

Toshio Satou

Illustration by
Nao Watanuki

15
FINAL

suppose

a Kid from the
LAST DUNGEON
BOONIES Moved
to a Starter Town

Toshio Satou

Illustration by
Nao Watanuki









“Don’t
worry.”

“In time,
you’ll
learn
how.”

“Just
like I
did.”

And time passes—it’s the **Military Academy’s** entrance exam.
Lloyd’s an instructor overseeing
the **future of the new kids.**

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PROLOGUE

CHAPTER 1

Light Novel: A Kid from the Last Dungeon Boonies Saves the World

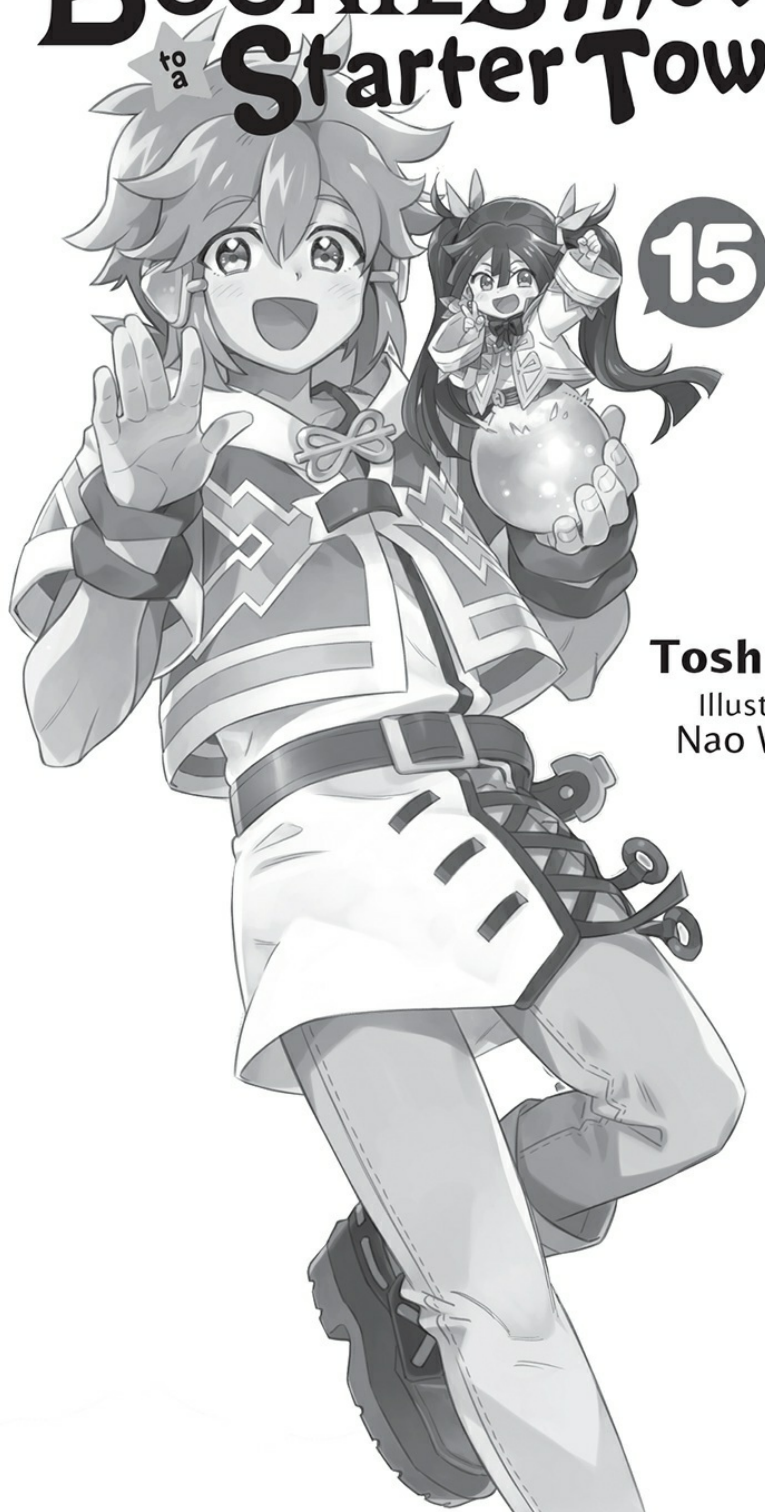
CHAPTER 2

Classic Trope: The Protagonist's Secret Past Proves Pivotal!

CHAPTER 3

Happy Ending: No Suppositions Required

Suppose
a Kid from the
LAST DUNGEON
BOONIES Moved
to a Starter Town



Toshio Satou

Illustration by
Nao Watanuki


NEW YORK

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SUPPOSE A KID FROM THE LAST DUNGEON BOONIES MOVED TO A STARTER TOWN 15

TOSHIO SATOU

Translation by Andrew Cunningham Cover art by Nao Watanuki

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TATOEBA LAST DUNGEON MAENO MURANO SHOUNEN GA JYOBAN NO
MACHI DE KURASUYOUNA MONOGATARI volume 15

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Character Profiles



Lloyd Belladonna

Boy raised in the town of legend. Becomes the hero who saves the world!



Marie the Witch

A princess who can't convince Lloyd that she is. Maybe this time?!



Alka

Immortal chief of the town of legend. Watches over Lloyd.



Selen Hemein

Lloyd saved her from a curse. Off to the destined battle with him.



Riho Flavin

Former skilled mercenary. Puts her faith in Lloyd in the final conflict.



Phyllo Quinone

A martial artist who insists Lloyd is her master. Puts those skills to use in the last battle.



Rinko

Azami's queen—and the one who knows what Eve is really after.



Shouma

Young man from Kunlun. Defeated by Eve's powerful trump card.



Micono Zol

In love with Marie. Has mastered the demon lord's power.



Anzu Kyounin

A master of the blade. Falls under Eve's control.



Sou

The legendary hero, awoken to witness Lloyd's feats.



Satan

The Demon Lord of the Night. Here for his student's final battle.



Lena Eng

Alka's rival. Finally out of her coma.



Merthophan Dextro

Passionate agricultural evangelist. Does battle with muscles and his love for farming.



Eve Profen

President in the old world, using the demon lord's power to do whatever she wants.



Allan T. Lidocaine

A classmate devoted to Lloyd. Meeting him changed his life.



Asako Ishikura

Her body was taken over by Eve, but in time, she'll be—

Prologue

In the Profen palace, in what remained of the laboratory, stood the protagonist of our story, Lloyd Belladonna.

His gentle smile was gone, replaced with grim determination.

In his arms was the painful sight of his wounded brother figure, Shouma—unconscious, his arm broken, his tanned skin covered in blood.

Shouma was stronger than Lloyd, always there for him—and Lloyd had found him in a heap in the ruins of this laboratory, badly injured at the end of the previous volume.

“Shouma...”

He knew who was responsible for this—Eve Profen, monarch of this country and goofball, always inside a rabbit costume.

But that was only a pseudonym.

Her real name was Eva.

Like Alka, she was a demon lord who had come from another world over a century ago.

At heart, she was a hedonist, bent on wrecking this world for shits and giggles—and also to prevent the others from following her back to her old home. There, she planned to rule with an immortal body and exclusive control of rune magic.

For people from *this* world—like our Lloyd—she was truly detestable, a veritable last boss.

Shouma had gone up against her and been easily trounced.

“He’s hurt bad—he fought for all of us!” Lloyd studied his unconscious face.

But despite his condition, Shouma's expression looked oddly peaceful. He knew Lloyd would handle the rest. He'd passed out certain of that fact.

"....."

A bleak breeze came through the cracked walls, brushing Lloyd's cheeks.

The only sounds came from fragments falling from the ruined ceiling.

"....."

The old Lloyd would have put himself down. *"If Shouma can't handle it, I won't stand a chance."*

But time and time again, he and his friends had faced peril and overcome it. (Although usually for entirely the wrong reasons.) He was no longer the kind of boy to wimp out here.

"You get some rest, Shouma," Lloyd said gently, with love. "I don't know much about demon lords, their world, or what fate has in store for ours..."

A keen light gleamed in his eye as he looked up.

"But I will avenge you!"

He made his vow to the silent sky, for his fallen friend.

Chapter 1

Light Novel: A Kid from the Last Dungeon Boonies Saves the World

Meanwhile, in the Profen palace conference room...

Here, too, the walls and ceilings had collapsed, leaving the place mostly destroyed.

The sky was visible through the hole in the roof—as if an earthquake had brought the place down in mere seconds.

Eve had made Vritra go berserk, and his rampage had laid waste to more than just the conference room. Many an innocent servant had been in harm's way, and the scene was swiftly becoming a makeshift field hospital.

“Is that all the injured?” Marie asked. She was using torn-up curtains in lieu of bandages.

“I think so,” Allan answered, wiping the sweat from his brow. “Colonel Choline rescued everyone hurt downstairs.”

He'd been helping tend to the wounded.

“Just gotta wait for those two to wake up.”

His eyes were on the father and daughter lying side by side on the carpet.

One was a gaunt man in a white lab coat—Vritra, once known as Ishikura.

The other was a delicate-looking girl—his daughter, Asako, until recently possessed by Eve.

This new world, and Eve, had put them both through the wringer.

“The power of Sir Lloyd and my love have freed them from the spell, and they shall soon awake!” Selen said, not one to break character in a crisis. Her words were perhaps more painful than the wound she was tending. No medicine here

—or in all the world—could cure what ailed *her*.

Riho was casting healing spells, and Phyllo was helping with first aid—but neither let Selen’s gibberish pass without comment.

“Sure it did. I’m more worried about the rest of the kingdom. It’s gotta hurt to know your own ruler unleashed a demon lord on the populace.”

“.....She was very popular. Her betrayal will cause chaos.”

Both had once been mercenaries and knew a thing or two about the lay of the land here. They were acutely aware of how bad the mop-up could get.

At this point a tanned man in a loincloth—Merthophan—stuck his oar in.

“That’s the least of our worries. We can leave that to King Sardin and the other visiting heads of state. It may take time, but they’re up to the task. Naturally, I’m willing to assist.”

“.....In the fields?” Phyllo asked.

Azami’s agricultural adviser nodded, adjusting the loincloth’s wedgie. “That’s all I know!”

He seemed to mean that, and Phyllo looked askance.

Relieved to hear Profen was someone else’s problem, Marie allowed herself a sigh, then started worrying about Lloyd instead.

“So, uh...Lloyd went running off. Where’d he go?” she asked.

The girls all sprang into action.

“Good question!” Selen said. “I’ll go check.”

“I’m curious myself.”

“.....Mm.”

They dashed to the side of the room Lloyd had left from.

Selen squinted in that direction. “He’s holding someone fallen... I’m honestly jealous.”

She wasn’t one to hide these things, and Riho looked exhausted already.

“Still committin’ to the bit, eh, Selen? I almost respect that.”

“.....Consistency is—!” Phyllo started to chime in but broke off in a gasp.

“What’s wrong, Phyllo?” Mena asked.

“.....He’s coming back, but...look.”

“At what? *Erk?* Howww?”

Marie saw Shouma in Lloyd’s arms and could not conceal her shock. No one could.

“What happened to Shouma?!”

“You gotta be kidding me. He’s from Kunlun!”

“.....And.....one of their stronger fighters.....”

Probably the strongest person here—so seeing him bloodied and beaten was horrifying indeed.

“Um, is Colonel Choline here?” Lloyd called. “Can you take a look at Shouma’s injuries real quick?”

Choline was a healing magic expert.

Marie quickly moved to accommodate Lloyd’s request. “I-I’ll get her! Put him down here!”

Selen took a closer look as Lloyd laid him down. “How awful,” she said. “Poor Shouma...”

“His legs and arms are broken. It’s a miracle he’s still breathing.”

“Shouma’s injured?!” Choline cried, running up. “That ain’t the half of it! Break off the legs of that chair so we can get some splints on him, stat!” She set to work.

Figuring Eve was the culprit here, Marie asked, “Where did Eve go? Was she still there?”

Lloyd shook his head. “By the time I arrived...”

“She beat Shouma? This badly?”

Merthophan had fought the boy himself once (in a loincloth, armed with farming artifacts) and was so astounded, he accidentally tugged his loincloth

too far up his crack.

The demon lord duo of Satan and Surtr were equally astonished.

Satan was scratching his mop top, unsure what move to make; meanwhile, Surtr was stuck in turtle form and couldn't do much aside from stretching his neck out.

"Director Ishikura said Eve was not yet at full strength. Yet she trounced him this easily?"

"Holy moly! Eva—Eve has power like this?"

Casting a healing spell on him, Choline looked lost. "Uh-oh," she said.

"Wh-what's wrong, Colonel Choline?" Lloyd asked. "Is his condition deteriorating?"

"Nah," she said, but she wasn't sure how to explain it. "The healing spell ain't doing anything; it's like something's blocking it."

Satan frowned.

"Kunlun villagers all have super healing to begin with— Why isn't that kicking in?"

"R-right...even I can heal a broken bone in a day! And everyone else can heal them instantly."

