland, so we can’t say for sure whether there are a lot of beautiful women, but even so, I really don’t think there are many women as pretty as Nemumu.”

“Lord Dark?” Nemumu turned to me, her face beet red. “Do you really think I’m pretty?” Unlike her nonreaction to the young soldier, Nemumu broke out into a bashful but genuine smile because I’d praised her beauty. The soldier must have gotten the hint that he had no chance with Nemumu, since I saw him looking deflated out of the corner of my eye.

The veteran soldier chuckled awkwardly and bowed his head apologetically. “Please excuse my associate. He’s still young.”

I laughed. “No, it’s fine. We get it a lot on the mainland, so we’re used to it.” But I couldn’t help asking a follow-up question after seeing the veteran soldier’s attitude toward us.

“Speaking of the mainland, over there, we have to endure a lot of bigotry and bias from the other races, but here, you treat us with a lot more respect,” I noted. “Aren’t you prejudiced against humans too?”

“Oh, I had heard that people were biased against humans on the mainland,” the soldier replied. “But humans are a very rare sight on these islands, so it doesn’t even cross the minds of folk like me to discriminate against your race. In fact, you’re the first humans I’ve seen in my lifetime, so I view you more as curiosities than folk I should be hating. Of course, it’s a different story when it comes to people who have moved to the mainland or frequently travel there.”

The glum younger soldier nodded in agreement with his older colleague. Since the Onifolk Archipelago was an isolated set of islands surrounded by ocean, a vanishing minority of onis even went to the mainland at all, so the onifolk simply weren’t concerned with any of the other races, let alone humans, and since they were so focused on what was going on in their own nation, antihuman sentiments didn’t make much sense to the ordinary oni. *It might be different for onis who encounter humans a lot on the mainland, but for the onis*

living on these islands, race relations simply aren't an issue to them, I thought.

Since most onis never even saw humans throughout their whole lifetimes, it was probably impossible for them to develop antihuman prejudice. That would explain why the inn had given us extra helpings, and why our so-called interrogators had been amiable and professional in dealing with us. We might even have gone as far as to say that the oni soldiers were acting this way simply out of the goodness of their own hearts, but I couldn't help feeling that the young soldier was serving us tea and making sure we were comfortable mostly for Nemumu's sake, and Gold and I were simply along for the ride. Speaking of Nemumu, she was presently squirming with delight at me calling her "pretty," and she even clasped her hands to her cheeks. Gold shrugged in exasperation at how the Assassin's Blade was acting, while I stifled a wry chuckle.

"Thanks for sharing that valuable information with us," I said to the veteran soldier.

"Oh, don't sweat it," he replied. However, the easygoing mood in the room didn't last long, because an uproar suddenly erupted in the hallway outside the interrogation room. Even Nemumu's giddiness dissipated, and she fixed her vigilant gaze on the door, though several more seconds passed until the footsteps and chatter stopped on the other side of it.

"Is this where you're keeping the Black Fools?!" a loud voice yelled, and without even waiting for an answer, an oni who looked to be in his fifties barged into the interrogation room with an entourage in tow. The oni was wearing an unusual outfit that consisted of a waist-hugging outer jacket with sleeves so wide that the cuffs fell all the way down to his shins, and pants that flared. To complete the look, the oni had a tall, oblong-shaped hat on his head and a folding fan in his hand. I remembered seeing that fan back at the inn.

While his clothes might have been unusual, they didn't hold a candle to what he had done to his face. For one thing, his whole face was white, and it wasn't the kind of natural paleness that could be attributed to skin pigmentation. No, he had obviously made his face white using very heavy makeup, and for some odd reason, he had painted his teeth black. If anyone was unlucky enough to run into this oni on the street at night, they'd undoubtedly fall onto their backside out of sheer fright. Because his whole getup was so vastly different

from all of the other onis I'd seen, I immediately recognized who he was. *Is this the head of the Kamijo, the clan that controls the government and army on behalf of the Holy Princess?* I thought. *Hm, what was his name again? Utamaro?*

If that were the case, I was presently staring at the de facto leader of the Onifolk Archipelago. It hadn't taken me long to identify him since the reference documents Mei had given me in my office had included a picture of Utamaro in his unusual garb. The only question that remained was: why was the head of the government going out of his way to come and see us?

"L-Lord Kamijo!" the two soldiers in the room both exclaimed as they stood to attention. Utamaro ignored them and walked brusquely toward me and my party.

"Are you the Black Fools?" he asked.

"Yes, we are," I said hesitantly. "Might I ask your name and how we can help you?" My party and I also rose from our chairs, but unlike the soldiers who had been questioning us, we were on edge, but not quite at full combat readiness. Utamaro had brought a three-member security detail with him, and they quickly surrounded him to prevent him from getting any closer to us.

"Your Excellency," said the oni guard who was standing directly in front of Utamaro. "You must not go any closer for your own safety."

This security guard looks the strongest of the three, I mused. The guard in question seemed to be leading the security detail, and he was roughly 180 centimeters in height, though he seemed a tad taller than Oboro. His jaw was so square, it made his head look like a gallon jar, and even his muscles had muscles. Heavy armor covered his massive frame, and at his waist, he carried a huge oni island sword. Given his overall look, it would have been easy to assume that this guard was a slow, lumbering oaf, but he had shown how surprisingly agile and nimble he was when positioning himself in front of Utamaro. He also wore a patch over his left eye, possibly because he'd lost it, but despite this notable handicap, he still radiated an aura of overwhelming strength to the point where it seemed like the other two guards were relying on his might rather than backing him up. The lead guard sized me and my party up with his one good eye, and when his gaze landed on Nemumu, he mimed wolf

whistling, making her recoil in disgust.

While that was going on, I could tell that under his white makeup, Utamaro was going red with indignation. “Where did you people take the Holy Princess and her sister?! Confess to your crimes!”

“Your Excellency, please calm yourself,” the veteran oni interrogator urged nervously. “We’re still in the middle of questioning them—”

“This manner of questioning is meaningless!” Utamaro yelled. “These rogues are the only outsiders in our capital who have been anywhere *near* the Holy Princess! They *must* be the ones responsible for her abduction! Torture them if you must, but we must find out where the two holy sisters are and rescue them right away!”

It seemed the real leader of the onis wasn’t willing to let go of the idea that we were the kidnappers. *Heck, I’d probably lose my head too if two members of a royal family went missing under my watch*, I thought. *But what kind of leader gets so worked up that he barges in on an interrogation?* The kidnapping might have been a big deal, but Utamaro was the nation’s leader and he was going too far. There was no way he should have been putting himself in the same room as people who are suspected of being dangerous criminals, even if he had brought bodyguards with him. I could see that Utamaro was sweating so much, his white makeup was starting to run.

“We *must* find the princess and her sister at once!” Utamaro exclaimed. “Otherwise, we’ll—” He suddenly stopped midsentence, as if he’d said too much, even covering his mouth with the folding fan he was holding. This raised my suspicions, and under my mask, my gaze narrowed. *He’s more worried about his own self-interest or something like that than he is about Yotsuha and her sister*, I thought to myself.

“I-In any case, we must *force* these criminals to confess if we are to find the two sisters!” Utamaro screeched, seemingly raising the pitch of his voice to distract from his gaffe. “Take these inferiors to the torture chambers and make them talk!”

“But Your Excellency...” The veteran oni soldier clearly didn’t want to waste time torturing people who, on the face of it, couldn’t possibly be the culprits.

But this wasn't just any higher-up ordering him about; it was the commander in chief of the whole nation. If the veteran soldier refused this particular order, he'd consider himself lucky if they only fired him. Worst-case scenario, he'd be putting his entire family in jeopardy.

While the elderly oni struggled with the competing pressures of the need to follow orders and his conscience telling him this was a bad idea, the eye patch guard intervened. "His Excellency has ordered you to take these three to the torture chambers. However, I will assist you by *personally* interrogating the female," he said, licking his lips with his one good eye fixed on Nemumu.

I guess there are always exceptions that prove the rule, I thought glumly. *While ordinary onis may not be biased against humans, it looks as though the same bigotry that exists on the mainland is prevalent the further up the social ladder you go.* Did this bigotry come with the territory when wielding authority and getting drunk on power? The stark difference in treatment compared to how our interrogators had approached us actually made me rather upset. I sighed inwardly to calm myself down, since I didn't want to go lashing out at these bodyguards and cause problems for the two interrogators.

"Nemumu. Gold," I whispered. The two of them nodded and we made our move. Gold charged at one of the walls with his shield and punched a hole through it, allowing Nemumu and I to follow him into the courtyard beyond. *Right, we'll break out of the magistrate's office, find someplace to hide, then activate the SSR Conceal card, and—*

As I went over my newly formulated escape plan in my mind, a deadly sense of foreboding made me turn around, and I saw something shocking. The guard with the eye patch had unsheathed his sword and slashed the air heavily in our direction, unleashing an aerial blast that was barreling toward us. The blast was easy enough to dodge, but I was presented with the problem of a few oni women who looked to be office workers walking down a covered corridor who were directly in the line of fire!

"Gold! Nemumu!" I called out instantly.

"Yes, milord!" Gold replied.

"Understood, Lord Dark!" Nemumu said.

Gold stood in front of us and deflected the blast to somewhere without people, while Nemumu positioned herself in front of the office workers to shield them just in case. I braced myself with my staff held out in front of me, ready to engage any follow-up attack Utamaro's bodyguards might make. Thanks to this, we had lost our chance to make good our escape, but our performance seemingly warranted the bodyguard with the eye patch to use his free hand to stroke his chin, impressed at what he'd just seen.

"For a bunch of inferiors, that was some quick thinking," the bodyguard said.

"Sogen! Seize those criminals!" Utamaro yelled. "You don't need to kill them! Just cut off their legs if you must!"

"As you wish, Your Excellency," replied the oni guard apparently named Sogen. "Leave this to me."

Leaving the other two bodyguards to protect Utamaro, Sogen rushed into the courtyard and smirked at us with naked contempt. Utamaro began taunting and threatening us over Sogen's shoulder.

"Sogen is the only champion on our island who's over Level 1500!" Utamaro announced. "You inferiors have no hope of winning! Your only choice is to surrender and submit to our torture. You *will* tell us where to find the Holy Princess!"

"As my lord says, you people stand no chance of defeating me," Sogen echoed. "If you surrender now, you might manage to avoid the worst of the pain. Though I would personally rather you resisted to the very end, so that I can amuse myself."

Well, Appraisal tells me they're speaking the truth, I thought after activating an Appraisal card. *His power level's above the typical cap for an oni...*

The usual cap for an oni was between 500 and 700, which meant Sogen's power level of 1500 made him a one-in-a-million talent among his people. This rare talent charged across the courtyard toward us like an apex predator homing in on its prey, his sword resting on his shoulder as he leaned into his gait.

"Oni Island Sword Art: Rock Cutter!" Sogen yelled.

This battle cry apparently made him zoom toward his target faster than any normal warrior could manage. At the same moment, he swung his sword toward Gold, who was the furthest forward of my party. Gold reacted quickly and deflected the sword with his shield, the impact causing a shower of sparks to fly in all directions. Without missing a beat, Gold brought his shield around with the intention of bashing Sogen with it.

“We didn’t come to this ruddy place to get tortured, so it’s time to put you to sleep, old boy,” Gold stated.

“My lord orders that you be tortured! Your intent is neither here nor there!” Sogen yelled back, quickly raising his sword to block Gold’s shield, much to the knight’s surprise. Well, Sogen obviously wasn’t a Level 1500 champion for nothing. Gold could have continued to try to overpower Sogen with his shield, but he opted to pull back instead and put some space between himself and his opponent. Or more accurately, he needed to make some room so that I could unleash *my* attack!

“Thunder Arrow!” I yelled from behind Gold’s back.

I released multiple Thunder Arrows with the intention of stunning Sogen and his gang rather than killing them. I didn’t really care what happened to Utamaro and his bodyguards, but I didn’t want to do any harm to the two oni soldiers who were still in the interrogation room. If I stunned all of the onis and escaped, the interrogators would only receive a light punishment, though if Utamaro did decide to punish people dearly for not stopping us, then at the very least, Sogen and his crew would be punished alongside the interrogators.

“You’re every bit the mage you appear to be,” Sogen called out to me. “But you won’t find it so easy to beat me! Oni Island Sword Art: Moonlight Blade Wings!”

Sogen infused his sword with mana, then slashed the air repeatedly to unleash multiple ranged blasts that intercepted every single one of my Thunder Arrows. *This guy may be a despicable bastard, but he’s a champion through and through*, I admitted. *Plus, I gotta hand it to this school of martial arts they practice on the oni islands. It’s no wonder the other races are so scared of it.*

To explain why the other nations saw the oni island combat techniques as a

threat, we needed to return once again to the Onifolk Archipelago's creation myth. The first Holy Princess managed to seal away the evil, flesh-eating ogre god, but she'd needed a massive army of onis to do it, and the epic battle resulted in the loss of countless lives. That event marked the founding of the nation, but at the same time, the onis didn't want to suffer a repeat of the carnage wrought by the ogre if it were ever to wake up again. And if the ogre *did* reawaken, the thinking went, the resulting battle would need to destroy it rather than simply reseal it.

So the founders of the Onifolk Archipelago had decided that the solution for dealing with any potential resurrection was to become masters at combat. That way, in the event of another calamity, the onis would grow stronger together and defeat the evil god for good, rather than stay weak and get slaughtered. In other words, the founding of the nation was down to a desire to train an entire army of skilled warriors, and the prospective apocalyptic battle against the ogre under the auspices of the Holy Princess developed into a full-blown religious ideology among the onis.

From then on, the onis devoted themselves to improving their mastery in swordsmanship, spear fighting, archery, hand-to-hand combat, horsemanship, and several martial arts. The onis studied their crafts and taught each other everything they learned, so that they might one day achieve their shared goal of defeating an enemy that was known to be vastly more powerful than them. This focus on collective learning eventually came to be known as the "oni island school of martial arts," which sought to master the kind of skills needed for slaying higher-level foes.

Before the Onifolk Archipelago was officially founded, the ancient onis would fight sea monsters that came up to the surface every so often, and even though there were no dungeons on the islands for some reason, the onis spent their lives fighting sea creatures that were more powerful than the kinds of monsters you could find in dungeons. For that reason, the oni island martial art suited the way of life on the archipelago.

It wasn't in the onis' nature to keep things to themselves, so this shared vision of defeating an evil deity also meshed well with their culture. The activities they engaged in toward that purpose also served as a way to entertain themselves,

meaning that most onis practiced and trained in at least some form of martial art. But was this level of collective combat training truly enough to strike fear into the hearts of the other races?

Not necessarily, it seemed, for back when the onifolk first started interacting with the mainland races, the dragonutes and the demonkin looked down on the onis—or at least, that was true at first. The oni island martial art was designed to defeat powerful monsters, yes, but back then, nobody else thought the techniques by themselves would be enough to defeat members of a more powerful race.

But according to legend, one day, a Level 500 oni adventurer got into a fight with a Level 1000 dragonute. The dispute was about some trifling matter, but things escalated, and soon, a crowd had formed around the two fighters. The onlookers naturally believed the dragonute would win the battle, but it was the oni who eventually prevailed. The dragonute had been armed with a large broadsword that had been custom-made by a skilled dwarf blacksmith, the blade forged specially for slaying monsters. By contrast, the oni had wielded a thin oni island sword, which the dragonute had instantly made fun of. The hecklers in the crowd thought the oni island sword would break pretty much immediately if it clashed with the dragonute's mighty broadsword.

The dragonute laughed in the face of the oni adventurer and swung his broadsword at him, but instead of moving out of the way like the dragonute was expecting, the oni stood his ground and met the broadsword with his blade. The onlookers started jeering in the belief that the broadsword would go right through the oni's sword or warp it out of shape, but even after a second and third thunderous strike from the broadsword, it didn't leave behind so much as a scratch, suggesting that the oni was skilled enough to be able to parry the broadsword in a way that softened the force of each blow.

Finding himself unable to destroy the skinny oni island sword with his broadsword after multiple hits, the dragonute was subsequently on the receiving end of laughter from the crowd. This caused the dragonute to go red in the face and completely lose his head, and he swung wildly at the oni. The oni adventurer maintained his composure and used the dragonute's furious attack to set up his own finishing move. The oni dodged the broadsword,

infused the tip of his own blade with his mana, then methodically thrust the weapon through the gap in the dragonute's armor to pierce the bare, scaly skin underneath. In the end, the oni managed to successfully run his opponent through the heart, killing him on the spot. Everyone in the crowd fell silent as they attempted to digest the swordsmanship that had just been on display.

This legend became the basis of the rumor that the onifolk were able to overcome pretty much any difference in level by using skills unique to the school of martial arts they practiced. Both the dragonutes and demons learned then that it was a mistake to underestimate the onis, even though they had a lower-level cap than themselves, and the same went for the other races too. Back when I was in the Concord of the Tribes, I'd asked Oboro to teach me how to train in the oni island style, thinking this would help me compensate for my low power level.

"You are not naturally gifted, so teaching you would be difficult," Oboro had said at the time.

While I was busy reminiscing, Sogen stroked his jaw and grinned. "Hmph. You seem to be very different from the rest of the chum we get here."

"*Chum*"? I queried inwardly, but I knew instinctively that he was using a very disturbing slur for humans. Regular onifolk weren't bigoted toward humans in the least, because they rarely ever saw us, yet here was Sogen, calling us humans "chum" as if we were basically meant to be no more than shark bait. I'd thought Sogen was bigoted toward humans merely because of his high power level and the fact that he was part of the upper crust of onifolk society, but apparently, I had been wrong on this.

Could the onifolk leaders possibly be buying up human slaves in secret, then killing them for some as-yet-unknown reason? I pondered. That would certainly explain why Utamaro's inner circle was so prejudiced against humans despite the rest of the onis not seeming to be biased against us. If I were to hazard a guess, Utamaro's people had been buying humans in secret to use as "chum," and I didn't even want to imagine the kinds of gruesome things they were doing with this so-called "chum."

Unfortunately, all of this is just speculation at this point, I thought to myself.

And this sure isn't the best time to cut loose with our powers, knock these guys out, and get Ellie to read their minds.

Adventuring as the Black Fools was supposed to give me and my team a way of collecting intelligence up on the surface without raising any eyebrows, but if it were to get out that my party had essentially kidnapped the people in charge of the Onifolk Archipelago, we'd quickly become well-known for all the wrong reasons. In the event of that happening, nobody would approach us with secrets, and our quests would be completely pointless.

We've always got time to probe their minds later, I reasoned. I don't have to capture them here and now, since Ellie can pay these guys a visit as the Wicked Witch at any time.

While I was busy talking myself out of going ballistic on Sogen, the warrior with the eye patch smirked evilly and swept the oni island sword to one side before leaning forward.

"It appears I'm dealing with a skilled opponent," Sogen remarked. "In that case, I will no longer suppress my full strength. Your flesh and blood will taste the *true* power of the Oni Island Sword Arts!"

"Phantom Pain!" I yelled out, immediately drawing an anguished screech from Sogen.

The SSSR Phantom Pain was a gacha card that caused an opponent to temporarily feel excruciating pain, regardless of their defensive stats. The card didn't actually injure the target in any way, but it created the illusion of pain without leaving any physical or mental scars behind. I made sure to release Phantom Pain before Sogen could make his move so it would immobilize him.

"Super Air Breath!" I shouted next. The SSR Super Air Breath was a wind attack that targeted a single opponent, and in Sogen's case, I used the card to blow the oni away like a kickball, his body smashing chunks out of the magistrate's building as his flight path took him somewhere deserted. With his hand resting above his eyes like a visor, Gold watched Sogen soar away into the great beyond.

"That hulking great wastrel's still airborne, by the looks of it," Gold muttered. "Must be because he left himself as wide open as a barn door."

“I can’t believe how quickly you took that guy out, Lord Dark!” Nemumu chirped, back from shepherding the spooked office workers to safety. “But you didn’t need to get your hands dirty fighting that creepy hound, even if you did beat him easily.”

“Yeah, you have a point there, Nemumu,” I replied. “Though, honestly, I didn’t think that attack would blast him *that* far away.”

Nemumu was right, of course. We were trying to escape from the building, and we didn’t exactly have time to take on Sogen in an all-out battle. I had intended for the Super Air Breath to give us some space by nudging back Sogen, but I had accidentally blasted him to kingdom come. Utamaro, his remaining bodyguards, and the oni soldiers all cast stunned looks in the direction of the disappearing Sogen, unable to grasp how their Level 1500 champion had been defeated so quickly. Before Utamaro had time to come back to his senses and order our arrest, I whipped out my trump card that I was sure would get us out of here.

“Firewall!” I shouted, releasing the SR Firewall to create a barrier of billowing flames that separated my team from our foes. After using the Firewall to screen ourselves from view, I activated the SSR Conceal and SR Flight cards to get my party up into the air, where no one would be able to see us. From our resulting high vantage point, we could see that, after Sogen’s rather dramatic exit, Utamaro’s gang looked shocked for a second time due to the towering Firewall in front of them. This shock quickly transformed into fear that the building and everyone in it would go up in flames, but they had nothing to worry about on that score, since the Firewall soon died down. Utamaro’s crew was left staring at the empty space where my party had once been standing, their astonishment at the situation continuing unabated. Utamaro ordered the soldiers to search for us, and the troops scattered like mice in all directions.

Floating high in the air, Gold looked down at the scene with his arms crossed. “Jolly good show. I’d expect nothing less from you, milord, hiding us with that Firewall, then using Conceal and Flight cards to make our daring escape. You knew those two good eggs would be reprimanded if we leaped over a wall and fled, but no one could take the blame if we simply vanished into thin air, what what?”

“I would’ve preferred to take the heads of every single maggot that disrespected us so callously,” Nemumu remarked.

“If you had done that, m’girl, you would have only besmirched the good name of the Black Fools,” Gold said, looking directly at Nemumu. “You mustn’t even pretend to lay a hand on anybody. Are we clear on that, m’dear?”

“I *know* I’m not supposed to lay a hand on anyone!” Nemumu whined indignantly. “You saw how hard I fought the urge to teach those pigs a lesson they wouldn’t forget!”

Not for the first time, I chuckled at the banter between my two partymates. “I absolutely get how you feel, Nemumu. But at least now, I know *exactly* what I need to find out from them.”

“You’re going to interrogate them?” Nemumu asked, her head tilted to one side in an adorably quizzical manner.

I nodded as I peered down at the scene below. “Obviously, it’s something I’ll need Ellie’s help with, so we’ll have to head back to the Abyss for now. We’ll also need to track down Yotsuha, because I have a few questions I wanna ask her too. If it turns out she’s in cahoots with these guys...”

I cast a hard, dark stare at Utamaro and his minions who were still milling about below us. Gold and Nemumu fully understood what I was getting at, and a silent consensus hung in the air between us. Since we had no more reasons to stick around in the airspace above the magistrate’s office, I activated an SSR Teleportation card and spirited the three of us back to the bottom of the Abyss.

Chapter 5: The Holy Princess Yotsuha's Past and Present

Shortly after running away from home, Yotsuha had a dream consisting of a collection of memories of being with her mother back when she was younger than Ayame was at present.

“Mother, that’s amazing!” the young Yotsuha cooed. “You’ve made a crown out of flowers!”

On that particular day, Yotsuha and her mother—who was the Holy Princess at the time—were sitting in a field full of flowers. Since Yotsuha was the firstborn daughter, she was her mother’s presumed successor, and even though a security detail had accompanied Yotsuha and her mother on this excursion, they remained out of sight as much as possible, meaning that Yotsuha’s experience of coming to this flower patch with her mother was no different than if they were alone.

Yotsuha’s mother placed the crown of flowers on her daughter’s head. “Thank you, mother,” Yotsuha said, adopting a cutesy pose. “How do I look?” She treated her mother to a heartfelt smile while she was showered with praise.

“Thank you so much, mother! That was very sweet of you!” Yotsuha gushed. “Now I want to give you a present.” In return for the crown of flowers, Yotsuha handed her mother a four-leaf clover, which was viewed as a symbol of good luck on the mainland, far across the sea. Yotsuha’s own name was another word for it, and that wasn’t by coincidence either. Yotsuha’s mother had named her that because she wanted her daughter to be blessed with good fortune.

Yotsuha beamed broadly as she showed her mother the four-leaf clover. “Since I love you so much, I shall give you this, so that you may have good luck for the rest of your life!”

Yotsuha’s mother tenderly accepted the gift of the clover and hugged her daughter to show her gratitude. The young Yotsuha hugged back, giggling with

glee. This idyllic scene from the past played out with the older Yotsuha watching on from a distance, an unseen spectator. *When we went back to the castle that day, mother and I pressed that four-leaf clover and made a bookmark out of it,* the present-day Yotsuha recalled. *Mother loved to read, and she said we would always be together as long as she had that bookmark. I loved her so much, and I was so happy that she liked my present. But why can't I remember her voice or her smile?*

All throughout the dream sequence, her mother's face had been blotted out, as if it were stained with ink, and while she had definitely spoken during the dream, her voice had been too distant to make out. It pained Yotsuha deeply that she couldn't hear her mother or see her face, but the dream carried on apace with no concern for Yotsuha's feelings, transitioning from the flower patch to the bedroom the young Yotsuha shared with her mother. The two had been sleeping side by side in futons, but her mother had awoken in the middle of the night, crying and trembling with fright. Although her mother's voice was still unintelligible, it was easy to tell what she was saying from the movement of her lips: *"I don't want to die. I don't want to die. I don't want to die."*

Her mother's sobs woke Yotsuha, and she rubbed her eyes and sat up. "Mother, why are you crying? Are you in pain?" Noticing that her daughter was awake, Yotsuha's mother wiped away her tears, pulled the little girl into a warm embrace, then gave a hastily made-up excuse to assuage her worries. Young Yotsuha noticed that her mother was still trembling, so she hugged her with all her strength, as if trying to make whatever was scaring her disappear. Knowing exactly why Yotsuha was holding her so tightly and realizing just how much her daughter loved her, her mother wept once more as these emotions coalesced with her earlier despondency and dread. But through her tears, Yotsuha's mother hugged back just as tightly.

I didn't know at the time why mother was so scared, the present-day Yotsuha reflected as she viewed the scene. *But now that I'm in the position she was in then, I understand the feeling all too well. She was probably saying, "I don't want to die."*

Despite fearing her own death, Yotsuha's mother didn't run away and stayed for the sake of her daughter. Yotsuha had come to learn that she must have

meant the world to her mother, even before this dream crystallized that idea. As she grew older, Yotsuha viewed her mother in a whole new light as a strong, majestic woman who did everything she could for her daughter.

The dream transitioned again, this time to the afternoon when Yotsuha saw her younger sister, Ayame, for the first time. Her mother let Yotsuha carry her new sister in her arms.

“She’s so cute and tiny!” Yotsuha said. “Ayame, I am your big sister, Yotsuha.”

Yotsuha hadn’t seen her mother in days but was finally granted permission to see her once she had recovered sufficiently from the strains of childbirth. On top of the joy of getting to hold Ayame, Yotsuha was delighted to see her mother again. The older girl brought her face close to her sister’s to talk to her, and the baby squealed with delight at the attention, which thrilled Yotsuha even more. Her mother watched on as her two daughters interacted for the first time, and it was clear from her disposition that she wanted to shield her children from any and all misfortune. Yotsuha was too young at the time to notice the look of determination on her mother’s face as she cradled Ayame in her arms.

“Ah, Ayame, you’re so *cute*,” Yotsuha cooed. “Your big sister is going to protect you, my little Ayame...” Yotsuha turned to her mother, who was still resting up on her futon. “Mother, I am going to be the best big sister I can be!”

Yotsuha’s mother moved her mouth to say something, and the older Yotsuha watching the dream sequence strained her eyes and ears to try to work out what her mother was saying, but she found herself wholly unable to decipher the words or reconstruct the expression on her mother’s face. *She was probably smiling and telling me to protect Ayame like a good big sister*, the present-day Yotsuha thought. *She probably also said Ayame and I should always look out for one another.*

This event happened too long ago for Yotsuha to remember it exactly, but she believed her mother’s words had been something along those lines.

I didn’t think my promise to Ayame would become so real, she thought. *When mother died, I swore again that I would keep Ayame safe for her. But once I was officially anointed as the Holy Princess, I found out the truth about my nation for*

the first time, as well as what the role of Holy Princess really entailed. Mother and all of the other Holy Princesses who came before her were forced to take on such a horrible duty to protect not just our nation, but the whole world.

While recalling her fateful role in her dream, Yotsuha clutched herself to stop herself from trembling due to the fear she was feeling, as well as the pressure of the responsibility that had been foisted upon her.

I want to escape! Yotsuha yelled in her head. I want to run away and turn my back on it all! But if I do that, I'll be putting my nation and the whole world at risk of being destroyed. And what's worse, they would make Ayame take my place if I ran away without taking her with me. I could never make her go through what I'm going through! I had to do this—

Yotsuha's train of thought was suddenly interrupted as she jerked awake due to sensing the presence of strangers towering over her. She groaned softly and the first thing she saw when she opened her eyes were the Black Fools, the party of humans that had been part of her security detail on her trip home.

"Good morning, Holy Princess Yotsuha," said the masked boy known as Dark.
"Was it a nice dream?"





After making our escape from the magistrate's office in the capital of the Onifolk Archipelago, I used the SSR Teleportation card to whisk me and my party back to the bottom level of the Abyss. I dismissed Nemumu and Gold and left them to their own devices for a short time, while I headed down to my office, telepathically contacting Mei, Aoyuki, and Ellie on the way to tell them to come see me.

When my three lieutenants had arrived and lined up in front of my desk, I told them about how Sogen had called humans "chum" and asked what they thought of it.

"It is indeed a highly unusual term to use for humans," Mei agreed, placing her hand on her well-sculpted chin. "According to the background investigation we performed, there were no signs of any human slaves put to work in the Onifolk Archipelago at present, and we have received no word of any humans being sold to the islands either. Is that correct, Aoyuki?"

"Mrrow," Aoyuki confirmed. Aoyuki was in charge of managing the creatures that had been deployed to the surface world to gather intelligence covertly, and these monsters hadn't picked up on any ongoing slave trafficking that the onifolk were involved with.

"Maybe I'm reading too deeply into this, but if I were to hazard a guess, I would say the word 'chum' might refer to something they did with humans *before* we started our intelligence gathering," I said.

"Your insight is impeccable, Blessed Lord Light," Ellie said. "You're right that we've only been gathering intelligence for around a year or so, meaning there is no way we would know if the onis had purchased human slaves in secret before then."

"It's certainly a huge blind spot," I agreed. "Mei. Aoyuki. I need you two to reach out to our intelligence operatives up on the surface and get them to find out if the Onifolk Archipelago was involved in any human slave smuggling before that time frame."

"As you wish, Master Light," Mei said.

“I’ll complete the investigation as fast as humanly possible, master,” Aoyuki replied.

“Keep in mind that I’m only intending for this investigation to be a secondary avenue of exploration, and we’ll mostly be carrying it out to confirm the details,” I explained. “My main plan is to have Ellie extract the relevant intel directly from the heads of the onifolk’s leaders.”

I turned to Ellie. “As you know, Lilith wants one more nation in her corner by the time the summit kicks off at the Principality of the Nine. If you were to pay the onis a little visit as the Wicked Witch, it would kill two birds with one stone. I’ll need you to be ready to topple the Onifolk Archipelago at the drop of a hat. And once you have captured their leaders, make sure you read their minds thoroughly to see if any crimes against humankind have been committed.”

“You can leave everything to me, Your Blessedness!” Ellie said excitedly. “I’ll be *more* than ready to carry out your divine mission! And if I find out they have committed *any* cruelty to humans whatsoever, I’ll make sure they pay dearly for their crimes! I guarantee it!”

“I know I can count on you, Ellie,” I said.

“You humble me with your words, Blessed Lord,” Ellie replied, an aura of glee radiating from her as she bowed to me.

After Ellie had straightened up again, Mei put a very pertinent question to me. “Master Light, how would you like us to proceed with Oboro?”

“Right, well...” I started. “I will eventually have my revenge on him, of course, but as of right now, I’m not sure if he’s involved in this potential case of human slave trafficking, so we need to dig up more dirt on him concerning that. And since Oboro is friends with Yotsuha, we will have to check out what possible connections she has to human slavery too.”

“I see,” Mei said. “That means we will have to perform a search for the Holy Princess for you.”

“Actually, I’ll be the one to go looking for her,” I said. “After all, I do have a card that might just be able to find her instantly.”

Still seated behind my desk, I held up the SSR Clairvoyance card for all to see.

The card allowed the user to view and locate a faraway object or person, but only under certain conditions. It wouldn't work as intended if the user was unclear about the target or didn't know what the target looked like. The card was also ineffective if the target was too far away, or if the target had changed too much from the image of it the user had in their mind.

It was only these last two conditions that stopped me from finding Yume or my big brother using this card, I thought. They were either too far away or they had grown up and weren't how I remembered them. It's in no way a perfect card, so I'll have to brace myself for any potential weirdness it might throw out.