Lloyd's standards for normal were still a bit off, but at this point, everyone just smiled awkwardly. It was a running joke.

"But I don't get why he'd be repelling healing spells," Merthophan said. "Choline's are the best in the world—hm?" He broke off, eyes snapping to the sky.

"What, is something incoming?" Allan asked.

Phyllo braced herself. ".....Something bad."

"Not Eve herself?!"

"Pure malice...it's here!"

Schiiing!

Something rocketed into the Profen conference room, like a comet. And when the dust cleared, there stood— “Pretty Alka is here!”

—the white-robed chief of Kunlun, the kid grandma herself—Alka.

“Ch-Chief?!”

“Yo, Lloyd! It’s been too long! Can I get a kiss and hug?”

It was quite a request to follow her surprise arrival, and it really ruined the serious vibe. Quite a few eyes widened. Some may have rolled back in their heads.

“Who said I was malicious?!”

“I insist that term is largely accurate.”

“.....A malicious meteor.”

Our three girls resorted to snark.

Lloyd dodged the ill-timed embrace, spluttering questions. “Chief? Why aren’t you in Kunlun? I thought you stayed back to watch over Sou’s sleep and protect the village treasures!”

Alka took the hint and broke off her attempt at a hug.

“Mm, but then Sou woke up!” she said, suddenly serious. “Said he thought Shouma was calling to him. He’s looking after Kunlun for me.” Alka looked around. “So I popped on over to whoop President Eva’s butt, but...I don’t see anyone who looks like her... Wait, Shouma?!”

She finally spotted Shouma lying battered on the ground, and she nearly leapt out of her robes.

“Wh-what the... I can’t believe my eyes! *Ngk*... Director Ishikura?! Asako?!”

The subsequent shock knocked her to the ground, until she sat back up.

“Satan? Marie? Merthophan?! Explain!”

“Uh, Master—”

Satan and Marie quickly filled her in on Vritra’s rampage, the truth behind Eve’s identity, and how Eve had left Asako for her new body and flown away.

Once Alka was all caught up, the pieces fell into place.

“That explains it! I wondered why I couldn’t find Asako anywhere in a hundred years. Right under my nose...and I never noticed. Did the poor girl wrong.”

Alka flinched guiltily. Back in her lab days, she and the girl had been close and had often talked together.

“Chief Alka,” Merthophan said, redirecting her attention. “Can you take a look at Shouma’s injuries? We’re pretty sure Eve did something to him, but it’s weird.”

“Sorry, I’m throwing in the towel,” Choline said.

“Don’t sweat it,” Alka said, taking over. “Hm?”

Not even she could heal him.

“Ch-Chief? Is Shouma gonna be okay?” Lloyd asked nervously.

Alka frowned, tilting her head.

“Um...the recovery rune can heal anyone not dead...so what does this mean?”

She got to her feet, staring at nothing.

“I gotta assume Eve had some ace up her sleeve and used it on him,” she muttered. “Fastest approach would be to ask her. Where’d she go...? That way!”



“You can tell?” Lloyd asked.

Alka looked smug.

“Just felt around for unknown hostility. But...frankly, it was all too predictable.”

“It was?”

“She’s off taking a gander at Lab Chief Rinko and grabbing the Holy Sword... which is the key to the Last Dungeon.”

“So she’s headed for Azami?”

“Yup,” Alka said, wincing. “Man, no one can get enough of that place...”

With that, she turned to Azami, looking grimmer than ever before.

The very air trembled as they all followed her gaze.

“Time for the final battle.”

Meanwhile...

Stripped of her bunny suit—and Asako’s body—President Eva/Eve Profen was now free, possessed of the exact beauty she’d always longed for, and able to wield the demon lord’s power. She was swimming merrily across the sky toward Azami.

“Woo-hoo! Woo-hoo-hoo-hoo!”

She was in a very good mood—gallivanting cheerily, bobbing up and down, wheeling round, going through clouds. It was like she had just acquired the airship in an RPG.

She skimmed the ground, taking childish delight in startling the animals, and stuck a hand in the water to make ripples, admiring her reflection.

“The ideal face, the ideal body, youth, power, et cetera, et cetera! There’s nothing better than this.” Eve kicked the water, making a rainbow in the spray. “But I’m a greedy creature. I have all this—yet I’m far from satisfied.”

With a hint of self-mockery, she flittered through the air, eyes locked on target.

On the kingdom of Azami, where Rinko was—and where the key lay, the Holy Sword itself.

“I’ll steal that sword, get a glimpse at the look on Rinko’s face, and then go back to my world, where I’ll make it all mine!”

Cackling with delight, she stopped horsing around and made a beeline for Azami.

Meanwhile, inside the Azami castle...

“I can sense it... Something went wrong.”

Rinko had stayed behind to protect the Holy Sword, and her instincts were sounding the alarm. She was staring up at the sky, uncharacteristically serious.

She was shaken to her very core, and she couldn’t stand still— She was about to go check on the sword when the royal guard, Chrome, came running in.

“Q-Queen Rinko!”

“What’s up, Chrome? Something happen with the sword?”

“No reports like that— Why do you look so spooked?”

“No reason,” she said, unable to explain the chill running down her spine. “What’s the news?”

“Right, reporting!” Chrome said, straightening up. “Dr. Eug just woke up!”

“Huh?! Eugy’s awake?!”

Eug had worn herself out in an earlier fight and spent the time since in a coma. If she was awake—that might be a sign.

Rinko hurried to the basement, but on the way, she found Eug staggering toward her. Both looked equally surprised.

“Eugy?!”

Eug didn’t try to run. If anything, she looked relieved, as if Rinko was the very person she’d been searching for. She leaned against the wall, slumping to the floor and breathing heavily.

“You okay there, Eugy?” Rinko asked.

Eug flashed her canines, forcing a smile. “Lab Chief...been a century since we spoke, huh? Or longer?”

“Lots to catch up on, but this is hardly the time.”

“You noticed?” Eug chuckled. “I thought you might.”

“You know why it feels so ominous?”

“Yeah, it’s gotta be Eve. President Eva.”

“President Eva?”

“She’ll have taken possession of her new body. A good one, fully featured—and extremely dangerous. It’s so bad, it woke me up.”

“Mind if I run my theory past you?” Rinko asked. “Alka and I have worked out a few things. President Eva was on the brink of death. She must have been brought over here in someone else’s body—as irregular as that sounds.”

“Someone else’s body?!”

Rinko nodded. “That explains why she didn’t get any demon lord powers. She’s in someone else! Tony—Surtr was in Allan’s ax awhile but couldn’t work with his full strength, which backs up the theory.”

That made sense to Eug, too, but one phrase Rinko had used jumped out at her.

“Wait, ‘brought over’? What’s that mean, Lab Chief Rinko? Isn’t this Earth?!”

Rinko quickly explained that they were in another world entirely—which came as a shock, but it soon made sense to Eug.

“Oh...so the OOPArts we found weren’t left over from Earth, but were bits and pieces summoned here? By-products of advanced magic?”

Mena had once used a similar spell, *Tidal Wave*, and brought over a ton of seawater from Earth. Alka’s favorite meteor rune had also grabbed a chunk of rock from Earth somewhere. Any scientist would see how it added up.

Eug seemed even more impressed by Eve’s decisions.

“That’s why she wore that costume: to hide her face. And why she kept going on about how we messed up Earth and made me feel guilty. She *was* a skilled

fortune teller—knew how to work anyone.”

“She was a first-class mentalist. She got you good, but don’t beat yourself up about it.”

“I blame her, not myself. Knowing she made a fool of me for a century is more enraging than depressing.”

Despite her language, Eug looked pretty despondent. Eve’s betrayal had clearly hit her hard.

“Yes, but no use wallowing,” Rinko said, trying to encourage her. “If Eve’s got the demon lord powers she was meant to have, they’re gonna be bad. Any clues what they might be?”

“I dunno what her own power is.” Eug sighed. “But I know what comes with the new body she was making, ’cause I designed it.”

“What’s it got?”

“.....Everything.”

“What do you mean, ‘everything’?”

“I mean everything.” Eug started confessing her sins. “Every demon lord power I extracted. Abaddon, the treants, Satan, Surtr, all of them.”

“She’s got *all* of that?!” Chrome cried. He’d been listening in silence, but this was too much for him.

Meanwhile, Rinko was just nodding. This explained the chill she’d felt.

“No wonder she’s reeking of evil. It ain’t just her own demon lord qualities! Those altered humans aside, the only other person like that is Micona...which shows how scary it can be.”

“Mm... That girl is indeed unusual.”

Two first-class scientists had officially decreed Micona a last-boss power—Micona was allowed to shed a tear or two.

“Can’t Kunlun take care of the demon lords?” Chrome asked. “This is their specialty! Send the whole village after her! They’re out there every day dispatching whatever pops out of the Last Dungeon. If they pitch in...”

But Eug's face was falling fast. "Maaaaybe they can beat her all together, but if Eve's mastered my nastiest trick..."

Before she could finish, Rinko shuddered. "She's here."

"Q-Queen Rinko, you don't mean—?"

Chrome looked up, full of alarm.

Rinko shot him her classic smile. "Oh, don't you stress it. Chrome, you just get Lou—the king—to the inner chambers."

"Th-that's all?!"

"She's after me and the sword. Once he's safe, alert all soldiers to the state of emergency."

"Th-that bad, huh?"

Eug slapped him on the ass. "Go lead the dang army, old man! We got our own fight."

"R-right... I can trust you?"

Eug popped her sucker in her mouth, rattling it around. "I mean, that would sound weird coming from me." She cracked the candy under one of her sharp canines. "But I got a century's worth of frustration looking for an outlet—ow!"

Rinko had bopped her on the head. "Down, girl. You can't beat her with frustration! And you just got outta the sick bay. You need rest!"

"But..."

"Vritra...Director Ishikura would say the same. After all, if you violate labor standards, it's a mountain of paperwork."

With what she'd done to him, that sure shut Eug up.

"Do ya read me?" Rinko asked.

"Loud and clear."

"But I would like you to hunker down with Lou and look after him. Although he's *my* man; no seducing him."

"Oh, please. Fine, take me there—*urgh*."

She swayed on her feet, hardly her old self.

“You okay?”

“I’d like to say yes, but I’d be lying. I feel like I’ve been up all night.”

She fought off her urge to sleep, issuing one last warning.

“Rinko... Eve’s body is my masterpiece. Not only can she use every demon lord power I researched...she might well have finished my countermeasures against Kunlun villagers. You may be our only hope.”

Rinko answered with a grin, “Well, that sure sounds like a last boss to me! Gotta get good.”

“God, it’s useless talking to gamers...”

With that, Eug ran out of steam and fell asleep.

Chrome was still concerned as he carried her on his back.

“If we take Dr. Eug at her word, this foe will be a serious threat.”

“I’ll bet.” Rinko looked rather pleased, which left Chrome a little stunned.

“Hah...”

“Eve’s crafty mind and multiple demon lord powers, a perfect foil for Kunlunism—” Rinko started cackling, and it was an honest laugh. “But I’m not alone. I’ve got people to protect, people to back me up. You get me?”

“I do.” Chrome nodded.

He knew why she was grinning, and he grinned himself.

“Welp, she’s almost here. I’d better go.”

“In that case, we’ve got no time... *Ngh...*”

Chrome frowned...and a new figure appeared.

“—I’ve heard it all! Give the word, and I’ll buy you time.”

“Y-you’re—!”

Who could this be? Who was capable of buying time against a foe this mighty?

“I’ll bet my life for my beloved Marie!”

.....I don’t need to spell it out, do I?

Not long after...

Schiiiiing.

Eve was rocketing straight toward her destination fast enough to make the air itself sing around her.

As the roads below her began to coalesce into major thoroughfares, Azami grew visible to the naked eye.

“Hey, ho! Target sighted... Hm?”

She was over the field just outside the walls.

But a sinister aura below made her pull up short, wheeling above.

“What could that be? My, my!” Eve squinted and saw a girl standing in the center of that field. “.....Hmph.”

With eyes like daggers, arms folded, and feet planted firmly apart stood Micono Zol.

An upperclassman at Lloyd’s school, she’d been forced to acquire demon lord powers. And she was head over heels in love with Marie.

Today, she was filled with hate and bile, like she’d been when she’d first hit the scene.

Eve fluttered down before her with a mocking curtsy. “And what might you want, little lady?” she asked, as if she didn’t know.

Micono just kept glaring.

Eve feigned confusion. “If you don’t use your words, how can I—?”

“You’re Eve Profen?”

Eve smirked. “You noticed? All that time I spent in a rabbit costume, I figured no one would recognize me! Perhaps I’m just that refined—”

“Spare me the bullshit.”

Eve pouted, not pleased to be interrupted twice. “What, you know I’m king

and dare act this way?”

“I’ve heard of your vile nature and the deeds you’ve done because of it,” Micona snarled, not the least bit intimidated. “And that you were behind the schemes that implanted the demon lords’ power within me.”

“Um,” Eve said, blinking. “I heard you just chugged two demon lord boosters all on your own?”