"As you know, this card has its limitations, but I know what Yotsuha looks like, and she couldn't have changed her appearance all that much in just a few short days," I explained. "At the very least, she couldn't have grown up as much as Yume has. If my party and I return to the archipelago and spread out all across the islands using these cards, I'm sure we'll find her soon enough. If she has indeed been kidnapped, I doubt she would have been ferried all the way to the mainland in the short amount of time it's been since she went missing."

Nemumu, Gold, and I could use the Conceal and Flight cards in conjunction with the Clairvoyance card to search the islands until it got a firm lock on Yotsuha, meaning it shouldn't take us all that long to locate her.

"Since we haven't seen the Holy Princess or her sister ourselves, we wouldn't be much help using that card, would we?" Ellie deduced.

"Meeew," Aoyuki mewled dejectedly.

"You are indeed correct, Ellie," Mei said. "It hurts my pride as a maid that I cannot serve you in this capacity, Master Light."

I smiled at my lieutenants to try to lighten the mood. "You three have much more important work to do anyway, and I really appreciate what you're already doing for me. Besides, I'll have Nemumu and Gold helping me in the search for Yotsuha, so that should be enough."

"I thank you for your kind words, Master Light," Mei said. "I shall do everything in my power to support you."

"Mrroww!" seconded Aoyuki.

“The three of us will devote our bodies and souls toward accomplishing what you ask of us, Blessed Lord Light!” Ellie added.

I breathed a quiet sigh of relief when I saw that my lieutenants were in good spirits again. After this brief break in the Abyss, my adventuring party and I returned to the Onifolk Archipelago to carry out our search and rescue operation.



“Honestly, I figured it would take a lot more work than this to find her,” I admitted.

“Who would have fancied that our mission would be over before it began, what?” Gold agreed.

My party and I had touched down in front of a wooden cottage nestled in the forest at the foot of the mountain near the capital of the Onifolk Archipelago. The mountain itself was definitely the weirdest I’d ever seen, since its summit was basically shaped like an empty bowl and boasted a swamp inside. The only way into the swamp was through one gated entrance, which was built on a bit of cleared land that had a place for stacking firewood for lighting.

Nemumu, Gold, and I had returned to the Onifolk Archipelago using the SSR Teleportation card, and we almost immediately made ourselves invisible using the SSR Conceal card, before taking to the air using the SR Flight card. I gave each of my teammates a number of SSR Clairvoyance cards and we split up with the intention of trying them in every part of the capital to search for Yotsuha, but as luck would have it, I got a hit on her location with the very first Clairvoyance card I used.

I called back Nemumu and Gold using my Telepathy card and got them to use their own cards just to make sure I wasn’t getting a false reading, and sure enough, they also saw Yotsuha hiding out at the foot of the mountain, which was called Mount Ogre. And if that weren’t enough, all of our Clairvoyance visions showed Yotsuha playing with some yarn with what looked to be her little sister. The authorities had said that Yotsuha had been missing since the previous morning, but it sure as hell didn’t look like she was being forcibly detained by any kidnappers. No, Yotsuha and her sister looked far too happy

and relaxed to suggest that they were in any real danger.

Yotsuha's hideout provided even more clues that she hadn't been kidnapped. It was a single-story cottage, meaning it wasn't exactly big enough to call it a stately villa, but there was still plenty of space to house Yotsuha's security detail as well as her handmaidens, and the cottage even had a bathroom and a bunch of other conveniences. There were guards stationed outside this safe house, and they looked very much like the oni soldiers we had seen in the capital.

"Is this supposed to be a kidnapping?" Nemumu scoffed, echoing my own thoughts on the situation. "If I didn't know any better, I'd swear she was just out for a day trip with a bunch of security guards in tow. Do you think she might have faked her abduction, Lord Light?"

"Yes, I think she did," I said. "She's definitely not acting like she's been kidnapped." I cupped my chin in thought. "But even if we do assume that she faked her kidnapping, the way Utamaro reacted to it yesterday in the magistrate's office didn't look like an act to me."

"If it was an act, then that painted scoundrel would make a better thespian than a statesman," Gold concluded. Yotsuha's relaxed attitude as she played with her sister also seemed too natural for that to be an act.

"I didn't see her pal, Oboro, in the hideout. A lot of things aren't adding up here," I mused. "I think a little chat with the Holy Princess is in order. That should help us to clear up some of this mystery."

It couldn't be overlooked that the Black Fools were still considered the prime suspects in this phony kidnapping case, apparently thanks to Yotsuha, so if she had a good explanation for getting us into hot water with the island authorities, I wanted to hear it from her personally.

"Yotsuha's security perimeter is full of holes, guards or no guards," Nemumu reported. "I could infiltrate the cabin and bring Yotsuha out to you without using the Conceal card. Do I have your permission, Lord Light?"

Getting past the oni bodyguards and whisking Yotsuha away unnoticed would be a piece of cake for the UR Level 5000 Assassin's Blade, but I had my reservations about that plan.

“It doesn’t feel right just grabbing Yotsuha while she’s playing with her sister,” I said. “I think we should wait until they’ve gone to sleep later tonight before we make our move. I can use a card to put her sister into a deep sleep, and another card to make sure nobody else overhears us asking the princess some questions.”

The main reason I didn’t want to disturb Yotsuha during playtime with her sister was because they reminded me a little of me and Yume.

“Depending on what Yotsuha tells us, we may need to get Ellie to probe her memories for more intel,” I said. “We should tell her to be on standby to receive her either in the Great Tower or in the Abyss.”

“As you command, Lord Light,” Nemumu replied. “When we return to the Abyss, allow me to relay the message to Miss Ellie.”

“Thanks. That’d be a great help,” I said.

“Leave it to me, Lord Light!” Nemumu said, her eyes sparkling.

With his cloak fluttering in the breeze, Gold couldn’t resist getting in one last dig. “Nemumu, make sure you don’t go adding anything beyond what milord has requested, m’girl.”

“Of course I won’t!” Nemumu screeched. “How careless do you take me for?! I would never misquote Lord Light like that!”

I laughed as the two launched into their usual round of bickering, before releasing the SSR Teleportation card to take us back to the Abyss.



Later that night, the three of us sneaked into the room where Yotsuha and her sister were sleeping. I used a card to put the younger girl into a deep sleep so that she wouldn’t wake up in the middle of the interrogation, then used another card to erect a soundproof barrier around the room. We then all stood over Yotsuha, who was sleeping in some bedding that was spread out directly on a floor made from woven straw, which I learned were called “tatami” mats. With the cards activated, I signaled to Nemumu to rouse Yotsuha, and she knelt down and shook the princess by the shoulder, causing her to groan softly and open her eyes. I greeted her with a businesslike smile.

“Good morning, Holy Princess Yotsuha,” I said. “Was it a nice dream?”

Yotsuha’s sleep-filled eyes immediately widened to the size of saucers when she realized she was surrounded by intruders. She sat upright with a frightened look on her face, but instead of yelling at us, her first thought was for her sister, and she moved to shield her. Trying her best to maintain her cool, Yotsuha stared us down, though it was clear that she would call out for help as soon as a chance presented itself.

After staring at us in the dark for a few more seconds, she finally realized that we were the party that had escorted her back from her school. Her guard dropped slightly, but her body language told us she was still ready to call for help if she deemed she needed it.

“Are you the Black Fools? What are you doing here?” Yotsuha said. “Wait, let me guess: your crush on me was too much to bear and you couldn’t get over it, so you decided to sneak into my room. Is that it? You really need to learn some manners, kid. You can’t just waltz into a girl’s room uninvited. And with your dirty shoes on, no less.”

Yotsuha might have reverted to her teasing brat mode, but her voice was a tad softer than usual, and beads of sweat were forming on her face. It was plain as day that she still saw us as a threat.

“Yes, please forgive us for coming here uninvited,” I replied. “But we needed to approach you in secret, since we may need to help you to escape from your captors. We’ve put your sister to sleep using magic and put up a soundproof magical barrier around us so that we can have some privacy. No matter how loudly we speak, no one outside of the barrier will hear us, so feel free to talk to us in your normal voice.”

“Wow, aren’t you considerate?” Yotsuha said with a hint of nervous sarcasm. Of course, she knew the sound barrier had been put in place to prevent her from calling out for help, and she figured she wouldn’t get very far if she had to try to run away from us with her unconscious sister in her arms. In other words, if we wanted to, we could easily kill Yotsuha and her sister on the spot, so I had to show her that was not our intent.

“Don’t worry. We’re not here to hurt you,” I began. I told Yotsuha about how

my party had been falsely accused of kidnapping her and her sister, and how we were almost jailed and tortured before making our escape. Since then, we'd been trying to find Yotsuha in an effort to clear our name, and our search had led us here.

"If you've been abducted, we're willing to help you and your sister to escape, but..." I paused and treated her to a stern look. "Is this really a kidnapping? If you're trying to pin this 'kidnapping' on us, we will be forced to file a formal complaint with the adventurers' guilds saying that your nation hired us for an illegal quest."

The part about making a formal complaint was a total bluff. Rather than simply asking her what was going on, I figured the added threat of going through the guilds about it would compel her to fess up, since something like that would drag the Onifolk Archipelago's reputation through the mud. Realizing that she was in danger of having the guilds asking a lot of difficult questions, Yotsuha silently weighed her options, then turned to face us once more, but this time in a more formal kneeling position.

"I'm sorry that I caused you so much trouble," Yotsuha said. "I'll do everything in my power to make sure that you are not punished for escaping from the magistrate's office." There was a sincerity to Yotsuha's voice, and none of the brattiness that characterized her earlier conversations with us.

"The wider public doesn't know about this yet, but a summit is going to be held in the Principality of the Nine really soon," Yotsuha explained. "I had to come home early in order to meet with officials and prepare for the summit. I decided to hire your party as bodyguards as a favor to the guild, but I also figured you guys could take the heat for my fake kidnapping. I never imagined the head of Kamijo would treat you *that* harshly, though. I'm sorry it happened."

"So you *did* fake your kidnapping..." I said. "But why? You're *the* Holy Princess of the onis."

"Well..." Yotsuha was hesitant to spill her guts, but the sense of guilt she felt over our plight won out in the end. "I believed that if I and my sister were kidnapped, it would throw my nation into turmoil, making it easier for the

Wicked Witch of the Tower to make her move here.”

Nemumu, Gold, and I all looked at Yotsuha with baffled expressions plastered across our faces. *Why is she mentioning the Wicked Witch?* I wondered. *I know I told Ellie to be ready to overthrow this nation, but Yotsuha wasn't meant to be in on the plan or even know about it.* I'd received no word that Ellie had come into contact with Yotsuha, and Ellie had no reason to hide a secret like that from me.

Yotsuha could sense that we were hopelessly confused—though I was fairly sure she didn't know precisely why—so she decided to fill us in on the details. “I'm only telling you this because I got you into trouble, okay? This is something only a select few know, so what I'm about to say stays in this room.” She paused. “Do you know the creation myth of this nation?”

“Yeah. Well, at least as much as everyone else knows,” I said. If I were to be perfectly honest about it, the Onifolk Archipelago creation myth didn't differ all that much from other creation myths I'd heard.

Yotsuha's tone turned a shade darker. “That myth is actually true.”

It took me a second to work out what Yotsuha was trying to tell me. “You mean, there really *is* an ogre god and it's sealed away somewhere?”

“Yes, it exists,” Yotsuha said. “The first Holy Princess confined the ogre to the swamp at the top of this mountain, and if the ogre were to ever awaken, it could destroy the world.”

Back then, the people responsible for first sealing the ogre away believed the deity would only destroy the island, since they weren't yet aware that there was a whole continent beyond the sea, but once the islands had organized themselves into a nation and established contact with the mainland, the onis began to suspect that the ogre might even be able to destroy the world, given its power. The nation's capital sprang up at the foot of Mount Ogre, and the peak of the mountain was regarded as sacred ground, open only for national ceremonial rites. Commoners were prohibited by law from going near the peak, and anyone caught breaking that law was arrested and detained. The big secret they were trying to hide was that an actual ogre was sealed away inside the mountain.

“The ultimate goal of the onis since the founding of my nation is to destroy the ogre god,” Yotsuha continued. “That’s why our soldiers take it upon themselves to train diligently in the art of combat.”

Of course, it was all well and good if the onis became skilled enough to defeat a powerful ogre thanks to the school of martial arts they had invented, but realistically, no nation was ever going to stake its very survival solely on training up a bunch of soldiers.

“Apart from all the military training, from the very beginning, my nation decided to take the extra step of weakening the ogre after sealing it,” Yotsuha said. “They took condemned criminals and inscribed hexes specifically designed to weaken the ogre onto their bodies, then they sacrificed these criminals to the ogre. But it turned out not to be enough.”

Yotsuha let her words hang in the air for a moment before continuing. “The first Holy Princess decided she should also be sacrificed to the ogre, with the same weakening spells inscribed on her body.”

At first, her oni countrymen had been vociferously against sacrificing the Holy Princess, but she had made up her mind and insisted on doing what needed to be done, according to Yotsuha. She had argued that if the ogre were to reawaken, there was no telling whether the onis would be able to successfully seal the monster away for a second time, so if the Holy Princess didn’t give herself up as a sacrifice, the ogre might end up destroying the Onifolk Archipelago, and perhaps even the rest of the world with it. Eventually, everyone relented to the Holy Princess’s wishes and allowed her to sacrifice herself, and from that day forward, every Holy Princess throughout history would give birth to a daughter, raise her to become the next Holy Princess, then sacrifice herself to the ogre to weaken it.

“All Holy Princesses are powerful priestesses, so our blood sacrifices have made the ogre a lot weaker compared to what it was in its prime,” Yotsuha said. “If the Holy Princesses keep sacrificing themselves, then one day, the ogre will become weak enough for us to destroy it for good. But...” She paused. “But I don’t want any part of it!”

Yotsuha stroked her sleeping sister’s head lovingly. “I don’t want her to

become a sacrifice either. I swore to my mother that I would protect her.”

She added that she never wanted her children or her sister to become sacrifices either, which was why Yotsuha had enrolled at the School of Magic in the Duchy, hoping to learn of a way—*any* way—to finish off this ogre god. After all, the school in the Duchy was the top research academy when it came to magic spells. While there, Yotsuha pored through books looking for ways to either seal the ogre away forever without needing to rely on living sacrifices to keep it weakened, or destroy it altogether.

“But all of that research and studying I did came to naught,” Yotsuha said in a partly self-deprecating manner. She lifted her head, and I could see that her eyes that had been clouded with resignation now twinkled with hope. “I thought there was nothing I could do to save myself. That is, until I heard about the Great Witch of the Tower! Even though she’s a human, she was powerful enough to conquer the Elven Queendom, the Dark Elf Islands, and the Beastfolk Federation! If anyone can destroy that ogre or seal it away forever, it *has* to be her! I immediately tried to find a way to get in contact with the Great Witch, and when one of my personal bodyguards, Oboro, told me he had connections to her, I asked him to tell her about me. I even gave him all of the research materials I had on the ogre so that he could pass it along!”

Yotsuha told us that Oboro had written back to her sometime later to tell her that the Wicked Witch had looked over the documents and determined that she would be able to seal the ogre away forever and free Yotsuha from being a sacrifice. She wiped away tears as she recalled the sense of joy and relief she had felt at the time.

“After reading that letter in my room, I couldn’t stop crying my eyes out,” Yotsuha said. “I’d never felt so happy in my whole life, and I know I’ll never feel what I felt in that moment ever again. Ever since I was consecrated as the Holy Princess after my mother died in a freak accident, I had felt the hand of death constantly hovering over my shoulder. I promised I would protect my sister, but I felt like there was a complete void inside me because I knew she might be sacrificed next. But I have finally been set free from that horrible fate. How could I not be thrilled by that?”

Yotsuha, her sister, and every other Holy Princess born thereafter would

finally be able to live their lives free from the ever-present fear of being sacrificed to a flesh-eating ogre. However, Yotsuha faced a whole bunch of obstacles that kept her from forming an alliance with the Wicked Witch. For one thing, the Wicked Witch had become too notorious, and it was very doubtful that the Onifolk Archipelago would simply accept having their Holy Princess openly collaborating with such a villain. Inviting the Wicked Witch to permanently seal away the ogre would be the last thing the Kamijo clan would want to do, since such a move could only hurt the nation's image. After all, if the Onifolk Archipelago were to rely on the Wicked Witch for help, other nations would naturally assume that this meant the onis were now within the Wicked Witch's sphere of influence, much like the elves, the dark elves, and the beastfolk. Plus, if it got out that the onis had been sacrificing their Holy Princesses to an ogre since time immemorial, that alone would tar the nation completely. And the onis had another reason for keeping the ogre a secret: they didn't want outsiders to purposely come to the archipelago to break the seal and end up putting the nation on the path to destruction. No, given the circumstances, Yotsuha couldn't count on the House of Kamijo to help her and the Wicked Witch to permanently seal away the ogre.

"So we decided to take matters into our own hands," Yotsuha said.

The "we" in this instance meant the other daimyo: the House of Shimobashira. If Kamijo was the de facto ruling authority of the Onifolk Archipelago, Shimobashira was the clan that basically served as the Holy Princess's retainers. Back when the nation was founded, the two daimyos were considered equal in standing, but over time, Kamijo got the upper hand to create a power imbalance, and Shimobashira didn't like that one bit.

Yotsuha said she had used the hostility Shimobashira felt toward Kamijo to her advantage by secretly arranging to stage a kidnapping of the two sisters with Oboro and the rest of the Shimobashira people. Her reasoning was that if she and her sister were to vanish into thin air, it would throw the House of Kamijo into turmoil and give the Wicked Witch of the Tower the opening she needed to come to the Onifolk Archipelago and seal away the ogre for all eternity without meeting any resistance.

Yotsuha planned to take the heat for all the commotion once the dust settled,

and to appease the officials from Kamijo—who were sure to be thoroughly enraged by that point—Yotsuha was willing to abdicate from the role of Holy Princess and let Ayame assume the position.

In other words, Yotsuha was acting first and asking for forgiveness later. However, a permanent seal on the evil ogre god would be welcomed by everyone, and the power imbalance would be upended to the point where Kamijo would forever remain subservient to Shimobashira. Given this highly likely outcome, Shimobashira could hardly say no to getting involved in the scheme.

“Of course, the Great Witch will be fairly compensated,” Yotsuha said. “She wants my nation to pay her a huge monetary tribute for her services. But I don’t care what her price is. I’ll do everything I possibly can to convince Kamijo the expense is worth it. Nobody can put a price on all of the good that sealing the ogre away forever will do. Anyway, I’ve already faked my kidnapping now, and I’m not going back. I need the Great Witch to seal the ogre away for good.”

Once Yotsuha had finished confessing everything to us, I stood in the dark for several moments at a total loss for words, my palm pressed against my forehead, stupefied at what I had been hearing. Her entire account was so unexpected and off the wall that Nemumu was frowning at Yotsuha, wondering if she was half-demented. On the other hand, Gold had more or less figured out what was going on, and he stood with his arms crossed and pity exuded from him in much the same way as it would for someone who had fallen for a scammer. I turned to Nemumu and Gold, and asked with my eyes if they had heard anything about Ellie scheming to seal away an ogre god, to which they both shook their heads.

Shoulda guessed, I thought. I can’t imagine Ellie of all people would ever keep such a huge secret from me. The only conceivable possibility is that someone tricked Yotsuha—and all the signs point to Oboro and Shimobashira being behind it.

That would totally explain why Yotsuha had become so affectionate with Oboro. Anyone would treat someone like that like a family member or even better if they owed their life to that person.

I awkwardly cleared my throat. “I appreciate your candor in explaining the situation you find yourself in, and I’d like to return the favor by being equally honest with you. As it happens, my party works very closely with the Great Witch of the Tower, and we have spoken with her on multiple occasions, but at no point have we heard of any plans to seal away an ogre.”

Yotsuha reacted with a little surprise. “W-Well, of *course* she wouldn’t tell you. The plan was meant to be a secret, and frankly, I wasn’t even supposed to blab about it to you guys. All that other stuff I told you about was highly confidential, because they were all state secrets, and I only let you in on it because I felt like I owed it to you. But the Great Witch is too honorable to go sharing any of those kinds of secrets with you guys, no matter how closely you say you work with her.”

“I think the Great Witch is honorable too, but we’ve only just recently come from the Great Tower, and we saw nothing to suggest that she was preparing to come to this island imminently,” I pushed back. “Remember, we’re talking about sealing away an evil god that’s powerful enough to destroy the world here, and yet we didn’t catch a single whiff of her preparing to embark on such a huge mission. I mean, she couldn’t have kept a mission of that magnitude hidden from *everyone*, could she?”

I continued by pointing out some of the other inconsistencies. “And even if the Great Witch was able to seal away the ogre all by herself, she’d still need to bring people with her on such a long trip. Your nation is too far from the tower for her to get here quickly by ship or by carriage, so that would mean she and her retainers would have to come over on dragons. But we saw the dragons while we were at the tower, and all of them were either patrolling the area or helping out with the ongoing construction work like always. There wasn’t a single dragon that looked like it was getting ready to take the witch on a long flight. Not one.”

Of course, Ellie could just turn up here any time she wanted using a Teleportation card, but Yotsuha didn’t need to know that nugget of information. Speaking of the princess, her mouth was open wide as if she was just about to say something back, but nothing seemed to be coming out. Instead, her open mouth trembled like she was a newborn baby trying to speak

before her face turned a shade of crimson that was even visible to us despite how dark it was in the room. The next thing we knew, the princess had sprung to her feet and had started screaming at us.

“D-Don’t you *dare* lie to me!” Yotsuha hollered hoarsely. “You’re nothing but inferiors, and you are beneath me! You have no *right* to mock me and the pact I made with the Great Witch of the Tower! You should be put to death for what you have just said to my face, and when the Great Witch does reach this island, the first thing I’ll do is tell her *exactly* how you insulted us both!”

Yotsuha was so mad, the capillaries in her eyes started standing out like spiderwebs. “We’ll see how ‘closely’ you’re working with the Great Witch when she squashes you like bugs for offending her! If you had any idea the kind of mess you’re in, you would take back everything you just said and apologize! Take it back! Take back what you said *now*!”

Yotsuha was breathing heavily through her nose by the time her diatribe came to an end. Gold simply shrugged his shoulders like he would roll his eyes, but Nemumu’s forehead veins were pulsating and one of her hands was reaching for a dagger. She shot me a quick glance, pleading for me to give her the go-ahead, but I quickly shook my head to get her to come back to her senses.

“Please compose yourself, Your Holiness,” I said to Yotsuha. “We’ll only end up talking past each other unless the Great Witch clears things up for us. In fact, would it make you feel better if you spoke with the Great Witch about it yourself?”

“Huh?” Yotsuha breathed. “What are you suggesting now?”

“I’m inviting you to come and meet the Great Witch in person so you can ask her what she knows about your plan to seal away the ogre,” I said. “She gave us a translocation item that will spirit us away to the Great Tower in case of an emergency, so we can go see her right now if you like.”

Yotsuha was still red in the face with fury, but that anger had become mixed with confusion at what I was saying to her. As far as she knew, there was no item that could teleport her all the way from the Onifolk Archipelago to the Great Tower in the Elven Queendom, and she would know more about

teleportation items and their limits better than the average person up here on the surface, since she was a student at the world's top magic school.

Instead of trying to verbally convince her, I produced an SSR Teleportation card and activated it on the spot, causing myself, my party, Yotsuha, and her sleeping sister to be whisked away from the cottage. A moment later, we all found ourselves on the roof of the Great Tower, the full moon shining down on the forest that was steadily being cleared by dragons while some of their kin patrolled the perimeters. Yotsuha looked around frantically, convinced that she was no longer in her home nation.

“What just happened?” she yelped. “A-Are we really at the...”

By this point, the color had drained from Yotsuha's previously reddened face, and she kept rubbing her eyes as they bulged with wonder. She tried to take in her new surroundings but her brain wasn't quite able to believe what her eyes were seeing.

I thought about teleporting her directly inside the tower, but judging by her reaction, I made the right choice in bringing her out here first, I thought. This way, she knows she's not at home anymore, plus she can't accuse us of creating an illusion.

While Yotsuha was still looking around totally agog, I contacted Ellie using an SR Telepathy card and gave her a quick rundown of what was going on, before telling her to come to the roof of the tower disguised as the Wicked Witch of the Tower. Before long, Ellie showed up wearing her signature face-concealing hood of her alter ego, and she walked out onto the roof flanked by fairy maids.

“Salutations and welcome to the Great Tower, my dears,” Ellie said with extravagant flair. “Even though you have arrived here late at night without any warning, I will always entertain any guests of the Black Fools. And yes, it is I, the Wicked Witch of this tower, here to extend my greetings to you.”

“Y-You're the Great Witch...” Yotsuha uttered in a strained voice. Although this was Yotsuha's first time seeing the Wicked Witch, Ellie was wearing the same unique outfit she must have heard about, and if that weren't enough, the otherworldly fairy maids were fairly convincing in their own right. At that exact moment, still wrapped up in her bedding, Ayame mumbled in her sleep.

“Dear sister...” she said softly. “I’m hungry...” Drool even dribbled from the corner of her mouth.

“By George! How is she still able to talk after we used that sleeping card on her?” Gold said in some shock. “Mark my words, this girl is going to grow up to be a force to be reckoned with, what?” Nemumu and the fairy maids instinctively nodded in agreement with Gold’s observation.

Chapter 6: Entreaty

We brought Yotsuha and her sister down from the roof of the Great Tower to a reception chamber inside. Or more accurately, Ellie used another Teleportation card to instantly transport all of us there since it was too much hassle to walk downstairs. Once there, with Yotsuha's permission, one fairy maid carried the still-sleeping Ayame to a bedroom elsewhere in the tower, and a couple more fairy maids followed on behind with the little girl's bedding. Yotsuha seemed concerned about the idea of letting her sister go to a different room where she wouldn't be able to keep an eye on her, but we could hardly just leave Ayame to sleep on the floor in the reception chamber. Yotsuha reluctantly agreed to part with her sister only after the Wicked Witch had given her a solemn pledge that Ayame would be looked after, and the Holy Princess watched on as her sister was carried away. Ellie ordered the fairy maids to bring Yotsuha some outerwear to put on for the sake of her modesty, since she was still only in her nightwear, and once she had donned the extra layer of clothing and the pair of slippers that had been given to her, Yotsuha was directed to take a seat on a sofa. Still in her guise as the Wicked Witch, Ellie sat on the sofa on the other side of the coffee table from Yotsuha, while I seated myself in an armchair at the far end of the table, still wearing my disguise as Dark. Nemumu and Gold took up positions behind me, their backs to the wall, and a fairy maid placed cups of tea on the table in front of us before bowing and leaving us.

Ellie took a sip from her cup, placed the cup back on its saucer, then began. "Might I ask who you are? And why have the Black Fools brought you to my tower? Your circumstances must be awfully dire if they were moved to use the emergency teleportation item I gave them."

This was partly an act since I had already given Ellie a quick rundown on Yotsuha and her situation using my SR Telepathy card while we were up on the rooftop, but this meeting was an opportunity for Yotsuha to fill Ellie in on some of the details.

"W-Well, you must have heard about the creation myth of the Onifolk

Archipelago, yes?” Yotsuha started as meekly as a kitten. “The thing is, the myth is actually true.”

Yotsuha related the same lengthy backstory that she had recounted to me and my party back at her hideout. By the time she was done, the hot tea the fairy maid had poured for us was nearly ice cold, and Ellie raised a hand to signal for the fairy maid to pour us all some fresh ones. After the fairy maid had finished doing so and retreated again, Ellie finally offered her thoughts.

“Yes, I believe you are telling the truth. Or at least, as much of it as you know,” Ellie said. “However, I do not recall hearing anything about this ogre god from a Mr. Oboro, nor from any person from the House of Shimobashira. In fact, no one from your nation has even approached me about a malevolent deity threatening your people. I can assure you that I do not know of an oni named Mr. Oboro, nor of anyone associated with him. For him to tell you that he has connections to me is a fabrication of the most deplorable kind.”

“H-How *could* he?” Yotsuha said, growing pale and nearly fainting as the Wicked Witch completely dismantled the one ray of hope she’d had for survival. I definitely empathized with her on how devastated she must have been feeling at getting hoodwinked by the person she trusted most. Under normal circumstances, she would have needed a bit of time just to process all of the emotions she was feeling, but I wanted to clear up a few things and they took priority.

“Holy Princess Yotsuha,” I said warily. “Do I have your permission to ask you a few questions about a couple of issues I’m confused about?”

“Yeah, go ahead,” Yotsuha replied weakly.

“It makes sense that you trusted Shimobashira, since the clan has tended to your every need for as long as you’ve lived,” I said. “But how did Oboro become your confidant? He’s just a commoner.”

“I’ve been exchanging letters with Oboro for the past three years because he shared information with me about powerful warriors,” Yotsuha replied with a blank look on her still-ashen face. “Since he’d been active on the mainland for years as an adventurer, I thought he might be able to clue me in on someone powerful enough to destroy the ogre. He told me everything he knew in those

letters. In fact, the head of Shimobashira, Mitsuhiko, was so impressed with Oboro's faithful service for my benefit, he appointed Oboro to serve as my personal bodyguard. I thought I could trust Oboro too, but..."

Powerful warriors? I thought. *Oh, yeah. That reminds me of a story Oboro once told the rest of the party, back when we were still in the Concord of the Tribes. It was during one of our drinking sessions...*

Oboro was obsessed with training and turning himself into a more powerful warrior. He also made a thing of looking up champions, combat experts, and other fighters who had made names for themselves on the battlefield. Between drinks, Oboro had said that he loved finding out about powerful fighters and challenging them to duels, if it was feasible. That way, he could level up his skills, he'd told us.

Funnily enough, it appeared Oboro hadn't mentioned the Black Fools at all in his communications with Yotsuha. I figured for any humans to be considered worthy of being caught by Oboro's discerning eye, they would need to be as powerful as the Wicked Witch. But that was beside the point.

"Do you have any idea why Shimobashira and Oboro lied to you like they did?" I asked Yotsuha.

"I-I don't know," Yotsuha stammered. "I probably should've guessed that a newcomer like Oboro would try to trick me, but Shimobashira has always been loyal to me and the other Holy Princesses. I thought it was next to impossible for them to betray me like this..."

Yotsuha couldn't hold the tears back any longer, and she pressed her sleeves to her face before burying her head in her knees and weeping. We let her cry for a little while, her sobs echoing around the reception chamber, and once she had cried all the tears she could, she sat up straight again and regarded Ellie with reddened eyes.

"Please, I need your help, Great Witch!" Yotsuha said. She was very close to sprawling across the coffee table to grab Ellie's hands. "I know we got off on the wrong foot, but I beg you to use your immeasurable powers to save us! If you can seal the ogre away for the rest of eternity, or even destroy it once and for all, I swear upon my sanctity as the Holy Princess that I will pay whatever price

you request!”

“I will never agree to that,” Ellie replied bluntly.

“G-Great Witch?” Yotsuha was so stunned by Ellie’s instantaneous rejection that, just for a moment, she looked neither sad nor heartbroken by it.

There was an edge to Ellie’s tone when she spoke again. “I believe you saw fit to disparage the Black Fools as ‘inferiors’ who are supposedly ‘beneath’ you. So why exactly would I assist someone who speaks so contemptuously of my dear friends, might I ask?”

“How did you know I said that?” Yotsuha gasped. I couldn’t blame her for being astonished by this revelation, since she had been with me and my party the entire time and hadn’t seen us tattle on her at all. Sweat started to form on Yotsuha’s brow, since she was now probably under the illusion that she was gawking at a sorceress who was powerful enough to literally read people’s minds. The fairy maids in the room were all staring daggers at Yotsuha, as though they were wishing they had known about her trash-talking me beforehand so they could have squeezed the water from their dirty washrags into her tea before serving it to her. I was flattered that they were so angry on my behalf, but they really didn’t need to take it *that* far.

But seriously, how did Ellie know what Yotsuha had said to us in the cottage? I asked myself. I only briefed Ellie on the bare bones of what was said, and I know for sure I didn’t get into those kinds of details about our conversation...

I hadn’t told Ellie about Yotsuha’s rant using my Telepathy card, which left only two other possibilities. *Gold isn’t the type to blab about something like that, so did Nemumu tell Ellie via Telepathy?*

I turned to look at Nemumu and saw her eyes darting back and forth, her expression hidden behind her muffler. Gold was looking across at Nemumu too, presumably because he had noticed that she was acting all nervous, and this only confirmed that I’d hit the nail on the head.

In the past, Ellie and Nemumu bonded over their shared interest in poisons and medicine, and by the looks of it, Nemumu had been furious enough at Yotsuha to relay her comments to Ellie using a Telepathy card, I deduced. With that mystery solved, I turned back around to Ellie and Yotsuha, and saw that the

princess had risen from her seat and dropped to her hands and knees.

“I deeply, deeply apologize to the Black Fools for all of those awful things I said to them!” Yotsuha repented. “I was laboring under the wrong impression at the time, but that’s no excuse for my deplorable actions! When I get back to my nation, I will issue a formal apology and offer monetary reparations to make amends for the insult, so I beg you for mercy, Great Witch! You’re the only hope I have to save me, my sister, and every other Holy Princess that comes after us from being sacrificed to the ogre! I’m begging you with the entirety of my being, Great Witch of the Tower!”

“I couldn’t care less about this ogre you speak of,” Ellie said sharply. “Whether it is destroyed or not is completely irrelevant to the interests of the human race. As far as I’m concerned, you and your descendants can just carry on sacrificing yourselves to that creature all you like.”

“I...” Yotsuha leaned forward and planted her forehead on the floor. “I don’t care what happens to me. But please, at least save my baby sister and all future Holy Princesses. Please, I beg you.”

She just wants to save her sister? The fact that I had my own little sister in Yume meant Yotsuha’s desperate plea to protect her sister from harm really hit home. Although on a separate note, I did still want to know exactly why Oboro and Shimobashira had wanted to trick Yotsuha, and whether I could somehow use this massive breach of trust to my advantage when it came to getting my revenge on Oboro. I glanced over at Ellie and gave her a quick nod. She understood the message and let out a theatrical sigh of resignation.

“Very well,” Ellie said. “If I were to refuse the pleadings of a young girl who was imploring me in this manner, I would only look like a craven coward hiding in fear from some silly ogre. I will make an exception this once and assist you in your cause.”

Yotsuha raised her head, tears of joy streaming down her cheeks. “Thank you so much, Great Witch! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!” Yotsuha pressed her head to the floor again in a deep bow, eliciting a mildly irritated shrug from the Great Witch.

“I accept your words of gratitude,” Ellie said. “But I’m sure you’re aware that I

do not offer my services for free. We will enter into a formal agreement, similar to a bilateral pact between nations. I alone will determine the terms of our deal, so you may now rise and retake your seat on the sofa.”

“Yes, of course! Anything you say!” the overjoyed Yotsuha said before returning to the sofa. “As the Holy Princess of the onifolk, I will accept and enforce any and all conditions you apply to us!”



Yotsuha ended up agreeing to a whole bunch of provisions in return for receiving help from the Wicked Witch of the Tower. These included having the Onifolk Archipelago cover any and all costs incurred during the mission to destroy the ogre, backing Lilith’s ascension to the throne of the Human Kingdom at the upcoming summit, and surrendering any item, document, information, or person when requested (with possible exceptions allowed after consultation with the Wicked Witch). And of course, Yotsuha would grant the witch access to the inner workings of her nation in order for her to gather the intelligence she would need to destroy the ogre god.

Once the specifics had been ironed out, Ellie and Yotsuha signed an official agreement, but the process had taken so long that by the time they put ink to paper, it was already morning. Ayame had awoken from her sleep and was wondering what was going on, so Yotsuha took it upon herself to explain the situation to her sister. Or to be more precise, Yotsuha told Ayame a bunch of white lies intended to convince the younger girl that she was merely staying at the Great Tower for a little vacation.

After that was all settled, I teleported Ellie, Nemumu, Gold, and myself back to the bottom of the Abyss, whereupon I dismissed Nemumu and Gold, and took Ellie with me to my executive office. I sat down at my desk and had a fairy maid pour me some tea to perk me up (although I could go for days without needing sleep, thanks to my max level). The maid placed the tea in front of me, then bowed and left us to our conversation. I took a sip of the tea before launching into a discussion with Ellie.

“Sorry for calling you out so late at night,” I said. “I know I got Nemumu to warn you beforehand to be ready to engage with Yotsuha, but that really was

asking a lot.”

“Please, there’s no need to apologize, Blessed Lord,” Ellie said. “I’m always delighted to be at your beck and call, morning, noon, and night! S-Speaking of which, you’re free to summon me if you ever get lonely s-s-sleeping by yourself at night.”

I politely laughed off the suggestion. “Thanks, Ellie. Whenever that time comes, I’ll be sure to call on you.”

Ellie was still blushing from making that awkward proposition. I took another sip of my tea, then changed the subject.

“I wasn’t expecting to hear all that stuff from Yotsuha after finding her,” I said. “What would make Oboro and her own Shimobashira retainers lie to her? I think it’s safe to say the Kamijo clan wasn’t involved in her fake kidnapping, given how frantic their leader looked when we saw him. So why would Shimobashira fake a kidnapping to fool Kamijo and lie to Yotsuha so that she played along? How does it all fit into the power struggle?”

“We should be able to find all of that out in due course once we’ve launched our intelligence-gathering operation,” Ellie said. “Thankfully, we’ve just received permission from the Holy Princess to conduct espionage all across her nation, and since Miss Yotsuha and Miss Ayame have now *truly* gone missing, as far as the onifolk are concerned, the entirety of their power structure will be mired in turmoil, allowing us to conduct our intel operations as smoothly as we could have hoped.”

Up until this point, we’d had very little luck in getting any kind of intel on the Onifolk Archipelago due to how insular and isolated it was as a nation. We couldn’t risk deploying Aoyuki’s spy monsters because we were afraid some high-level onis we weren’t previously aware of might have been able to sniff them out. But thanks to that fiasco at the magistrate’s office, we now knew for sure that Sogen was the most powerful warrior in the archipelago, and he was only Level 1500. Besides, if the onifolk did have people as powerful as us, they would’ve taken care of their ogre problem a long time ago, so with all of this new knowledge, we were free to go wild spying on the onis.

“First, we need to gather all the intel we’re currently missing,” I said. “After

all, we don't even know if it's safe to destroy the ogre like Yotsuha is suggesting. There could be potential repercussions we're not presently aware of."

For instance, destroying this ogre god might actually cause a cataclysmic event by itself, such as the main island sinking below the waves, though I was fairly sure that possibility was close to zero. Since we were keeping Yotsuha and Ayame in the Great Tower, we could take our time gathering the intelligence we needed. We didn't need to make our move prematurely.

I sat back in my office chair and allowed an evil grin to break out across my face. "And all the new intel we gather might show us the best way to exact vengeance on Oboro. Ellie, I'm authorizing you to use whatever monsters and cards you have at your disposal to scoop up every last bit of intel the onis have been hiding from us. I'll inform Aoyuki and Annelia of this mandate too, so could you take care of this assignment for me?"

"Yes, Blessed Lord Light! Allow me to handle this operation!" Ellie exclaimed. "I promise I will gather all the intelligence you seek to your satisfaction!"

"Thanks a lot, Ellie. You're the greatest," I said, my smile turning sunnier.

Ellie gasped with ecstasy in a long, drawn-out kind of way. "Y-You're far too kind to me, Your Blessedness."

It just went to show that nothing made Ellie happier than having me depend on her to oversee a project, and I chuckled despite myself at her overexaggerated reaction. And with that, we launched our huge intelligence-gathering operation across the whole of the Onifolk Archipelago.

Chapter 7: Absolute Power

Oboro was born the second son of a soldier stationed in a provincial city in the Onifolk Archipelago. Oni males typically started martial arts training from an early age as a form of basic education, purportedly to become warriors who might one day band together with the Holy Princess to defeat the resurrected ogre god, and Oboro was no different, training with his older brother and other neighborhood youths. He took a liking to more physical activities, all while harboring the somewhat hazy goal of becoming a soldier like his father.

But when Oboro was still a boy, he witnessed an event that would change his life forever. On that day, Oboro awoke earlier than usual for his morning training, and he went down to a totally deserted beach with his wooden sword, so that he could practice swinging it about. But before he'd even swung it once, he noticed something strange moving about in the water. At first, he thought it must be a broken piece of lumber floating far from the shore, but he soon realized he was wrong.

"Is that a *sea monster*?!" the young Oboro exclaimed.

The fishlike monster had a massive head and scales that gleamed in the morning sunshine like burnished armor. Just breaking the surface, the leviathan sliced its way through the water at breakneck speed toward the shore. The Onifolk Archipelago had no dungeons for reasons that were still being debated by scientists, but the sea surrounding the islands spawned monsters all the same, and these creatures often had higher power levels than regular surface-dwelling monsters.

The onis would battle these sea monsters that showed up near their islands to level grind, which is how the onifolk quickly became the most experienced of all the nine races when it came to fighting aquatic creatures. Young Oboro himself had witnessed sea monster battles several times before, but this was the first time he had seen such a creature project so much ferocity from his vantage point from the shore. He could tell that this sea monster's level was north of

1000, making it the type of aquatic beast that rarely came to these shores. But in this moment, this near-mythical creature was swimming directly toward the beach where Oboro was training.

Oboro knew he was supposed to run in the opposite direction and scream for help from any adults who might be around, but terror had seized his nerves, and he fell over backward onto the seat of his pants, whimpering helplessly. Considering how old he was at the time, he did well not to wet himself.

Out of nowhere, he heard a fierce kiai war cry, and the next thing he knew, the sea monster's head detached from the rest of its body and fell onto the sand with a thundering crash. In this consequential moment that changed his whole outlook on life, Oboro's eyes moved from the severed head, to the rest of the sea monster's blood-covered body, and lastly, to the single human male who was standing atop the corpse. The man had dark hair and his eyes had a long strip of black cloth covering them. In his hand, he held a long blade that was the same shade of black as his blindfold. Oboro knew from a distance that this person was human, because his ears were neither beastlike nor tapered like the elves, and he had no horns growing out of his head.

A hush descended on the beach. Shrouded all in black from head to toe, the man turned his blindfolded eyes toward Oboro and briefly observed the young oni, though he soon lost interest and disappeared from the spot in a flash. Left all alone, Oboro collapsed onto his back and passed out, the fear and tension of his brush with death overwhelming him.

Later on, he woke up in his bedroom. Upon hearing a thunderous noise over at the beach, some adult onis had arrived to find out what all the ruckus was about and discovered the remains of a powerful sea monster not far from an unconscious boy. The frightened onis called soldiers to come and deal with the emergency, and a nearby doctor who had been brought there to check on Oboro's condition determined that the boy had not been injured and had simply passed out. So with the help of a few neighbors, Oboro's mother had carried her son home.

On waking, Oboro told a soldier that he had seen a man dressed all in black slice the head off the sea monster, but despite his best efforts, he wasn't able to convince the soldier that a human—a member of a race scorned as

“inferiors” on the mainland—could defeat a Level 1000 sea creature all by himself.

The soldier ended his questioning by aiming a look of pity at the young oni. A cursory probe later on failed to turn up any other sightings of a human in that area, and authorities closed the case believing that Oboro had passed out on seeing the decapitated body of a large sea monster on the beach, for this was a much more plausible explanation than what his testimony suggested. Rumors of a powerful human showing up on the islands briefly circulated among the onis, but talk of it soon died down, and nobody spoke of the episode again. But Oboro knew what he saw had been real, and wasn't the product of a dream or a hallucination.

Now that I think about it, that sea monster seemed scared of something, Oboro mused. *Maybe that man in black scared the monster into swimming toward the beach. That'd mean that human was powerful enough to scare a Level 1000 monster! Unbelievable!*

The might of the man in black remained stuck in Oboro's mind from that point onward, and the boy eventually embraced a new goal: to become as powerful as the human he saw that day. He threw himself into his combat training, and a few years later, he ended up besting all of his peers in martial arts contests, which he put down to the amount of time he had spent practicing, as well as the natural gifts he had been born with. Whenever an opportunity presented itself, Oboro would participate in battles against sea monsters, and before he knew it, everyone considered him to be his people's top young warrior. Yet no matter the heights Oboro attained in terms of his combat abilities, he still felt worlds away from what that shadowy human could do. *My skills are still sorely lacking compared to that man in black* was the line Oboro often repeated to himself back then.

A time soon arrived when defeating sea monsters just wasn't enough to elevate his power level as fast as he wanted, so he decided to set off from the Onifolk Archipelago and strike out for the mainland in order to become more powerful. However, it took him an inordinate amount of time to become acclimated to the wildly different culture on the mainland, meaning he started off by exploring dungeons alone. Oboro was quite able to cart his own luggage

around, and he could get magic gems and other sellable materials from the monsters he slew, but he was unable to camp and sleep outdoors at night, since he had no one to watch his back while he was asleep. These constraints limited how deep into a dungeon he could go, and how much time he could spend on such quests. *Not only is it difficult exploring dungeons alone, the money I earn isn't enough to maintain this lifestyle*, Oboro mused.

To solve this problem, he decided to form his own party, though almost as soon as he'd put up the recruitment notice, another party reached out to him. This party—known as the Golden Treasure Chest—had long had their eye on Oboro, since onis were known for their superior combat abilities. The party was led by a demon and had a few beastmen as members, and as the name implied, it was the party that had been formed by treasure hunters searching for riches in dungeons. Because the objectives of the Golden Treasure Chest seemed to match those of Oboro, he readily agreed to join their party.

Oboro served as the party's vanguard on quests and he slew plenty of monsters, which helped to raise his power level. The party also successfully found loot boxes in the dungeons they ventured into, meaning its members were better compensated than most other parties. However, it wasn't long before Oboro ran into the same problem that had led him to leave his homeland.

I was right. I'm not leveling up as quickly as I did before, he thought, his brow wrinkling in distress. Oboro had reached Level 400 by this point, but he was having trouble breaking clear of that particular threshold. *Perhaps my own limit is around the 600 mark*, Oboro surmised.

The level cap for most onifolk was said to be in the 500-700 range, and Oboro was staring that barrier in the face. Without some kind of intervention, he believed he would never attain the peak level he sought.

No! This is not the end of it! Oboro thought defiantly. *There is no doubt in my mind that I will grab the absolute power displayed by that man in black with my own two hands!*

Unable to let go of his childhood dream so easily, Oboro vowed to do whatever it took to become as dominant as that human he had seen in

midnight attire. On his days off, he would go off by himself to fight powerful monsters or ask warriors mightier than himself if he could study under them. He also tried another, more unconventional approach.

“P-Please don’t kill me!” pleaded the human slave he had tied to a tree. “Please, sir! I’m begging you! I don’t want to die!”

Oboro ignored the human’s desperate cries and swung his oni island sword with a grunt, slicing the unfortunate slave cleanly in half from his collarbone to the right side of his lower abdomen and cutting the rope that had bound the slave to the tree. Oboro had used the money he had earned questing with the Golden Treasure Chest to purchase the slave, then taken him to the woods outside of town with the express intention of butchering the human.

“Will this really help me to surpass my limit?” Oboro muttered to himself as he flicked the blood off his sword and resheathed his weapon in its scabbard. He had heard a rumor about an elven knight who had been able to smash past his level cap by slaying a human slave, but despite killing slaves in this manner several times, he saw no indication that his power level was climbing at its previous pace.

“And I had believed these so-called inferiors might be of some use to me...” Oboro lamented. After breathing a disappointed sigh, he left the dismembered body lying at the foot of the tree and headed back into the city. He had decided to kill the human out in the woods because he knew monsters would eventually come along and eat the body, saving him the trouble of cleaning up the remains.

Despite his best efforts, Oboro’s chances of becoming meaningfully powerful seemed as out of reach as ever, until one day, the Golden Treasure Chest made the discovery of a lifetime. The party was in the middle of exploring a dungeon when they happened upon a loot box containing a magic hand mirror. The party’s demon leader used an item that was capable of performing basic Appraisal to scan the mirror, and he blinked in surprise.

“This is apparently called the Doppelgänger Mirror,” the party leader told the rest of his crew. “It can only be used once, but this item can copy someone else’s abilities and transfer them to the user? If I’m not mistaken, this might be

an epic-class item, or maybe even a phantasma-class one!”

The other party members erupted with jubilation at this news, since phantasma-class items often fetched untold amounts of money when auctioned off.

“We finally found the ‘get rich quick’ treasure we were looking for!” one of the party members exclaimed.

“Way to go, chief! You’re lucky as hell!” another called out. But while everyone else was celebrating, Oboro remained silent, for he had realized the possibilities this mirror could open up for him.

If I use that Doppelgänger Mirror on the man in black or a similarly powerful warrior, then perhaps I too can possess absolute power, he thought.

Later that night, Oboro proceeded to betray his party by waiting until they fell asleep, then killing them methodically one by one. Because the Golden Treasure Chest had stuck together through thick and thin over the past several years since Oboro had joined them, nobody in the party suspected the oni capable of committing such an act of treachery, which only made the deed easier to carry out.

“All that is left to do now is to feed the bodies to random monsters to conceal my tracks,” Oboro said as he pocketed the Doppelgänger Mirror. He didn’t feel one ounce of remorse over slaying his comrades, because he now held the key to gaining absolute power as a result. Any concern he felt for his dead partymates was solely reserved for spinning a believable alibi: that he was the lone survivor of a mass slaughter. Fortunately for Oboro, other adventurers bought his cover story, and because he was disciplined enough not to have pilfered any other belongings from his deceased former partymates, that helped to give his alibi an extra veneer of plausibility. All the other adventurers felt sorry for Oboro, but they balked at the idea of recruiting him into their own parties. There was a stigma attached to the survivors of deadly slaughters like the one Oboro had reportedly witnessed, due to the superstition that they would just infect any new party they joined with similar bad luck.

On top of that, the oni wasn’t really friendly with enough adventurers for any of them to take a chance on him. But for Oboro, these circumstances actually

suited him fine. *I need to explore the mainland and find a champion with absolute power so that I can use this mirror on them*, he told himself. With this purpose in mind, Oboro set off on a whole new journey, though because he used to seek out powerful fighters in his spare time anyway, this development hardly came as a shock to adventurers who knew him.

Weeks turned to months and months to years, yet Oboro didn't encounter a single champion worthy of using the Doppelgänger Mirror on them. He found plenty of warriors who were vastly more powerful than himself, of course, but none were on the same level as the man in black. Oboro was just reaching the point where the money he'd earned with the Golden Treasure Chest was starting to run dry when an envoy sent by the House of Kamijo unexpectedly paid him a visit.

"You have been ordered to assist in the search for a powerful being known as a Master," the oni messenger had told him.

It was a command rather than a request, because onis who ventured out of the archipelago to become adventurers were few and far between, so there weren't exactly many other candidates to choose from. Oboro was also a prime choice since he had previously been a part of an interracial party, which aligned perfectly with the nature of this secret assignment. Of course, Oboro would be well compensated for his services, the envoy informed him: not only would he receive an honorarium that would make him a wealthy man, he would also be granted a high-status position back home if he wanted it.

Oboro welcomed this well-timed and highly opportune proposition. A Master was said to be a human gifted with superpowers that defied description. Oboro mentally licked his chops at the prospect of using the Doppelgänger Mirror on one of these supreme beings. *It could be that the man in black I saw as a child was one of these Masters*, Oboro thought as the pieces started coming together. There was no way he was going to refuse an offer like this.

"I will humbly abide by this order," Oboro said.

"Good," the messenger replied. "You have done well to say you will."

Once the contract was signed, Oboro moved to the appointed city, where he met up with the other members of the Concord of the Tribes. He naturally

didn't let it show on his face, but he was immensely excited to be getting the opportunity to encounter a Master through this undercover adventuring party.

Apparently, finding a Master is more a case of luck than skill, so the chances of us finding one is remote, thought Oboro. However, there is a real possibility that we might encounter the man in black.

Oboro's hopes were dashed, however, when the Concord of the Tribes discovered a boy by the name of Light, a potential Master who turned out to have a completely useless Gift. Oboro was disappointed to find out that Light was a fake, but after the party had disposed of the boy in the Abyss, the oni shrugged off the setback and restarted his search for a champion, this time armed with the riches that had been bestowed upon him for completing his mission. This activity fell within something of a gray area in terms of Oboro's contractual obligations. The nations responsible for putting together the Concord of the Tribes banned all of its former members from searching for Masters, because having the same people conducting such manhunts would make it easier for any undiscovered Masters to identify the clandestine project.

Oboro wasn't searching for Masters, however. At least, not on the face of it. He was merely using his own funds to gather information on powerful champions, much like how any eccentric adventurer looking for a new challenge would do. This pretext helped to ward off questions about the legality of it, and besides, Oboro wasn't necessarily obsessed with looking for a Master, anyway.

"I search for absolute power," Oboro had said at the time. "It doesn't even matter if a monster possesses it." Indeed, if Oboro were to encounter the world's deadliest monster, he would happily use the Doppelgänger Mirror on it.

A few months after the Concord of the Tribes had left Light for dead in the Abyss, Oboro received a letter from the Holy Princess Yotsuha.

"I hope this isn't another annoyance," he said as he opened the letter. He braced himself for an order to carry out another mission, similar to how he had been appointed to the Concord of the Tribes, but to his surprise, the message contained an innocuous if somewhat unusual request.

"She wants the information I have on powerful warriors?" Oboro summed up. "Why would the Holy Princess seek such knowledge from me?"

Although her position was merely ceremonial, the Holy Princess was still regarded as the top figure in Onifolk society. If she had wanted this information, she could have easily asked others to gather it for her. But the Holy Princess had gone out of her way to write this letter to Oboro specifically, and well, he didn't have anything to hide.

"It would be unwise to defy my betters," he said to himself as he put pen to paper.

A few days after he had mailed his response, he received another letter from Yotsuha, and this one asked him to send her regular updates on powerful warriors. Oboro frowned this time, because he viewed this as unnecessary busywork, but he wrote a letter in response anyway, reasoning that the minor inconvenience of his compliance would pale in comparison to the unwanted attention he was sure to receive if he refused the request of the princess. As such, Oboro dutifully sent updates to Yotsuha, believing that this would be the extent of his involvement with the Holy Princess, and for a time, it was, until he was visited by an official while on one of his journeys outside the Onifolk Archipelago.

"Please forgive the intrusion, Master Oboro," the visitor said. "I work for the House of Shimobashira. I would like to inquire about the nature of the written correspondence you have been sharing with the Holy Princess."

After a few moments of silence, Oboro invited the agent up to the room at the inn where he was staying at the time. Shimobashira was one of the two top daimyos of the Onifolk Archipelago, so he was in a poor position to just send the official packing.

Sitting in a chair facing Oboro, the agent said that the House of Shimobashira had found out that the Holy Princess had been exchanging letters with a male while attending the School of Magic. She had refused to share the contents of the letters, but judging from her gleeful expression others had witnessed on her face whenever she opened Oboro's letters, there was good cause to assume that the Holy Princess and Oboro were romantically involved. The head of Shimobashira entrusted with the Holy Princess's well-being had grown concerned about whether his charge had become entangled in some scandalous affair.

The Holy Princess certainly possesses the wisdom to attend the School of Magic, but she is still a young girl, Oboro thought. Why would they think I would be smitten with a mere child? Spare me that shame.

He resisted the urge to pull his hair out in frustration at the accusation and instead rose from his chair to retrieve a stack of papers that he placed in front of the agent. "These are all of the letters I have received from the Holy Princess. I ask that you read them."

"Thank you. I shall peruse them," the official said. Oboro had saved the letters for precisely this contingency, and he waited patiently as the agent scanned the text. Once finished, the Shimobashira functionary looked up, a sheepish grin splashed across his face.

"From what I have just read, it appears we've rushed to judgment," said the agent.

"I am only relieved that we have been able to clear up this misunderstanding," Oboro replied.

The official handed back the letters and bowed his head. "We would appreciate it if you could continue to humor the Holy Princess and her whims." And with that, the agent got up and promptly left the room.

After seeing the agent off, Oboro sighed in relief. *I hope that is the last I see of any higher-ups*, he thought. But a few months later, his hopes were dashed again.

"A letter from the head of Shimobashira?" Oboro muttered to himself. After finding out about Oboro's background, the clan chief became interested in him and desired a meeting in person. Although he could have done without the invite, Oboro wrote a letter back to agree to this proposed meeting.

A needless inconvenience, but hopefully a single meeting will satisfy him, Oboro thought with a sigh as he prepared to make the return trip to his homeland. On his arrival back at the Onifolk Archipelago, he delayed the meeting he had agreed to in order to give himself some time to ask around about the head of Shimobashira.

So the former head died suddenly, and his only son took his place, Oboro

thought after he had finished doing the background check. *They say the son is a talented man of the like never seen before in the daimyo. He is still young, yet he has already earned the confidence of Kamijo and his subordinates, huh?*

The new head of Shimobashira was the youngest to ever hold the position, which just proved the level of support he had managed to curry among others in the house. Not only was the leader highly intelligent, he was rather handsome and exuded a warm personality in addition to demonstrating calm and collected decision-making under pressure. In the art of combat, he possessed skills that surpassed those of a middling soldier, meaning that he had no flaws in all the important aspects, which only made Oboro highly suspicious of him. Oboro agreed to a meeting all the same and showed up at the House of Shimobashira on the appointed day.

“It is I, Oboro, and I am humbled to be in your presence,” he said as he knelt in front of the floor cushion that he would be using as his seat for the duration of the meeting. “It is my great honor to be blessed with the opportunity to lay eyes upon you on this occasion, Lord Mitsuhiro.”

“Ordinarily, I would be the one paying a visit to your abode, but I have been so busy as of late,” Mitsuhiro explained. “As such, I very much appreciate you answering my summons. You may make yourself at home and drop the formality.”

This meeting between the two onis took place in the living room of the Shimobashira manor in the capital. The pair sat at a low table on a tatami floor, and the room they were in had decorative scrolls hanging on the walls, and meticulously tended flower bouquets dotted around. On Mitsuhiro’s instructions, Oboro sat down on his cushion, though he made sure to remain sitting up straight, for even though a superior had told him to “make himself at home,” it would be the height of folly to take such an invitation at face value. While Oboro was served tea and cakes on the table in front of him, Mitsuhiro asked him various questions about his background, his way of thinking, and his relationship with Yotsuha. As he answered each of the queries in turn, Oboro observed the young Shimobashira head closely. *He is every bit as handsome and charismatic as people say he is, Oboro thought. His physique is also impeccable. If I were to leap over this table and attack him, I do not believe I would be able*

to overpower him easily.

Mitsuhiko was a good 175 centimeters tall and wore a traditional court robe with long, flared sleeves. If there was something about his appearance that set him apart from other attractive onis, it was his eyes. Mitsuhiko had heterochromatic pupils, which meant his left eye was a different color than his right. Combined with his looks and his mellifluous voice, his two-colored eyes were a unique trait that only added to his charms.

Of course, Oboro wasn't the only one quietly sizing up the other. Mitsuhiko carefully scrutinized his guest, though like his counterpart, he had already gathered plenty of information on the oni adventurer from myriad sources prior to the meeting. On finding himself speaking to Oboro personally, Mitsuhiko believed he had stumbled across a man of extraordinary abilities, so he quickly broached a new topic of conversation.

"Mr. Oboro, would you side with me?" Mitsuhiko asked. "I believe you possess the necessary qualities to join my ranks."

"You want me on your side?" Oboro said.

Mitsuhiko's amiable expression was replaced with a fiendish grin. "The House of Shimobashira will take control of the god ogre as our ultimate weapon, and reign supreme over these islands and the entire mainland."



The normally poker-faced Oboro stared at the young leader in shock as Mitsuhiro started laying out his secret plan in detail.

The founders of the Onifolk Archipelago initially had the goal of weakening the ogre sealed away in the mountain, but when the onis later made contact with the other races, they became aware of more advanced nation-building taking place on the mainland. The more the onis interacted with the other races, the more the House of Kamijo dreaded the possibility that one or more of these races might try to attack and conquer their homeland, and at around the same time, Kamijo hit upon the idea of turning the ogre into a weapon to protect themselves.

The founding onis had successfully managed to stop the ogre from wreaking havoc on the main island by springing a trap on it and placing seals on its lower limbs to basically immobilize the giant. Once the onis had constrained the movements of the ogre, the soldiers were able to attack their foe as one and gradually weaken it enough for the first Holy Princess to place seals on the upper half of its body. This was how the oni founders were able to completely seal away the ogre, according to legend.

Kamijo sought to reverse the process by canceling the seals that had been placed on the ogre's head and feeding the enfeebled god live sacrifices in order to restore it to its former strength. Generations of research supplemented by knowledge that had been gained from the mainland had culminated in a treatise written up by an oni scientist: a method for attaining complete control over the ogre. After reading the paper, the head of Kamijo at the time had slavered at the thought of turning the tables on the other races and conquering the mainland with the ogre. The top brass in Shimobashira had also discussed the prospect of vanquishing the entire mainland and were fully embracing the project as well.

Kamijo and Shimobashira put their plan into action by falsifying the historical records and convincing the Holy Princess at the time that all of her predecessors had sacrificed themselves to weaken the ogre. Once she was fully indoctrinated by their falsehoods, she allowed herself to have subservience spells inscribed on her body, all the while thinking they were weakening spells, before willingly sacrificing herself to the ogre.

The two daimyos also fed the ogre human slaves that they had secretly smuggled into the nation, oni criminals condemned to be executed, and other assorted victims who had been unlucky enough to be chosen for this ghastly undertaking. All had subservience spells inscribed all over their bodies, but it was the sacrifices made by the Holy Princesses who had been fooled into believing they were weakening the ogre, that had infused power and subserviency into the ogre god, much more in comparison to the sacrifices of the human slaves and the oni commoners.

The ogre's powers had steadily been amplified with each generation of Holy Princess sacrificed, and bringing the tale up to the present day, the ogre was more or less completely controllable by this point. The Kamijo leaders had gone ahead and unsealed the upper half of the ogre's body, then made it do a little performance to prove it. Utamaro had been supremely impressed by the display and the other Kamijo officials knew that the time to take over the mainland would soon be at hand. Mitsuhiro, however, was hell-bent on making sure that this dream would not come true for the rival clan.

"The only reason Kamijo is able to get close to completely controlling this ogre with its renewed strength is due to our cooperation," Mitsuhiro said. "It is only thanks to the efforts of this house that they were able to reach that milestone. The two houses were once considered as equals, as I am sure you well know. In fact, I would argue that our house held the superior position, since we are the protectors of the Holy Princess, the very embodiment of our nation. Yet Kamijo had the audacity to forget their place in the hierarchy and saw fit to treat us like we were beaten dogs, or slaves even. If you were in my position, would you continue to link hands with such a company of dishonorable fools?"

According to Mitsuhiro, the House of Shimobashira were planning to double-cross Kamijo by taking control of the ogre right at the very end. Once Shimobashira had commandeered the ogre, the clan would capture every man, woman, and child in the House of Kamijo and feed them to the colossus as sacrifices.

"Kamijo wanted to indirectly take control of the mainland by flaunting the strength of the ogre, particularly to the dragonutes and the demonkin,"

Mitsuhiko explained. “But we are not like them. We intend to seize anyone who gets in our way, be they dragonutes, demons, elves, dark elves, or these so-called Masters, and feed them to the ogre as sacrificial offerings. Once the ogre accumulates more power from these sacrifices, there will be no one left to challenge Shimobashira’s worldwide domination.”

Mitsuhiko stared fixedly at Oboro. “Those incompetent fools in Kamiyo have no inkling that we are about to betray them, because we have quietly bowed to their false authority for centuries. The leader of that house has done nothing to change my opinion that he is a hapless charlatan who is resting on the laurels of his unearned power. Do you not also think that this is the case, Mr. Oboro?”

“Lord Mitsuhiko, why are you telling me all of this in confidence?” Oboro said, replying to the question with a different question. But instead of being annoyed by it, Mitsuhiko treated his guest to a knowing, almost mischievous look.

“The Holy Princess has grown rather attached to you, as evidenced by the letters the two of you exchange,” Mitsuhiko said. “I do not believe she will try to run away from us, but assuming she did ever pluck up the courage to do so, we would still have her younger sister as backup. However, it is best if the Holy Princess Yotsuha remains in our custody, so if you—her trusted confidant—were to agree to join our side, we would be able to maintain complete dominion over her.”

Shimobashira would continue to support Yotsuha in her public and private affairs, while Oboro would provide emotional support as a full-fledged member of the clan. This arrangement would tie Yotsuha down so that she could never run away.

“Oh, and there is one more thing,” Mitsuhiko said. “My investigators have informed me of your personal history from when you were a little boy. I summoned you here to speak directly with you so that I could confirm what I have heard. You seek absolute power, correct? If you join us, that absolute power will be yours for the taking. What do you say to that?”

Oboro was at a complete loss for words at Mitsuhiko identifying his lifelong desire with such pinpoint accuracy. However, Mitsuhiko was merely dangling the resurrected ogre as bait while seemingly completely unaware about the

existence of the Doppelgänger Mirror that Oboro had in his possession. He immediately caught this oversight, and on the ceiling of his mind, he started dancing.

The truth about the ogre was astonishing enough, but if everything he just told me is true, then I have been truly blessed! thought Oboro. *If this house succeeds in their ploy, then I alone might be able to attain absolute power!*

Oboro would play along while Shimobashira fed the Holy Princess, the entire Kamijo clan, and all of the other living sacrifices to be found in the realms they would have conquered to the ogre, and then, once the ogre had attained its as-yet unimaginable *true* strength, Oboro would rob its power using the Doppelgänger Mirror on the living weapon. Oboro would finally become just as powerful as the man dressed in black that he had seen on the beach that day.