“Spare me the bullshit.”

Micona was always good at forgetting anything that worked against her, without a trace of guilt.

She seemed so confident, Eve rather respected it.

“Well, okay. Thanks for the warm reception! I take it you’re a hater?”

“That, too!” Micona roared so loudly, Eve flinched.

“Why are you yelling? And by ‘too,’ you mean...?”

Micona’s eyes softened so completely, Eve recoiled. “More than anything, Marie’s mother wants me to stop you here! This is a direct request from my future mother-in-law, Rinko! If I can score points with the fam, I’ll be one step closer to true loooooove!”

Yes, that was Micona earlier.

She’d sniffed out the threat to Azami and come running. Aware that Rinko was Marie’s mother, she’d volunteered to delay Eve—even if it cost her life.

Naturally, this had left both Rinko and Chrome looking like they were suffering from bladder discomfort.

“Purely personal, then? Well, at least that’s easy...but could Azami really not find anyone better to step up to the plate first?”

“We know you plan to steal the Holy Sword and lay waste to the kingdom! If I can stop you here, I can cajole Marie into rubbing my head— Er, I mean, no Azami soldier would stand for that!”

The last line sounded regal enough, but it was rather undermined by her drool.

“Look at yourself! Is everyone from Azami determined to turn things into a joke?” Eve was almost impressed. The sheer bliss in Micona’s eyes was clearly more about her fantasy life with Marie than it was about the future of the kingdom.

Eve looked to flummox people but found herself on the back foot instead.

“So! We’re gonna throw down, Eve Profen!” Micona roared—and she was instantly in combat mode.

Abaddon’s power gave Micona colorful wings, and the treants let her extend tree roots.

Eve looked delighted. “Heh-heh-heh! I was just thinking I could use more of a warm-up! Fine, I’ll—”

“Diiiiiiiiiiiiiiii! For my gleaming future with Marie! Oh, and Azami, too!”

“Do you *ever* listen?!”

She did not. Fueled by lust, Micona was coming for Eve’s life like a bullet with her name on it.

Tree roots reached out for Eve, but she easily darted through the air around them.

“You didn’t *have* to tell me your country was a secondary concern... Still, I’ll enjoy tormenting you.”

With an impish gleam in her eyes, Eve began fighting back—with the same tree roots Micona had used.

“How?!” Micona yelped, astounded.

Eve smirked. For the first time, she had the initiative.

“You were just an experiment—all so I could gain the same powers!”

She was really enjoying swinging those roots around.

Micona and Eve’s respective roots tangled together, as if each of them had four hands.

“*Nghhhhh*... But I’ve had these roots longer—I’m better with them.”

Micona *did* seem to have a surprising advantage here, but this failed to diminish Eve's confidence.

"Experience does do wonders! Still..."

"?!"

And Eve breathed fire. No incantation, no magic stone—just pure fire from her mouth, like a monster.

If she'd heard a chant, Micona could easily have countered it—but at this speed, she was helpless.

The wall of fire came right at her.

"Waughhh! Hot, hot, hot! What is that? That's not magic!"

She barely managed to shield herself with roots.

But that blocked her line of sight, and she missed Eve's next action.

"Gotcha!"

A huge, hard stone fist came swinging right from her blind spot—the golem that demon lord Zalko the Thief had used.

"Crap!"

Two attacks of very different natures—soft and hard—sent Micona flying.

"Mm, that golem arm is so nice! Nothing like blunt force trauma!"

Micona had been struck so hard, she left a trench in the ground, but thanks to the locust demon lord's shell, she avoided any fatal damage.

"Hurk... I heard you could use *all* the demon lord powers, but seeing's believing."

"Too much for you, Micony?"

"I relish the challenge! True love can overcome all hardships!" Micona was still all fired up.

Eve smiled approvingly. "You're one tough cookie! How's this?" She took the golem arm, pointing one finger at Micona. "Rune cannon, was it? Doesn't matter. Fire!"

“Huh?”

Crack!

There was a noise like an electric spark, a flash where Micona had stood—and a plume of flame.

Micona had dodged by the skin of her teeth, and the ground was scorched terrifyingly bare.

“Tut, tut,” Eve grumbled. “It’s so hard to hit you if you move! I remember that time I got them to give me some target practice at the gun range. Shoot enough times, and you do start to improve, but the toll on your shoulders! Recoil’s a bitch.”

Her voice echoed through the smoke.

She soon lost interest in her anecdote and aimed her finger again.

“But this has no recoil! I can shoot as much as I like! Hmm, the smoke does make it tricky, but—”

Crack! Crack!

On the last word, Eve began firing runes wildly, not aiming at all and going for quantity alone.

“If I fire a few dozen shots, some of them are bound to hit! Okay, about time I go pay Rinky a visit. Too smoky for me here!” She turned her back on the plumes behind. “Don’t fret, Rinky, I’m coming—”

Shnk!

Micona’s attack came just as Eve let her guard down.

“Rahhhh!”

“Oops! That was careless. They *all* missed?” Eve backed away unhurriedly, scratching her head and fake wincing. “I suppose I’ll never be much of a markswoman! Even in the last world, Asako wound up snatching my gun away and murdering me instead. Or...?”

She’d assumed the rune cannon had whiffed...

But Micona bore quite a few burns. She’d clearly taken the brunt of those

light beams.

Bleeding badly, radiating the scent of burning flesh, Micona was still coming on hard.

“My! I *did* hit you!” Eve said, surprised.

“Of course you did!” Micona roared, punching her. “And it hurt like hell!”

Eve took the blow right in the kisser and rubbed the point of impact, appalled. She did not seem particularly hurt, however.

Meanwhile, Micona was a wreck, especially her hair. Yet she was throwing her full power into every blow.

These wounds were clearly life-threatening, but that did not dissuade her.

“How are you still moving?” Eve asked. “Fighting with injuries like that will be the death of you! I realize I’m the last person who should be pointing this out, mind.”

Micona seized a fistful of Eve’s shirtfront.

“When I get hurt! I know a girl! Who’ll heal my wounds!”

You could almost hear the percussive emphasis in her words.

“They’re fatal, though?”

“I’m not dead yet! The deeper the wounds, the longer it’ll take Marie to nurse me back to health! No hardship at all! See?”

“Uh...sure!”

Eve saw nothing but decided it was best to nod along. She’d worked out by now that nothing she said would make a difference.



Perhaps the blood loss was preventing Micono from thinking straight—she was rambling on, and it was unclear if she was talking to herself or not.

“I’ve got someone who needs me, someone who’ll heal me up, someone who worries about me, someone I love. What more joy could you ask for in life?!”

“.....”

“Being needed makes people strong! Don’t you dare turn up your nose at that!”

As bleary as her mind was, Micono was focused on her target.

Shnk—

Until Eve sprayed something on her face.

“Ack...!”

Micono inhaled it—and her eyes rolled back in her head. She toppled over.

Eve gave Micono’s prone form a bored look.

“Dionysos’s knockout mist... When you’re on the brink of death, a puff of a liquor-like spray is more than enough to take you down. Still—”

Micono couldn’t hear anything, but Eve could not seem to stop herself.

“The nerve! Lecturing me about the joy of life? If being needed was enough to satisfy me, I’d never have become a demon lord at all.”

With that, Eve turned toward Azami again.

“When the people who need you are crushed along with their kingdom, what will you say then?” Eve chuckled. “I hope you cry your eyes out.”

Her pace quickened, hastening toward her destination.

“The joy of life, my ass,” she spat.

Micono was powered by something Eve lacked, and she proud of herself no matter how beaten she was— Everything about Micono annoyed Eve like a bone caught in her throat, and her body language betrayed her irritation.

At the north side entrance to Azami itself...

Ordinarily, this gate was teeming with merchants and tourists, day and night, but now—it was eerily quiet.

The gate itself was firmly shut—it had almost never been closed before, and that alone was ominous. Like when you hit up your regular store and find the shutter closed, leaving you to wonder if it's gone for good or if a crime took place.

Azami soldiers were peering over the top.

Eve scanned their faces and sighed. “Lordy, so Micony was buying time? Well, mission accomplished, I suppose!”

The lady leaning against the pillar by the gate—like she was waiting for a date—raised a hand in greeting.

“It’s been so long! Look how young you’ve become, President—or should I say King Profen? Lady Eve?”

It was Rinko. As she spoke, she moved slowly closer, hands in her coat pockets. She was wearing an easy smile on her face, like they were about to go out for drinks at the pub by the station.

“This is quite the welcome party, Lab Chief Rinko. Or should I call you Queen?” Eve jerked a thumb over her shoulder at Micony, chuckling. “The sacrifice you sent out to buy time is sleeping it off. Glad to know you’re still a heartless taskmaster!”

“Heyyy! I’ve seen the error of my ways. I’ve improved my life *and* my character.” Rinko flashed a hand sign to the crowd behind her—and Micony’s classmates rushed off to her side.

“Hmm. Micony’s a popular gal! I see, I see— How inspiring!”

“Yeah, sounds like they went through a lot together. I’m a touch surprised you let them go.”

“Just a whim. I’m having fun picturing her face when she wakes up to see a smoking hole where your kingdom used to be. That’s what I’m here for!”

Eve took a step toward Azami—but Rinko blocked her way.

“Sorry, but you aren’t welcome in my house.”

“Yours, is it?” Eve was both appalled and impressed. A fellow alien, proudly claiming a new home—it made her want to tease. “Always took you for the type who’d abandon your family if the research demanded it. You certainly have changed!”

“I get that a lot,” Rinko said, wincing. “For that, I’m grateful to you. That may not have been your goal, but it helped me figure out what really matters.”

“Back at the lab, I figured extolling the virtues of family might make you easier to control. But you waited till we got isekaied first! Too late for my purposes.”

“I never would have met some of these people otherwise. I mean it— I am grateful for that. If nothing else.”

Rinko was holding a solid stance, just like Micona had.

Eve made a show of shrugging. ““What really matters’? Families are nothing more than a shackle holding you down.”

“I think even you would figure it out once you had one, Lady Eve. They’re not holding me back. They’re putting wind in my sails.”

As this calm, leisurely war of words continued, the two were closing in on each other.

“I knew I’d have to fight you someday, but a bare-knuckle brawl in another world?”

“Live long enough, anything can happen. A social outcast like me can even find a family.”

“Ready when you are.”

“I’m ready right now.”

And with that—both *vanished*.

Torn grass danced in the air where they’d been.

And—

BOOOM!

The noise was like two big trucks crashing.

Everyone watching felt the vibrations, as if they were watching taiko drummers up close.

Even soldiers used to battle let out yelps of surprise.

The source of the noise was Rinko and Eve's fists slamming together. Like two boxers bumping fists after the gong sounds, a hello by way of a solid punch.

That crack of thunder came from a slender beauty and an out-of-shape-looking scientist.

It felt wrong and deeply weird to the onlookers.

"President Eva!"

"Lab Chief Rien Cordelia!"

BOOOM!

Another blow came as they yelled each other's old names.



“——!”

Rinko won the clash of fists, and Eve went bouncing across the fields like a skipping stone.

She stopped only when she hit the forest in the distance.

“Looks like you win on raw power,” she said, getting up like nothing had happened.

Rinko hadn’t taken any relief in that victory, either—her fists were still raised. She knew Eve was a real threat.

“Punches were never meant to be your thing, Eve Profen,” she said, well aware.

Eve chuckled. “You hit as hard as you could on the off chance you’d take me out before I kicked it up a gear, right? Like a chef hoping you’ll be satisfied with just the hors d’oeuvres.”

Raising her arm again, she waved a hand—as if she were summoning the concierge.

“?! Runes?!” Rinko knew right away what that meant and yelled at the soldiers and adventurers behind her. “Is the evacuation done?!”

“Barely in time!” yelled Rol—Riho’s surrogate sister. “Noncombatant military staff are on standby in the castle, too.”

“Rinko!” yelled the adventurer guild’s Katsu Kondo. “Guild members are ready to go!”

Gaston clashed his two shields together. “Rinko! I am Gaston Tien, the man who survived three hundred slimes! Ready whenever—”

“Yeah, yeah, okay.” Rinko didn’t let him finish. “All forces! Brace for attack! She’s bringing out the demon lord minions!”

““““Aye-aye!””””

Even as the soldiers and adventures roared...

Bzzzzt...bzzzt...

A skin-crawling noise reached them from the sky above.

A flock of giant locusts was inbound. Just like Abaddon's attack and the assault on Maria Stadium.

But that wasn't all. The locusts were carrying mystery objects.

As they grew closer, those on the ground managed to identify them.

"Those are the mechanical soldiers...and copies of Surtr?!"

Giant bugs were enough of a threat on their own—but Eve had also brought fire-breathing turtles and machine soldiers more powerful than any humans.

These numbers meant total war, and Rinko was sweating.

"Far more than I'd imagined. I think skipping the hors d'oeuvres and going right for the main dish is tactless, Chef!"

"Sorry. Never was big on the finer things in life." Eve winked.

Rinko had lost some of her aplomb.