Oboro's excitement was so undisguised that his eyes flickered like twin flames. Oboro once again rose from his seat cushion and knelt low before Mitsuhiko.

"Lord Mitsuhiko, I humbly ask that you make me one of your own," Oboro said. "I vow to be the best servant in your service."

"I have always believed we would come to such terms!" Mitsuhiko replied, overjoyed. "I welcome you as my cohort, Lord Oboro!"

"My gratitude knows no bounds," he replied. "I'll do everything in my power to repay my debt to you!"

From that point on, Oboro was hired as a retainer in the House of Shimobashira. The official story was that Mitsuhiko had heard that the Holy Princess had taken a liking to Oboro and decided to meet with him so that they could converse face-to-face. Then, after being impressed by Oboro, Mitsuhiko had decided to employ him as the Holy Princess's personal bodyguard. And with that, Mitsuhiko and Oboro shook hands on the same conspiracy, although they both held very different ambitions for it. However, things failed to go according to plan when they later discovered that Yotsuha and Ayame had gone missing, and this time, it was for real.



Mitsuhiko and Oboro convened once more in the living room where they had first made their secret pact, the former angrily slamming his fist down on the low table.

“How the devil could the Holy Princess and her sister have gone *missing*, Oboro?!” Mitsuhiko yelled. “I thought you and your people had safely transported them both to the safe house!”

“From what the soldiers guarding them have told me, they just suddenly vanished from what should have been a secure location without anyone noticing,” Oboro said soberly.

“Did the Holy Princess catch wind of our plan and escape with her sister?” Mitsuhiko wondered.

“I can’t see how that would be likely, Your Excellency,” Oboro said. “From what her handmaidens have told me, the Holy Princess was not acting in the least bit suspicious at any time leading up to her disappearance. The soldiers searched the surrounding area but found no signs that anyone had passed through there at speed. The pair have literally vanished like smoke.”

“Then, could they have escaped through some unknown secret passageway, much like the one we used to get them out of the castle?” Mitsuhiko suggested. “Could Kamijo have uncovered our plot to usurp them and seized the Holy Princess? No, they couldn’t have. We built that hideout in secret and specifically for this plot, so I know we didn’t build any secret passageways. But where could those two girls have gone?”

The castle boasted multiple secret passages to facilitate the escape of the inhabitants in case of emergencies, and since Shimobashira had served successive Holy Princesses, the clan was aware of these passageways, while the Kamijo clan didn’t know of their existence. It was thanks to one of these hidden exits that Yotsuha and Ayame were able to take flight from the castle without being noticed by anyone connected to the House of Kamijo. Mitsuhiko had briefly wondered if Kamijo might have pulled the same trick, but immediately dismissed the idea for the reasons outlined. With the disappearance of the two sisters weighing heavily on his mind, the head of Shimobashira clicked his tongue in a mix of desperation and annoyance.

“We were *this* close to controlling the ogre and slaughtering the Kamijo house, the dragonutes, the demonkin, and all those other races on the mainland who stand in the way of our dominance! Where the hell have those spoiled brats run off to?!”

“Excuse my impertinence, but why do we need to sacrifice the Holy Princess and her sister to the ogre?” Oboro asked. “From what I have seen, it seems we can already fully control the ogre god.”

“Thanks to years of hard work and research, we’re able to control the ogre to an extent, but it’s not quite correct to say that it is completely under our control,” Mitsuhiro replied. “According to our researchers, we can only control it in a limited way. If we were to unleash the ogre now and have it feed on the entirety of Kamijo house without their bodies being inscribed with the subservience spell, the ogre might very well become powerful enough to wrest itself away from our control. Yet we need to maximize the strength of the ogre if we are to conquer the mainland, so we have no choice but to feed it as many living sacrifices as we can get our hands on. To ensure the ogre is completely and unquestionably under our control, we must inscribe a unique spell onto the Holy Princess, then sacrifice her living flesh to the ogre. We also need to do the same with her sister to make doubly sure that the ogre is fully under our command.”

Mitsuhiro then touched on another problem. “Kamijo may consist solely of incompetent fools, but there’s still a chance—however slight—that they might discover the truth behind the initial ‘abduction.’ If Kamijo finds the Holy Princess first and uncovers our plot, then without the ogre to aid us, it would put us in an unfavorable position.”

Oboro nodded silently, though in his eyes, a crisis like that would go beyond merely “unfavorable.” Shimobashira had a modest retinue of soldiers at its disposal in order to safeguard the Holy Princess, but they would be no match for the national army under the command of Kamijo. If the two sides were ever to come to blows in a civil war, Shimobashira would lose easily. The strength of the ogre was enough to single-handedly turn the tables in such a war, but without Yotsuha and Ayame, Shimobashira would be unable to control it. And if they resurrected the ogre prematurely, they would likely unleash the

uncontrollable behemoth from the myth and it would end up destroying not only the Onifolk Archipelago but the rest of the world too.

“All we had to do was sacrifice the Holy Princess to the ogre, then blame her unexplained death on some accident, just like all of the other Holy Princesses before her!” Mitsuhiro ranted. “But now all of our efforts to control the ogre are in danger of going to waste!”

“Indeed, my lord!” Oboro said.

Mitsuhiro stood up, his eyes bloodshot. “You *must* find those two sisters before Kamijo does! If they find even one of them, then they’ll be able to sacrifice her and control the ogre themselves. You and your men must find both girls before those old buzzards do!”

“As you command, Your Excellency,” Oboro replied. “If I must lay down my life in my search for them, then so be it!” Even though the ogre was already plenty powerful, there was a possibility that it could become even more powerful still. Oboro wasn’t going to settle for anything less than absolute power, so he was prepared to do whatever it took to find Yotsuha and Ayame, if not necessarily for Mitsuhiro’s sake. However, a small animal had observed the whole conversation, and the two onis left the room without noticing its presence at all.

Chapter 8: Payback for the Princess

It had been several weeks since Yotsuha and Ayame teleported to the Great Tower and they had stayed there for that whole time. Due to the very real disappearance of their national figurehead, the Onifolk Archipelago was in turmoil, with both the Kamijo and Shimobashira daimyos in a state of total confusion, meaning it was unbelievably easy for us to gather intelligence. Not only had we managed to listen in on the Shimobashira leaders discussing their secret plot, we had verified the info by cross-checking it against documents from the research lab in the archipelago's capital. Once we had gathered all the intel we needed, everyone concerned agreed to meet in the reception chamber of the Great Tower. Nemumu, Gold, and I attended the meeting as the Black Fools, with the other participants being Ellie (in her guise as the Wicked Witch) and Yotsuha.

Ellie handed Yotsuha a stack of documents to read. As before, the Holy Princess was sitting on the sofa across from the Wicked Witch, with a coffee table separating the pair. I was seated in an armchair at the end of the table, while Nemumu and Gold were standing over by the wall behind me. Yotsuha scoured the intelligence report, her complexion losing more and more of its color with each page she read.

"This *can't* be true..." Yotsuha said quietly. Ellie had already briefed me on the intel beforehand, so I wasn't as astonished by it as Yotsuha was, but I couldn't help feeling sorry for her. Once she had finished reading, her ghost-white face turned so red with anger, it was like someone had put heavy makeup on her.

"I believed the Holy Princesses were sacrificing themselves to weaken the ogre so that we might one day destroy it!" Yotsuha screeched as she stood up, scrunching the report up in her hand. "We Holy Princesses have been sacrificing ourselves, believing it to be for the sake of our people and for all the people on the mainland, but it turns out we were told a pack of lies! The daimyo clans sacrificed all those people so they could take over the mainland?! Wh-What the hell?! Do they have any *idea* how many times me and all of the other Holy

Princesses before me struggled to sleep at night just so they could act like megalomaniacs?! Do they even know how many tears we have shed due to our fear of being sacrificed?!”

As I’d suspected, the oni higher-ups had been purchasing human slaves on the sly to kill, though what I hadn’t predicted was that the onis had been feeding these slaves to the ogre to restore its power and somehow control it. However, they had stopped buying human slaves about a year ago, likely because other nations had started getting suspicious. Since this coincided with my people launching our intelligence-gathering operations on the surface world, it escaped our notice entirely.

So the reason they called us “chum” was because they were feeding humans to the ogre as live sacrifices, I thought. I knew that word spelled bad news, but this is something else. I sighed as I recalled my encounter with Utamaro and Sogen. Utamaro, in particular, looked like he was about to totally lose his head over the loss of a key sacrifice and her sister.

I’d go half-crazy too if I was that close to completing my project, only to see it fall apart at the very last minute, I thought. Not only would all of the money that had been spent on the project go to waste, but people would also question the authority of the Kamijo leader. They might even force him to leave his position. While I mulled over this scenario, Yotsuha continued her tirade to the Wicked Witch.

“They sacrificed my own mother, and *lied* to me about her dying in a freak accident!” Yotsuha cried. “And now they’re planning to do the same to me and Ayame? Th-Those lying bastards! They can all go to hell! How *little* do they think of us Holy Princesses?! They think we’re just livestock that they can slaughter whenever they like! Are they *insane*?!”

In a fit of rage, Yotsuha tore up the sheets of paper she had just read and hurled the pieces down onto the table and the floor. On contact with the surfaces of both, the shredded pieces of paper flew up into the air and floated around like snowflakes. But even this outburst wasn’t enough to calm Yotsuha down, and it looked like her dark emotions would continue spewing from her soul like endless magma.

Yotsuha grabbed the hair on both sides of her head and gazed up at the ceiling. “I’ll make them *pay* for betraying me like this! I’ll kill them all! I won’t rest until I’ve had my revenge! I’ll spend eternity rolling in my grave if I don’t strike back at these backstabbers first!”

Needless to say, I totally sympathized with her wanting to get retribution on her betrayers—I remembered shouting pretty much those exact same words on that first day in the Abyss—but at the same time, I sensed Gold take a step back, likely due to the vaguely awkward nature of the scene. With her hair a complete mess and tears welling up in her eyes, Yotsuha turned to the Wicked Witch.

“Great Witch of the Tower, I’ve always feared sacrificing myself to the ogre,” Yotsuha told her. “I was so scared, I even decided to go to a school far away on the mainland in order to search for a way to seal away the ogre for good. But even so, I was still prepared to sacrifice myself as a last resort if it would keep my beloved sister, my people, and the entire world safe.”

Yotsuha paused for a second, then started yelling again. “But all of that was based on a bunch of *lies*! They tricked and killed my mother and the other Holy Princesses who came before her just so they could rule the world! I loved my mother more than anything in the world, and they killed her! And now they’re trying to make Ayame a sacrifice too! They must pay for what they have done! I want my revenge, and I don’t care if I have to sacrifice my own life to get it! I will surrender my life, body, and soul to this cause, so please aid me in exacting revenge on my betrayers!”



It was clear that her whole spirit was behind these words, and once she had said her piece, the room fell so silent, it was possible to hear the torn-up scraps of paper rustling on the ground. Ellie opened her mouth to answer, but I raised my hand and stopped her before she could get a word out. I got up from my seat, took off my SSR Fool's Mask, and faced Yotsuha. Ellie, Nemumu, Gold, and the fairy maids all gasped, since I hadn't informed them ahead of time that I was going to do this, but I ignored their reactions and spoke directly to Yotsuha, not as the adventurer, Dark, but as Light.

"Do you mean what you just said?" I asked her. "About being willing to sacrifice your own life to get your revenge?"

Yotsuha was also shocked by this turn of events, to the point where she was rendered dumbstruck. She forgot all about her rage and her eyes grew as wide as saucers.

"My real name is Light," I informed her. "And if that really is how you feel, then you have my word that you will get the most perfect revenge on those who betrayed you, Holy Princess Yotsuha." As her name passed my lips, I brought up my stats screen and showed Yotsuha my maxed-out power level of 9999. But that wasn't the end of it. The Wicked Witch of the Tower rose from her own seat, pulled down her hood, then knelt elegantly and with reverence before me. All of my other allies in the room followed suit.

At first, Yotsuha was stunned by this display, but she slowly began to make sense of what she was witnessing: I was actually the lord and master of the Wicked Witch and all of the other powerful retainers Yotsuha had seen around the tower over the past few weeks. Even though the tears on her cheeks were not yet dry, Yotsuha started cackling maniacally and didn't stop for quite some time.

"So it was you all along!" Yotsuha finally said to me. "You were my destiny! The one fate brought into my life!" Yotsuha giggled dementedly until she was out of breath, then joined Ellie and the others in getting down on both knees before me. She folded her hands together over her chest as if in prayer.

"Yes, I swear on my word," Yotsuha said. "I will gladly surrender my life if it means getting revenge for my dear mother and all of the other Holy Princesses

who were deceived into killing themselves. So please, I beg you, help me exact the ultimate revenge on my enemies!”

“I can promise you that,” I said with a smile. “You will realize the sweetest retaliation you could possibly imagine.” In a way, Yotsuha was just like me, and I could hardly refuse a request from someone of the same stripe. On hearing my words, my newfound kindred spirit sobbed quietly with joy, and once she felt in charge of her emotions again, we spent the rest of the meeting trying to come up with the best way to get our revenge on our respective foes.

Chapter 9: Coup d'État

Mitsuhiko summoned Oboro to the Shimobashira manor in the capital city again, and even though Oboro was in desperate need of rest due to his ceaseless searching for Yotsuha and Ayame, he was in no position to ignore an order from his employer. Trying his best to make sure his annoyance didn't show on his sleepless face—complete with bags under his eyes—he followed a servant to the living room where he and Mitsuhiko always held their secret talks. Before Oboro could open his mouth, however, Mitsuhiko placed an envelope on the table in front of them.

“And what might that be, Lord Mitsuhiko?” Oboro asked.

“I believe it is a letter from the Holy Princess herself,” Mitsuhiko said. “It arrived this morning without a return address. I would like you to read the contents and confirm that it's in her hand.”

“By all means,” Oboro replied as he fished the letter out of the envelope. The text on it was short and concise, with no introductory remarks: *Mitsuhiko and Oboro will come alone to Mount Ogre tonight*. The message ended with Yotsuha's name written out, and although the letter was much shorter than the usual ones she sent, Oboro instantly recognized the Holy Princess's handwriting from years of exchanging correspondence with her. Given what was written in the letter, it was easy to understand why Mitsuhiko had called Oboro to the manor on such short notice.

“The letter is very brief and lacks the courtesy one would expect of the Holy Princess, but it is indeed her hand,” Oboro confirmed. “Would you like me to bring some of her letters that I keep at home for further comparison?”

“No need. We've already compared the handwriting to the material the Holy Princess wrote while under our care, so it's undoubtedly her handwriting,” Mitsuhiko said. “But what I want to know is why she would send us this message, and how it showed up inside this manor. I highly doubt that the Holy Princess would be capable of sneaking unnoticed past the layers of security

protecting the nobles in this district to bring the letter here, so did she write it and enlist a third party to deliver it? If so, who are these collaborators? And what do they have to gain from assisting the Holy Princess? Should we assume that Kamijo has found the princess and is luring us into some kind of trap?"

Mitsuhiko's talents had seen him become the youngest ever leader of Shimobashira, and he had focused all of his intellect onto trying to figure out the mystery behind the letter, but even with his smarts, he couldn't come up with a plausible answer.

"What do you think, Oboro?" Mitsuhiko asked. The clan leader hadn't only called Oboro here to confirm that the letter had come from Yotsuha,. He also came to pick his brain, since he was close to Yotsuha and had a wealth of experience from spending so much time on the mainland. Now cognizant of the real reason he had been called to the manor, Oboro answered Mitsuhiko dutifully.

"First, it is true that we can safely assume the Holy Princess has written this letter herself," Oboro started. "And in addition, someone else must have delivered the letter, which suggests an individual or an organization is standing with her. However, I don't believe the Holy Princess would have switched alliances to Kamijo. If they did have the princess and knew of our plot, they would have sent their soldiers to arrest us without bothering with this kind of chicanery. If I were Kamijo, I wouldn't send my opponents a letter and give them the chance to escape capture."

Mitsuhiko nodded in agreement at this, so Oboro continued. "So right now, we have no idea who or what is providing backing to the Holy Princess. If we follow the course of action written in this letter, we may well find ourselves walking into a trap. However, the option of simply ignoring this letter isn't available to us if we wish to know the whereabouts of the Holy Princess and her sister, for we have no other leads and this may be our only chance to recapture them."

"So there really is no other way, is there?" Mitsuhiko sighed. "In that case, we will bring our best soldiers with us to Mount Ogre, and if worse comes to worst, we can revive the ogre and get it to destroy the trap for us. This letter is still highly suspect, but we cannot allow this opportunity to seize the Holy Princess

pass us by.”

“A very wise decision, Your Excellency,” Oboro said, praising his boss for ultimately agreeing to his proposal. Mitsuhiro grinned with self-confidence, then issued an order to Oboro.

“You will continue your search for the two sisters, but while you’re at it, be sure to select soldiers to accompany us to Mount Ogre tonight,” Mitsuhiro commanded. “I’ll make the necessary preparations to resurrect the ogre just in case the situation calls for it.”

“Yes, Your Excellency,” Oboro replied. “I shall make the arrangements right away!”

Oboro bowed deeply, then departed from the manor, excited to finally have some kind of lead in his search for Yotsuha and Ayame, which had proved fruitless up to that point.



Oboro ended up picking out a dozen or so soldiers who had previously proved themselves in battle, and it was this retinue that accompanied Oboro and Mitsuhiro on their trek up Mount Ogre later that evening. Commoners were normally forbidden from going up the mountain, and there was even a checkpoint at the start of the established route manned by sentries who had been ordered to drive off anyone who might potentially break this law, but because Oboro was leading the official gatekeeper of the mountain, he and his entourage were allowed to pass on through without any questions directed at them.

The group soon reached the lip of the gently sloping, tuff cone formation at the peak containing the large bog filled with murky water in the center where the onis of old had sealed away the ogre, before passing through a section of the rim that had been chiseled out and fashioned into an entrance to allow for easy access when sacrificing Holy Princesses, criminals, and other live offerings. Oboro lit piles of firewood placed on stands to provide them with some light.

“It appears she hasn’t come, as far as I can see,” Mitsuhiro observed, squinting and scanning the area around the entrance in vain for any sign of Yotsuha. Due to the presence of the ogre, the inside of the crater was devoid of

plant life, and there were no boulders to be seen either. As there was enough visibility thanks to the beacons Oboro had lit to reveal anyone waiting within the crater, this meant there was nowhere anyone could hide.

“They should be here by now,” Mitsuhiro grumbled, but neither Oboro nor his soldiers had noticed anyone arriving. Just when everyone was starting to assume the summons had been a trick to throw them off track, the voice of a young girl thundered through the air around them.

“My beloved subjects of the Onifolk Archipelago, listen to the words of your Holy Princess, Yotsuha!” The pronouncement was so loud, the inhabitants of every island in the archipelago could hear Yotsuha’s voice, not just the onis on the peak of the mountain.

One of the oni soldiers pointed upward into the sky above. “Lord Mitsuhiro! Lord Oboro! A swarm of dragons approaches!”

“There’s someone riding on the front dragon...” another soldier reported. “Wait, is that the Holy Princess?!”

Yotsuha was indeed astride the largest dragon in the swarm that was descending on the capital city, and she continued her oration from atop the dragon.

“To answer your first question, these dragons serve the Great Witch of the Tower, but they’re not here to harm the good onifolk of this nation,” Yotsuha stated. “Our purpose is to capture those who have betrayed my trust and expose their crimes for all to see!”

In a voice dripping with righteous fury, Yotsuha launched into the details of how the Kamijo and Shimobashira clans had tricked generations of Holy Princesses into sacrificing themselves to the ogre sealed within the mountain, but instead of weakening it like they claimed, the two clans were conspiring to strengthen the evil god by feeding it the Holy Princesses, as well as condemned criminals and enslaved humans. The two clans had even gone as far as falsifying historical records to justify these sacrifices, when their real goal was to control the ogre and use it to gain supremacy over the other nations. Yotsuha relayed all of this information to the inhabitants of the islands by using Ellie’s voice projection magic.

“I was able to uncover the truth thanks to the Great Witch of the Tower!” Yotsuha yelled out. “The first Holy Princess of our nation managed to seal away the ogre through her own valiant efforts! It is because of her great achievement that our oni forefathers rallied around her, forming this great nation in order to support the first Holy Princess! All of the Holy Princesses that came afterward strove to honor the memory of the first Holy Princess, ensuring not to betray the heartfelt desire of our people to support us!”

Angry-looking veins were visibly pulsating on Yotsuha’s forehead. “My people! The love and sacrifice you have shown for your nation know no bounds, matched only by the love and sacrifice the Holy Princesses have also demonstrated down the ages! But that love has been befouled by the craven, *despicable* deeds committed by the Houses of Kamijo and Shimobashira! I find what they have done to be completely unpardonable, not just as the Holy Princess but as a fellow citizen of our great nation! And so, I have allied myself with the Great Witch of the Tower in order to capture and punish the irredeemable vermin! Not one of these traitors will escape my wrath! If you have nothing to do with this abominable conspiracy against our nation, then you have nothing to fear. All you need to do is stay calm and follow orders! I repeat, if you have nothing to do with these crimes, all you need to do is stay calm and follow orders.”

As Yotsuha repeated her instructions, the dragon army that looked to be more than a hundred strong circled in the sky above the capital. Some of the dragons were carrying armed fairy maids who were directing the dragons to hover above certain buildings so that they could float down to them. These high-priority targets included the facility dedicated to top secret research on the ogre, the estates belonging to the Houses of Kamijo and Shimobashira, the homes of affiliated aristocrats, the castle, and the magistrate’s office.

The UR Level 8888, Pied Fiddler, Orka, was playing his fiddle atop one of the dragons to calm the citizens of the capital, while the fairy maids who had disembarked from their dragons moved to capture people of interest and secure research documents and other materials before they could be destroyed. Before long, the fairy maids had control over the entire power structure of the Onifolk Archipelago, in effect meaning that Yotsuha had

successfully pulled off a coup d'état. Oboro, Mitsuhiko, and their entourage witnessed this whole sequence of events unfolding from their vantage point atop Mount Ogre.

“What the...” Mitsuhiko breathed, ashen-faced. “What?!” The sight was so unexpected, he was unable to form any more full sentences, his lips flapping wordlessly like a fish out of water. Oboro and his soldiers, on the other hand, were completely silent as they watched the fantastical scene play out below.

However, everyone on the peak knew they were facing their imminent destruction, and that feeling of foreboding only deepened when Yotsuha finished her address to the citizens and steered her dragon toward the mountain until she was close enough to no longer need voice amplification magic to speak to her adversaries in the crater. Riding on the dragon with Yotsuha were Dark, Mei, and the Wicked Witch of the Tower, and standing on the dragon's back, the Holy Princess glared down at her former retainers, rage boiling in her eyes.

“I'm here to deliver divine retribution, you treacherous worms,” Yotsuha growled. She almost seemed to project imaginary tongues of flame, and a crazed smirk spread across her face as she savored her revenge. “It's much too late to start feeling sorry or begging for forgiveness,” she added.



“All fairy maids, mobilize as per instructions,” Khaos commanded. “Take special care to escort any noncombatants out of danger. Use tranquilizing cards on anyone who panics. You're authorized to use healing cards on the injured. If anyone foolishly attempts to struggle or resist, you have full authorization to incapacitate them. If a belligerent presents too much of a challenge, contact me.”

“Received loud and clear, Mr. Khaos!” the fairy maids replied. A vanguard team of fairy maids arrived at the Kamijo manor and alighted from their dragons, each of the fairy maids wearing metal armor over their maid outfits and carrying shields and short spears. They encountered a group of guards who refused to abandon their posts, in spite of everything that had happened so far.

“Halt!” the lead guard barked at them. “This manor belongs to the House of

Kamijo! No one is allowed to enter these grounds—”

“We’re aware that you’re simply doing your jobs, but didn’t you hear what the Holy Princess just said?” a fairy maid pointed out. “Please drop your weapons and do as we say.”

The oni guards looked at one another, confused about what they should do next. Some of the guards were ready to surrender to the fairy maids, but others weren’t quite so willing.

“Silence, intruders!” one of the guards in this latter group said, drawing his sword. “We won’t allow the likes of you to rampage through the House of Kamijo!”

“Weapon drawn. Neutralizing hostile,” a fairy maid said in an officious tone. She infused her SSSR Lightning Spear with mana and unleashed a bolt of electricity that immobilized the oni and made him yelp in pain. Some of the other fairy maids used their weapons and magical attack cards to take care of the remaining resistant oni warriors, even the ones that had power levels higher than the Level 500 maids. The squad of fairy maids used their overwhelming weaponry and superior numbers to subdue the oni guards, clearing the way for the UR 8888, Menace of Mayhem, Khaos, to alight from his dragon in the courtyard along with four more fairy maids. From there, Khaos led his team toward their target destination, and he knew exactly where to go because the premises had been fully mapped out beforehand. Along the way, they encountered a group of handmaidens who were huddled together on the ground, trembling in fear.

“P-Please spare our lives!” one of the handmaidens cried, seemingly speaking for the others.

“We don’t intend to harm any of you,” Khaos said to them. *Didn’t they hear what the Holy Princess said?* Khaos thought with mild irritation. He ordered two of the fairy maids to take the handmaidens outside and out of harm’s way, since he didn’t want to risk them getting caught in the cross fire of any potential fighting that might go down. Khaos took the remaining two fairy maids in his squad to their destination: the private library.

“Why do they favor these types of contraptions?” Khaos wondered, standing

in front of a specific bookshelf. He signaled to one of the fairy maids to get to work, and she did so by pulling one book off the shelf and pressing the switch that had been hidden behind the tome. On hearing the sound of a door unlocking, they pushed the bookshelf, and a section of it smoothly opened inwardly like a door. The opening revealed a stairway to the basement, which Khaos and his team descended without hesitation. At the bottom of it, they were expecting to find all the riches owned by the head of Kamijo, along with research reports pertaining to controlling the ogre. Khaos's team had been assigned to retrieve these critical documents—which they had confirmed beforehand would be in this secret room—that would provide evidence of the Kamijo clan's deep involvement in the plot to feed the ogre live sacrifices. Light didn't want the documents to be burned or destroyed before he could retrieve them, so he had personally appointed Khaos to lead this mission.

Since I lost my duel with Light, it's merely a matter of course that I follow his orders, thought Khaos. *However, him asking me to lead this important assignment shows that he trusts me greatly, so I suppose I should spare no effort in ensuring this mission's success.* Khaos could feel his self-esteem surging from being entrusted with this critical mission, even though he tried to play it down in his mind. An outraged voice quickly tore him from his reverie.

“Wh-Who are you people?!” Utamaro exclaimed. “How did you find this place?! No one other than me knows about this room!” The underground chamber was lit by a magic item, but it wasn't quite strong enough to brighten the whole room. Yet even in the semidarkness, Khaos and the fairy maids were able to tell who was speaking to them. In fact, they would have known regardless, because their power levels were all high enough that they had the ability to see in total darkness.

The Kamijo head was flanked by three bodyguards led by Sogen, and each bodyguard was carrying a metal-reinforced wooden chest. Khaos briefly hypothesized that these chests contained more research documents they intended to destroy, but this notion was dismissed as quickly as it had reared its head because he suddenly realized they were the chests containing the riches the House of Kamijo had been squirreling away for centuries. Light had considered sneaking into the secret room before the invasion to secure the

research documents, but he had ultimately decided against it since the room was watched closely and there was a chance the infiltrators might be discovered. But that was all beside the point at present.

“I would’ve understood if you had rushed here to spirit away a number of secret documents, but to think you would value wealth over your own safety is *beyond* incorrigible,” Khaos admonished them.

“You insolent whelp!” Utamaro yelled. “Do you have any *idea* who I am?!”

Sogen put down the chest he was carrying, drew his blade, and stepped forward. “It will be fine, Your Excellency. These people are likely minions of the Wicked Witch. In fact, those two females standing behind the brat have wings and they’re both scarily beautiful, which means they work for the Wicked Witch. There’s no mistaking it.”

“Th-The witch sent her people all the way to these chambers?!” Utamaro screeched. “Does this mean that sorceress used her dark magic to find this place?!”

It had actually been Aoyuki’s monsters disguised as small animals that had discovered the secret room, but Khaos felt no reason to correct Utamaro. Sogen pointed his oni island sword at his adversaries and smirked with self-confidence.

“This is the chance we’ve been waiting for, Your Excellency,” Sogen insisted. “We can capture these two females as hostages and use them as leverage in negotiations with the witch if necessary. Since the witch believes in all that ‘absolute autonomy of humans’ nonsense, it’ll be easy to make her listen to our demands. Not only that...”

Sogen took in the two fairy maids standing behind Khaos with his one good eye, and his leering was so lascivious, it was like he was licking them from head to toe. Undisguised looks of disgust appeared on the faces of the fairy maids, and they raised their shields in front of them.

“These females have exquisite looks and figures,” Sogen decided. “I’m sure we’ll thoroughly enjoy their company while we’re making our escape to the mainland. And then, once we’re far enough away from the witch, we can sell these females to fund us. We’ll be safe on the mainland since plenty of people

there despise the witch.”

“Why, yes, what an excellent idea, Sogen!” Utamaro said cheerfully. “Not only are you powerful, you’re also quite intelligent! All right, I give you permission to capture those two women!”

“At once!” Sogen replied.

Utamaro had readily agreed to Sogen’s plan of taking the fairy maids hostage, though the beauty of the maids had definitely played a large part in this acquiescence. Fed up with the premature victorious attitude they were displaying, Khaos narrowed his eyes slightly.

“The laws of nature are absolute,” Khaos stated. “You people have long been the strongest on these islands, but you do not have the mettle to protect the weak, and all you do is wallow in your own self-interests. Do you miscreants take any pride in being part of the strong?”

Khaos’s version of the “laws of nature” was for the strong to protect the weak. Under this value system, it would have fallen to Khaos to carry out Light’s vendetta for him if his summoner had proved to be weaker than him in battle. But standing before him were people who not only *refused* to protect the weak, they planned to use them as ogre food, and this kind of thinking deeply offended Khaos. Meanwhile, Sogen and his crew flashed contemptuous smirks at their opponents in response.

“You’ve clearly misunderstood what the laws of nature *truly* entail, human,” Sogen said. “In nature, it’s perfectly natural for the strong to eat the weak. The only thing awaiting an inferior like you is for us mighty ones to chew you up and spit you out. And you only have yourself to blame for being born a lowly inferior.”

Sogen pointed his sword at Khaos and dropped into a fighting stance. “Last time I took on an inferior mage who looked a lot like you, I allowed him to get the better of me, but I will not be so careless this time! Our surroundings favor me, boy, because you’re holding a giant scythe in a small, underground room. Anyone with any intelligence would know that a long weapon such as yours cannot be wielded adequately in such a tiny space. Or at least anyone more intelligent than an inferior, it seems!”

As Sogen scornfully pointed out, the basement room was only about as wide as a hallway, fitting at most a few adults standing side by side, while the ceiling was low enough for someone of average height to stretch out and touch it. The weapon Khaos was carrying did look like a large, two-handed farming scythe of a type that couldn't be swung in a space this small without hitting a wall or the ceiling, and so, knowing that he had the tactical advantage, Sogen prepared himself to run Khaos through with his sword.

"I will show mercy by slaying you with a single stroke," Sogen declared. "You may go in peace to the underworld knowing that we will take *very* good care of the females behind you."

With a sadistic smirk on his face, Sogen charged forward with enough force to crack the stone floor under his feet, and his advance was so instant, any normal person would have assumed that he had disappeared into the ether. Sogen closed the gap to Khaos in an instant, but the warrior mage responded by simply tossing his Chaos Scythe at his attacker. The throw contained all of his pent-up irritation at the attitude on display by the onis in the room, and the scythe scored a direct hit on Sogen, who squawked in confusion. Utamaro and his two other bodyguards were blown backward, all ending up in a pile and out like a light. The treasure chests the onis had been holding fell to the ground, scattering jewels, ingots, and other riches on the floor like a metallic hailstorm. The Chaos Scythe returned to Khaos's hand like a giant boomerang.

"Loathsome toads," Khaos sneered. "Those who forget their pride as the strong are less than animals."

When Khaos had thrown the Chaos Scythe, the weapon had come in contact with the walls, the floor, and the ceiling like it should have, but since there were no magical or physical barriers below a certain class that were actually able to stop the magic scythe, the weapon easily passed through the walls and other structures as though they weren't there at all. Sogen, however, had harbored no inkling that he was facing such a powerful weapon, and he had left himself wide open to attack as he charged forward. Luckily for him, though, Khaos had made sure to only throw his weapon with enough force to stun, because while the safety of Sogen and the rest of the security detail might have been of no concern to him, Light had given explicit instructions for Utamaro to be captured

alive for questioning (or rather, for one of Ellie's mind probes).

"Too many people up on the surface world are rotten to the core," Khaos muttered to himself as he looked down at the four unconscious ones.

"Mr. Khaos, were we cleared to do this?" one of the fairy maids asked. "We were allowed to engage any target that resisted, yes, but we didn't allow the others to escape. Miss Iceheat is waiting to capture any escapees at the other end of this secret passageway, but I'm afraid we may have just denied her the chance to contribute."

Khaos fell silent on hearing the fairy maid's reminder. His primary objective had been to collect research documents and any other written materials of critical importance, but while capturing Utamaro came second to this goal, it had been assumed that the Kamijo head would attempt to flee the estate through a secret underground passage to save his own life as soon as he knew the compound had been stormed. The infiltration team was already well aware of this secret passageway that came out at a river that ran through woodlands the House of Kamijo owned. If Utamaro could have gotten that far, he could have taken a boat down the river and been whisked away to the port city on the main island. From there, he could have boarded a proper ship and set sail for the mainland and freedom.

But Iceheat had been posted at the boathouse on the riverbank with the assignment of capturing Utamaro if he tried to escape by the river. In the sequence of events that had been envisioned by Light's allies, Utamaro should have escaped through the secret passageway before Khaos and his team had even arrived at the secret basement room, and then run straight into Iceheat's ambush. But they hadn't counted on how much Utamaro's mind was focused on his wealth rather than his safety, and he had wasted a few precious minutes stuffing as many riches into treasure chests as he could. As a result, Utamaro had encountered Khaos's team just as the latter was arriving in the underground room, and the resulting one-sided clash had robbed Iceheat of her opportunity to shine in this operation.

"I'll use Telepathy to explain the situation to Iceheat," Khaos finally said. "You two take care of restraining the prisoners."

“Anything you say, Mr. Khaos!” the fairy maids said, beaming broadly in the knowledge that they wouldn’t be the ones to break the bad news to Iceheat. Khaos produced an SR Telepathy card, and anyone looking at him would have noticed that his expression was grimmer than it had been at any time during his encounter with Utamaro’s gang. The warrior mage felt duty bound not to force underlings who were weaker than him to undertake this unpleasant task, but he still hesitated before reporting the news to Iceheat. He stood in complete silence for a few moments to steady his nerves, then he activated the Telepathy card and contacted Iceheat to tell her of the outcome of the mission.



Near the Kamijo estate, on property owned by the clan, a river meandered through a forest, and on one section of riverbank that had been cleared of trees and foliage, there stood a boathouse by the edge of the water with a boat moored up in front of it. Anyone escaping from the manor’s secret passage would have hightailed it to this boathouse and taken the boat downriver to the main island’s port city in order to hop aboard a bigger vessel destined for the mainland. Soldiers who had sworn an oath of loyalty to the Kamijo clan had even been stationed around the boathouse in order to aid any such getaway, but Iceheat had rendered all of the soldiers unconscious before carefully tying them up. She had used cards on the soldiers to make sure they would be dead to the world for a good twenty-four hours at least.

Iceheat didn’t enter the boathouse, instead deciding to hide in some nearby trees as she waited for Utamaro and his entourage to flee the manor. *I can’t believe Master Light personally ordered me to capture the head of the ruling Kamijo clan, Iceheat thought giddily. I myself need to make sure I carry out this mission successfully!*

Light had specifically chosen Iceheat for this assignment because she was a specialist in fire and ice attacks. If Utamaro did somehow reach the boat that was moored up, Iceheat could use her powers to freeze the river and foil his escape. At first, the plan had called for someone to destroy the boat to cut off that potential escape route, but there was a risk that Utamaro’s retinue would have seen the wreckage and taken an alternate escape route, creating more work for the infiltration team. So instead, Iceheat had been assigned the job of

capturing Utamaro unawares.

Ellie had assigned Nazuna, Mera, Jack, and Suzu to provide backup to the fairy maids in case they encountered any oni fighters they couldn't handle, and wearing masks and hoods to conceal their identities, all four had flown into the capital on dragons. Nazuna had used her Prometheus sword to make copies of herself, and Ellie had made sure to instruct the Nazunas to follow the directions of the fairy maids to the letter. The other superwarriors had also made Prometheus duplicates of themselves to make sure they wouldn't get spread too thin.

All of this meant that Iceheat was basically on a solo mission, and she couldn't help feeling an air of superiority over her peers about that, even if she knew it was improper to indulge in sentiments like that. *Thanks to that shameless degenerate, I wasn't able to prove my loyalty to Master Light the last time an opportunity arose*, Iceheat thought, thinking back to her aborted battle against Miki. *But now I finally have a chance to show my fealty by capturing a high-profile target!*

Sitting under the tree branches, Iceheat broke into a smile as she imagined all the praise Light would lavish on her for her upcoming exploits. *After a long series of setbacks, fortune has finally smiled on me*, she thought. *Should I freeze the boathouse as soon as they enter it? Or would it be better to freeze the whole river once they've set off in their boat? No, they might have a teleportation item, so I should render them unconscious as soon as they get here...*

As she weighed up her options and tried to figure out the best way to capture her foes, Iceheat waited excitedly hidden among the trees, making sure to keep her breathing shallow to avoid detection. She didn't find the waiting tedious at all—if anything, she was having the time of her life—but her exhilaration quickly evaporated when Khaos contacted her telepathically to relay the bad news.

Chapter 10: The God Ogre

Once Yotsuha had finished her address to the archipelago, the dragon carrying her, Dark, Mei, and Ellie (in her guise as the Wicked Witch) descended on Mount Ogre until they were within shouting distance of Mitsuhiro and Oboro.

“Your Holiness! What is the meaning of this?” Mitsuhiro called out. “Why would you bring that evil witch and her dragons to these islands? I’ll have you know that you’ve just committed treason against our nation!”

Yotsuha sneered at him from atop her dragon. “And why are *you* making such a big deal over it? I mean, wasn’t it our plan all along to bring the Great Witch to this island in order to seal away the ogre?”

Instantly realizing that Yotsuha had figured out his plot to deceive her, Mitsuhiro was stupefied into silence. The princess had originally believed Oboro when he told her he had contacted the tower witch, for she had thoroughly trusted him and the Shimobashira clan. This meant that when they suggested to Yotsuha that she should leave the castle with her sister, Ayame, and fake a kidnapping to send the Kamijo clan into turmoil, which would in turn allow the Wicked Witch to operate on the main island unimpeded, she was all for it. However, the *real* plan had been to sacrifice the two sisters to the ogre, then with the deity under their complete control, to destroy the Kamijo clan and take over the world. But before Mitsuhiro could execute this final part of the plot, Yotsuha and Ayame had vanished from Shimobashira’s custody as well.

Mitsuhiro regained his composure and cast his eyes upward at Yotsuha. “Don’t let them fool you, Your Holiness! That woman with you is not the Great Witch of the Tower! She’s an impostor! She’s not the one we contacted! Get down from that dragon and come to us, Your Holiness!”

“Do you really think I’m going to buy that garbage?” Yotsuha said bluntly. “What kind of ‘impostor’ can control this many dragons? I’m done with being treated like an idiot! We can prove that you’ve been lying to me this whole

time!”

As she continued, Yotsuha grew more emotional. “Thanks to the Great Witch’s powers, I now know the full depths of your disloyalty to me! Your clan has sacrificed generations of Holy Princesses—including my own mother—and you planned to do the same to me and to my completely innocent sister! *You’re* the ones who have committed treason against my nation! You’re all nothing but a bunch of deranged, power-hungry scumbags!”

Yotsuha’s fury had reached a point where it seemed like her veins were on the verge of bursting. “Don’t think you can talk your way out of what you’ve got coming to you. We’re gathering up all your secret research reports and records, and building up evidence against you as we speak. Everything will be brought out into the light and you will suffer the consequences! We will capture every single person who has been involved in this plot against me, and none of you will escape my vengeance! I *will* avenge my mother’s death and make you pay for everything that you’ve done!”

Despite being the target of Yotsuha’s banshee-like screaming, Mitsuhiko didn’t even consider apologizing. Instead, he looked at the Holy Princess in the same way that he would view a piece of equipment that was coming to the end of its useful lifespan.

“Really, now?” Mitsuhiko said unimpressed. “Who would have thought you would escape from our care only to needlessly ally yourself with the Wicked Witch? It’s no wonder we couldn’t find hide nor hair of you despite searching everywhere on these islands. It’s a real shame that you had to get the witch involved in all of this. Our original plan was to protect you from the awful truth and turn you into a beautiful sacrifice for the sake of the nation and the world, but it appears we are being forced to change those plans somewhat.”

From his front pocket, Mitsuhiko took out some black prayer beads that glowed dimly in the moonlight and exuded a haunting, unsettling aura. A sinister smile spread across Mitsuhiko’s face as he thrust the beads toward the bog.

“Arise, god ogre!” he yelled.

Ripples immediately radiated outward from the center of the swamp, and

steadily escalated into larger and larger waves until the giant ogre crested the surface, exposing the upper half of its body as it roared loudly into the night air. Its upper body alone was easily over ten meters in height, but everything below its hips remained stuck in the bog, since those body parts remained encased in their magical seals. From what could be seen of it in the darkness, the ogre had bright red skin covered in large and small scars, and sharp fangs jutted from its mouth. It had a muscular build and four arms, albeit one appeared to have been amputated at the elbow. That arm had been severed in the momentous battle against the first Holy Princess and her army. Like the onis, the ogre had two horns growing out of his skull, and it had a head full of hair, though the strands looked to be as hard as nails. With the prayer beads in his hand, Mitsuhiro yelled up at the ogre, his eyes gleaming with frenzied excitement.

“O God ogre of legend!” Mitsuhiro intoned. “Devour the foolish Holy Princess along with the witch and her dragon! Do unto them what you did unto the Holy Princesses of old and unto all the human chum we have brought you!”

The ogre roared again and swung its three remaining arms at the hovering dragon. Any normal person would have collapsed with fright at the sight of the ogre, but Yotsuha merely snorted with derision and brought her hands together in front of her chest as if in prayer.

“Come to me, my destiny. Avenge the lives of my mother and of the Holy Princesses who came before her,” Yotsuha said. “I do not have the power to fight for them, so please exact revenge for me!”

“I can handle that thing,” said Dark, who hadn’t brought his signature staff with him. “I’ll get revenge for the both of us.” He activated his Item Box and retrieved a sword from it that looked an awful lot like an oni island blade. Although the sword looked much too big for the young boy to carry, Dark seemed to have no trouble at all wielding it. He stepped in front of Yotsuha as if to shield her, and that action alone made her blush like a maiden in love, her eyes nearly brimming with tears as she looked longingly at Dark. Both Mei and the Wicked Witch of the Tower cast annoyed looks at Yotsuha, but Dark ignored the spiteful energy building up behind him. He grinned at the ogre, leaped off the dragon’s back, and hurtled toward his adversary.

The first thing Dark did was deflect all three of the ogre’s arms with his sword,

making the deity yell out in shock, for someone as tiny as Dark shouldn't have been capable of a feat like that. The boy adventurer landed on the ground, and as soon as he was upright, he slung his sword onto his shoulder. Knowing full well that Oboro and the rest of the oni soldiers were watching from behind him, Dark decided he would use this opportunity to try out a trick he had picked up.

"Oni Island Sword Art: Rock Cutter!" Dark yelled as he instantly closed the distance between himself and the ogre. The creature instinctively raised all three of its intact arms to protect its face, but this wasn't enough to stop Dark from striking the monstrosity with his sword. His blade lopped off one of the ogre's arms, causing the monster to double over and shriek animalistically in pain as the severed arm landed in the water and sank into the swamp. Meanwhile, Dark himself rebounded off the ogre's body and propelled himself back to solid ground. Back on the banks of the swamp, Dark flicked the ogre's blood off his sword.

"Aw, man..." Dark muttered dejectedly. "I wanted to kill that thing in one stroke. Looks like I'm just not cut out to be a swordsman."

"I-Impossible..." Mitsuhiro whispered. "How could that little boy have sliced off one of its arms?"

Oboro was also surprised, but for an entirely different reason. "This cannot be..." he mumbled. "We left him for dead in the Abyss. But that sword swing employed the exact same form I taught him, and the unique mannerisms of his movements are exactly as I remember them. But he *must* be dead!"

Dark turned to face Oboro, Mitsuhiro, and the other onis, who all trembled in response. The boy grinned at their reaction as he slowly removed his mask.

"It's been a while, Oboro," the dark-haired boy said. "I've come back from the Abyss to get my revenge on you."

"L-Light?!" Oboro cried out uncomprehendingly. "How can you still be *alive*?!"

Light smiled gleefully as Oboro's face contorted with shock.



"It's been a while, Oboro," I said as I took off my SSR Fool's Mask. "I've come back from the Abyss to get my revenge on you."

“L-Light?! How can you still be *alive*?!” The look of total surprise on Oboro’s face was so delicious, I couldn’t stop myself from grinning.

“I should’ve guessed you’d know it was me under the mask from the way I swung that sword,” I said as I stashed the mask in question away in my Item Box. “After all, you *did* teach me basic swordplay during my short time in our old party.”

I’d decided a devil-may-care attitude suited the situation, especially when I had a comically large sword resting on my shoulder. Meanwhile, Mitsuhiro appeared to have no idea what was going on, his two different-colored eyes as wide as saucers as he looked from me to Oboro and back. The other oni soldiers reacted in pretty much the same way, but I ignored all of them and continued to address Oboro instead.

“But seriously, it’s been ages, Oboro,” I said. “Three years, to be exact.” The oni looked on without a word, so I continued. “Back then, you and the rest of the party tried to kill me. But I managed to survive at the bottom of the Abyss, and it was there that I made my vow.”

A smile crept across my face, this time due to the pure joy I was feeling. “I swore I would get my revenge on all of you. I swore to exact vengeance on each and every one of you, and make you experience the same agony and grief that I felt that day, several times over. And it just so happened that I learned about what you had done to Holy Princess Yotsuha, and I promised her I would get the vengeance she seeks too. You and the rest of your buddies are going to wish you’d never been born by the time I’m through with you.”

“O-Oboro, what’s this boy saying?” Mitsuhiro asked his accomplice. “What exactly happened between you and this brat?”



Before Oboro could answer, a roar from the ogre behind me drowned out all other sounds. The creature had managed to stanch the blood flowing from its freshly amputated arm by contracting the flesh around the wound, and now that it had recovered from the pain, its two remaining fists were ready to take a swing at me. I turned to face the monster once more.

“I think I’ll start off my revenge by disposing of this ogre you guys wanted to turn into your weapon,” I said to Oboro with my back turned to him. “Then, once I’m done, you’re next!”

“You’re an inferior who turned out to be a false Master,” Oboro drawled unimpressed. “I assume you managed to survive your ordeal in the Abyss thanks to the intervention of the Wicked Witch. That magic weapon the witch gave you will never be able to destroy the ogre, no matter how superior you think that blade is!”

Oboro obviously appeared to be laboring under the assumption that it was the sword that had been overleveled enough to slice off the ogre’s arm, and that it had nothing to do with my own strength. It was at this point that I noticed black mist forming around the ogre’s fists, and if I had to hazard a guess over its significance, I would have said the mist was dark ghostly energy formed by the vengeful spirits of all the people who had been sacrificed to the ogre. If this ghost energy were to touch a regular person, he or she would be killed instantly, and unfortunately for me, those energized fists were presently heading straight for my skull.

Oboro, Mitsuhiro, and the other onis ran off to a safe distance before the ogre could pound the ground repeatedly, which it subsequently did, roaring as each crushing blow kicked up dust that flew everywhere, its mighty fists leaving behind cracks, holes, and other indentations. Even the dragon I had rode in on backed away from the ogre to avoid getting dirt in its eyes. But I easily dodged the monster’s fists of fury, then jumped up into the air toward the rim of the mountain, laughing all the way.

“Well, if that’s what you think, watch as I slice up this meat puppet of yours!” I yelled. I landed on the rim of the crater, kicked off from the ground again, and sped through the air like an arrow toward the ogre. From what we already

knew, both the Kamijo and Shimobashira clans had been feeding the ogre live sacrifices in order to conquer the mainland, so if I wanted to make Oboro truly miserable and get the perfect revenge on him, I needed to take down this monster before his very eyes. Yotsuha had agreed with me on this point too, since she wanted revenge for the death of her mother and the other Holy Princesses.

As I approached the ogre, I came in swinging, but the giant monster managed to block my sword with the ghostly energy surrounding one of its fists, and the blow sent me tumbling toward the ground. I guessed it must have learned from my last attack. The onis down on the ground celebrated my temporary setback, while the ogre itself drew back its right arm in preparation for smashing my head in with its other energized fist the moment I crash-landed.

“Did you think I put all of my might into that one attack?” I said. “Not even close, ogre!”

Prior to this mission, Ellie had informed me that she believed the ogre’s power level had been somewhere in the region of Level 4000 back when the Onifolk Archipelago was founded, climbing to Level 5000 in the present day. The onis might have thought the ogre was some sort of singularly powerful being, but its power level was so middling, it wouldn’t even qualify as a god.

The ogre roared in premature triumph as it slammed its fist down on top of me with its full force. I countered by aiming my sword between middle finger and ring finger, and slicing the fist straight down the middle as if it were a fleshy apple. From there, I turned my sword sideways and chopped off the chunk of palm containing the ring and pinky finger, causing the ogre to arch its back in pain. I jumped up onto the newly mutilated arm and ran all the way up toward the shoulder, with its neck as my target this time.

Panicking, the ogre erupted into a quick succession of roars as it tried to brush me off with its one remaining arm. But I sliced my way through it and continued my ascent, the ogre now unable to stop me. All it could do was flail its severed limbs around ineffectively, splashing dark blood around as if it were in the final throes of death.

“You’ve terrorized the onis long enough, ogre!” I yelled. “Give me your head

so that I may avenge the Holy Princess, Yotsuha!”

The ogre screeched as it stretched its neck out and opened its jaw wide, likely in an attempt to eat me alive before I could reach the top of its shoulder. I knew this was the only thing it could do now that it had no hands left attached, so I raised my sword in preparation to behead the giant monster. But to my surprise, the ogre hadn’t been trying to eat me with its jaws, and it unleashed countless white tentacles from its mouth, though a closer look at them told me they were more like bleached bones than tentacles, and they were coming toward me at high speed.

“Are those the bones of the live sacrifices it ate?” I wondered aloud. The thought of who the bones might belong to caused me to hesitate momentarily, which allowed the bony tentacles plenty of time to wrap themselves around me.

The ogre roared and I figured it would pull me into its mouth and gobble me up, but once again, I was wrong. The ogre swiveled its neck at speed and swung me up directly in front of the dragon that was still hovering in the sky. I then saw more ghostly energy gushing from its mouth and forming a growing, swirling sphere.

“Oh, *now* I get it,” I said. “You’re going to try and kill me with the ghostly energy from all those sacrifices you ate, aren’t you? I guess you could call this trick the ‘Ghost Cannon’ if you wanted to give it a name. And you’ve even made sure Holy Princess Yotsuha will be in the line of fire, so that if I do try to dodge out of the way, the ghostly energy will hit her and the others on the dragon instead. I gotta say, you’re pretty underhanded for a world-destroying ogre.”

The ogre bellowed in my face, which was probably its way of letting me know that it’d do anything to beat me, then it unleashed the ghostly energy blast. I could have dodged the blast easily enough and left it to Mei and Ellie to protect Yotsuha and the dragon, but I didn’t really want to create more work for my two lieutenants, so I took out a gacha card.

“SSSR High Magic Counter—release!” As soon as I activated the card, a bright barrier formed in front of me. The card had the power to reflect a magical attack back at the attacker, and only attack magic of a higher level than the card

could breach the magical force field it produced. The Ghost Cannon ended up shattering the bone tentacles, but the blast bounced back toward the ogre and gouged out a third of its head before landing some distance behind the monster. The resulting giant explosion not only destroyed part of the peak and the uninhabited forest on the exterior of the rim but also uprooted trees before sending them and other debris flying up into the air.

Now that I no longer had bone tentacles wrapped around me, I activated an SR Flight card so that I could hover in the air and look down at the ogre. Or rather, at what was left of the ogre, since it was missing all four limbs and a third of its face by this point.

“Got any more tricks up your sleeve, ogre?” I taunted the monster. “In fact, I’ll be generous and give you one last chance to show me all you’ve got before I finally smash you into the dirt and make Oboro and his pals writhe around in despair.”

The ogre snarled again, but this time, its voice was tinny and lacked all of the intensity it had displayed previously. The creature was even trying to back away from me, but of course, since the lower half of its body was still stuck in the bog, it couldn’t go anywhere. I took this attempt to escape as the ogre’s way of saying that it had no more cards left to play.

Okay, time to stop toying around with it, I thought. I don’t wanna get a rep for being a bully, after all.

I raised my sword and descended on the ogre, which growled weakly at me. “You want me to spare your life?” I said, interpreting the growls. “Sorry, but that’s never gonna happen. You might have had a little help, but you’re an evil monster that has devoured countless lives, and you need to pay for that.”

I upped my speed and flew at an angle toward the ogre, then swung my sword at its neck as I zoomed past it. It was a clean strike that sliced off its head, which now rendered free of its body, tumbled down into the swamp below, where it made a huge splash. The head bobbed on the water briefly but it soon sank beneath the murky surface of the bog and out of sight. Still in midair, I swung my sword again to fling the blood off it, and that marked the end of the so-called ogre god that was supposedly going to destroy the world.

Chapter 11: The Doppelgänger Mirror

The massive, headless body of the ogre toppled forward into the bog like a falling giant redwood, and caused smelly water to splash everywhere. The swampy water rained down on Oboro and his retinue, who stood stock-still and stared in astonishment at the sight in front of them for a good few moments without even bothering to wipe themselves down. It was so quiet in the crater, you could have heard a pin drop, and the silence was only broken when Mitsuhiro fell backward onto his rear and finally accepted the reality of what he had just witnessed.

“O-Our ogre!” Mitsuhiro cried out in anguish. “Our *legendary* god ogre of destructive might was felled by some inferior brat?”

One of the oni soldiers screamed in terror and fled, with his peers following suit until only Mitsuhiro and Oboro remained.

“H-Hey, wait for me!” Mitsuhiro called after them as he frantically scrambled to his feet. “Don’t leave me behind, you numbskulls!”

“Dorn Fesseln!” Ellie quickly unleashed the strategic-class spell to trap Mitsuhiro and his troops in a snarl of steel vines, and the restraints were so strong, not even a Level 9999 warrior could have broken free of them. Normally, it would have needed a bunch of top-level mages all chanting in unison to cast a strategic-class spell, but Ellie was able to instantly whip out several Dorn Fesseln traps at once to make sure nobody escaped. She wasn’t the Forbidden Witch for nothing.

Mei, Ellie, and Yotsuha disembarked from their dragon, and Ellie walked over to the prisoners, her SSR Faceveil Hood already pulled down to show her face at this point.

“Honestly. Do you have any idea how many questions I need to ask you gentlemen?” Ellie tutted. “You also have to answer for the untold number of lives you have sacrificed to that abominable ogre. And yet here you are, trying to flee from me? I’m quite confident you won’t be able to escape from the Dorn

Fesseln, but I suppose I should fracture your legs just to make sure.”

“N-No! No, don’t—graaaah!” Before Mitsuhiro could even finish his sentence, Ellie had manipulated the Dorn Fesseln vines to snap his leg bones in half like skinny tree branches. She subjected the oni soldiers to the same treatment, causing all of the detainees to cry and whimper in pain like toddlers. I winced at having to hear all of these disturbing noises and raised a hand to Ellie who understood immediately and cast a Silent spell with a wave of her hand so that the wailing onis would be in a sound containment bubble.

Good. Now I’ll be able to talk to Oboro without being interrupted by the peanut gallery, I thought. I gave Ellie a nod of approval before turning to face my sworn enemy once more, only to pause because I had thought that Oboro would have been every bit as shaken as the other onis after seeing me defeat their powerful ogre, but instead of looking miserable, he looked happy—excited, even—as he gazed up at my hovering form.

I just destroyed his secret weapon. So why’s he smiling? I wondered. Have I demoralized him so much that I’ve driven him close to insanity? No, the look in his eye tells me he’s still all there...

I had expected Oboro to beg me for mercy or bemoan his fate in a similar fashion to the other former members of the Concord of the Tribes that I had captured before this point, yet here he was, looking pleased as punch. Just as I was wondering what exactly to make of it, Oboro finally broke the silence.

“I’ve found it...” he uttered. “At last, I’ve found it!” His eyes had lit up like he’d met someone he had idolized for a long time. “Light! You’re the one with absolute power that I’ve been searching for all these years!”

Oboro was looking at me hungrily, as if I were his long-lost lover, and the look on his face grossed me out so completely, I instinctively flew back a little way to put some more distance between us. Even Mei, Ellie, and Yotsuha looked disgusted at how Oboro was acting toward me, but the oni didn’t take any notice of our reactions as he produced a mirror from his front pocket.

“I will copy your power using this, Light!” Oboro yelled up at me as he thrust the mirror in my direction. All of a sudden, the mirror flashed so brightly, I couldn’t see a thing.

Is he trying to blind me so he can escape? But while Oboro was undoubtedly acting somewhat crazy, I didn't think he was quite mad enough to use this particular type of distraction to attack someone who had just defeated a giant super-ogre, so I assumed he was just trying to flee. But when the light show finally died down, my hunch proved to be very, very wrong.

"Huh?" I yelled out in confusion. "Why do you *look* like me now?!"

Oboro laughed maniacally. "It's mine! All mine! I possess the ultimate power that tore the ogre god apart like it was wastepaper!"

Standing in front of me was a figure that I would have sworn was my evil twin if not for the fact that he had Oboro's horns growing out of his head and the oni's clothes hanging loosely over his frame. In all other regards, this person was the spitting image of me, right down to my height, facial features, and even my dark hair and eyes.

"Y-You're Master Light?!" Mei sputtered before quickly regaining her composure and reverting to her usual restrained demeanor. "No, you are not. You *do* resemble him very closely, however..."

"Is it an illusion?" Ellie pondered. "No, it can't be. He looks far too real to simply be a vision."

"How did he make himself look like the destiny of my life?" Yotsuha said, equally goggle-eyed at this sudden turn of events.

"What a magnificent body this is!" Oboro crowed, looking extremely self-satisfied in response to our expressions of shock. "I can tell how infinitely powerful I am just by standing here on these two feet! It's no wonder you showed no fear while fighting a living god!"

"Is that really you, Oboro?" I said. "What have you done to yourself?"

Oboro managed to stop flexing his muscles long enough to answer my question. "Yes, it is I, Oboro. I now look like you because I copied your powers and imbued myself with them using the Doppelgänger Mirror."

"Doppelgänger Mirror?" I echoed, but Oboro simply smirked and tossed aside his baggy outerwear and the shorter of the two swords.

“Before I joined the Concord of the Tribes, I was a member of a party known as the Golden Treasure Chest,” Oboro explained. “And we happened across that Doppelgänger Mirror while exploring a dungeon one day.”

Now shirtless, Oboro tightened the belt that was holding up his pants before continuing. “The mirror was a single-use item, but it had the ability to turn the bearer into an exact replica of the being it was directed at. I had almost given up all hope of achieving my lifelong quest of acquiring absolute power, but when we found that mirror, I knew it would prove useful in realizing my dream. So to get my hands on it, I killed everyone in the Golden Treasure Chest and disguised their deaths as a monster attack.”

I felt physically ill hearing the craven depths Oboro had gone to in order to steal a magic item. But to see if Oboro’s story checked out, I secretly activated an Appraisal card, and his stats did indeed read: “Human (Fake), Male, Light (Fake).” His power level reading was scrambled, however.

Hm, his power level isn’t being displayed, and this indicates his name and race are both fake, I mused. What’s more, there’s nothing here about him having the Unlimited Gacha, which suggests that while the Doppelgänger Mirror might be capable of copying someone’s power level, it can’t replicate a Gift.

Totally unaware of what I was up to, Oboro droned on in a vainglorious fashion. “From then on, I searched high and low throughout the lands for the mightiest champion worthy of being copied by my Doppelgänger Mirror. But then, my home nation ordered me to join the effort to search for a Master, and I almost leaped for joy when I heard about the incalculable power Masters possess.”

All of a sudden, Oboro’s demeanor changed and he spat out the next part with rage. “But my joy was short-lived because we encountered *you*. You were the one who robbed me of that perfect opportunity to find a Master! Do you have *any* idea how vexed and thoroughly disappointed I was at my misfortune? We weren’t allowed to torture you to death, since we needed to make it look like you were slain in a monster attack, but if I had been given a choice, I would have carved you up from head to toe, keeping you alive just long enough for you to endure the unbearable pain in full!”

Oboro regained his composure, then picked up where he'd left off. "After leaving you for dead, the party was dissolved and that was the end of my official search for a Master. But I later learned the ogre god of fable really did exist! So instead of searching all over for an elusive Master, I concentrated my efforts on enhancing the power of the ogre that was already in our possession. I became a wealthy man as my reward for getting rid of you, and I used my newfound riches to purchase a multitude of inferior slaves to sacrifice to the ogre. But I stopped buying slaves when it became clear that I was in danger of being found out by the House of Kamijo. But you will be glad to know you contributed to the strengthening of the ogre, Light, if only indirectly."

"Oboro..." I breathed. "How many humans did you sacrifice to that ogre?"

"I don't know, and quite frankly, I don't care," Oboro replied. "You can't really expect me to keep track of how many inferiors I kill."

"You're nauseating..." I could feel my anger threatening to boil over at the cavalier attitude he was displaying regarding this wholesale slaughter of humans. But Oboro remained unmoved. He unsheathed his oni island blade from its scabbard, before tossing the scabbard to the ground and giving the sword multiple test swings to get a good feel for the weapon in this new body.

"Thanks to the Doppelgänger Mirror, I now have the same physical attributes as you," Oboro announced. "Does that mean our fight will be on equal terms? I should think not, because the oni island martial art grants me an overwhelming advantage over you!"

Once he was done testing his sword, Oboro grinned and pointed the blade toward where I was still hovering in the air. "You lack the talent and ability to fight with a sword, so you have no hope of prevailing against me. But as a gift to you for granting me this absolute power, I shall make your death quick and painless!"

Oboro suddenly leaped into the air with his sword still pointing at me, and since he was presumably at my power level now, it took him just a fraction of a second to close the distance between us. I instantly raised my sword and our blades clashed, producing a shower of sparks.

Oboro clicked his tongue in irritation. "So you managed to fend off my attack,

huh? Well, in that case, let's see if you can handle *this!*"

Oboro unleashed a rapid sequence of sword blows that produced even more sparks as blade met blade. Oboro laughed as I struggled to keep up with his quick combinations, knowing that it was all I could do just to react in time to parry each strike.

"See? You have no sword-fighting skills!" Oboro screeched. "Do you think you can keep up with this speed?" I didn't answer, which he took as a tacit admission that he was superior to me in the swordsmanship department, and to add insult to injury, he started cackling even more.

"Your defense is too weak!" Oboro yelled as he finally caught me out and bashed me with his sword with all of his might. I just about managed to partially shield myself from the blow with my own sword, but I couldn't prevent myself from being blasted downward onto the toppled corpse of the ogre.

Oboro also landed on the corpse, then immediately unleashed a finishing move. "Oni Island Sword Art: Cloud Twister!"

Oboro did a full spin to give his sword extra rotational force, his aim clearly to cleave me in twain. I chose to dodge the attack instead of meeting it head-on, rolling to the side just in the nick of time. But although he had missed me, the sword blast was powerful enough to slice through the dead ogre's entire body, and the energy of the attack even ripped a fissure into the mountain's rocky rim. But despite causing all of this destruction, Oboro didn't miss a beat, swiftly unleashing his next move.

"Oni Island Sword Art: Water Reaper!" he yelled, crouching down so low on the ogre's corpse that he was at the same level as the surface of the water, before sweeping his sword in a flat arc in front of him and taking aim at where I was still on my hands and knees after hurling myself out of the way of the last attack. Back in the old days, I remembered Oboro teaching me that the Water Reaper was a move designed to cut off an enemy's feet at the ankles, but this wasn't the time to be reminiscing. I jumped into the air to avoid the ranged sword slash attack, but Oboro just grinned, for he'd been expecting me to react in this exact way. He gripped his sword firmly with both hands and drew it back like an archer aiming a giant arrow at a target.

“Impale him!” Oboro shouted. “Oni Island Sword Art: Reverse Meteor!”

Oboro covered his sword in mana then thrust the blade toward me with all his might, unleashing the mana at me like a high-speed arrow. Since I was still midjump, I would normally have had absolutely no way of twisting and turning out of the way of this giant mana arrow, meaning I would have been a sitting duck in the face of this deadly attack. Thankfully, however, I had already activated an SR Flight card during my battle with the ogre, so I used it to gently and effortlessly glide to one side. My reflexes also made me bend my torso out of the way for good measure.

“Oh, I almost forgot. You’re able to fly, aren’t you?” Oboro said, looking at me like you would a dog who had just performed a trick. “I will praise you for having the means to dodge that attack. However, you have merely delayed your inevitable demise. In fact, I have now grown more used to my new body, thanks to you forcing me to keep on the move.”