"Fire-breathing heavy tanks, flying bug units, and infantry no ordinary soldier can face head-on. Talk about insanity mode!"

"Do you really have time to bellyache, Rinky?" Eve was lording it over her now.

Rinko made a face. "Throwing in all your forces here?"

"That's the plan!" Eve acknowledged.

"Surprising," Rinko said, clenching her fists.

Assured of victory, Eve launched into a monologue. "You didn't see this coming? True, once I get the Holy Sword, I still have to hit Kunlun. You assumed that meant I'd have to conserve my forces!"

"....."

Rinko's answer was silence, but that said everything.

"And you also didn't expect me to show up unharmed and powered up after you sent Lloyd, Shouma, and the loincloth man my way."

Unable to hide her irritation, Rinko clicked her tongue. "But if you're throwing

everything at us, you must have more up your sleeve.”

“Oh, is it that obvious? Well, I’m certainly not telling.”

She wasn’t even hiding it—she knew she didn’t have to.

“If what Eugy said was right, then I guess this *is* on me,” Rinko said.

“Mwa-ha-ha! Consider it an honor I sent my entire army after you!”

Eve accepted that she’d scored a point here and gleefully set about commanding her forces. She was like a kid playing with toys.

All Rinko could do was force herself to smile.

“If only they were here... Maybe I miscalculated.”

Eve didn’t let that lapse go unpunished. She came in quick, swinging hard—this time with her golem arm.

“*Hrk!*”

The fist buried itself in Rinko’s face.

Eve relished Rinko’s expression, but she didn’t stop there.

“I’ve got the powers of the demon lords, and I’m here to flex that strength! You can’t fight me worrying about what stands behind me!”

“Gah!”

When the flurry did stop, it was only to bind Rinko in treant roots.

Rinko was yanked into the air.

“.....!”

“Gosh, that was easy! Micona was far more of a threat.”

Rinko glared at Eve through swollen eyelids. “You were possessing someone else—not sure who—and couldn’t use your demon lord powers. That’s why you had Eugy make you an ideal body, right?”

Eve took this as an acknowledgment of her victory and moved on to the postmortem. She rolled with it.

“Yes, some divine prank left me in Director Ishikura’s daughter—you

remember Asako? That's why I never had demon lord powers. I suppose I was more the ghost demon lord than anything else."

Rinko's eyes widened. "You don't say? That never occurred to me. That does explain how you could be reckless enough to gather all the demon lord powers."

"Reckless?" Eve blinked.

"Take it from a gamer. When we came here, everyone in the lab got this 'demon lord' attribute added to our character sheets. Less strong-willed folk started out as monsters—but once they get their wits back, they're in the prime of their life. Alky's love for her brother turned her into a nine-year-old, and as far as I know, that old gardener lost his sense of self and turned into the treant demon lord—the Erlking."

"What's your point? You're not exactly the type to explain your theory on your deathbed." Eve was getting suspicious.

"Don't get it yet?" Rinko grinned. "The fact that you *could* pile on more powers proves you lack a sense of self. You've got ambition—but it's hollow."

"And now it's a sermon!"

Eve frowned.

But Rinko did not seem to be grasping at straws. If anything, she seemed to believe victory was still in her grasp.

"Were you aware demon lords show their true selves after you beat them once?"

"Like in your retro video games?"

"You blow yourself up and let the demon lord's instincts out. That's your second form."

"Ah, that's why Eugy turned into that beast. I can't do that just yet, but someday..."

"You won't," Rinko snapped. "The very fact that you could add *other* powers proves you have no second form! That's the difference between us, and it's my shot at winning!" Her eyes went wide, and her abs tensed. "I don't like doing

this in public—it tends to scare people.”

There was a creaking sound—a sound of flesh expanding.

“...So you have a power that I don’t. You never cease to delight, Lab Chief.” Eve cackled, watching Rinko transform.

“Don’t panic, Eve. It’s still me, even if I’m a dragon.”

With that, her flesh tore apart—and a thunderous pulse filled the air.

The treant roots binding her ripped and snapped.

“Oh, look at you! Your husband and Marie would flee in terror!”

“Trying to rattle me, Eve? My family is made of tougher stuff than that!”

Even as she spoke, a burst of light enveloped her—and when it cleared, she was a massive dragon. She was golden and bipedal, like a slim T. rex; her awesome form mingled the divine with the destructive.

Truly, this was the king of dragons. Rinko’s second form even got a gasp out of Eve.

“That is so much cooler than I expected! You were the model for the domain’s dragon legends, right? I wish Anzy could be here to see this! She’d *love* it.”

“She’ll love it more if I can beat you.”

“Well, that *is* a shame. Because that’ll only happen in your dreams, Rien Cordelia.”

“Aww, you really do care about her.”

“She was the first good friend I ever had— Oh!”

Rinko’s tail swung in and sent Eve flying before she could finish her line. It was large enough to balance her body weight—like a long, thick whip.

The sound of it was a crack, a crash, a clang.

It was also the signal for the battle to begin. A roar went up from across Azami’s walls.

“Hyah!”

The tail swung again; this time, it slammed Eve into the ground.

The crowd roared at each move Rinko made.

The dragon raised her small forelimbs, acknowledging the crowd. The gesture seemed a mite bashful. Perhaps she hadn't expected cheers in this form.

And that rubbed Eve the wrong way. She got up, rolling her shoulders.

"Like rooting for Godzilla in a kaiju movie."

"Does that make you the giant mech, then?"

"I suppose— This body is certainly cyborgy."

As Eve finished, Rinko breathed searing flames, and Eve countered that with Surtr's fires.

Perhaps this face-off between two similar powers was Eve's way of showing how confident she still was.

"Must you drag this out, Eve? I want to smash you quick and save the others."

Letting the fires die down, Rinko tried to bite her foe.

Eve saw it coming and blocked it with her golem arm.

"Oh, I saw this at a police dog training demonstration."

"Grrr..."

Eve wasn't daunted at all.

Rinko was starting to wonder just why Eve was so confident. The fight was clearly going Rinko's way, and for all Eve's bluster, she was entirely on the back foot...

"You know you can't win, so you're bluffing? Is that what this is?" she asked.

Eve's smile was downright evil. "Mwa-ha-ha, curious? Lemme show you what else I got."

"What now?!" Rinko gasped.

When her jaws weakened, Eve slipped away—

"Hokay."

"Hah?!"

—and hid in her own shadow.

“Crap! Seta—Satan’s power!” Rinko backed off, ready to snap her jaws the moment Eve emerged.

But Eve stayed under.

“What now? Running away?”

“Oh, puh-leez,” Eve purred.

Something shot out of the shadow—

“Grrr!”

“Ha?!”

A wolf. No, not exactly a wolf—it was walking on four legs, but it was covered in plant-like vines.

“Dionysos’s wolf?!” Rinko yelped.

“Bingoooo! And now here’s your prize!”

The weird wolf started bounding around, running right past Rinko toward Azami itself.

“C-crap!”

Rinko had assumed Eve had already used up all her summonses.

Eve popped back out of the shadow and floated above it, smirking.

“Wave attacks are the key to any battle! Oh, right—you’re a scientist, not a strategist.”

“Grr, some gamer I am! Forgetting the most obnoxious part of SRPGs!”

“Haha! Didn’t think a creature that big could change colors with fear! You learn something new every day.” Eve was cackling wildly.

“Shit!”

Should she fight Eve? Or protect her citizens?

Trapped in a dilemma, Rinko left herself exposed.

And Eve seized her opportunity.

“——Time you died.”

She quit showboating and came in for the kill.

No longer toying with her opponent, Eve darted forward, her fist aimed at Rinko's throat.

Everything up to that point had been sporting—but now it was mortal combat.

Rinko failed to react in time, falling squarely into Eve's trap.

Rather than flaunting her strength, Eve was making short work of the fight—like rubber-stamping a document. Rinko couldn't keep up.

The blow drew blood, and Eve grinned. For a chatterbox like her to let her smile do the talking—she must be sure she'd won.

“See, like I said. Shackles. QED.”

Rinko had argued that having someone to protect made her stronger—and Eve appeared to believe she had just shredded that line of logic.

Rinko snarled, blood gushing from her throat. “I ain't lost yet!”

“Oh, let's not get carried away.”

Rinko tried to breathe fire at point-blank range, but with a fist lodged in her throat, this didn't work out.

“Gah...*hnk!*”

“Aw, got a sore throat? Poor Rinky.”

With that taunt, Eve started swinging.

She was too close for Rinko to defend herself from the hail of kicks and punches.

Eve could hit anywhere she wanted, like a Boxercise sandbag.

Seeing Rinko on the ropes, the troops' cheers gave way to alarm.

And that just fueled Eve's frenzy.

“Mwa-ha... Aha-ha-ha!”

Unable to stop the laughter, she rained down her blows faster and faster.

But Rinko still stood, long past the point when Eve thought she should have gone down, and that started to frustrate her.

“Give it up! You used to know when to quit! What is this, emotion? You never had that!”

“Like I said...I got heart now!”

“And it’s pumping the blood right out of your wounds! Go down!”

“Never!” Rinko roared. She wasn’t trying to intimidate so much as inspire herself with a cry from the soul.

“Give it up!”

“Not giving up makes things happen! That boy taught me that! Sorry, but I’m not gonna roll over and let you win!”

“Another sufferer of Lloyd Syndrome? No cure for that, Rinky!”

It was time for the curtain to fall. Eve flexed the fist in Rinko’s throat...

...and the boy who’d taught Rinko how not to quit arrived.

“Are you okay?!”

The source of Lloyd Syndrome himself.

“L-Lloyd?!” Rinko’s cry was a mix of joy and surprise.

“G-gahhh?! Lloyd?!”

Meanwhile, Eve made a noise like a frog hit by a car. She was now thoroughly allergic to him.

She quickly pulled her fist free and backed off.

“Vritra’s rampage should have bought more time... You came all the way from Profen? How— Aughh!”

Eve had found her explanation: a little black hole in the sky.

And flying through it were Selen, Riho, and Phyllo—the usual company.

“Time to earn our keep!”

“.....Mm.”

“Yikes, Azami’s a shitshow!”

They were followed by Marie, Allan, Renge, Anzu, and Mena—everyone who should have been stuck back in Profen.

And the last face that poked through the hole—

“Yoo-hoo!”

Yup, it was Alka, smirking down at Eve from on high.

“Arghhhhhhh!”

“You sure didn’t hold back on that body! You had a real complex about your boobs and waistline, didn’t you, President Eva? Or should I say Eve Profen?!”

“Alky...I never imagined you’d abandon Kunlun.”

“Hmm? I didn’t! Sou woke up, so I left it in his hands. Apparently, a threat to his friend woke him!”

“Oh, what a shame... If it was unguarded, I might as well have attacked it right away.”

“Your voice is cracking,” Alka teased—then turned grim again, glaring at her. “It was only possible ’cause you decided to torture poor Shouma. Really gotta thank you there. So I brought along a real nice boy, a blacklisted stalker, some demon lords—the whole shebang.”

Eve thrust a fist in Alka’s direction. “So be it! We were bound to clash sooner or later. Time we settle—”

But as their serious conversation peaked—

“Um, is the lizard okay? Wait, I feel like we’ve met before.”

“*Cough cough*... Uh, ’sup, Lloyd! It’s me, Rinko.”

“Oh? *You’re* Rinko?!”

Heedless of the climactic showdown brewing around him, Lloyd was just impressed with Rinko’s dragon form.

“Wow! You’re just like a real lizard! Very strong looking. I didn’t know you

knew a trick like that!”

So much for the moment.

“He’s always doing this!” Eve lamented, impressed despite herself.

Meanwhile, Marie took one look at her mother—and the blood.

“Mom?! Y-you’re bleeding a lot!”

“Yes, my daughter! Don’t worry, nothing a little spit won’t fix! Gah!”

“That wasn’t spit, Mom! You’re coughing up blood!”

She was just as bad as Lloyd on that count.

And between the two of them, Eve wasn’t really feeling it anymore.

“And just like that, the tension is gone! Really makes you wonder why you bother.”

She pressed a hand to her forehead—and then Anzu stepped up.

“Then I’ll help give it back, Eve.”

Anzu Kyounin, master of the blade, head of the domain, and always intimidating. She’d known Eve well back in her mascot days. But now she knew Eve had just been using her—and she was pissed about it.

“See? A normal reaction! That’s exactly what I wanted, Anzy!” Eve shot her a huge smile.

“See, that’s creepy, grinning a second after you gripe about the dissipating tension.”

“Oh, now, now. You’ve arrived just in time! It gives me an idea.”

With that, Eve glanced at the battle raging around her.

Locusts, machine soldiers, fire turtles, and wolves had given her a real advantage—but the Profen contingent was turning things around.

“I was hoping to push through while the others were held up, but that didn’t work out,” she muttered.

Meanwhile, Lloyd and the others were busy taking out the monsters attacking Azami.

“Hahh! Lloyd and I are worth a hundred men!” Allan roared. His reputation might have been *slightly* inflated, but his cry helped restore the spirits of the exhausted defenders.