Oboro grinned widely as he continued his preening. “What magnificent abilities I have! This is precisely the absolute power I have been dreaming about for so many years! No one will be able to match my strength! *No one!* I am the only one with this absolute might!” Oboro laughed at length like a man drunk on his own hubris.

Still hovering in midair, I sighed. “You really call what you have ‘absolute power’? If anything, you’re weaker than what I thought you would be if your claim of copying my powers had been true. I tried running an Appraisal on you, but your stats didn’t show a power level, and the data said you were a fake. But you look almost identical to me, so I kept dodging your attacks, just to be on the safe side. But it turns out I was stupid for being so overcautious.”

“What?” Oboro mumbled, the smirk disappearing from his face, though only for a moment. He quickly brightened up again and flashed me a haughty smile, clearly acting under some wrong assumption.

“You’re simply attempting to trick me into thinking I’m weaker than you to rattle me,” Oboro scoffed. “If that’s the case, I pity you. This just proves your race will always remain doltish inferiors, even when one of your kind manages to attain a high power level.”

“It’s not a trick,” I assured him. “Those are cold, hard facts.”

I wasn’t kidding either. While battling Oboro, I’d found him to be surprisingly weak. If his power level had truly been 9999, his Cloud Twister would have split this mountain clean in half, and the impact of the attack would have been felt from miles away. But the damage Oboro’s attack had done was much smaller than that, and I was pretty sure he wasn’t pulling his punches. This was just a hunch, but I suspected Oboro’s power level was either the same as—or maybe a smidge higher than—the ogre’s had been, which probably put him at Level 5500.

“It’s too bad I didn’t get to run an Appraisal on that Doppelgänger Mirror of yours, meaning I can’t say for certain,” I shouted over to him. “But if I were to hazard a guess at what happened, I’d suggest my power level was too high for that mirror to copy completely. Your mirror probably had a maximum limit on how much power it could actually duplicate. I’ve used a bunch of Unlimited Gacha cards with limitations like that, so I can make an educated guess at what’s going on here.”

The first gacha card that sprang to mind was the UR Double Shadow. Even though it was an ultrarare card that was able to duplicate the user, the Gift wielded by the subsequent clone was weaker in comparison to the Gift it was modeled off. My thinking was that the magic mirror had similar mechanics to that card.

“In any case, you can go on and on about having ‘absolute power,’ but I have never once in my life thought of myself as having that kind of power,” I declared. “And even if you *do* have absolute power, I’m not scared of a loner like you.”

I wasn’t trying to purposely rile Oboro, but I told him exactly what was on my mind all the same.

“I never would have gotten anywhere near to realizing my revenge on you and the rest of the Concord of the Tribes if I’d become powerful alone without picking up allies or any extra knowledge along the way,” I said. “I would’ve gotten nowhere near finding out the truth about this world either. I never would have uncovered any clues about who destroyed my village, and I never

would have found Yume. If I hadn't had Mei, Aoyuki, Ellie, and Nazuna by my side, I never would have found out about the Masters, and I would probably have ended up being buried by them. But because I have my allies and all the knowledge they have given me, I'm not in the least bit afraid of someone who's all alone, like you are."

"Master Light..." Mei piped up before Oboro could respond. "You humble me with your kind words."

"Meeting you was the best thing that's ever happened to me too, Blessed Lord!" Ellie yelled out.

Yotsuha looked across at Mei and Ellie with undisguised jealousy, while Oboro shot an annoyed glance in the direction of my two lieutenants before spitting out his own rejoinder.

"Who needs worthless allies?!" Oboro declared. "As long as I have absolute power, any so-called allies are needless impurities! You can only spout that foolish prattle because you've yet to witness *true* absolute power!"

"True absolute power, you say?" I said, repeating his phrase. "Fine. I'll just have to show you how the unlimited power given to me by my allies crushes your 'absolute power' any day of the week!"

I stowed my sword away in my Item Box and took out a gacha card. "UR Ability Copy—release!" The card produced a flash of light, and a familiar-looking pair of white gloves magically appeared on my hands. I immediately pointed all of my fingers at Oboro in preparation to unleash my newfound powers.

"How is wiggling your fingers at me going to—gaaah!" Before Oboro could finish his sentence, a bunch of cuts appeared all over his skin, and blood started spurting everywhere.

"Are you using my Magistrings?" Mei queried with a mix of surprise and glee. I confirmed her hunch by shooting out more Magistrings with the intention of slicing up Oboro.

"Now I see how you're performing this trickery," the oni muttered between grunts of pain. "Well, you haven't won! That ploy won't work on me!"

Even if Oboro wasn't at max level, his power level was seemingly high enough

for him to be able to see the microthin Magistrings, and he began slicing through the web of steely threads with his sword before they could reach him.

The UR Ability Copy card duplicated the powers of whoever the user was visualizing and conferred them onto the user, but if the one using the card didn't know the abilities of the person they had in mind intimately, the card wouldn't be able to copy the powers perfectly. Another drawback of the card was that it was only able to copy abilities at seventy percent of their full potential. Plus, whether the user could even use their newly acquired power effectively was a whole other can of worms.

While Oboro was busy cutting through my Magistrings, I calmly manifested another UR Ability Copy card and released it. Mei's white gloves disappeared from my hands, and in their stead, a cat-eared hood materialized on my head and a spiked collar attached to a chain appeared in my hand.

"Mrrow!" I mewled, perfectly mimicking Aoyuki and her catspeak.

"M-Master Light is wearing a hood with cat ears!" Mei exclaimed in surprise.

Ellie exhaled loudly. "You look absolutely fetching!"

"Omigosh! So cute!" Yotsuha gushed.

Not only could the Ability Copy card duplicate someone else's powers, it also had the capacity to make the user look like the person in question, and since I associated Aoyuki's trademark hood so strongly with her, I ended up wearing one too. While my three fans were busy cooing over my cutesy new appearance, Oboro reacted angrily.

"You louse!" he yelled. "You not only ridicule me by donning that outfit, you also dare to speak to me like a cat?"

"Mroww!" I swung Aoyuki's Beast Chain toward Oboro's location on top of the dismembered corpse of the ogre, but he batted it aside and rushed toward me, his face red with fury.

"Don't you mock me!" Oboro screamed. "Do you really think that attack will defeat me and my absolute power?"

"Mrrow," I said, a mischievous, catlike grin spreading across my face, for I

knew the Beast Chain wasn't just a deadly, blunt object: it was also a highly exceptional phantasma-class magic weapon. Even as he spoke, Oboro was pursued by the collar without me needing to manipulate it.



But he was so incensed at supposedly being made fun of, he failed to notice the spiked collar approaching him from behind, and by the time he did, it was too late and the collar had tightly wrapped itself around his neck.

“I-Impossible!” Oboro wailed. “How could this have happened?!”

I tugged on the chain with all my might, and since he was airborne, Oboro had no way of resisting being dragged around. I swung the chain toward the rim of the crater and smashed Oboro into the rocky surface, though since he was an experienced warrior, he was able to quickly maneuver himself into a position that helped to soften the blow. He still took heavy damage, however, and the squawk of pain that followed proved it. I swung the chain again, and this time, Oboro was propelled into the ground like he was the head of a hammer.

“Mrrew mrrow!” I called out.

“Damn you!” Oboro tried cutting through the chain by swinging his sword, but not only was he in an awkward position to get a clean strike on it, the Beast Chain was also made of a tough material that no one would ever be able to slice through easily. I kept swinging the chain around like a mace, pummeling Oboro against the mountain over and over, while all he could do was endure the beating and do his best to hold on to his sword. I eventually finished up the combo by smacking Oboro into his own bespoke crater in the ground and purred as I watched the dust settle. I loosed the Beast Chain’s collar from around Oboro’s neck at last, and caked in dirt, he glared at me.

“You dare to fight me while making cat noises?” Oboro uttered before raising his voice and screaming: “Do not mock the sanctity of combat! Or perhaps this ability is so powerful, it has left you completely unable to speak aside from making cat noises?”

“Nope, there are no handicaps,” I replied in a cool, even voice. “I am merely imitating the original wielder of this weapon.”

“C-Curse you, Light!” Oboro roared, now thoroughly enraged. This was good, since this time, I actually wanted him pissed off. I treated the oni to a contemptuous glare before releasing another Ability Copy card. The cat-eared hood and Beast Chain disappeared and was replaced by a witch’s hat and four grimoires strapped to my waist. Ellie—the person I now resembled—was so

overjoyed, I thought she was going to pass out.

“B-Blessed Lord Light now looks like me!” Ellie squealed. “I can hardly contain myself!”

I made the four spell books float and spin in the air around me, with each book open and their pages flipping.

“Terra Chain! Hellfire Angel! Heavy Acid Rain! Star Puncher!” I yelled, casting four spells in rapid succession which launched four high-level magical attacks simultaneously thanks to help from the grimoires.

The Terra Chain was a gravity spell that aimed to stop an opponent in their tracks, and the sheer force of the attack was so vast, it could create a crater as far as the eye can see. As the name suggested, the Hellfire Angel was a floating bonfire in the shape of an angel that attacked a target of the user’s choosing. Heavy Acid Rain produced a downpour of highly corrosive acid able to melt metal, while the Star Puncher was an upgraded version of the SSR Solar Ray, which meant I was basically firing off a giant laser beam.

My three cheerleaders had decided to take up a safe position behind me near the mountaintop entrance as I unleashed the spells. Because I had already completely immobilized Oboro with Terra Chain, the other three attack spells scored direct hits. The combination of the Hellfire Angel spell and the Heavy Acid Rain spell turned Oboro’s oni island sword into mush, along with the surrounding terrain. Then Star Puncher came along to compound it all by blasting Oboro and a huge chunk of the nearby ground into the opposite rim of the mountain.

When the dust had cleared again, it turned out that Oboro had somehow managed to withstand this combo by dropping into a protective crouch, but unfortunately for him, he was now weaponless, wounded all over, and appeared to be on the verge of death, if his struggle to even rise to one knee was anything to go by.

“H-How do you possess *that* many items similar to the Doppelgänger Mirror?” Oboro grumbled in a feeble voice. “How is it possible, Light? Where did you even *get* those items?!”

“You know damn well where I got those items,” I retorted. “They all came

from my Unlimited Gacha. And thanks to my Gift, there are plenty more where they came from. There's practically no limit to the powers I can copy."

"Th-That's completely ludicrous..." Oboro said in disbelief. "We *proved* all your Gift could produce was junk! There's no way you had such an overpowered ability as a Gift!"

"Well, you guys *would* think that because of what it was like back then," I conceded. "But I'm not about to reveal the truth about my Gift to you. It's time to finish you off, Oboro."

Oboro grunted under his breath as I produced the last Ability Copy card I intended to use and showed it to him. "I'll repeat what I said earlier: I don't consider myself the most powerful fighter, by any means. If you are going to claim that you have 'absolute power,' then you'd better at least be as powerful as this. UR Ability Copy—release!"

A light glowed around me for a second then faded away, and the witch's hat and grimoires from before had been replaced by a knight's armor and a huge broadsword. In other words, I had chosen to copy Nazuna's powers.

"Ah," Mei uttered, clearly taken aback.

"This fight is over," Ellie declared. Yotsuha looked at the other two in confusion, not understanding their reactions. Oboro—who was also ignorant of whose powers I had copied—laughed triumphantly despite his extensive injuries and lack of a weapon.

"Is this really the most powerful form you could muster, Light?" Oboro scoffed. "And you intend to engage me with a sword yet again? You have no talent for wielding a blade, so it's no use fighting me like that—"

"Prometheus, bend my reality!" I shouted out, and the sword made three exact clones of me. Of course, now that he had witnessed the true power of the Prometheus, Oboro could only stare at me and my two copies in utter shock, and his mouth kept opening and closing without any sound coming out, because he was unsure what to say next.

"I'm not all that great as a swordsman, I'll give you that," all three versions of me said simultaneously. "But I wonder if you're able to take on all three of me

at once.”

“Th-This is just an illusion!” Oboro finally concluded. “You must have placed a spell on me to make me see things that aren’t there! That’s surely what you must have done!”

“I haven’t cast a spell on you, Oboro,” I said in triplicate. “All three of me are here in the flesh. I simply used the reality-bending power of the Prometheus to copy my level, skill, equipment, and pretty much everything else about me.”

“Damn you, Light...” Oboro wheezed, knowing he didn’t stand a chance now. “Damn each and every one of you!”

Me, myself, and I dashed toward Oboro, superexcited about the prospect of smashing him to a pulp. Oboro tried to turn tail and run, but it was too late.

“Oboro! You can’t escape us!” all three of me called out.

“S-Stay away from me, you savages!” Oboro cried.

Oboro wasn’t able to get very far since he was injured, weaponless, and had exhausted the last of his strength. When the three of us all caught up to him, Oboro only managed to dodge our first two sword swings before finding himself off-balance for the third, allowing me to bash him with the Prometheus, and send him rocketing into the air. All three of me leaped up into the air in hot pursuit until we were all in position just above our target.

“Prometheus! Bend reality and don’t kill!” all three of us shouted out before swinging our broadswords at Oboro as hard as we could. The oni didn’t even get time to scream before the heavy sword hits blasted him straight into the ogre’s corpse on the ground like a comet. The impact caused the totality of the crater’s rim to collapse, and dirty swamp water gushed down the sides of the mountain, emptying the bog completely.

All that was left in what was supposed to have been a bottomless bog were the remains of the ogre, piles of bones from the sacrifices that had been eaten over the centuries, and Oboro, who was out for the count by this point. He had also reverted to his former form as an oni, maybe because the shock of the combo had been too much for him. I knew Oboro wasn’t dead because all three of me had manipulated our Prometheus swords to make sure we wouldn’t kill

him while remaining free to go way overboard by piledriving him into the ground. After all, it was the least he deserved for killing so many humans just to realize his stupid lust for power.

I canceled the Prometheus's effects and went back to there just being one of me. Still hovering high in the air, I looked down at my defeated foe.

"Oboro, death would be too good for the likes of you," I spat angrily. "When we get back to the Abyss, I'll make sure you're locked away in a living hell, where the crimes you have committed will never stop haunting you."



After defeating Oboro, I went over to Mei and Ellie to dish out my next set of orders, and when I was done reeling them off, my two lieutenants teleported Oboro, Mitsuhiro, and the oni soldiers to the bottom tier of the Abyss. I then used Telepathy to contact the others currently present in the capital city in order to update them on the situation. Once that was done, I glanced around at my surroundings and noticed that Yotsuha was standing alone at the edge of the now-waterless bog and peering vacantly at the huge pile of bones that remained alongside the corpse of the ogre.

"Are you all right?" I asked her. "You don't look too good."

"Thank you for worrying about my well-being, my destiny," Yotsuha said, turning to me. "I can promise you that there's nothing wrong with me physically. I'm simply glad that I was able to exact revenge on my enemies. But..." Yotsuha paused briefly before finishing her thought. "But I can't help wondering, you see."

Yotsuha turned her gaze back to the emptied bog once more. "I wonder what would have happened if my fateful encounter with you had come about sooner. What if I *hadn't* placed all of my trust into the Houses of Kamijo and Shimobashira, and in Oboro in particular? What if I'd doubted what they were telling me sooner? I might have been able to save my mother's life if things had turned out differently. So as you can probably tell, I can't help thinking what might have been. Please forgive me."

She's just like me, I thought, feeling a deep empathy toward her. I never stopped thinking all of those things about my own family too. Even to this day, I

wondered how my life would have turned out if I'd found out about the *real* powers my Gift was hiding a lot sooner. I'd also always wondered whether I'd made the right choice leaving the family home to become an adventurer. I'd even wondered what would've happened if I hadn't been born with a Gift in the first place...

My parents and everyone I knew in the village are all dead, but at least I was able to gather up their remains and give them proper burials, I reminded myself. But here, we just have a huge pile of bones and no way of knowing which belonged to Yotsuha's mom. It'll be impossible to identify all of these remains. I wish we could at least make a grave for her beloved mother.

The best I could think of doing was performing a memorial service for all of those people who had lost their lives to the ogre, but aside from that, I had no idea what else we could do for Yotsuha, and I was at a loss at how to comfort her. Then, out of the blue, Yotsuha gasped and bolted off into the drained bog.

"Hey! Princess Yotsuha!" I yelled after her, but she didn't even pause. She nimbly ran down the incline toward the very bottom of the bog, dodging all the cracks and crevasses that had formed here and there. Although there was no water in the bog now, the bottom of it was still filled with slimy mud that stunk to high heaven, but Yotsuha didn't even flinch as she waded through the mud and the dreck. At one point, she tripped and fell with her face landing partially in the mud, but she immediately picked herself back up and continued, not caring about her face being covered in filth.

When she finally stopped, she knelt down and picked something out of the muck. Her hand trembled as she brought it up to her face, as if she was holding something extremely fragile.

"Is that a four-leaf clover bookmark?" I asked.

"Yes..." Yotsuha confirmed. "When I was very young, I gave my mother a four-leaf clover as a present, and she made a bookmark out of it. Mother always carried this bookmark everywhere she went. She treasured it so..."

Yotsuha's voice trailed off. This could only mean that her mother had been carrying the bookmark on her person even when the time came for her to be sacrificed to the ogre. Although the bookmark was a little scuffed around the

edges, through some miracle it had managed to survive and keep its general shape, and Yotsuha had been lucky enough to spot it.

The tears that welled up in Yotsuha's eyes started streaming freely down her cheeks. "You're back! You finally came back to me, mother! I'm so happy you're back!" After crying like a kid who had just been reunited with a long-lost parent, Yotsuha looked up at me.



“Thank you so much!” she said. “I’m now able to go home with my mother, thanks to you. I really can’t thank you enough!”

I smiled gently and nodded at her without saying another word. Yotsuha went back to cradling the bookmark and weeping. Then at that moment, a brief glimpse of *something* took me aback. I could have sworn I had seen a woman—or the illusion of one—who looked a lot like Yotsuha, embracing the weeping princess lovingly, but it was impossible to confirm because the image had only lasted for a fraction of a second.

Was that Yotsuha’s mom I saw just now? I wondered. Maybe her spirit had shown itself out of sheer joy that Yotsuha had found her bookmark. I allowed the princess to sob for a little longer before calling out to her.

“I’m glad you’re able to bring your mother back home with you,” I said, stretching my hand out toward Yotsuha. “Your sister’s also waiting for you, so I think we should head back now.”

“Yes, thank you again...” Yotsuha said, wiping away the tears before grabbing my hand. Her hand—and well, her entire body, for that matter—was smeared with fetid muck, but to me, she didn’t look dirty in the slightest. If anything, I thought she looked beautiful and radiant after crying all those tears of joy, and the same happy smile spread across my own face as I helped Yotsuha back to her feet.

Epilogue

By the time the sun had risen the following morning, we had gathered up all the evidence we needed to prove that the House of Kamijo and the House of Shimobashira had been committing heinous crimes for centuries, and we detained all of the elites and researchers who had a hand in perpetrating them. There were also a number of people who had been unwitting coconspirators to the murders, but the vast majority of the onifolk had absolutely no idea what had been going on and the news came as a huge shock to them. Or put another way, there was practically no disruption to the day-to-day governance of the islands as most of the rank-and-file public servants were innocent and allowed to remain in their posts.

Of course, there was some turmoil at the very top of the hierarchy due to the removal of the wrongdoers, but this was quickly resolved by Yotsuha assuming the role of head of state of the Onifolk Archipelago in practice as well as in name, and since the Wicked Witch was helping her to establish control over the nation, I was fairly certain the Holy Princess wouldn't need to worry about any unexpected setbacks.

As for the ogre, we put the body of the monster on public display for all to see as a way of proving that Yotsuha had been right to overthrow the previous order. The lower half of the ogre had still been sealed in place under a huge pile of bones, so Ellie had to use her bag of tricks to remove the rest of the seals in order to show the ogre in its true form. Yotsuha then presented the huge corpse to her people, in part to underline her authority but also to make everyone aware of the overwhelming power the Wicked Witch possessed. As Yotsuha had anticipated, her citizens were cowed by the display, and as a result, no one objected to the Holy Princess allying with the witch. With that matter settled, Yotsuha was completely free to align herself and the nation with the Wicked Witch at the upcoming summit taking place at the Principality of the Nine. That meant the deciding vote had been secured for Princess Lilith to depose her father and take over as ruler of the Human Kingdom.

As for myself and the Black Fools, the guild in the Dwarf Kingdom border town promoted our party to A-rank as soon as we handed over the voucher that proved we had completed the quest to provide security for Yotsuha. After clearing this final hurdle, I was at last free to attend the summit as Lilith's bodyguard. By pretty much all standards, this little episode had wrapped up neatly, though there were still a few loose ends I couldn't quite dismiss out of hand.



I was sitting at my desk in my executive office in the bottom tier of the Abyss, listening to Mei's and Ellie's final reports.

"I've finished scanning the memories of the former onifolk leaders, Blessed Lord," Ellie told me. "Unfortunately, I wasn't able to extract any new information that would be of interest to us. But when I read Mr. Oboro's mind, I stumbled across a very clear memory of him seeing someone who appeared to be a Master."

"We found out from the dark elves that a 'superhuman' was once spotted in the Onifolk Archipelago," I reflected. "But who would've guessed that it was Oboro who reported the sighting?"

When Oboro was a boy, he witnessed a human kill a Level 1000 sea monster on a beach. The human had black hair, was dressed in dark clothes, and had a long strip of black cloth covering his eyes. The weapon used to kill the monster was a black-bladed sword that he carried around in a black scabbard. The man seemingly noticed Oboro, but quickly lost interest and vanished from the beach.

The authorities decided Oboro must have dreamed up the whole thing, since they thought it was impossible for an "inferior" to kill such a powerful sea monster. But even so, it appeared talk of Oboro's sighting had spread all the way to the mainland and the Dark Elf Islands.

"I still can't believe that seeing what could very well have been a Master set Oboro on the path of a lifelong quest to attain absolute power," I said.

"I wouldn't be complaining at all if he had simply committed himself to working hard to build up his might," Ellie said indignantly. "But he's a truly despicable creature for killing so many innocent people in the pursuit of that

silly goal!”

As she quite rightly said, what Oboro had done was unconscionable, and as his punishment, he was at present suffering a pain worse than death in the deepest pits of the Abyss. Or to be more precise, he was enduring the same pain and torment he had put his countless victims through, but without the prospect of the ultimate liberation that is death providing a way out for him. As I had told him up on the surface, he was literally going through a living hell, where all the crimes he had committed were coming back to haunt him.

I stopped thinking about Oboro, and instead touched on something that had caught my eye in the report I was holding. “It says here that this ‘man in black’ Oboro recalled seeing *wasn’t* the Master who destroyed my village. Are we sure about that?”

“Yes, to the fullest extent of my knowledge, I’m certain of it,” Ellie assured me. “The Master Miss Yume witnessed attacking your village did not attempt to conceal his mana in any way, but the Master Mr. Oboro saw was clearly suppressing his mana output and I believe he was doing it of his own accord. Whatever technique he was using seemed sophisticated to an exceptional degree, and it definitely wasn’t the kind of feat anyone could just perform right away. Because he was suppressing his mana during the encounter, I can’t even begin to hazard a guess at what his power level might be. All I know for sure is that this Master must be at a high level, given the monster he slew, as well as his demeanor. But as far as I’m concerned, he is not the Master who destroyed your village, Blessed Lord.”

“Yeah, makes sense...” I muttered. Shortly after I was reunited with Yume, I got Ellie to read her memories to find out more about what had happened on the night our village was razed to the ground. Ellie managed to extract a brief visual sighting of the assailant, and she concluded that, based on the high volume of trace mana observed, the perpetrator was likely a Master with a power level over 9000. But it seemed the suspected Master in Oboro’s memory had deliberately suppressed his mana, so it’d be an impossibly huge stretch to suggest that the “man in black” was the same person who destroyed my village.

“In any case, what we do know about this guy in Oboro’s memory is that he has a very unique appearance, so Miki can probably tell us who he is,” I said.

“Of course, that depends on what she’ll want in return.”

“I can’t even imagine what her quid pro quo might be,” Ellie sighed. “I feel sorry for Suzu for having to go through *that* ordeal again.”

For those who might have forgotten, Miki was a Master who had previously been affiliated with the Demonkin Nation before her defection to our side after falling madly in love with Suzu—and I really do mean “madly.” But to protect herself, Miki had placed a geas on herself using a summon known as an Oath Bee that she claimed would kill her if we ever tried to extract any information from her by force. This meant we didn’t have the option of probing her memories or using conventional means of torture, so to get whatever information we needed from her, we had to give Miki what *she* wanted. During the first round of interrogation, she had ended up getting Suzu’s tights. My head hurt just imagining what Miki might ask for next, but it was unavoidable if we wanted more intel.

Figuring I would address the Miki problem later, I turned my attention to another report. “It says here Yotsuha’s going to keep the remains of the ogre’s victims at the top of the mountain and turn the spot into a memorial site.”

“Yes, Blessed Lord. After she and I had discussed the matter, she decided to redevelop the summit of Mount Ogre and place a monument at the site honoring the dead,” Ellie informed me. “The Holy Princess reasoned that the ogre had left behind too many skeletons to identify them all properly, so it was better to go down this route instead of needlessly disturbing the remains.”

Miraculously, Yotsuha found a bookmark that had once belonged to her mother among the remains, and it was the same bookmark that had been made using a four-leaf clover Yotsuha had given to her mother as a present when she was younger. The bookmark had been badly damaged when Yotsuha found it, but she’d hired an artisan to restore the keepsake to how it was. I’d assumed Yotsuha would bury the bookmark in place of her mother’s remains, but it turned out she had other ideas.

I’m going to hold on to this bookmark for the rest of my life, because I want to show my mother all the sights there are to behold in this world, rather than leave her in a dark grave somewhere, Yotsuha had declared, according to the

report. *Now that I have her bookmark again, I'm able to remember what my mother looked like and how she sounded, so I don't want to let go of it ever again.*

It seemed Yotsuha wasn't able to recall the most important aspects of her mom after being orphaned at a young age due to a mysterious "accident." I was only guessing, but it appeared to me that losing her mother without ever seeing a body had been so emotionally scarring to Yotsuha that her mind had blocked out all memories of her mother's face and voice. Then, when Yotsuha learned the truth about her mother's demise, I was willing to bet that the course of events that followed, where she avenged her murder and found her mother's bookmark mostly intact, had put her on the path to finally reconciling with her emotional scars and unblocking all of her repressed memories. It also looked like Yotsuha planned to take the bookmark to her own grave, which she was entirely free to do, and I felt there was no more I needed to say on it.

Yotsuha felt extremely indebted to me and the Wicked Witch for helping her to carry out her revenge, so she wasn't likely to turn on us for any reason. And not only was she giving us all the intel we needed from her nation, we had once again confirmed that she would back us at the summit.

"I didn't think Yotsuha was actually going to blab about who 'Dark' really was, but we told her to keep my identity a secret, just to be on the safe side," I said. "It's nice that we managed to take care of everything on the Onifolk Archipelago, but..." I sighed as I picked up another report. "I never imagined we would find this so-called 'Fragment of the Undergod' inside the body of the ogre."

After completely unsealing the ogre, Ellie performed an autopsy on the beast to see if there were any more victims that were as-yet undiscovered inside it, but instead of finding remains, she chanced upon a foreign object embedded in the inner lining of the ogre's stomach. Ellie ran an Appraisal on the object and was told that this was a Fragment of the Undergod.

I opened the tiny box that held this "Fragment," picked it up, and inspected it. "It looks like the tip of a fang from some kind of monster or animal. And Mei, you weren't able to glean any other info from this thing using your boosted Appraisal, correct?"

“Indeed, Master Light,” Mei said. “Ellie and I took turns performing Appraisals on the Fragment, but we were unable to retrieve any information on it aside from its name. We assume this is because whatever power it once had was exhausted a long time ago and the object has degraded too much to be able to tell its original composition.”

“I would have liked to know what kind of powers it *did* once have, at the very least,” Ellie said, placing her hand on her cheek and sighing.

The ogre had dwelled in the Onifolk Archipelago since before the founding of the nation, which meant this Fragment was as old as time as far as I was concerned. It wouldn’t have surprised me at all if this object was now merely a fossil without any powers, though at the same time, I *was* taken aback by how intact the Fragment still was even after all this time.

“Who would’ve believed the ogre would have something from the Undergod embedded in it?” I said. “And Yotsuha didn’t know anything about it?”

“No, she didn’t, Your Blessedness,” Ellie confirmed. “She hadn’t heard the term ‘Fragment of the Undergod’ before in her life. With her permission, I’ve got the fairy maids poring over all the available records concerning the ogre. Should we also interrogate Miss Miki about the Fragment?”

“No, I’m leaving her out of this one,” I replied. “Miki *might* know something about it, but I’m not sure if I really want her knowing about the Fragment if she doesn’t already. We haven’t run out of leads just yet, so I think we should wait until the fairy maids are done going through all those records. Only then should we decide if we need Miki’s help with it or not.”

The Fragment also put me in mind of something I’d discovered while exploring the vast set of ruins underneath the Dwarf Kingdom. On the bottom floor of the ruins, we stumbled across a church that had a partially destroyed mural, and what remained of it showed members of the nine races banding together with a Snakething and a group of what I could only assume were Masters to fight a swarm of monsters spewing from the huge, gaping mouth of a superfiend. Unfortunately, the part of the mural depicting the archfiend was missing, so all I was able to see of it was its jagged fangs. But those fangs and that gaping maw had been repulsive enough to send chills down my spine.

This Fragment does kind of resemble the fangs on that mural, I mused, though it must be noted that this was only my personal impression of the Fragment. We were in the process of reviewing all of the records we had found in the ancient ruins, though to date, no information about the mural had been uncovered, which was irritating because it really could have helped me to figure out what I was holding in my hand at present.

And how did a piece of the Undergod end up inside that ogre in the first place? I wondered. My mind turned to what the ogre god had looked like when I fought it, and I couldn't help thinking it looked like someone had just made a monster out of a regular oni, since it also had two oni horns growing out of its head. This train of thought led me down the path of some unsettling speculation.

Does this thing have the power to turn someone from one of the nine races into a monster? I thought, looking at the fang in my hand. *I know I'm jumping to conclusions here, but it wouldn't surprise me if something with a name like "Fragment of the Undergod" had that kind of freakish power. If that's the case, did this thing turn a normal oni into that mythical ogre god?*

"Master Light?" Mei said, noticing I had gone quiet. "Is something troubling you?"

"No, it's nothing to worry about," I said, deciding to keep my thoughts to myself. It was all totally baseless conjecture on my part, anyway, and until I had more facts at my disposal, I'd just be needlessly stirring the pot.

I put the Fragment back in its box. "Ellie, I'll need you to keep searching for info on this thing, and if you find anything, tell me. If you need more staff or materials for your research, they're yours. They are automatically granted to you under my authority."

"I'll do all I can to uncover everything to your liking, Blessed Lord," Ellie replied.

"Thanks. But just to be clear, that research isn't all that high on my list of priorities, so there's no need to overdo it," I said. "In any case, I'll let you handle any unfinished business left in the Onifolk Archipelago."

"Of course, Blessed Lord Light. I'll take care of everything!" Ellie chirped,

smiling joyfully at being given another task by me. I turned back to Mei, who was in the process of giving a fairy maid some documents to hand to me.

“These are the dignitaries who will be attending the summit at the principality, Master Light,” she stated. “Aoyuki’s intelligence operatives were able to put together this list of names in advance.”

“Wow, she was able to get all of that information ahead of time?” I said, impressed. “This’ll go a long way in helping us to prepare for the summit.”

“Indeed it will,” Mei agreed. “In particular, there is one high-ranking dignitary from the Demonkin Nation that I felt required your immediate attention.”

“And who might that be?” I wondered aloud as I took the list being offered to me by the fairy maid. I skimmed the names of the demonkin delegation and almost gasped when I landed on the one Mei had been referring to.

“Diablo is coming to the summit?” I said, reading the name of one of my betrayers from the Concord of the Tribes. Forget about grabbing my attention; this was all I could think about now. “Diablo, of all people, is gonna be at the summit? For real?” I said, fidgeting excitedly in my chair. “I never would’ve dreamed this would be how I came face-to-face with him again. I must remember to thank Lilith for setting the stage for this meeting!”

I was honestly thrilled by this turn of events, and the reunion with Diablo after three years would make being Lilith’s bodyguard at the summit all the more worth it.

“Looks like I owe Lilith another favor, on top of the one I already owe her for saving my sister,” I said. “I’ll have to find some way of paying her back when the opportunity presents itself.”

“I am sure Princess Lilith will be delighted to know that,” Mei said.

I laughed like a kid high on sugar. “First, I’ll meet him as Dark, then I’ll make the big reveal when I get closer to him. But I can’t just do it for shock value. I have to reveal myself in a way that’ll make him want to rip his heart out. I have to make him suffer like he made me suffer!”