And of course, the clincher—Lloyd.

“Here goes, Lloyd!”

“Ready, Satan!”

The boy had bounded on Satan’s back, and they were knocking locusts out of the sky.

Their arrival had completely turned the battle around.

Mena and Renge were strong fighters, too, and they were quickly taking out machines and wolves alike. Everyone watching them was transfixed.

Eve had thrown in all her forces—and they were going down. By all rights, this should have shaken her.

But she was still smiling. She might have lost that battle, but the war was still well within her grasp.

“Heh-heh-heh...”

Alka didn’t miss that something was wrong. “The loss drove you mad? No, that ain’t it.”

She knew Eve too well to let her guard down.

“Oh, just fond memories,” Eve said evasively.

“Okay, lemme say this first— We ain’t holding back. This’ll be the last fight, and Lloyd’s watching. I’m obligated to remind him how impressive I am.”

Some things never change, and neither does Alka.

Eve just grinned. “Works for me. I wasn’t in the mood for a squabble. Best if we just go right at it, and you go down quick.”

“Sure...then let’s go!”

Alka’s whole tone changed.

A moment later—she looked *grown up*.

The human demon lord was Alka's true form.

The very air crackled around her. Even Eve took a step back.

"Oh! I've seen the chief in this cosplay before!" Lloyd said, clearly not feeling the tension at all.

Alka's second form carried a risk of going berserk, and having that dismissed as mere cosplay took some of the wind out of her sails.



“Well, better than scaring him?” Eve said, trying to cheer her up.

“No comment.” Alka gathered her spirits back, ready to fight.

Eve sighed, smirking. “Honestly! Three—no, if I count Shouma, *four* fights in a row. Does this make me the protagonist?”

Clearly, she was still confident.

“You have a man-made body, a pile of demon lord powers—making you the demon lord of nothing,” Alka said. “You’ve got no true self, no second form. And yet you think you can win?”

“You think I’m just bluffing? I’m afraid that’s not true.”

Making a fist with her rock arm, Eve swung as hard as she could.

Her fist was the size of a hut, larger than any she’d made against Rinko. It hit Alka hard...

Shnk!

Just as all seemed lost—Alka stopped it with a single finger.

“You stopped that with a *finger*?!”

Eve just sounded delighted. “Not ready to quit? Fine, I’ll make that mask crack.”

Her whole kid grandma vibe gone with the wind, Alka was back to her original standoffish vibe. And she was fighting back.

Scratch scratch scratch—

She was using her nails on Eve’s fist.

And...

“Done.”

She tapped it with her finger, and the sturdy golem fist burst, dissolving into dust. Then there was another blast, then another, moving up the arm.

“Whoa!” Eve said, impressed. “Eugy mentioned this! You can engrave eternally active runes with your nails! You call it the Spellnail, yes?”

“You both talk too much.”

“You could call that move your Ultimate Rune Nailbomber! Well? I just thought it up. You can have that name for free.”

“It sucks. You couldn’t pay me to take it.”

While Alka was answering, Eve breathed fire.

“Cheap.”

Alka drew another rune into the flames.

Poof!

The flames wafted away and scattered in all directions, as if she had punched them into thin air in a CGI movie.

It was physically impossible to punch a fire under normal conditions—Eve couldn’t help but gape.

“How does that even work?”

Alka held up her nail, her voice flat. “Just drew an *impact* rune in the flames.”

All she had to do was get a nail on something.

“Well, I can’t afford to let you get your nails on *me*. I’ve gotta fight you like you have poison hands, Alky!”

With that, Eve extended her treant roots, going for a ranged fight.

“But I do have *all* the powers. Let me show you how powerful that is, Alky!”

The roots swung in.

Eve had charged those roots with the golem’s might—and Surtr’s. They had rocks at the tips like morning stars, or they cracked like fire whips; she had a variety of attack types that came in waves.

“Fancy tricks,” Alka sneered. “For an old lady.”

“You’re playing that card, kid grandma?”

Her roots were acting like flamethrowers and smashing rocks—while Alka was dancing through the air around it all.

“Like if Yamata no Orochi had more than eight heads...,” she muttered, shaking her head. Eve was throwing everything but the kitchen sink at her—but she had no finesse.

Alka flicked one root after another with her nail.

With a noise like plucked guitar strings, they detonated.

“Your efforts are futile, Eve.”

“Oh, would you accept my surrender? I thought not.” Eve was still joking around, and Alka looked tired.

“Your tone suggests you’ve got more up your sleeve.”

She was only pretending to be cornered. Alka zoomed in close, hoping to draw out her ace.

“Boo.”

“Whoa!”

Alka shot through her roots, and Eve leapt back into the air.

“You’ve got nothing, then? If you’re just bluffing, this is over, Eve Profen.”

Eve was flying away at top speed, and Alka was right on her heels.

The stage shifted to the air, but their battle was no less intense— And then Alka’s nail scratched Eve’s side.

That was all. That alone applied the *impact* rune—or enough of it to feel like Eve had been hit by a blunt instrument. She went flying.

“Urgh?!”

“This is the beginning of the end, Eve Profen.”

“O-oh no!” Eve’s face twisted, drenched with sweat.

Alka saw her chance to win—but for once, she approached with due caution.

As she zoomed in close, ready to land the final blow—

“You fool.”

—Eve’s grimace gave way to a grin.

“——?!”

That devilish look sent a chill down Alka’s spine.

“The *impact* rune is carved into you! How—”

How could she still be confident? Was it another bluff? Or was Alka the one on the hook?

As Alka’s eyes wavered, Eve’s hand shot out—clutching a lump of flesh.

Alka let out a squeak.

So *that’s* how she’d played it.

The flesh burst, flying off.

“Like I wouldn’t have a plan.” Eve smirked.

She’d faked the whole verge-of-defeat thing and allowed Alka to touch her.

When Alka had carved the rune into her side, she’d acted hurt—but gouged out that flesh where Alka couldn’t see. It was quite a grisly solution.

“Tch.”

Alka’s fist was already in the swing. She couldn’t stop it now—she had to follow through.

No matter what counter was coming, she’d just have to tank the hit.

As so she committed.

Whoom!

The wind roared in the enormous swing that left her fully exposed.

And Eve was right up against her.

——*Pssht.*

Something squirted from her fingertip. A little mist, right by Alka’s face—like a bug spray.

“What is that, tear gas?” Alka scoffed— “Er, uh...?”

And the demon lord mask split, falling away.

Her impassive poker face was replaced with a look of shock.

In a single instant—she was nine years old again.

And not just that. She was in free fall, no longer capable of flight.

Her back hit the ground hard, unable to catch herself.

“Wh-what the heck did you do?!”

She had no idea what had just happened. Her speech was back in kid grandma mode.

This mystery ploy left her too rattled even to move. Her body was immune to any and all poisons, yet it clearly was affected by *something*.

Her mind caught up.

“——?! Is this how you got Shouma?!”

Alka turned pale. Her body should be impervious to harm, yet she was badly hurt, and the pain wasn’t going away. She’d seen this before.

“I see it’s kicked in,” Eve said, landing next to her and ignoring Alka’s confusion. “That *impact* rune was certainly a threat. Oh, wait, the ultimate thingamajig, you said? If you’d got that on my chest, I *might* have worried. I’d hate to lose this rack!”

“What did you do?!”

“Works like a charm, doesn’t it? Glad I tried it on Shouma first. Let me figure out where the spray kicks in fastest.”

Eve quit beating around the bush, brandishing her fingers like a salesman demonstrating a new product.

“An anti-Kunlun villager weapon! I call it hannyatou! I took the same principle you used to call yourself the Priestess of Salvation and create the heroic Sou—and turned it against you.”

Alka’s mind was growing hazy, but she knew she’d slipped up.

“I thought you were throwing too much at Azami... So this is why!”

“Heh-heh-heh. Looks like everyone else is busy with my monsters. Time I grabbed the Holy Sword and made a beeline for Kunlun.”

“Did you forget?” Alka said. “No demon lords can touch the Holy Sword.”

“Oh, I’m well aware. And I’ve got a workaround.” Eve turned, looking around.

Her eyes found—

“Ha! You’re no match for me!”

—Anzu, cheerily slicing through a locust.

“All I need’s a good friend!” said Eve. “And by that, I do mean ‘useful pawn.’”

“What—”

But before Alka could say another word, Eve vanished into her own shadow.

“Gotcha!”

Astride Satan, Lloyd was wreaking havoc on both the locusts and machine soldiers.

It was like an exhibition. Soldiers and evacuated civilians alike were whooping it up.

Lloyd—and his comrades—had changed the whole tone of the battle, and this was the result.

“Let’s go! Match me, Satan, Surtr!”

“On it!”

“Hell yeah!”

Satan was zipping around the sky, while Lloyd and Surtr were working closely on his back.

“*Aero!*”

“*Fiyaaaaaa!*”

Lloyd’s wind and Surtr’s flames joined to produce a fire whirl that scorched the locust swarm.

Lloyd’s *Aero* had always been strong, and now he had total control over it. Satan was very impressed.

“Sheesh, I’ve got nothing left to teach you. Do we even need anyone else

here?”

“Hey, Satan!” Surtr objected. “Don’t dismiss my contributions!”

“Oh, right, right.”

“Brushing me off now? I get why you’re rejoicing in the boy’s growth, though. Makes you feel like a dad.”

“True... Oh, Surtr, locusts on your ten.”

“Aye-aye, sir!”

Lloyd and Surtr were handling offense, while Satan watched for incoming attacks.

“——Hm? What the...”

Spying something odd, Satan wheeled around.

“Whoaaa!”

“Dangerous maneuvers, Satan!”

“S-sorry, but good lord—”

He’d found Alka lying on the grass, and his yelp caught Lloyd’s attention.

“What’s wrong? Not many locusts left—is there a new threat?”

“I’m up for a break if you are, buddy!”

“That’s not it. If my eyes don’t deceive me... Sorry, going for a landing.” Satan dropped down, and Lloyd and Surtr were forced to grab his mane.

They landed on the ground and found—

“Oh, good eyes, Seta. Thank god you found me.”

“A-Alka?!”

She was lying in a heap, badly hurt.

Lloyd had never seen her like this. He ran over, shocked. “Ch-Chief?! Are you okay?”

“Oh, Lloyd...I can’t breathe... It hurts...”

“Oh no!”

“Can you give me mouth-to-mouth?”

“She seems fine,” Lloyd said. He was used to her shtick.

“If you could just act normal, you’d have him doting on you, Alka.” Surtr sighed.

“If you’ve got a shot at a smooch, you gotta go for it!” she wailed. “Those are the rules!”

“Alka, some rules were meant to be broken.”

Her kid grandma routine would never die.

“So what happened? Wait, what happened to Eve? Did you take her out?” Lloyd looked around but saw no signs of Alka’s opponent anywhere.

“.....She got away. I lost,” Alka managed, her voice feeble.

“You lost?!” Lloyd gasped. “She got away when you were in demon lord mode?!”

“Goddamn!”

Alka had a totally OP ability to carve a nigh permanent rune into her foe’s body—and she’d still lost. She was ready to admit her failings. “I underestimated her.”

“What did she do?” Surtr yelped, flailing his turtle head around.

Alka was genuinely struggling to breathe, so it took her a moment. “She’s got a trick...that’s good against Kunlun villagers. Kahhh!”

“Okay, you need to rest. But first, tell us where Eve went,” Satan said.

“I don’t know... She’s plotting something!” Alka groaned. “Sounded like she had a target in mind, but...”

“A target... Oh!” Lloyd had an idea and ran off.

“Uh, Lloyd?”

But he was already out of Satan’s reach.

“Wait, Satan!” Surtr yelled, seeing him about to give chase. “We gotta get Alka to safety before we go after the boy.”

“R-right.”

Alka looked ready to pass out at any second; Satan hoisted her on his back.

Still, she was trying to summon her last reserves of strength to tell them something. “.....Tell...”

“Mm? What’s that, Alka?”

“.....Tell Lloyd...not to be scared. Just keep going.”

“Is she half asleep?”

Alka heard those words before she passed out. She murmured something else, too soft for either demon lord to hear.

“——The poison only works on Kunlun villagers.”

“What was that, Alka? I can’t hear you!”

“——*You’ve* got nothing to fear.”

And with that, her eyes closed.

Surtr craned his neck, peering into her face.

“Is she dead? Nope, still breathing. Just asleep?”

“She used her last reserves of strength to tell him not to be scared... Which was very her.”

A moment later, Satan smiled.

“But you’ve forgotten something, Alka. That boy’s no longer afraid. No matter what anyone else says, he’ll keep going with confidence.”

That had always been Lloyd’s nature. He’d had his goal in mind and had been working toward it—his reason for leaving Kunlun for Azami alone proved it.

He might have lacked confidence and let his nerves get the best of him at times—but Satan knew he’d never once backed down.

“And he no longer lets himself get hung up on things. He’s got the confidence he once lacked. It’ll take a lot to stop him now.”

Alka could not hear his words—but Satan sure sounded like a doting dad.

In Azami's treasure vault...

Two figures stood in the room where the Holy Sword was kept. Behind them lay a horde of downed Azami soldiers.

Before them stood Eve, and—

“.....Damn it.”

—Anzu, holding her katana and wearing a look of fury.

Riho's sister figure, Rol, had been in charge of vault security, and she was shaken to the core.

“Wh-what's going on, Lady Anzu? You've turned traitor?”

She'd assumed the domain's leader was on their side.

“How much did she pay you?!”

“Why are we assuming this is about money?!”

“It isn't? Then...did she agree to publish your self-training guidebook? That's a bad deal! Stores won't take self-published books; they'll just rot in storage! Don't buy her excuse!”

“Sounds like the voice of experience, Rol,” Eve interjected. “Anzu hasn't betrayed anyone. Just to be clear.”

“How is that clear?! Gimme a break!” Anzu roared. She was standing perfectly still, sword raised—as if she *couldn't* move. It was increasingly clear that this was unnatural.

“Aw, I let you hit them all with the back of your blade! Didn't want you losing sleep over it later.”

“That doesn't help at all! Release this vile spell!”

Apparently, Anzu was under Eve's control somehow.

Eve cackled and wriggled her fingers, moving Anzu like a puppet. “Yes, yes, enough chatter.”

“?! Run!” Anzu yelled, swinging at Rol.

Her hands and legs moved—a bit stiffly, but that just made it more terrifying.

“Easier said than done! Augh!”

As rattled as she was, Rol tried to dodge...

“Too bad.”

...but Eve got her treant root hooked around Rol’s feet, draining the life energy from her.

“*Hngg!*” Rol passed out to the sounds of Eve’s laughter.

“I prepared for this and embedded the seeds of control in any number of acquaintances.”

“When...?!” Anzu growled, gnashing her teeth.

“Your hair ornament!” Eve purred, pointing at Anzu’s head. “I’m so glad you’re still wearing it.”

“Tch, I forgot you gave me this! Should have put it out with the trash.”

“Don’t be like that, Anzy! I’m only telling you the secret because we’re such good friends.”

“Friends, my ass! Friends don’t make friends do *this!*”

“I wouldn’t know! I’ve never had a proper friend... That sounds rather sad in hindsight.”

Done talking, Eve moved farther in. They arrived at an imposing door.

“Okay, Anzu! Cut it down!”

“——!”

Anzu scowled, but she had no say in this. Her powerful sword skills easily cleaved the lock in two. The sound of the door toppling over echoed through the basement.

Beyond it lay scores of treasures, an odd-looking statue, letters and message coupons Marie had given her dad as a kid, and at the very back— A conspicuous sword, arranged to draw the eye.

The Holy Sword—made by Rinko and also the key to the Last Dungeon.

“Holy Sword, come to Mama!”

“So that’s it?”

Eve went skipping merrily over and tried to grab it, but— —her hands went right through it.

“My, my.”

It was like trying to grab a rainbow or a holographic projection.

It was a strange object, indeed. And Eve just smiled.

“Even in my new body, if I’ve got demon lord powers, I can’t touch it. She made it so visitors couldn’t pull it out—only the natives.”

“Why go to all that trouble?” Anzu asked.

Eve explained Rinko’s motives.

“Rinko originally planned to head back to our world once she’d thoroughly enjoyed a long vacation with her newfound immortality.”

“Your world... I still find it hard to believe there’s more than one.”

“But she’s surprisingly diligent, really. She knew aliens in their midst may cause chaos here—and wasn’t about to stand for that.”

Like ecologists trying to study an ecosystem but finding their presence disrupts it.

“She wanted to find humans who could seal demon lords like Abaddon and the Erlking. People she could teach runes to. So she made a Holy Sword only super-strong local humans could pull.”

“Someone who’d handle demon lord mop-up for her?”

“It turned out that Alky had one of the Kunlun villagers unwittingly dispatch those demon lords. Poetic, really.”

Eve shook her head, smiling.

“But in the end, Rinko started to like this world and didn’t want to leave. As to why the key is a sword— Well, she’s just a big nerd for old-school RPGs.”

Eve wagged her fingers—and Anzu was forced forward, grabbing the sword’s hilt.

“Oh?! I can grab it?!”

“Pulling the blade from its original position requires powerful mana—but I guess anyone can handle it afterward. Or is it because you’re a master swordswoman from the domain? You do seem like the sort of person who’d open a portal to another world.”



“I do not!”

“Well, Rinko was never good at these sorts of finer details. Never mind!”

Eve had Anzu wave the sword around, like she was testing out a new video game.

Once she’d run through the basic controls, Eve said, “We’re done here,” and turned to go. “Now we just have to get out of Azami real quick. Off to Kunlun, pry open the door to the Last Dungeon—and once I’m home, it’s mission complete.”

“Mission, my ass. That’ll free all the demon lords trapped in there! How many deaths will that cause?”

“Rinko will be right on my heels, so it’s a desperate measure. It makes me sick—really, it does.”

“That grin proves you’re lying.”

Eve couldn’t stop herself. Her mind was full of future delights.

“I’m immortal! Only I can control the runes! Give me a hundred—no, fifty—years, and the whole world will be dancing on the palm of my hand. By the time Rinko catches up with me, it’ll be too late.”

She was practically frolicking.

But then—

“Did I hear my name?” Rinko was standing before them, albeit barely. She’d lost her second form, and her clothes were covered in blood.

Eve had not expected to see her here, but she soon started chuckling again. “If you had a white coat on, you’d look like a post-op surgeon!”

“I could use a surgeon. Everything hurts.” Rinko grinned.

Eve frowned slightly. “Seeing me off?” she asked.

Rinko didn’t answer.

“Buying time?”

Again, silence.

Eve pouted. “The right to remain silent will not help you here. Imagine a thriller—the killer, on the edge of a cliff, time to confess his sins—and he clams up? No one wants that.”

“Nothing else worked,” Rinko said.

“Meaning?”

“Eve, I’m here to kill you.”

“Didn’t you already try that?”

“Ha-ha-ha, fair.” Rinko conceded that point. “But I was also holding back. Or rather—I didn’t dare use *my* last resort. I’ve got a real doozy up my sleeve.”

“Yet you’re making a big deal out of it.”

“I’ve got a rune that cancels immortality.”

This was quite a bombshell. Eve froze up completely.

“——You what?”

Rinko was as calm as Eve wasn’t. “A rune that cancels immortality.”

Immortality was one of the main strengths the offworlders-turned-demon-lords had in common.

Even if their injuries did prove fatal, they’d come back to life inside a year (although it varied from individual to individual).

This would end that advantage.

Eve had spent much of her time as president trying to roll back the clock, trying to regain her health—and this ruined all of that.

She clearly couldn’t believe her ears.

“.....”

“That’s a good look for you.” Rinko smirked.

“Well, I suppose,” Eve said, recovering (or pretending to). Her voice shook. “You plan to wipe the slate clean?”

“Don’t get your panties in a bunch, Eve. It’s a risky move! So powerful, it’ll remove *my* immortality, too. If I mess this up, it might just be the death of me.”

She made it sound like a self-destruct, which showed she meant business.

“I made the thing so I could age along with Lou, the king of Azami. I’ll admit—with my injuries, if I kill my immortality, I might drop dead here and now.”

As it was, she was fighting off the pain, catching her breath again between each line.

“You, risking your life? How out of character.”

That was the best retort Eve could manage.

“I meant to use it once peace prevailed, but the circumstances leave me with no choice.”

“I’m unharmed! Remove my immortality here, only you’ll die. Your death will be in vain! If you can’t live out your life with your husband and daughter, what use is it?”

Eve attempted to appeal to Rinko’s emotions, but Rinko cut her down.

“But you won’t be able to *heal*.”

“.....Yes, that does go with the immortality.”

“Those who survive me will handle the rest. Lloyd and Marie will arrive before you head to Kunlun, and they will take you down.”

The look on Rinko’s face showed her mind was made up.

But Eve had made a career out of undermining these moments. Perhaps she *would* lose her immortality, but the joy of dashing these hopes outweighed that fear.

Her momentary panic died down; Eve was thinking clearly again.

Meanwhile, Anzu— Well, she’d only just found out about immortality at all, so she wasn’t really following much of this.

“I am so out of my element here. Can I go home?”

That bad.

Neither glanced her way, but both apologized.

“Sorry, Anzy.”

“This’ll be quick. You’re our witness!”

As that last word left her lips, Eve made her move...

Which meant turning and running for it.

“I’m done here! No need to take risks!”

“.....Not so fast.”

“Whoa!”

Rinko blocked her escape route with a ferocity that made Eve pull up short.

“Yikes!” she said.

Rinko shook her head. “Can’t believe you’re trying to skedaddle.”

She stepped forward, sketching the *anti-immortality* rune.

Eve looked exasperated. “I was just trying to surprise you!”

“You might manage it on your own, but how are you gonna get yourself to Kunlun with mind-controlled Anzy and the Holy Sword in tow? It’s not just me here. There’s tons of powerful foes outside.”

Even if Rinko fell here, she had backup.

That was why she could afford this risky ploy.

Eve was well aware of that. Scratching her head, she chuckled.

“I thought this might happen—and you’re not the only one with a card up your sleeve.”

“.....Yeah?”

Rinko had known her long enough.

It was often hard to tell if Eve was serious or joking around—but when she spoke like this, it was never a bluff.

A moment later—

—*Whmm.....*

—the whole castle shook.

Not just up and down, or side to side; it was unpredictable, like a baby playing

by slapping and rolling something around.

“Wh-what the—?!” Anzu yelped.

Rinko had to brace herself against it.

“What’d you do?” she said, glaring at Eve.

Eve explained the rocking castle with all the hype of an MC at an entertainment showcase.

“Why is it rocking? Pure magic! And not just any magic—a teleportation spell! This is the impact of moving the entire castle!”

“The entire castle?!” Anzu yelped.

“Yessss!” Eve said, delighted by this reaction. “If my plans were foiled here, I figured I could just bring the castle to Kunlun, with the Holy Sword inside!”

She’d had sleeper agents in the Azami army place magic stones geared for teleport magic at dozens of locations around the castle.

“They wouldn’t have *looked* like magic stones—Dr. Eug’s designs are good like that. An application of the rune cannon charged them with magic. I may not be good at hitting moving targets, but this much I can manage.”

“.....You’ve been planning this awhile, then. We knew Jiou had spies in our midst...”

The shaking was now so intense, Rinko took a knee—to Eve’s infinite pleasure.

“And you know where we’re going—Kunlun village!”

Whmm!

Even as she spoke, Rinko and Anzu both felt a horrible floating sensation.

That hit had been their landing, and the shaking stopped.

The ground was now at an angle; Rinko lost her balance. Eve clearly hadn’t anticipated this, either, and went tumbling after her.

She kept talking, not even picking herself up.

“Surprised? Not every day a castle moves!”

“I feel like it got you as good as you got us.”

“Just a trick of the mind, Anzy,” Eve insisted as she got to her feet.

“All the way to Kunlun?” Rinko yelped, clearly still not able to believe this.
“The magic stones that would require—”

“I swear it’s true! See for yourself!” Eve fired her rune cannon at the wall.

Bam bam.

The wall collapsed. Where the vault should have been—was now a pastoral landscape, with grassy knolls and a gentle breeze.

Rinko’s jaw dropped.

Eve absolutely relished *that*. “Mwa-ha-ha! Your backup’s nowhere near us! What now? Gonna use that rune? Leave the rest to the Kunlun villagers? I can use hannyatou to render them all powerless, but do you think it’s worth a shot?”

“Y-you really are—gahhh!”

Surprise and anger fought for control within Rinko—and she forgot she was still in a battle.

Eve landed a powerful kick right in her undefended side.

Rinko went flying, tumbling all the way to the wall.

The strike was so successful that Eve doubled over laughing.

“Flawless! Comeback! I only meant this to be a last resort to get the Holy Sword here, but cutting you off from your backup is the cherry on top! You look positively crestfallen, Rinko! Oh, what a glorious day!”

She was so worked up, she started talking to Eug, who wasn’t even there.

“Eugy, you’re a true genius! You weren’t the idea girl—you never could match Alky there. But you were better than anyone else at realizing other people’s concepts. Orders from above unleashed your true potential! You were born to do my bidding! Or perhaps it’s the other way around? Your pride got in the way, so you were useless unless I told you what to do.”

“Rinko! *Ngh!*”

Anzu tried to run to Rinko's side—but Eve quickly seized control again, forcing her to walk the other way.

"Come on! You can do it!"

"I'm not your baby! Rinko! Rinkoooo?!"

Rinko's wounds had opened, and she was curled up in pain.

Eve waved good-bye and merrily set off for Kunlun—and the Last Dungeon.

"It all comes down to this! My last dungeon—Kunlun itself!"

Rinko was furious with herself. She'd miscalculated badly, missed the signs—"Moving the whole castle?!" she murmured, curled up in a ball. "That was planned well in advance. Right under my nose! Everything's going wrong today. We're in it deep."

She'd love to count on the Kunlun villagers, but Eve had hinted at a way to foil them. If she'd taken Alka down, it was unlikely any other villager could stop her.