“That’s the Blessed Lord I know!” Ellie said cheerily. “I simply can’t *wait* to see what kind of misery you have in store for that miscreant.”

Mei and the fairy maid on duty also beamed at me like they were the ones celebrating the news instead of me, which just proved they were happy whenever I was happy. Seeing them all excited on my behalf put me in an even better mood, and I got started on planning for the upcoming summit and my fateful reunion with Diablo.



While Light was gleefully plotting his revenge on Diablo, Aoyuki was all by herself in another room, glumly contemplating what had just unfolded. *Lilith is clearly using master, yet she has accidentally been useful to him again, she thought. Did she know this would happen when she invited him to the summit? Is this all a ploy to extract more favors?*

Aoyuki couldn't rule out that possibility, since Light had personally told Lilith about his quest for revenge as well as his search for Masters. He had also talked about the individual members of the Concord of the Tribes to her, including Diablo. Of course, in reality, Lilith had no idea that Diablo would be attending the summit, but Aoyuki wasn't about to let ignorance of the facts stop her from gritting her teeth and ruing her carelessness.

She is the princess of the Human Kingdom. Have I not been taking her seriously enough? After some thought, Aoyuki made up her mind. *I should find Ellie and discuss it with her.*

Aoyuki planned to go find Ellie so the two could reassess their judgment of Lilith, and this time, from a decidedly less dismissive perspective. Little did Lilith know, her stock had risen ever so slightly with her two unintended rivals.

Extra Story 1: Miki Again

In an undisclosed location in the Dragonute Empire, four Master met, three of them seated on two wide sofas while the fourth chose to lurk off to the side like some shadowy bodyguard.

“It seems Daigo and Miki of the Demonkin Nation attempted to meddle with the Wicked Witch of the Tower, only to be foiled in their efforts,” said their leader, Hiro. “Nobody has reportedly heard from either of them since they left for the tower.”

Hiro, who was sitting on one end of a couch, allowed a grin to flicker faintly across his dazzling, princely visage. Although his youthful features were as soft as a woman’s, Hiro was tall and wore clothes as resplendent as any worn by royalty, and despite not really being a prince, he looked the part so well, one might assume he was showing off.

Kaizer snorted. “That leveling freak only went to that tower to farm more experience points. And you just *know* that other psycho freak was there to grab herself a bunch of cute girls. Far as I’m concerned, they dug their own graves. This is why I call those crazies ‘a delusional death cult.’”

Kaizer was sitting by himself on the couch opposite Hiro’s. The blond, muscle-bound man was wearing work pants without a shirt, and the only thing over his torso was a large, gold necklace that was attached to a golden collar. He was also wearing golden gauntlets, as well as earrings, rings, and other assorted baubles. Despite looking like he’d decorated himself with the entire contents of a treasure chest, his lean, towering physique made this unusual fashion choice work for him.



Daigo and Miki were Masters in a rival faction that was affiliated with the Demonkin Nation. Daigo had an X-shaped scar across his face that stretched from his forehead to the lowest parts of his cheeks, while Miki was a beautiful blonde teenage girl who generally wore hot pants and boots that reached her thighs. She also had a fetish for torturing cute girls and boys just to watch them suffer and die, which was a kink that highly offended the Masters in the Dragonute Empire faction.

Standing silently behind Kaizer was Hei, his expression unmoved by Kaizer's exasperated remarks. He was wearing all black from head to toe, and a long strip of black cloth covered his eyes, with the ends dangling far down his back.

"I knew Mr. Daigo would meet a wretched end given his personality, but I never thought he would charge the Great Tower and never be heard from again," reflected Hisomi, who was sitting beside Hiro. He was only around 170 centimeters tall, had a slim build, and was overall pretty average-looking, save for his squinty eyes and phony smile.

"We can safely assume that he has been slain, which only further begs the question: who exactly *is* this tower witch?" Hisomi continued. "I am less concerned about Miki, since she is oddly resourceful when her depravity calls for it. I would not be in the least bit surprised if she decided to defect to the Wicked Witch's side and is demanding her choice of attractive women as we speak."

Kaizer scoffed "That one's utterly depraved all right, but I'd say she's as good as dead this time. If I were the witch, I'd waste that out-and-out sex predator the second she opened her mouth."

"Miki is a highly skilled agent who's both intelligent and personable whenever the situation demands it," Hiro pointed out, then sighed. "Though her repulsive fetish *does* somewhat overshadow any virtues she might have."

Hiro was well aware of Miki's sadistic predilections. In fact, the majority of the Masters on the demonkin side had serious issues with their personalities, as Kaizer had already highlighted.

Kaizer narrowed his eyes as he regarded Hiro with suspicion. "Anyway, where'd you get that intel?"

“You mean about Daigo and Miki?” Hiro said. “Because of my position and activities, I frequently hear chatter from all sorts of places.” Because Hiro represented this group of Masters, he was often involved in negotiations and similar undertakings, meaning he had access to more intel than either Kaizer or Hei. However, Kaizer continued to gaze silently at Hiro, a knowing grin pasted across his face. Hiro maintained his jovial expression as if he were wearing a mask.

“If you had any free time, I would gladly share some of my duties with you, Kaizer,” Hiro joked. “Unfortunately, only you are capable of completing the work you are currently engaged in. Speaking of which, we would greatly appreciate it if you could be flexible enough to lend us a hand, Hei...”

“I refuse,” Hei said bluntly. “As I’ve said repeatedly, my duty is to protect Kaizer.”

Both Hiro and Hisomi chuckled and sighed on hearing Hei’s response, which had become all but routine by this point, but Hei showed no concern at being teased.

“If Miki has indeed defected to the Wicked Witch’s side, shouldn’t we be worried that she might divulge intel about us?” Hiro said.

“It would not impact us at all even if she told the Great Tower everything she knows, since she is unaware of the specifics of P.A.,” Hisomi replied. “I will make use of my resources to investigate the disappearances of Mr. Daigo and Ms. Miki, but security around Tower City is remarkably tight. I would not expect much solid intelligence given that.” He shrugged his shoulders with slight resignation.

Kaizer sniffed again. “Let’s say she did manage to survive by defecting to the tower,” he said. “I’m willing to bet good money she won’t cough up intel that easy. If anything, she’d probably only give out info in exchange for a bunch of whacko demands. And I wouldn’t want to be the one who has to deal with *that* psycho freak, let me tell you.”

Hiro and Hisomi had nothing else to add to Kaizer’s musings because they knew in their heart of hearts that he had a point. Hei remained as motionless as a statue, his expression and his silence unchanging.



It just so happened that at that exact same moment, Miki was busy laying out some of her “whacko demands” as Kaizer had suggested.

“You wanna *know* about a Master who’s dressed all in black?” Miki said. “In *that* case, that’s gonna cost some bathtime with my sweet, *sweet* Suzu. That includes me and her lathering each other up with soap so we can do some wet ’n wild foam wrestling, with a bunch of lovey-dovey deep tongue kissing to finish off.”

Light and his team had brought Miki out into the middle of the training grounds at the bottom of the Abyss where she sat with her hands and feet restrained and the SSSR Curse Collar around her neck. For good measure, Dorn Fesseln vines had been placed around her body to make sure she was completely immobilized.

Suzu shook her head furiously to this highly inappropriate suggestion, her eyes welling up with tears. Suzu was of course prepared to do anything to extract information from Miki if Light asked her to, but she was very, *very* unwilling to let her first kiss be with someone like Miki. But instead of agreeing to Miki’s salacious demand, Light sighed and upbraided her.

“Like I’ve said before, we’re not going to force Suzu into doing anything she clearly doesn’t want to do,” Light reminded her. “You need to be more realistic with what you want or we’re done here.”

“Oh, come *on*! I was *totally* meeting you halfway there! Still, Suzu looks oh so cute and absolutely *adorbs* when she’s all disgusted. Ah, I wanna completely *corrupt* Suzu’s body and soul just like mine!”

Miki directed her passion-filled gaze at Suzu, making the gunner tremble as if a swarm of insects were crawling all across her skin. Suzu brought her musket, Lock, around in front of her to act like a shield and backed away from Miki’s chair. Light cleared his throat in order to get Miki’s attention again.

“No, there won’t be any wet ’n’ wild foam wrest—there won’t be any of that,” Light said firmly. “Please think of something that’s halfway reasonable.”

“*Halfway* reasonable you say?” Miki said. “Lemme think...” An invisible light

bulb blinked on above Miki's head. "Ah! Then, how's *this* for an idea?"

Miki set out her request, which Suzu found to be within her comfort zone. This time around, Suzu would need to perform her quid pro quo first, before Miki would give up what she knew about Oboro's "man in black."



Light telepathically summoned some fairy maids to go down to the Card Repository to retrieve a bunch of cards that would be needed to fulfill Miki's request. It should be noted that fairy maids were generally not permitted to be in the presence of Miki, since they were only Level 500 and she was a Master, and while the Curse Collar weakened Miki's powers to a certain extent, it was still possible that she retained enough strength to present a threat to any fairy maids.

The fairy maids handed the cards to Suzu, who promptly went inside a makeshift changing room that Ellie had manifested in the training ground using her magic. Suzu released the first card, put on the outfit produced, and stepped out of the changing room to present herself to Light and the others. Instead of her standard hunter's outfit, Suzu was now wearing a maid's uniform.

In exchange for information pertaining to the "man in black," Miki had demanded to see Suzu in cosplay. However, Light and his team had initially had no idea what the word "cosplay" actually meant, so Miki had explained that she wanted to see Suzu in "cute outfits." Once the term was suitably demystified, Suzu assented to the request, and Light's team proceeded to set up an impromptu cosplay fashion show for Miki's viewing pleasure.

Miki had specified which outfits she wanted Suzu to wear, and the fairy maids had been sent to retrieve the cards with clothes that most closely resembled the named themes. For the first cosplay, the fairy maids had made sure that the maid outfit was the least revealing outfit that was in stock, out of consideration for Suzu's predicament. Both the sleeves and the skirt were long, and the bodice was buttoned up all the way to the neck. The outfit included a corset that Suzu wore underneath, which was ostensibly for helping to slim the waist, but since the gunner already had a naturally slender figure, the undergarment ended up being redundant.

“Wow, Suzu, that’s a whole new look for you,” Light said. “But you really do look fantastic in maidwear.”

Suzu instantly blushed, leaving Lock to speak in her stead. “My partner says ‘thank you very much,’ Lord Light,” Lock interpreted, but his wielder’s reverie was interrupted by the loud, steamy sigh elicited from Miki, who was ogling Suzu from head to toe.

“Omigod, Suzu! That classic maid look is *super* adorable!” Miki gushed. “Instead of going for the purposely titillating French maid look, you went out of your way not to show any skin at all! But this choice is almost *too* perfect, because it highlights your pure and innocent side! That hunting gear you wear all the time hides the real size of your bust, but this outfit really accentuates just how big and amazing your boobs are! Seriously, your outfit hits totally different!”

Miki’s overexcited, fast-spoken review of Suzu’s new look was completely gross and near-on unintelligible from start to end, but everyone decided not to engage, and Suzu went back into the changing room to don the next outfit. When the gunner stepped out again, Mei was the first to speak.

“My goodness...” she said in her usual understated way. “This is dramatically different from your usual attire, Suzu.”

The gunner reacted to Mei’s comment by bashfully attempting to cover herself up with her arms. Miki struggled to breathe as she took in Suzu’s latest cosplay: the “cheeky little devil.” To be more specific, Suzu wore a skimpy, sleeveless leather top that exposed her midriff, and if that weren’t enough bare skin already, the top had a heart-shaped cutout in the chest area that exposed her cleavage. On her lower half, Suzu wore a short skirt with short boots, which meant most of her thighs and calves were on display. She had short gloves on her hands, tiny decorative wings on her back, and two horns affixed to the top of her head. Completing the look was a long tail that ended in a triangular tip extending outward from the small of Suzu’s back. Her face also had small stick-on tattoos that were in the shape of a heart, a star, and other similar objects.

It was so unimaginable for Suzu to be wearing such a sensuously impish attire that Mei had felt the need to make an observation about it. Meanwhile, Miki’s

pent-up ecstasy was boiling over and she proceeded to unleash a torrent of off-color remarks.

“Oh! Em! Geeeeee! You’re *deadass* wearing a cheeky little devil outfit!” Miki screamed. “My pure, sweet innocent Suzu just went from deliciously cute to downright horny! Omigod, omigod, you have no *idea* how hot you’re making me right now! And all that skin you’re showing! This look is too horny to be devilish. You’re a total succubus now! Ahhhhh! I can’t wait for my horny little succubus, Suzu, to come and suck *all* of my life force out!”

Miki’s feverish rant caused everyone present to physically recoil, and Suzu’s face went beet red as she tried even harder to cover her body with her hands, which only served to drive Miki’s libido into nosebleed territory, and it took her several minutes to calm down enough for Suzu to go change into her next cosplay. When Suzu stepped out of the changing room again, Ellie was the one to break the ice this time.

“She just wanted you to wear a bathing suit?” Ellie said, sounding both relieved and somewhat deflated. “I thought the outfit would be a little more, well, *unconventional* than this.”

Suzu too looked fully reassured by her latest cosplay outfit, which was a two-piece swimsuit with a pareu covering her bottom half. On top of Suzu’s head was a wide-brimmed straw hat that Miki had specified that the gunner must wear. While Suzu was still showing some skin, the outfit was far less revealing than the devil cosplay had been.

“The ‘horny little devil’ look on you was a chef’s kiss, but the way you’re looking now, like a trust-fund baby on a beach trip, is too precious for words!” Miki roared. “This is perfect! *Too* perfect even! I could eat your cute swimsuit, pareu, and straw hat look forever and never go hungry again! That swimsuit gives me all the nutrients Miki needs to survive, sweet Suzu!”

Miki completed her gushing praise by throwing in a complete non sequitur about how this sort of chic yet run-of-the-mill outfit was more “Instaworthy” and would “definitely go viral,” whatever all that meant. In fact, if Suzu were to show off this outfit up on the surface world, every man would instantly fall in love with her. Miki patted herself on the back several times for thinking up this

particular ensemble.

“Oh, and *one* more thing, my sweet Suzu,” Miki piped up. “Is there any *way* you could maybe lift up your pareu and *show* Miki how you look in your supersecret panty parts? Could you?”

Suzu shook her head and Lock followed up: “Uh, yeah, my partner says she’s absolutely not gonna do that, so you might as well give up now.”

“Boo! That blows,” Miki grumbled. “But I *guess* it’s always better to save the best parts for last, so let’s make a *date* for that special occasion, my sweet Suzu.”

Suzu shook her head, once again flatly refusing Miki’s advances, and with that resolved, it was time for Suzu to change into her last cosplay. However, one of the fairy maids raised her hand contritely.

“Please accept our apologies,” the fairy maid said. “We couldn’t identify what the last costume looked like from the name alone. We consulted with the Card Repository administrator, but she too was unable to determine which particular articles of clothing would correspond to the desired costume.”

“The last costume was supposed to be a ‘reverse bunny suit,’ right?” Light recalled.

“Correct, Master Light,” the fairy maid said. “The costume name contained the word ‘bunny,’ so we provisionally brought back rabbit ears and an attachable cottontail, but we didn’t believe those accessories would completely satisfy what was requested.”

“The term ‘reverse bunny’ is certainly not intuitive,” Mei agreed.

“Does it mean an animal that is the opposite of a rabbit?” Ellie mused. “In that case, what sort of animal would that be?”

Miki rolled her eyes and spoke up. “Should’ve *figured* you guys wouldn’t be in the know. I don’t have the *time* or patience to explain what it is, so I’ll just draw you a picture instead if you just *loosen* up these cuffs for me. Don’t worry, I won’t try to break free or anything, ‘cause if I do, Miki won’t get to *see* her Suzu in a hot reverse bunny suit!”

Light paused. “Ellie, please do as she says.”

“As you wish, Blessed Lord,” Ellie said before proceeding to loosen the cuffs to the smallest degree possible that would allow Miki enough freedom to draw what she had in mind. She was still fully restrained elsewhere, so it remained impossible for her to escape from her bonds. Miki was given a pencil and a sketchbook, and it only took her a few minutes to draw a reverse bunny suit, which she showed off like a proud artist.

“Here it is! The reverse bunny!” Miki said happily. “Suzu definitely has to wear this one!”

“I’m not letting her wear *that*!” Light exclaimed. Mei, Ellie, and the fairy maids were similarly shocked when they saw what a reverse bunny suit actually entailed. Suzu tearfully shook her head nonstop like a scared little girl.

“Aw, what the hell?” Miki screeched. “Why’s the reverse bunny a hard no?”

“Because she’d be half nude, that’s why!” Light yelled back. “Who came up with *that* as an idea for a costume, anyway?!”

Miki happened to be a skilled sketch artist to such a surprising degree that her depiction of the reverse bunny suit seemed extra pornographic in nature. The model in the sketch was wearing the requisite rabbit ears on top of her head, some full-length stockings, and sleeves that covered the entirety of her arms. However, not a single piece of fabric covered the model from her chest area all the way down to the crotch region. Light would never force Suzu to wear an outfit that indecent for any reason whatsoever, and simply the thought of it forced him to rub his temples to get rid of the headache that had bubbled up.

“The reverse bunny outfit is out of the question,” Light said with a put-upon sigh. “There’s no way we’d ever degrade her like that. Anyway, you’ve had your fun, so it’s time for you to make good on your side of the bargain and tell me about this black-haired Master.”

“Oh, boo. I was so looking forward to seeing my sweet Suzu in a reverse bunny suit...” Miki sulked, before immediately perking up again. “Well, whatevs. I had a good time, so it’s worth keeping up my end of the bargain. But before I go any further, I need to know a bit more about who you’re talking about.”

“Mei,” Light prompted.

“At once, Master Light,” Mei said, activating her Item Box and retrieving a written report from within. “These are all of the relevant documents pertaining to our subject of interest.” The papers included a written description of the superhuman Oboro had seen as a boy along with an illustration of the man. Since Miki’s hands were still relatively free from when she had been drawing the reverse bunny suit, she had no trouble holding the documents as she looked them over. Miki immediately recognized the Master that Light’s team was trying to identify, and hummed with awe.

“So Hei went all the way to the Onifolk Archipelago, huh?” she marveled. “And all by himself? Wow, who knew?”

“So this black-haired Master is called Hei?” Light asked.

“Yeah, he’s one of the most powerful Masters with the dragonutes,” Miki replied. “I’ve always known him to serve another Master as their bodyguard, so I’m surprised he’d go anywhere solo, let alone out to those islands. Maybe he was out there killing sea monsters to level up?”

“Sea monsters are more powerful than land monsters, so that’d make sense,” Light mused. “So do you know anything about his Gift, his power level, his combat abilities, or his personality?”

“Miki has only seen him a handful of times, so there isn’t much to tell,” Miki admitted. “But he carries a sword called a katana, so I’d say he specializes in close combat. I don’t know about his Gift or his power level, but I hear he’s super strong. As for his personality, he comes across as a sus loner.”

“Sus?” Light repeated quizzically.

“Oh, right. I just mean he’s this seriously *unapproachable* guy who hardly ever talks, so you never know what he’s thinking,” Miki explained. “That’s *kinda* why I don’t know all that much about him.”

Despite Miki having practically zero interactions with Hei, she at least knew our mystery person’s name, weapon, and personality type, and all of that was valuable intel in its own right. Light’s team could use those leads to find out more about Hei and build a profile on him.

“Oh, yeah. When I said Hei was a bodyguard for another Master, he’s actually doing that entirely by his own choice because of how attached he is to this one Master,” Miki said. “Hei provides constant security for the Master, even if said Master and all the other Masters tell him to stop. Judging from the few things I’ve heard Hei say, something must’ve happened in the past that means Hei wants to watch over this other Master. But I don’t know about all that.”

“So who’s this other Master?” Light asked, but Miki simply smiled back playfully at him, her eyes twinkling.

“I already gave you the rundown on Hei,” she said. “If you wanna know about the other Master who is under his protection, Miki needs another payoff.”

“Fine, you win,” Light acquiesced. “What will get you to talk about this other Master?” He was prepared to treat this line of questioning as worthy of a separate deal. Thrilled about winning this concession, Miki stated her requirement with bullish fervor.

“I want my sweet Suzu’s ***** and ***** in return!”

“No way!” Light shouted without even giving it a second thought.

“Aw, why’s that a no?” Miki yelled. “Oh, come on. I promise I’ll be extra gentle with Suzu’s ***** and *****.”

“Not up for discussion!” Light snapped. Miki’s request was so stomach-churning, tears had formed in Suzu’s eyes again. Mei, Ellie, and the fairy maids all looked at the gunner with pity in their eyes. Yet Miki wasn’t done trying to bargain yet.

“Fine. I’ll give up on Suzu’s ***** and *****,” Miki grumbled. “But I’ll settle for taking her butt ***** if that’s—”

“Ellie, shut her up and restrain her again,” Light said with a grim expression. “Mei, you and the fairy maids take her away.”

“As you wish, Blessed Lord!” Ellie said.

“Leave it to us, Master Light,” Mei responded.

Ellie used her magic to tighten the bonds around Miki’s wrists once more and to place a gag in her mouth, which muffled the obscenities that were still

spewing from it. Once Miki had been properly restrained, Mei and the fairy maids proceeded to take her back to her cell, leaving Light alone with Suzu, and he did his best to console the gunner, who was sobbing uncontrollably by this point. Not for the first time, Light seriously considered whether it would be better if he just got rid of Miki for good.

Extra Story 2: Iceheat Jinxes Herself

A massive throng of more than a hundred dragons had gathered in the plaza in front of the Great Tower, all of them standing in rows like soldiers in formation to a soundtrack of deep, primal growls that could be heard here and there. Standing beside the dragons were battle-ready fairy maids performing final checks on their weapons and gear in preparation for the upcoming operation, which involved descending on the capital of the Onifolk Archipelago to capture the leaders of the Kamijo and Shimobashira clans. The spectacle had drawn a crowd of human onlookers from the city that had sprouted up in the shadow of the tower.

“They say the Great Witch is lending a hand to some royals from the oni islands,” one citizen remarked.

“It never ceases to amaze me how the Great Witch and her fairy maids managed to train all these dragons,” said another onlooker.

“Good luck, Great Witch!” called out a third city dweller. The crush of people had ostensibly come out to express their well-wishes to the departing dragon army, though in truth, most were there just to see the unusual sight for themselves. The fairy maids who were not being shipped off to take part in the battle busied themselves with crowd control.

“Please do not cross the cordon,” one fairy maid called out.

“Refrain from piling in at the back so that everyone remains safe,” said another fairy maid.

“If you are not feeling well, please let us know,” said a third fairy maid. “We’ll administer healing magic where needed.”

The crowd of people would have obediently dispersed if the Wicked Witch of the Tower ordered them to do so, but the witch had ultimately decided against that course of action. After all, not only did this formation of dragons serve as a form of entertainment, the display was also useful for broadcasting the Wicked

Witch's might.

The Wicked Witch herself stood with Yotsuha atop the largest dragon in the swarm, the pair reviewing what the Holy Princess was supposed to say and do upon her homecoming one final time. Iceheat, Mera, and Suzu had gathered in a separate spot among the dragons and they were chatting among themselves while Ellie was deep in conversation with Yotsuha.

Mera chortled in her usual distinctive way. "Once they're all done discussing the game plan, we'll finally get to head out. But I have to say, Iceheat, you must be pretty pleased with yourself. You're the only one of us Level 7777s who managed to bag a solo mission. Wish I had your kind of pull."

"Oh, no. It was purely a stroke of luck that Master Light chose me," Iceheat said. "I myself have the requisite abilities for completing this particular mission, though I'm sure you would have been selected yourself if you had had the necessary qualifications." Although Iceheat was trying her best to sound humble, she couldn't stop herself from grinning as she smugly folded her gauntleted arms.

Light had specifically assigned Iceheat the task of intercepting and capturing Utamaro, the head of the House of Kamijo. The plan was for Khaos and his contingent of fairy maid fighters to storm the main Kamijo estate, which would prompt Utamaro to escape the premises with his guards through an underground secret tunnel that Light's team already knew about. This tunnel led directly to a river in the nearby forest, where Utamaro would presumably jump in a boat and travel to the port city on the main island, before hopping aboard a bigger ship to the mainland and freedom.

Because Light was loath to spend extra time and resources on a manhunt for Utamaro, he had personally assigned the UR 7777, Frozen Firestorm Grappler, Iceheat, to capture the Kamijo lord at the boathouse before he could make his escape downriver. If by some chance Utamaro managed to evade capture long enough to unmoor the boat and start floating off down the river, Iceheat could use her powers to freeze the entire waterway and trap the fleeing lord and his entourage. It was for those reasons that Light had decided that Iceheat was the best person at his disposal to thwart Utamaro's getaway plan in its entirety.

Standing in front of the tower, Suzu silently puffed out one cheek in a pout under her SSR Faceveil Hood, before whispering something to Lock, her trusty talking musket.

“My partner says that while she completely accepts Lord Light’s decision, she thinks she would have been a good choice to neutralize and capture such a high-profile target since she’s a gunner,” said Lock.

To her mind, Suzu would have bagged Utamaro by shooting him with a paralyzing mana bullet from several kilometers away, but Light had instead chosen Iceheat over her, which had made her obviously jealous.

Mera cackled at Suzu’s remarks, as relayed by Lock. “Sure, hun. We all know you can take down the target, no sweat. But there *is* still a one-in-a-million chance that he might be carrying a magic item or something that deflects your bullets. And sure, you could just riddle the boat with bullet holes and sink it in that case. But what happens if our high-value target were to drown in the process? That’s why master picked Iceheat here, so she can freeze the river if that one-in-a-million chance does end up happening.”

Mera’s airtight rebuttal made Suzu extra pouty, prompting Lock to try to smooth things over. “Yeah, I guess you’re right there, Ms. Mera. Lord Light must’ve considered all the angles before picking Ms. Iceheat for the job.” Suzu knew perfectly well that Lock was correct on this, and decided there wasn’t much point in continuing to whisper her grievances.

Still beaming and exuding an aura of self-satisfaction, Iceheat gave Suzu a couple of pats on the shoulder. “Come on, cheer up. One of these days, it’ll be your turn to be asked by Master Light in person to complete a special solo mission for him. It was *purely* a coincidence that my specific powers were needed for this assignment, so you were just unlucky this time. But I know a time will come when you’re able to make Master Light marvel at how loyal you are to him!”

Suzu remained silent but looked tetchy in response to Iceheat’s happy-go-lucky attitude, which everyone could see sprang from an unmasked sense of superiority. But unlike Suzu, Mera felt an air of foreboding about Iceheat’s demeanor, which overshadowed all the barbs of jealousy. *Iceheat’s really*

letting this solo mission go to her head, Mera thought. Let's just hope it doesn't end up like that one fight she had with that nympho.

The “nympho” in question was Miki, a Master formerly affiliated with the Demonkin Nation who was currently a prisoner of war being held in the Abyss. Light had assigned Iceheat, Mera, Jack, and Suzu the task of capturing Miki, but Iceheat had pleaded with the other three warriors to let her have the honor of taking down Miki alone, because unlike the other three, Iceheat hadn't had the opportunity to serve Light on any surface world missions since the tower battles with the White Knights. In fact, Iceheat was so desperate to have her moment in the sun, she even lowered herself to calling Jack her “bro.” But despite that rather sizable sacrifice, Miki ended up defecting to their side before Iceheat could battle her.

Mera was starting to wonder if Iceheat's overly smug attitude might end up being a bad omen for something going wrong, in the same vein as what happened with Miki. *But I should keep that to myself. Or else, I might rain on her parade,* Mera thought, chuckling nervously to herself.

At that same moment, the Wicked Witch finished discussing the plans with Yotsuha, and everyone was ordered to mount their dragons. Mei and Light (disguised as Dark) joined the witch and Yotsuha atop the largest dragon, while Mera and Iceheat mounted their own individual dragons, the chimera still wrestling with her mixed feelings over Iceheat's conduct. The dragon army finally took to the sky and set off for the Onifolk Archipelago with the Tower City dwellers cheering them on, leaving Mera unable to warn Iceheat about her misgivings until after it was too late.



Shortly after the successful overthrow of Yotsuha's home nation, Iceheat sat dejectedly at one of the tables in the Abyss's cafeteria, with Khaos sitting directly across from her, attempting to cheer up the warrior maid in his own brusque and maladroit fashion.

“For what it's worth, the Kamijo head was not worth your time or effort,” Khaos said. “He was supposedly the leader of his nation, but he was too rotten to his core to be able to protect anyone weaker than him. His bodyguards

shared his reprehensible character too.”

Iceheat listened to Khaos’ attempt at a pep talk in silence and remained that way after he’d finished, her eyes twin pools of nothingness. Khaos let several more uncomfortable seconds pass before he decided he couldn’t take the silent treatment anymore and bowed his head.

“I apologize,” Khaos said. “My team and I unexpectedly encountered the Kamijo head and his detail in the secret underground room, and their conduct was so utterly inexcusable, I felt I had to engage them. I hope you understand that I was not trying to intentionally rob you of your chance to contribute.”

Despite Khaos showing genuine contriteness—something that was completely out of character for him—Iceheat continued to stare at the warrior mage with dark, empty eyes. During the invasion of the Onifolk Archipelago, Iceheat had waited patiently in the trees, excitedly anticipating capturing Utamaro, only to receive a Telepathy call from Khaos to tell her that he had captured the Kamijo leader instead. Considering this latest setback, it was no wonder Iceheat now found herself in a nearly irrecoverable state of shock.

Mera—who was seated next to Khaos at the cafeteria table—cackled after observing his failed attempt to talk Iceheat out of her mood. “Look, hun, I’d be moping too if I were you. But think about it: nobody thought that skunk you were supposed to capture would take his sweet time gathering up all his loot before making his getaway. Khaos was just doing his job when he ran into those dumbos in the basement, so you can believe him when he says he didn’t mean to steal your thunder.”



Light's team had been working under the belief that Utamaro would immediately flee the estate when he got word that the capital city had been invaded by a swarm of dragons. But instead of following what was logical, Utamaro had prioritized stuffing chests full of gold and other trinkets as soon as he thought he was in danger of being captured. Such a scenario hadn't even been considered by the planners of the raid, since they believed it was much more likely that as the de facto leader of the onifolk nation, Utamaro would still have connections on the outside who would provide him with the funds he would have needed to live a comfortable life if he had escaped empty-handed. But as it was, because Khaos and his retinue of fairy maids had wasted no time in reaching the secret underground room, they had stumbled across Utamaro and his bodyguards in the act before they had a chance to escape with all of his wealth. While defending himself against an attack, Khaos had put Utamaro and his security detail out of commission, and this mishap had resulted in Iceheat being deprived of glory.

Khaos had planned to use this meeting with Iceheat in the cafeteria to thoroughly explain his side of the story, but after seeing her in such a miserable state, he had broken down and offered an unequivocal apology instead. In a way, it had been an accident that had affected multiple victims.

After Mera had said her piece, some life finally returned to Iceheat's eyes, and the maid started to tear up. "I-I know you didn't mean to steal my assignment away from me, Khaos, but..." She choked up, then launched into a rant when she found her voice again. "But I wanted to prove myself after that absolute *degenerate* cheated me out of fighting her! That solo mission was my best chance of showing my fealty to Master Light!"

Iceheat tousled her bicolor hair with both hands in frustration. "Nothing good has happened to me since I laid eyes on that deviant, Miki! Has she become my jinx? Have I been cursed?"

Mera chortled. "No, babe. If anyone's cursed, it's Suzu for being that skeeze's eternal love interest."

"I won't comment on that," Khaos said icily. "And I will ask you not to mention that person's name in my presence." He suppressed a shudder as he

remembered what he had seen when he had made the mistake of visiting Miki in her detention cell.

Iceheat lazily activated her Item Box, took out a bottle of whiskey, and slammed the drink down on the table. Iceheat almost never drank alcohol, usually preferring tea instead.

“That’s it! I’m venting over booze!” Iceheat declared. “And you two are going to drink with me!”

“Fine, fine, I hear you,” Mera giggled. “I’ll listen to you whine and complain all night if that’s what it takes, sweetie.”

“I’ll accompany you as well, since I am the one who caused your grief,” Khaos said. “However, I won’t drink any alcohol, since I cannot stand the taste.”

“Who cares? Just sit and listen!” Iceheat shot back. For all those present, the commencement of Iceheat’s binge drinking session marked the true end of the offensive against the Onifolk Archipelago.

Extra Story 3: Ayame's First Love

Ayame awoke and mumbled something quietly as she slowly opened her eyes, before suddenly jumping out of the covers and on top of the bed when she realized she was in unfamiliar surroundings.

“Ah! Where am I?!” Ayame yelled.

When she had gone to sleep, she had been in bed beside her sister in a mountainside cottage, having arrived there only the day earlier after leaving her home in the castle with barely any explanation. Ayame's big sister, Yotsuha, had told her that they needed to hide out in the cottage for a while because of some kind of problems up at the castle, though she didn't go into any further details. Although Ayame was vaguely aware that what they were doing was improper, she was glad to go on this adventure with her beloved sister, since it meant they would be together the whole time.