"There's no way to turn this around," Rinko whispered, tears in her eyes.

The backup she'd been counting on was still in Azami. She was out of ideas—"Are you okay?"

But somehow, Lloyd was here.

"Colonel Chrome and Rol are both down! What happened?"

".....The castle's tilting."

"That was a *lot* of shaking— Look, outside!"

"Huh? Huh?!"

And Lloyd wasn't the only one. Riho, Phyllo, and Selen were all here with him. Rinko couldn't believe her eyes.

"Wh-why were you in the castle? Weren't you all fighting outside?"

Lloyd turned her way, looking very intent.

"We're here to save the Azami princess!"

"What?"

Rinko's eyes flicked over Lloyd's shoulder—to the actual princess, Marie.

She seemed equally baffled.

Meanwhile, Lloyd was chattering away.

"The chief told me Eve was targeting someone! I hadn't seen the princess around, so I knew it must be her, and I ran straight for the castle!"

"I'm right here..."

Her target had likely been Anzu, who was meant to carry the Holy Sword for her.

Classic Lloyd misunderstanding. Frankly, the fact that he still didn't know Marie's identity was itself a miracle.

"Is that why?" Selen blinked. She'd clearly followed him without any thought.

"Selen..."

"Well, if Lloyd goes running, so do I!" she said, owning it.

"Fair enough," Merthophan said. "Myself, I saw Lloyd's intense stare and had a horticultural hunch something must be wrong. That's why I followed. Was that not why you came along, Riho Flavin?"

"Except for the horticultural hunch part, sure," Riho said, glaring at the only man alive who'd come here in a loincloth.

Allan and Mena concurred.

"Farming crap aside, when Lloyd means business, he's never wrong."

"We've known him long enough!"

"Mwa-ha-ha, as have I! Our relationship: Long ☆ term!"

Nexamic interrupted the conversation with his buttocks out, which made his contribution sound positively bawdy.

"Nexamic," Renge growled. "That phrasing is inelegant."

Seeing every one of them doing their bit proved comforting, and Rinko started laughing.

"Mom?"

“Lost my footing,” she said. “And these wounds hurt pretty bad.”

Lloyd leaned in close. “Are you sure you’re okay, Your Majesty?”

“I’m fine. But she was after the Holy Sword.”

“The Holy Sword? Not the princess?!”

“She went that way. And she has the sword.” Rinko pointed through the shattered wall.

Lloyd looked shocked—he recognized the view.

When the stir died down, Rinko explained how Eve was controlling Anzu.

“So she’s using Anzu to carry the Holy Sword? So inelegant,” said Renge.

“Don’t blame Anzu, Renge. It’s hardly her fault!” Nexamic insisted.

“Oh, that was pure pity. Nothing less elegant than getting mind-controlled, is there?”

Lloyd listened, arms folded, eyes closed—and then he opened them. “Okay, I’ve got the gist.”

“Lloyd?”

“I’ll go thwart Eve’s evil schemes! Don’t worry, I’ve got this!”

“.....Okay..... Go for it.”

Seeing how motivated he was, Rinko chose to say nothing else. This purehearted boy had already worked wonders.

Eve had called herself the protagonist—but Rinko was nominating Lloyd for that role.

“I’ll lead the way! Everyone, back me up!” he said.

They were already nodding.

“Lloyd, you know we will.”

“Marie...”

Selen jumped between them, drawing attention. “Of course! I’ll follow you to the bowels of hell!”

Riho scratched the back of her head. “You may be going to hell, but Lloyd’s bound for heaven.”

“.....Selen belongs in hell. That’s a given.”

“Grrr! I am still but a young maiden! I have more than time enough to earn my ticket to the pearly gates! If it’s about being disqualified for your sins, I might be in a spot of trouble, but if you can buy your way in with good deeds, I can easily accrue sufficient marks!”

Not necessarily the time to debate heaven’s admission standards.

But Selen was not taking Phyllo’s comment lying down.

With these girls around, no straits stayed dire long.

Fixing the cut of his loincloth, Merthophan moved over to Lloyd.

“Any true farmer would want to settle things on the land that cultivated their agricultural spirit.”

Choline and Chrome winced. Their former colleague had changed a lot, in hindsight—and in that loincloth, they had a fine sight of his hindquarters.

“He’s not the man he was— Maybe inside he’s the same, but the outside matters, too.”

“What will we do with him?”

Chrome was leaning heavily on her shoulder.

“How are your injuries, Chrome?” Lloyd asked.

“Doesn’t matter now,” Chrome said, thumping Lloyd on the chest. “You’re not the boy who failed the entrance test, got all depressed, and tried to get a job at my cafeteria anymore.”

Back then, he’d looked so timid.

“No! I can do this!”

Lloyd was still forthright as ever, but he was also a fine soldier.

“I’ve watched you grow, both in the cafeteria and in the academy. Go get ‘em!”

Lloyd took this to heart with a nod.

Marie stepped up to offer her own words of encouragement.

“I trust you, too! As the princess—”

Booom!

Just as she tried to slip the truth in, a huge impact echoed through the area.

“No time to dillydally! Thanks for the kind words, Chrome! I’ll do my best!”

Lloyd was ready to run off to save Kunlun.

Marie saw him fired up...and hung her head.

“.....He *definitely* didn’t hear me.”

“Nope.”

“Not a word.”

“.....Mm.”

“That was totally the right timing for a reveal, too!” Marie wailed. She hadn’t missed it! But the results were not on her side. Time was ever against her.

“All we can do is sally forth to put an end to Eve’s wiles! And score points with Lloyd’s homeland, Kunlun! Lay the foundations for our future!”

“Selen, you’re a broken record.”

“.....Mm.”

Leaving Marie to her misery, the others headed off to Kunlun.

Lloyd was about to follow, but Rinko grabbed his sleeve.

“Lloyd, Eve’s got a weapon that only works on Kunlun villagers. Careful.”

“She does?! Oh no! I hope they’re all okay!”

Rinko was relieved. It was very Lloyd to worry about others first.

“That kindness is *your* weapon, Lloyd. Best of luck.”

“Okay! Huh?” Just as he was about to go, something caught his attention.

“Rinko, were you trying to wipe the dirt off your face?”

“Mm? I don’t think so.”

She looked puzzled.

“Then let me!” he said, taking out his handkerchief. “We don’t want germs getting in those wounds! Just let me clean you up.”

“I’m fine, Lloyd. You need to hur— Huh?!”

Rinko’s jaw dropped. Her eyes locked on the *disenchant* rune embroidered on his handkerchief.

“Lloyd, is that...?!”

“Oh yes! It’s called the *disenchant* rune, I guess? If you wipe dirt with it, it comes right off! A little housekeeping tip from me! It’s also great for cleaning wounds when you’re hurt. Weren’t you trying to use the same rune?”

He pointed—to where the half-written *anti-immortality* rune glowed.

“Huh? They’re actually not quite the same. What is this?” Lloyd said, taking a closer look at Rinko’s rune.

Rinko was busy comparing his *disenchant* rune to her *anti-immortality* rune.

“Oh...I hadn’t seen this one before, but it makes sense. It is a *form* of enchantment... Alka developed her own runes, so it all connects...”

She took Lloyd’s hand, her eyes filled with hope.

“Lloyd, there’s something I want you to remember.”

“Wh-what?”



“Your ‘household wisdom that helps with cleaning’ can save the world. Sounds impossible? But I’ve got a tip that will make it happen.”

Rinko’s grin broadened.

And Lloyd didn’t hesitate.

That big noise earlier *was* the result of Eve’s attack.

Kunlun villagers lay in heaps everywhere, victims of the hannyatou’s power.

“Hannyatou for you! Hannyatou for you! Spray my troubles away!” Eve was blasting it everywhere like a bug exterminator.

Facing her was the man who’d raised Lloyd—Pyrid.

“Fah!”

Ka-boom! Ka-boom!

It was his shockwaves that had caused that explosion.

He stood before Eve, his gabby geezer act replaced with firm politeness.

“I’m afraid I must ask you to stop brandishing that spray. It’s making the villagers suffer.”

“And here’s the Fierce God Pyrid! A present for you!”

But Pyrid had seen how she’d toppled the other villagers, and he smoothly dodged the hannyatou’s spray.

“Hahh!”

And a snap of his hand scattered it all to the sky. It was an impressive move, but Eve arched an eyebrow.

“You’re gonna play me like that? Still, all it takes is a single breath! How long can you hold out?”

“I may be old, but I can still hold my breath a full day.”

“.....So inhuman! But, well, so am I. Can’t really grumble.”

“You’re wha— *Hurk?!?*”

Treant roots were at his feet. She’d snuck them over while they talked.

And the tips were spraying hannyatou.

Naturally, Pyrid dodged it—but not all of it.

“Ha, that won’t be enough to— Aughhh!”

Hannyatou worked like a curse—even the slightest contact made the effect kick in.

“Age caught up with me... What a disgrace... Nevertheless!”

“It sure was a close one— H-hey!”

He hadn’t earned that title for nothing. His instincts were sound, and his will to protect the village was powerful.

But Eve was no less off the charts. She dodged his blows and sprayed more mist.

Each dose he took slowed him further.

And yet still he did not stop. Eve could not help but be impressed.

“*Fierce* is certainly the word for it! All this hannyatou, and you can still move?”

She would normally have stopped to play, but she had a goal here. She kicked Pyrid out of her way.

“Hahhh!”

“Gah!”

He hit the wall of a house and was buried in it.

When she was sure he wasn’t getting up, she turned to move on— “You really ought to show the elderly some respect.”

“.....Who?”

Eve heard a mysterious voice and spun around.

“Quite the welcome you gave my brother, and my old friend.”

An aging gentleman stood before her.

“Sou?” Eve said, like she’d bumped into an acquaintance.

“Indeed.”

She knew she’d met the man before, but she found herself rubbing her eyes for a double take.

“You seem rather different.”

Sou feigned ignorance. “Oh? I’m hardly aware of it myself, but perhaps I’m aging well.”

He was a runeman—which meant his vibe changed in the eye of the beholder.

Originally, he’d been a hero, but as that definition grew fuzzy, so did he, and this had long tormented him.

But after making friends with Shouma and sharing his love for Lloyd, he began to define himself as “Lloyd’s old man fan” and was now free of that chameleonic nature.

“For old times’ sake, let me ask— How do you see me, Eve?”

“A grandpa who dotes on his grandkids.”

That was totally his new vibe. Like summer vacation was almost here, and he’d spent all week preparing for the kids to visit.

Sou had no objections. He looked tickled pink.

“Indeed, I am! I woke up purely so that I might capture Lloyd’s heroics with this camera.”

“Him again?” Eve snorted, clearly sick of hearing that name. “I’m afraid I ditched him back in Azami. He does tend to get in the way.”

“Did you really?”

“Yes, so you can just go back to bed.”

“Afraid I can’t,” Sou said, shaking his head. “I cannot stand for what you did to my friends.”

“That word again!”

Eve made a face. She’d heard her fill of that concept.

Sou paid her mood no attention, acting like a presenter giving a talk on the

joys of friendship or his favorite idol.

“Being undefined was naught but suffering. Deprived of the purpose for which I was created, yet unable to vanish—I could not become anything. I could write novels about that pain.”

“I can sympathize. I’ve made it through life by constantly setting myself new goals.”

“And yet that’s never enough, is it? I tried to escape the hero role by making myself into the villain—and I know how unfulfilling that was.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Eve debated whether to say anything snarky, but Sou didn’t give her time—he was heating up into a regular sermon.

“What we all need is someone who understands us, Eve Profen. When I realized that, I escaped my undefined existence, ceased to be sinister—and was able to walk through life like any other elderly man.”

Eve’s teeth ground together.

“So this is a humble brag?”

Sou nodded gravely. “If you perceive it as such, that proves your thirst lies unquenched.”

“I’m thoroughly quenched! I’m young again! Look at these curves! Look at my skin! I could totally take a day off from my skincare routine without issue!”

Anzu looked baffled. “You have a daily skincare routine? I ain’t never done a thing.”

“And you’ll regret it five years from now.”

Sou waited that interaction out, then slowly raised his fists.

“Shall we?” he said. “I imagine you’re the one who hurt my buddy, Shouma. Allow me to avenge him.”

“Hard to believe you’re the same man who was trying to free the demon lords and make Lloyd fight them, all so you could make a movie of it.”

With that burst of spite, Eve prepared herself to fight.

“I shall record his deeds, and we shall release that movie. I’ll have time after you’re defeated.”

“If *you* beat me, then you’ll be missing a great battle scene—of him being trounced.”

“Lloyd Belladonna’s every action is appealing! In battle or out.”

Sou was getting a mite carried away, like a man headed to his grandson’s school sports festival.

“Ugh, it is far too late in the day for a headache like this. I do hope you’re the last one.” Eve waggled her fingers.

“W-whoa!”

Anzu was forced to move forward, Holy Sword in hand.

“Anzy, you go on ahead to the Last Dungeon.”