It was morning, and she looked around at the bed she was presently in. It was a canopy bed with lace curtains on all sides to give her a veneer of privacy. Ayame and Yotsuha had previously been sleeping on futons spread out on the floor, but like those futons, her sister was nowhere to be seen.

Where is my dear sister? Ayame wondered frantically. *Has someone kidnapped her while we were asleep?* With her hair still unkempt, Ayame balled up her little fist, determined to save her sister from the evil villains holding her.

“Don't worry, dear sister!” Ayame called out. “I have been training my whole life for this—”

“Why, good morning, Miss Ayame,” a voice replied almost immediately outside the lace curtain.

“Who's there?!” Ayame yelled back. After this prompting, a hand pushed aside one of the lace curtains and revealed a fairy maid so exquisitely beautiful, she took Ayame's breath away.

The fairy maid drew the lace curtain even wider before she spoke again. “Miss

Yotsuha is waiting for you at the breakfast table. We'll help you to get ready for the day, so please come with me."

"M-My sister's waiting for me?" Ayame asked.

"Well, of course," the fairy maid said. "Miss Yotsuha will tell you everything you wish to know." The fairy maid knew Ayame wouldn't believe her if she tried telling her where she was and why she was here, but it would be a different matter if the explanation came from her beloved sister.

"O-Okay," Ayame said. "Then please take me to my sister." For the time being, Ayame decided she would follow orders, although she remained alert and many questions tumbled through her head.

"Certainly, Miss Ayame," said the fairy maid. "But first, I believe it would be best if you made yourself presentable. If you were to partake in breakfast in your current appearance, you would not just injure your own reputation, but the reputation of Miss Yotsuha as well."

Ayame hesitated. "Please help me prepare."

"As you wish, Miss Ayame," the fairy maid said with a bow. The maid led the girl to a washroom where a number of fairy maids assisted in bathing her, fixing her hair, and changing her into different attire. Since Ayame had always been waited upon in a similar fashion by handmaidens all throughout her life, she didn't find anything strange about this treatment. Afterward, she was led to another room where Yotsuha was already seated, ready to have breakfast.

"Dear sister!" Ayame exclaimed.

"Good morning, Ayame," Yotsuha replied. "I'm sure you must be wondering what's going on. Well, I'll explain everything while we eat."

"Thank you, sister dear," Ayame said without a hint of suspicion in her voice. The fairy maids proceeded to place a load of food on the table, though to avoid any confusion, the maids had made sure that the meal matched what the two sisters would usually eat.

Yotsuha told Ayame that the two of them were presently inside the Great Tower due to unspecified political problems back at home that had forced them to remain the guests of the Wicked Witch for the time being. They had arrived

at the Great Tower in the Elven Queendom overnight thanks to the Wicked Witch's powers, Yotsuha added, before warning Ayame not to be rude while they were staying at their present location.

Although Yotsuha had made the actual details of their situation intentionally fuzzy, Ayame took her sister at her word that this step had been necessary and didn't press for more answers. After all, Yotsuha was the ruler of the Onifolk Archipelago—even if in name only—and if she simply blamed “political problems,” how could her sister argue? Particularly when that was a topic that completely flew over her head, because not only was she too young to fully grasp such complicated matters, her only goal in life was to become a warrior who could someday serve her elder sister as a guardian, so court drama rarely if ever crossed her mind.

After breakfast, Yotsuha took Ayame to the reception chamber to meet the Wicked Witch of the Tower. The sisters sat on one sofa and waited patiently until the witch eventually strolled into the chamber and took a seat on the sofa opposite.

“Salutations. It is I, the Wicked Witch,” said their host. “You and Ms. Yotsuha are welcome to stay in my Great Tower until everything is settled, so until then, please consider my home your home.”

“I thank you for your hospitality,” Ayame said with a bright smile. Ellie, in her guise as the Wicked Witch, was so taken by Ayame's politeness and charm that she chose to stay in the chamber and chat some more with the girl over tea. The conversation was pleasant and upbeat, right up until an impetuous grin appeared on Ayame's face and she said what was *really* on her mind.

“I have heard you are a very powerful sorceress, Great Witch,” Ayame said. “My dream is to become my dear sister's guardian when I grow up, and for that, I need to train. I wish to practice fighting you, so that I may improve my skills!”

“A-Ayame!” Yotsuha exclaimed, her face blanching. “We're *guests* of the Great Witch! How could you suggest something so rude? Take it back and apologize now!”

“There is no need to be so agitated, Ms. Yotsuha,” Ellie said, a friendly smile still beaming underneath the Faceveil Hood. “I don't consider your sister's

request impolite in the least. If Ms. Ayame is training to be a guardian, it is only natural she would be interested in testing her strength against a powerful opponent.”

These assurances from the witch managed to calm Yotsuha down a notch, and the witch turned back to Ayame. “However, I believe you’re training in hand-to-hand combat, correct? Since I’m a sorceress, I’m afraid we are too far apart in our range of abilities to be of much help to you. With that said, I suggest you train with a retainer of mine who is an expert in close-quarters combat. Would you settle for that alternative, Ms. Ayame?”

“I’m sorely disappointed that I won’t be able to spar with you,” Ayame grumbled. “But you are correct that I’m proficient in sword fighting and unfamiliar with spellcraft. As such, I will gladly accept your suggestion, Great Witch!”

“Very good,” the Wicked Witch said. “I shall contact my subordinate shortly. Whenever you wish to meet my retainer, tell one of my fairy maids and they will escort you to him.”

“I am indebted to you, Great Witch,” said Ayame.

“Honestly, Ayame...” Yotsuha said wearily, rubbing her temple while the Wicked Witch and the fairy maids all smiled warmly at the two sisters.



Soon after having tea with the Wicked Witch, Ayame asked to be taken to see the retainer in question. She changed into her “dogi” practice uniform and took a wooden sword with her. When they arrived at the Great Tower’s training grounds on an underground level, her opponent was already there, waiting for Ayame.

“Are *you* my sparring partner?” Ayame said, sounding more than a little disappointed. The retainer was taller than Ayame, but not by much, and basically looked like a child wearing knight’s armor. He certainly didn’t seem to measure up to the male oni warriors she was used to facing in mock battles. Her new training partner was a handsome boy with silvery-white hair, though his steely, frosty gaze made him seem kind of unapproachable. But in every other aspect, the sparring partner the Great Witch had recommended didn’t appear

to be a strong fighter at all.

The retainer purposely didn't say a word to the young oni girl when she entered the room and asked that discourteous question, so it fell to the fairy maid to make the introductions. "We would like you to meet Lord Khaos, who serves the Great Witch of the Tower as her right-hand man. It seems you are concerned about his appearance, but there's no need to worry, for although he may look like a mere boy, he is every bit a formidable fighter as the Great Witch says he is."

Khaos kept up the silent treatment, causing the fairy maid to give him a stern look urging him to try to act civil. Khaos got the hint but let out a sigh to indicate that his heart simply wasn't in this task. Ellie had instructed him via Telepathy to "spar with Ayame and make her happy," so he had obediently come down to the training area, understanding that keeping Ayame entertained would play a not-insignificant role in getting the Onifolk Archipelago on Light's side. But he would've rather he hadn't been assigned babysitting duty.

"I'm Khaos," he said brusquely. "I was told by my superior that you wished to challenge me in mock combat. Well, I'm ready whenever you are, so you're free to engage me."

"How can you be ready?" Ayame noted. "You're not even armed."

"I don't need any weapons to spar with someone at your level," Khaos said bluntly. "You'll realize what I mean once you attempt to battle me. You may swing your sword at me with all your might."

Angry blood vessels pulsed on Ayame's forehead, thinking that Khaos was looking down on her because she was younger than him. The fairy maid glanced over at Khaos and pleaded with her eyes for him to be a little more affable toward the girl.

Ayame raised her wooden sword, her rage-filled eyes fixed on Khaos. "It appears you are unaware how skilled I am. Well, in that case, I'll *make* you understand by hurting you!" Letting out a yell as she did so, Ayame ran at Khaos swinging her wooden sword, but the attack was so slow, Khaos even had time to sigh inwardly before swiftly dodging the strike.

“My sword went *through* you?” Ayame said in astonishment. From her perspective, Khaos hadn’t taken a single step to avoid her, but instead of hitting him with her sword, it felt like her swing had gone right through him like he was an apparition.

“Are we done here?” Khaos asked dismissively.

“This isn’t over!” Ayame snapped. She started breathing heavily through her nose and swung her sword again and again at Khaos, attempting all sorts of techniques that she knew, including diagonal slashes, thrusts, and vertical slices, but he effortlessly eluded all of them like a wraith. Khaos allowed Ayame to get within a hair’s breadth of landing a hit without her sword ever making contact with him, which meant Ayame was under the impression that her weapon was simply phasing right through Khaos. By the end of it, Ayame was leaning on her sword as if it were a crutch and panting heavily as large beads of sweat dribbled down her face.

“Why can’t I touch you with my sword?” Ayame moaned between gasps.

Khaos—who hadn’t broken a sweat in the most literal sense of the phrase—coldly and methodically listed all of Ayame’s shortcomings. “Your attacks were too slow. Not only were your movements rough around the edges, your eye movements gave away where you were aiming. I would be surprised if you ever reach a level where you are able to hit me at all. Your skills are too lacking for words.”

“I-I’m skilled enough to beat adult trainers!” Ayame protested. “I *can’t* be this weak!”

“You are first in line to become the next Holy Princess, so those others obviously showed deference to you by not fighting at full strength,” Khaos explained. “Your skills are only good for someone your age. Or well, they’re a *little* bit better, if we’re being generous.”

Ayame grimaced at the cutting remark, unable to say a word in response. Khaos had metaphorically rubbed salt into a concern that Ayame had harbored in the back of her mind for a while: that the male oni warriors had only been humoring her in their sparring sessions. If the worst were to happen to her sister—whether that be getting involved in a deadly accident or succumbing to

an incurable illness—Ayame would be the one to assume the position of Holy Princess. Given her station, those male warriors had nothing to gain from beating Ayame, except her potentially holding a grudge against them. Hot tears streamed down her face as she choked back her resentment toward them.

“Miss Ayame?!” called out the fairy maid, who frantically ran over to Ayame to wipe her face with a handkerchief while treating Khaos to a look of sheer disbelief at how the warrior mage had caused Ayame to cry instead of entertaining her. But Khaos ignored the fairy maid and continued providing his honest assessment of her skills.

“However, your form is precise, and your initial sword swings show that you’ve been practicing for years.”

“Huh?” Ayame said through her tears.

“Toward the end of the fight, you grew desperate and relied too much on your strength in a vain attempt to speed up your sword swings,” Khaos noted. “That ended up disrupting your form and working against you. You need to take full advantage of your strengths. If you lack speed, it is better to use your head. Face me with your sword again.”

Ayame looked confused for a second, then did as he instructed.

“Your form is clean and precise, but your eyes give away where you’re going to attack,” Khaos explained. “However, you can also use your eye movement to your advantage. Your eyes could fool your opponent into thinking you’re attempting a downward diagonal slice, when in reality, you’re about to perform an upward slice. That attack would take your opponent by surprise, and even if they dodged the initial swing, they’d be thrown off-balance, meaning you can nail them on a follow-up attack. Try it for yourself.”

“O-Okay!” Ayame stuttered.

“Your eyes are still moving with your attack,” Khaos said. “There’s no need to rush. You can take it slowly at first.”

“Yes, sir,” said Ayame. What had begun as a sparring session had morphed into more of a training session. Khaos thought he was doing Light a favor, since training Ayame properly would improve her skills, and therefore be more

beneficial to her than simply engaging in practice fights. However, his sole intent was to instruct her, nothing more.



A few days later, Ellie summoned Khaos to give him a good dressing down.

“Khaos,” Ellie started, a hint of warning in her voice. “I never said you were free to take things *that* far!”

“Why are you upset at me?” Khaos queried, bristling with anger. He honestly had no idea why Ellie was yelling at him.

“It’s what you’ve done to Ayame!” Ellie exclaimed. “I told you to make her happy by sparring with her so that we’d have an easier time of bringing Yotsuha over to our side, but that didn’t mean you had to make her fall in *love* with you! Why would you make her feel that way about you?”

“That’s a ridiculous accusation,” Khaos replied. “All I have done is instruct her on how to properly wield a sword. It does seem that she has grown attached to me to the point where she is even calling me ‘master,’ but there is nothing romantic about those feelings. She only sees me as a mentor, nothing more. Honestly, why are women always so quick to twist every relationship they see into some love affair? It is beyond my comprehension.”

“Oh, good heavens...” Ellie slapped her forehead with the palm of her hand. “You’ve made her fall for you without even realizing it.”

Ellie had first learned of Ayame’s feelings toward Khaos from Yotsuha. According to the Holy Princess, her sister had dropped an explosive question that had caught her totally off guard.

“Say, since my master is the Great Witch’s right-hand man, wouldn’t it bring the Great Tower and our nation closer politically if I married him?” Ayame had asked innocently.

This was the cherry on top of a series of bizarre changes in Ayame’s behavior. For one thing, she had become curious about wearing more feminine clothing and accessories, despite only caring about training in sword fighting in her dogi up until that point. Ayame had also asked Yotsuha to teach her how to apply makeup. The Holy Princess had absolutely no idea how to respond to what was

obviously Ayame's first crush, so she had gone to the Wicked Witch for advice.

"Is it really possible for Ayame and Khaos to wed?" Yotsuha had asked the witch. During that conversation, Ellie had managed to dance around the question by giving an equivocal reply, but she was furious with Khaos for putting her in such an awkward position in the first place. Now that she had learned that Khaos was completely unaware of Ayame's feelings toward him, Ellie was even more flabbergasted by the situation.

How did things turn out like this? Ellie wondered. Ayame's puppy love might end up becoming a bigger problem and interfere with our mission on the Onifolk Archipelago. If that were to happen, Blessed Lord Light would never forgive me!

Ellie knew there was no way Khaos would ever reciprocate Ayame's feelings, so it was inevitable that she would suffer a broken heart. If that ended up affecting the mission against the onifolk conspirators, even if only remotely, Ellie would be at a loss to explain the strategic failure to Light. As the witch mulled over the unanticipated dilemma she found herself in, Khaos cast one last icy glare at her while marveling at the nonsensical nature of the conversation, then turned to leave so that he could begin his daily training session with Ayame.

Afterword

I wish to thank you all once more for reading and/or purchasing this eighth volume of *Backstabbed in a Backwater Dungeon: My Trusted Companions Tried to Kill Me, But Thanks to the Gift of an Unlimited Gacha I Got LVL 9999 Friends and Am Out For Revenge on My Former Party Members and the World!*

This is the author Meikyou Shisui here to let you know that this volume—including the main story and the extra stories—is the second volume that is composed entirely of new content! When I was preparing to write this volume, I asked my supervising editor if I could have a longer deadline for submitting my draft, since penning completely new content takes more time, due to needing to work out the plot. My editor was kind enough to give me a little more time (and I thank you very much for that!), so I put pen to paper and prepared to face whatever hardships lay in store for me while writing this eighth volume.

But what took me by surprise was just how easy it was to write this volume, even more so than the other volumes. This was unexpected since I struggled frequently while writing the third volume, the first book of this series that was made up entirely of new content. If I were to take a stab at guessing why that might be, I'd say the third volume was my first experience of writing content not based on the web novel chapters, so I had little idea how to proceed. But now that it wasn't my first rodeo, I knew exactly what needed to be done, and the words came together surprisingly easily.

From the first page to the last, I was able to immerse myself in the story, and chapter after chapter basically wrote itself. Personally, I was very satisfied with how Light's revenge on Oboro turned out, as well as with the rest of the main story and the extra stories. I hope everyone reading the eighth volume can tell how much of a delight it was to write and comes away thinking this book was enjoyable.

And with all that said, on to the acknowledgments for this volume!

First, I wish to thank tef for providing yet more wonderful illustrations and

character designs. Unlike previous volumes, this one in particular had many elements that were particularly Japanese in nature, so I thank you for making the cover illustrations and the characters reflect that Japanese-style touch. Your drawings were superb as always and greatly matched what I wrote. Some of my favorite illustrations were those of two of the Masters, Kaizer and Hei. I was deeply impressed at how your designs of those two characters went well beyond what I'd imagined in terms of how fabulous they looked!

Next to thank is my supervising editor, plus HJ Novels's editorial team! I greatly appreciate you giving me extra time to write this volume, and thanks to your generosity, I was able to turn in work of the highest quality. I can't thank you enough for always going to bat for me in a variety of ways.

I also wish to thank Takafumi Oomae for authoring a truly enjoyable manga version of *Unlimited Gacha*, new chapters of which come out on the Magazine Pocket app! You can count me among the fans who wait at midnight every Tuesday for a new chapter to land. I can't wait to read your manga adaptation of the eighth volume of my novel!

I would also like to extend my gratitude to Magazine Pocket's editorial team and the supervising editor for their work in bringing such a wonderful manga to publication. I can assure you that this subscriber never misses a new chapter!

And last but certainly not least, I would like to thank all of my readers for reading this eighth volume! It's thanks to your dedication that this series has made it to this volume. I'll continue writing *Unlimited Gacha* to the best of my abilities, so I look forward to receiving your continued support right through to the very end!

PS: Just like in the previous volumes, I have written a bonus story that is available to everyone who purchased this novel. To access the bonus story, go to my activity updates on the *Shosetsuka ni Naro* website, click on the entry that has a date of or around October 18 or 19, 2023, and you will be directed to my personal web page, where you will need to enter a password. (You can also do a web search for “明鏡シスイ 活動報告 (Meikyou Shisui Activity Update)” and that should take you straight to the right web page. Once there, search for the entry that corresponds to the dates above. Also, the password to my personal website changes with every volume of the novel that's released, so

please bear that in mind. When you have logged in, you should also be able to read all the past bonus stories.)

The password for this volume is: **himemiko**. [Please note: As of this English-language publication, this password has expired.]

Bonus Short Story

A Favor for Everyone

A few days after I had exacted my vengeance on Oboro, I received a very unusual written request from several of my allies.

“They want me to use the UR Ability Copy to copy their abilities, like I did with you guys?” I queried before rereading the memo Mei had just given me in my office in the Abyss. It had been written by Iceheat, who was acting on behalf of a number of others who wanted to see me using the gacha card. The UR Ability Copy allowed a user to replicate someone’s powers just by thinking about that person. However, the card could only reproduce powers at seventy percent of their full potential, and there was no guarantee the card user would be able to wield these powers perfectly.

Mei sighed. “You defeated Oboro by utilizing the powers wielded by the four Level 9999s, thanks to those Ability Copy cards. However, it appears that Nazuna has been bragging to people about how you ultimately defeated him with *her* powers...”

“So they’re envious and want me to copy their powers too?” I asked with a perplexed grin. Like Mei said, I’d copied her powers as well as Aoyuki’s, Ellie’s, and Nazuna’s during my battle with Oboro. If I had thought the powers wielded by my other allies would have come in useful in that fight, I would have used them too.

“Well, if this is all they’re asking for, it’s no skin off my nose,” I said, still amused by the idea. “Besides, this will be a good opportunity to test out how well the Ability Copy is able to replicate other people’s powers. Mei, I’ll need you to schedule a good time and place for everyone to gather for the demonstration.”

“As you wish, Master Light,” Mei said. “I shall make the arrangements.” She bowed politely and left my office to fulfill my request. Once she had gone, I

picked up another set of documents to read.



A few days later, I arrived at the training grounds on the bottom level of the Abyss, where all the people who wanted me to copy their powers—Iceheat, Mera, Suzu, Jack, and Orka—were waiting for me.

“Master Light, all of us thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to grant us this favor,” Iceheat said, speaking for the others.

“It’s totally fine,” I said amicably. “This is also a chance for me to find out how well the Ability Copy card works with all your powers. Anyway, I say we get started.”

“Of course, Master Light,” said Iceheat.

I took out a card and pictured Iceheat in my mind. “UR Ability Copy—release!” A flash of light surrounded me for a brief moment before my new form was revealed.

“My goodness, Master Light!” Iceheat gasped. “You even have the same colors in your hair as myself!”

Since I didn’t have a mirror handy, I wasn’t able to verify it, but I was pretty sure the left half of my hair was now ice blue, while the right half was fire red. Of course, that wasn’t the only thing about me that had changed. I infused mana into my right hand, causing superheated flames to ignite around the fist, and when I pointed that arm at a Stone Golem that was serving as target practice for this experiment, the flames shot toward it and scored a direct hit, reducing the golem to a charred crisp.

“So *this* is what it’s like to have your powers, Iceheat,” I said, impressed. “Controlling that ball of fire was much smoother than I expected it to be.”

“Your compliment is much appreciated, Master Light,” Iceheat replied with a happy grin lighting up her face.

The fireball hadn’t been as forceful as the fire attacks Iceheat was capable of, however, though that tracked since the Ability Copy was only able to replicate seventy percent of someone’s power.

Next, I tried copying Mera's abilities using the gacha card. After a brief flash of light, I appeared with much longer sleeves covering both my hands, which is how Mera tended to wear her sleeved garments. Because I just couldn't help myself, I twirled the two loose ends of my sleeves around and around.

"Master Light, that's so adorable!" Iceheat exclaimed.

Mera cackled. "Master's the only one who could pull off that look. Or any look for that matter." Suzu nodded furiously in agreement.

"Thanks, guys," I said with a smile. "Anyway, let's see what Mera's powers can do, shall we? Hm, looks trickier to handle than Iceheat's powers."

After struggling for a bit, I finally managed to transform my hands into two giant dragon paws. I swiped at another Stone Golem with one of my paws, and the claws ripped it apart in one stroke as though it was made of wet paper.

"Wow, I can't believe you've mastered powers that are this difficult to use, Mera," I said. "It'd take me an awful lot of practice before I could put these powers to use on the battlefield."

"I'm a chimera, so using those powers comes as naturally to me as a bird taking flight," Mera said. "It's only a bit trickier for you because you're not used to it, master."

Mera's pep talk made me smile as I released the next Ability Copy card, mimicking Suzu this time. Another flash of light surrounded me, then dissipated as quickly as it had come.

"So copying Suzu's powers means I get to wear her hat and carry a gun that looks like Lock?" I thought aloud as I touched the hunting cap on my head and studied the new weapon in my hands. "I don't think this 'Lock' can talk like the real one, however." The musket looked exactly like Lock, but when I waved it around, I didn't get any reaction from it.

"Personally, I'm *glad* your gun can't talk, Lord Light," Lock admitted. "If that weapon could speak, it'd just leave me wondering if it was really a copy of me, or if it was another being altogether."

Lock had a point there. It would have been one thing if we'd made a copy of him using the UR Double Shadow gacha card, since we knew for sure it created

a fake that could be controlled and erased. But since the Ability Copy card didn't come with those features, people could well have started to wonder if my gun was in fact the *real* Lock if it had been able to talk.

As these thoughts swam through my head, I pointed the replica musket at another Stone Golem and pulled the trigger, causing a torrent of mana bullets to erupt from the muzzle and reduce the golem to pebbles. I found that I could even control the trajectory of the bullets to a certain extent after firing them. But truth be told, there were far too many bullets for me to be able to track and manipulate them effectively, so mind-controlling the projectiles proved very difficult for me.

"Wow, Suzu. You're just as incredible as Mera," I remarked. "I could never control so many bullets at the same time like you can. In fact, I don't think I could ever get to your level, even if I spent a long, long time training to do it."

Suzu blushed, and as ever, Lock replied on her behalf. "My partner thanks you for the praise, Lord Light."

I continued messing around with the powers I'd copied from Suzu to see how they compared to the real deal. I found that my musket fired off fewer bullets in one go than Lock, and that my weapon was more limited when it came to the kinds of buffs and debuffs the bullets could be imbued with. But those negatives aside, I was able to shoot a whole lot of bullets per second, and I felt that in the right situation, Suzu's copied abilities could still prove to be very powerful.

Next up, I copied Jack's powers. I released another Ability Copy card, and after glowing for a second, I found myself wearing Jack's outfit. In other words, I had nothing covering my top half, save for a jacket that was draped over my shoulders like a cape.

"Whoa, that card's even good enough to copy my style," Jack remarked. "This bro seriously approves. Lookin' good, Lightmeister."

"If you don't mind me reiterating Mr. Jack's observation, I think the outfit flatters you remarkably well," Orka added.

"Thanks, Jack, Orka," I replied. By contrast, my female allies all had a totally different set of reactions toward my new look.

“Oh my goodness!” Iceheat gasped before turning to Jack. “He’s shirtless, just like you, bro!”

Mera chuckled. “I normally can’t stand the getup Jack walks around in, but unlike that cementhead, you make it *work*, master!”

As for Suzu, her face had turned a shade of red I’d never seen before, sending Lock into a state of panic. “Calm down, partner!” the gun pleaded. “Get it together before you give yourself a nosebleed!”

I could kind of understand why they would get so excited about seeing me in this getup, so I charitably declined from remarking on their comments and instead concentrated on testing out Jack’s powers. “Ironblooded Barricade!” I yelled. The skill was supposed to cover my whole body with a layer of hardened, mana-infused blood to create a near-unbreakable shell, but only my arms ended up being covered by the red armor.

“What’s this?” I muttered. “I thought the Ability Copy was able to replicate seventy percent of someone’s powers. Why did it stop at my arms?”

Jack stroked his chin, deep in thought. “Hold up, bro. Why don’cha try punching my hand with your fist?” He covered his right arm with the same Ironblooded Barricade armor I had on and thrust his palm out toward me. I drew my own fist back, then punched Jack’s palm, though obviously not with my full strength. But even that weak hit was enough to send the heavy, dull sound of metal on metal reverberating around the arena. With the sound echoing around us, Jack brightened up as if he’d figured something out.

“Ah, now I get it, bro,” Jack said. “The stuff on your arm is just as hard as my Ironblooded Barricade. *That’s* why you can only get it to cover your arms.”

“How have you reached that conclusion, Mr. Jack?” asked a clearly puzzled Orka.

“It’s real simple, bro. The Lightmeister can’t cover his whole body if he wants armor as hard as mine,” Jack explained.

“So in other words, if I *did* want to cover my entire body with the armor, I’d have to sacrifice how tough it is?” I concluded.

“Attaboy, broski!” Jack said, tousling my hair. “Always quick on the uptake.”

At least I'd solved the mystery of why Jack's Ironblooded Barricade had only covered my arms. But even if I did accept that the armor on my arm was every bit as hard as what Jack could manifest, I wasn't really sure what situation having two armored fists was really going to help. If I ever deigned to copy Jack's powers in the future, I would have to keep this limitation in mind.

Next, I chose to try out Orka's powers. *Truth is, I've been looking forward to copying Orka's powers the most, though I should probably keep that to myself.* My anticipation sprang from my belief that the gacha card would give me the ability to play the fiddle like Orka. I'd never played an instrument in my life, so I wanted to experience that firsthand. After releasing the Ability Copy card, Orka remarked on my new appearance.

"I see your hair matches my own," he said. "Your hair is usually all dark, but having it half white like that suits you, my lord and master."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Orka," I said. Again, I had to take my ally's word for how I looked, since I didn't have a mirror handy. I grabbed the fiddle and bow strapped to my waist, and felt a rush as I gripped them, ready to play.

"Whoa, I like this," I said. "I've never played an instrument before, but I know exactly in my mind what to do."

"If that's the case, then the Ability Copy is a truly impressive card," Orka said, seeming genuinely surprised. Playing an instrument required years of training, and it was definitely not the kind of thing someone could manage well on their first try, yet here I was claiming to be some kind of musical expert straight after releasing the card.

"Well, now that I have this power, why don't I play a song for you guys?" I suggested.

"Yes, please!" Iceheat replied enthusiastically, speaking for the group. "Play to your heart's desire, Master Light!"

I took that as my signal to place the bow on the strings of the fiddle and begin playing "The Silent Riverside," which was the same tune Orka had played to becalm the human slaves who had been forced to fight for the beastmen who waged war on the Great Tower. *So this is what it feels like to play a real instrument,* I mused. I concentrated all of my thoughts on the bow and my

fingertips, and let the melodies from inside my soul flow naturally into the sounds made by the fiddle. The music filled the arena and made us feel like we were relaxing outside on a warm, sunny day. When I finished the piece, everyone broke into applause.

“What a marvelous performance, Master Light!” Iceheat gushed.

“You got that right, hun,” Mera said with a chortle. “That was the best piece of music I’ve ever heard!”

Suzu nodded twice, which Lock translated for the rest of us. “She said the melody was so beautiful, she could have listened to it forever,” the musket said. “And I feel the same way, Lord Light.”

“You crushed it, bro!” Jack said. “You totally knocked that tune outta the park, my man!”

Even Orka was effusive in his praise. “You might have borrowed those powers from a card, but I can tell from the exquisite notes you played that you put every effort into the piece. I daresay that you have a natural talent for music. Do you wish to use this opportunity to take up an instrument? I would even be willing to coach you on the finer points of music making, my lord and master.”

I laughed. “Oh, come on now. You’re making me blush. But thanks, Orka. I had fun playing the fiddle. Maybe I will practice it for real when I find the time to do so.”

And I meant what I said, to the point that I fully intended to get Orka to teach me how to be a musician once everything else I had going on was out of the way. Since I was having such a blast, I went ahead and played a few more songs for my audience, the performances serving the double purpose of appraising how my powers measured up to Orka’s.

“It looks like I’m only able to play a very limited number of songs—at least compared to you, Orka,” I said. “And the buff and debuff effects of the songs don’t rise to your level either.” But I could live with those drawbacks. In fact, if those handicaps weren’t in place, it would put Orka in a bad light.

I was done copying the powers of everyone present in the arena, but I was having so much fun, I decided I should copy people who weren’t here. Since I

still had some time to spare, I decided to pull out another Ability Copy card.

“Wait, who’re ya gonna copy this time, bro?” Jack asked.

“Well, since I’ve been copying high-level fighters up to now, I think I should try copying someone who’s at a lower level this time,” I reasoned. “I’m curious what’ll happen to me personally if I do that.”

Would my own power level go down if I copied the powers of a low-level ally? Or would I be able to perfectly replicate their powers? I had so many questions I wanted answers to.

“Well, here goes nothing,” I said. “Think I’ll start with one of the Mohawks—”

“Don’t!” Iceheat, Mera, and Suzu all yelled in unison, and I was especially surprised to hear the usually almost-silent Suzu cry out in such a loud voice. Even Lock seemed astonished by his partner’s newfound assertiveness. In any case, the three of them began desperately trying to talk me out of activating the card for the purpose I had stated.

“M-Master Light! I think it’s *way* too early to be copying the powers of people as low level as the Mohawks,” Iceheat said hurriedly. “Perhaps you should go down the scale *gradually*, for example by copying Gold’s or Nemumu’s powers.”

Mera chuckled nervously. “Ditto on that. After all, we don’t want anything happening to your hair—I mean, to you, master.”

Suzu nodded along emphatically as the other two spoke. They needn’t have been so dramatic about it. After all, I wasn’t *that* keen on copying a Mohawk. I obediently went along with their suggestions and copied the powers of Gold, Nemumu, and some other allies who fell within that range of power levels.



The following day, I was sitting doing work with Mei when Khaos entered my office.

“I heard you were testing the UR Ability Copy using other people’s powers yesterday,” he stated. “Did you use my powers to test the card too?”

“No, I didn’t copy your powers,” I said matter-of-factly. “Why do you ask?”

Khaos unexpectedly clicked his tongue in disappointment, leaving me

stunned. Noticing how bewildered I looked, Mei came over and whispered in my ear.

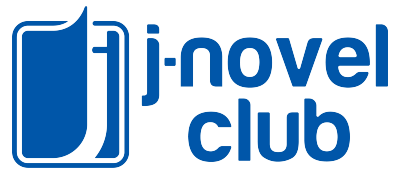
“It appears Khaos is displeased that you chose not to copy his powers yesterday. As his master, I believe this is an opportunity for you to show how magnanimous you are.”

“Then he should just come out and ask me to copy his powers, if that’s how he feels,” I whispered back, but I decided to take Mei’s advice and attempted to smooth things over.

“I didn’t copy your powers yesterday because I didn’t feel it was right to do so without asking you first,” I said. “But if you want, I can use a card to copy your powers too.”

“Do as you like,” Khaos said aloofly. “You beat me in battle, meaning I am in no position to tell the strong what to do. But don’t assume that I’ll always be so weak as to need a favor from you. Even the mighty eventually fall. If you truly think I’ll remain weak and forever be relying on your strength, think again. I’m not as soft as you might assume.”

As Khaos left my office, I couldn’t help noticing that his earlier peevishness had been completely replaced by a more buoyant attitude, and once the dust had settled on his dramatic exit, Mei and I glanced at each other and chuckled awkwardly.



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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 8

by Meikyou Shisui

Translated by Gad Onyeneho Edited by SMR

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