“Wait, hey! Stop! You belong to me, feet!” Wailing, she was dragged off toward the back of town.

Eve pulled out a handkerchief, faking a teary farewell, then turned back to Sou.

“Oh, are you letting Anzy go?”

“There’s little she can do on her own. You’ll have to be there.”

“True. If she goes back to my old world, it’ll just be the start of a reverse *isekai* story. I can just see it now—her knees buckling the first time she sees an airplane. Not exactly original.”

Sou read between the lines. “I don’t wish to involve civilians or those I care about. The same applies to you?”

For a moment...

Eve’s brow furrowed, but she soon began to bluster.

“Suuure, can’t have the sword bearer getting hurt, can I? This *is* rather powerful.”

“What is?” Sou frowned.

“Oh, I kept something up my sleeve to deal with anyone not from Kunlun and impervious to hannyatou.”

“You certainly are prepared.”

“*Non, non!*” Eve said, wagging a finger. “I did not prepare it—I just finished *making* it.”

“Making...? *Hnk!*”

Squeak.

Rabbit costumes popped out of the shadow at Eve’s feet.

It was a horrifying and deeply weird image—and the legs were bending in all sorts of directions, proof there was nothing inside.

There were five of them.

Their unstable, sinister nature was all too familiar. Sou’s eyes widened.

“Runemen?”

“Yesssss!” Eve said, her tongue wagging. “Just like *you*. The king of Profen and her rabbit costume— You’ve heard people suggest there were actually several people inside, many of them simply doubling for me?”

“And you’ve used those words as the basis for these runemen?” Sou inquired.

“Bingo! Nothing as thorough as carving your name into ancient ruins and manuscripts, so they’re very unstable, but that’s also a strength.”

That was enough for Sou to catch her drift.

“Ah, that is vicious.”

“Yes! I bet they can easily kill these poor, immobilized Kunlun villagers.” Eve raised a hand.

The rabbit costumes scattered, arms and heads wobbling, letting out noises like *tokusatsu* minions.

“Oh dear, that’ll never do!”

Sou’s reaction was charmingly grandfatherly. Moefication complete.

“Now whaaat? You’d better act before someone dies!”

“Indeed. My friend’s grandchildren are here!”

But as he dithered, one of the rabbits charged right at him.

“Eeee!”

“Hmph... Appropriately powerful.”

Sou had taken a nice big swing at it—

But the empty mascot head merely dented, and it didn’t even slow down.

“They’re empty— How ironic!”

“What, feeling sorry for them? One runeman for another?”

“Yes. For their own good, I wish to put them down promptly. To my eyes, this is a most deplorable sight.”

“Oh, you flatter me! Well, I gotta be getting on home. Although I wonder if my old home’s still standing.”

Eve wagged her fingers, moving away.

“Wai— Oww!”

Sou tried to follow, but the mascot wasn’t letting him.

“Oh dear. Their power may be modest, but it could prove strong enough to kill several Kunlun villagers. That would never do. Death is always sad.”

Sou had once turned to villainy, trying to end his own existence.

That awkward smile suggested he knew he’d changed his tune.

“Perhaps it’s not time to reflect on these things... That woman is so self-centered.”

Eve was also the sort of person who had to get the last word in. She called an excuse over her shoulder. “I’d love to stay and torment you! But overconfidence tends to undermine.”

Sou chuckled as he grappled with the mascot. “Ha-ha-ha. I remember that sinking feeling.”

“Meaning?” she growled.

“You’ve let Lloyd get in your head. And now you’re scared of him.”

“Huh?!”

That got a big response from her—which said everything.

Sou punched the costume, calmly explaining just what made Lloyd so frightening. “He’s always unexpected. He’s the master of acrobatic misunderstandings and miraculous rug pulls. He is Azami’s—nay, the world’s—wonder boy. That’s what makes Lloyd so appealing.”

Eve was doing her level best to hide how close to home this hit. “Oh, please. I didn’t warp here from Azami because I was scared of him! And how’s he going to work miracles when he’s still riding around on Satan back in Azami, fighting my trash mobs?”

She was about say out loud, “He’ll never make it here.”

But then a wobbly bunny costume came flying their way, crashing to the ground at her feet.

“——Huh?”

“Speak of the devil! I had no reason to believe he’d come, yet I still did. Ha-ha-ha, what a pleasure.” Sou didn’t even need to look.

Eve’s glare was fixed behind him.

“That’s enough, Eve!” Lloyd and his companions had arrived.

This was the second time Lloyd had interrupted her in the same day, and Eve was fit to be tied.

“You *again*?! And totally a repeat of last time! Take a hint! Why did you tag along! *Ngk*?!”

Only Alka could teleport. Eve had assumed that, with her out of commission, they’d never get here in time. But she soon figured it out.

“You were already in the castle?!”

In that chaos, he must have had a very good reason to head that way. No ordinary person would do that. It was like he’d read her mind.

She ground her teeth in shock and rage. “Was this Lab Chief Rinko’s ploy?!”

She didn't seem like she knew! Or was Alky still alert and talking? Only pretending to be hurt? Did she pull the wool over my eyes?! Why were you in the castle?!"

"Oh, I just got worried about the princess!" Lloyd said. "I ran over to check on her, and she wasn't there... It was weird, right? Did I just miss her? But I didn't see anyone who looked the part..."

Eve's eyes shifted to look over his shoulder.

Marie was sobbing.

"Mm, his failure to work things out is what allowed us to be here! It's for the greater good...!"

"When this is over, time to rethink your life, Marie," Riho said.

Marie's head drooped. This was no comfort.

"Anyway, I never found the princess, but I'm sure she's hiding somewhere safe!"

Eve fought off the urge to point behind him. Instead, she glanced at the others for confirmation.

"I merely followed Sir Lloyd, hoping for a chance to get up close and personal."

"I tagged along to stop Selen from doing that."

".....I'm with her."

"If Lloyd's flustered, it's a disciple's job to lend a hand!"

".....I'm with him."

The words of his companions were warm and caring, while Marie alone was left scowling.

"I wondered why Lloyd was so worried, but it turns out it was about the 'princess,' which is honestly a shock. It's for the best, but it also hurts."

Lloyd simply would not believe she was the princess—his concerns were all for a fictitious one.

In other words, Lloyd's miracle misunderstandings had once again come back to haunt Eve.

"Marie, clean up your act! If you had ever once acted like a princess, no one would be meddling with my plans!"

"Why is the last boss nagging me about my life?!"

The unfairness was shredding her spirit.

Lloyd tried to help, but he finished her off instead.

"That's right! What does Marie's slobbiness have to do with the princess?!"

"Pretty much everything," Eve muttered.

Each word they said ran Marie through—she might be in worse shape than the Kunlun villagers.

"See?!" Eve yowled, pointing at her. "She's all depressed!"

"What for?"

"Enough! That witch is the princess of Azami, Lloyd!"

Lloyd glanced once at Marie...then shook his head. "Telling obvious lies to try and rattle me? I'm not that easily fooled!"

"It's true! Your hard head is breaking hearts! Marie, tell him!"

Eve was now encouraging her enemy.

Marie's eyes had gone dead, and she was muttering, "I've told him, over and over. It's never worked; it's never gonna work..."

"Don't give up! Don't surrender! Forward!"

The last boss was cheering for her. Good for you, Marie. *Snerk.*

Still fighting the mascots, Sou watched with a radiant smile.

"Heh-heh-heh... Just his presence turns everything to comedy. He has the power to turn bad ends into happy ones. That is what a true hero does."

"Crap! Crap! Craaaaap!"

Eve threw in the towel and turned to run.

“Ack, hey!” Lloyd called after her.

Sou urged him on. “Leave this to us! You go after her, Lloyd! We’ll keep the villagers safe!”

“Oh, okay! Thank you!”

Lloyd bobbed his head, and Sou whipped out a camera, starting to film.

And then started doing an interview.

“Best of luck, our hero! By the way, Lloyd.”

“Er, yes?”

“What do you see me as?”

“Um...hmm...a retired grandfather?”

Sou laughed out loud. “Indeed! I’m done being a hero! Done pretending to be evil! Leave the rest to us.”

“Okay...thanks!”

Satan pulled up next to Lloyd in his second form—the lion.

“Climb on, Lloyd! Surtr, you stay here and help Allan out.”

“You bet your bottom dollar! That boy’s not much use on his own!”

Surtr trotted off after him.

Satan turned back to Lloyd. “C’mon!”

“Let’s get after her, Satan! Everyone else—please take care of my hometown!”

“We’re on it, Sir Lloyd!” Selen said, thumping her chest. “I expect it’ll be my hometown eventually!”

“You just gotta slip that on in there... Welp, we’re on it, Lloyd.”

“.....Mm.”

Riho, Phyllo, and the others all nodded, thumping their chests.

Leaving his home to his reliable (minus one victim) compatriots, Lloyd ran after Eve.

The final showdown was almost at hand.

Meanwhile, with the Holy Sword in her hands, Anzu had been forced to walk into the deepest part of the continent, the Last Dungeon itself. She looked terrified.

She might be ruler of the Ascorbic Domain, the holy training grounds for martial artists everywhere—but Kunlun was the stuff of legend, and what lay beyond that... Well, she wasn't here by choice. Her legs were moving for her, and she was so not ready. Each time she stepped on a twig or made the leaves rustle, she flinched.

The brush cleared, and she found herself in the open.

Across the field was an ominous rock.

Her feet were taking her that way, and she could not stop them.

"Please, no! My instincts are screaming that it's dangerous!"

Complaining out loud to no one, she reached the rock face. The sight before her was downright unnatural.

The building was more avant-garde and modern than anything she'd ever seen, buried beneath—no, fused with—the rock face. Calling it a cave felt deeply wrong.

But Anzu's feet didn't even hesitate. This was unbearable.

"Where am I? The gates to hell? Aughhh!"

Someone had grabbed her from behind.

"Helloooooo!"

Eve had flown here—literally—and snatched her by the waist, flying them both all the way to the back of the cave.

"E-Eve! Let me go!"

"Sorry, Anzy. We're all out of time."

Anzu knew what that meant. "Wait, Lloyd showed up?"

That boy was a miracle worker—basically everyone knew that now.

“Your instincts are getting sharper, Anzy.”

Then Eve swore under her breath. They flew on and on, farther and farther into the Last Dungeon.

In the distance behind them, they heard a boy’s voice—likely Lloyd’s.

“Is this the place? Wait for me!”

“Argh, already? Nope, still good! I work quick!”

Eve sped up—and there it was.

The Last Dungeon.

The very back of it was so quiet, it was like no man had ever dared tread there before.

Natural rock mingled with the man-made objects—such as concrete corridors, like the remains of the laboratory.

At the center loomed the keystone. It was difficult to describe—like a large stone weight placed on an even larger rock lid.

If you’ve seen the stones used in pickling, imagine those, but massive.

If they’d draped ropes around it, you’d assume this was a place of worship—but just the bare rocks were far more sinister.

There was a mosquito-like whine coming from somewhere. It was almost ticklish and unsettling.

Anyone setting foot here would know that humans did not belong.

“What is this place...? Yikes!”

Tossed aside, Anzu landed on her face.

Eve was gazing up at the keystone, the emotions catching up with her.

“Hundreds of years...but it feels just like yesterday.”

Long, long ago—she’d found this witchcrafty, shamanistic-looking keystone on a deserted island, bringing color back to a life she’d grown weary of. Her new toy got her brain juices flowing again.

“Good thing it brought the lab over with it—that means the steps will be the

same. First..." Eve was muttering away to herself.

There were no warning signs or colors, but Anzu's brain was telling her that nothing here was safe to touch. "What is this?" she asked. "Eve, this thing is crazy dangerous!"

"...Oh, well spotted, Anzy. Those animal instincts going off?"

"Yeah. It's like...super-concentrated demon lord."

"Concentrated! That's the word!" Eve cackled.

It was far too frightening for Anzu to muster any sort of smile.

This stone looked like it was sealing something away. Like in a children's story, where removing it would unleash evils upon the world. And she knew Eve had talked about releasing the demon lords.

"Is this what seals away the demon lords that Alka and the Kunlun villagers defeated?"

"Ooh, you can tell?" Eve said, in the kind of tone a clothing shop employee uses.

"Even a baby would know not to touch that thing!" Anzu was hissing like a kitten that had just seen the ocean.

"See that little gap here? Weaker demon lords slip through there, even after they're defeated. The really bad ones take much more time, I hear."

It was barely big enough to fit a pinky.

The image of a demon lord squeezing itself through that was unsettling.

"And if we popped the keystone off entirely..."

"A whole bunch of demon lords would return. And not just that."

"It gets worse?!"

"Everyone in the vicinity would get flung to the other world and get exposed to so much mana, they'd lose their minds good and proper."

"Good and proper?!"

Eve fixed Anzu with a flinty glare. "It means *you'd* become a demon lord."

Anzu gulped.

“You’d maintain your own ideal age and gain a superpower derived from your dreams and aspirations. A wish would be granted that’d you influence the world. Eugy was always grumbling about how she wanted other people as short as her around—and so the dwarven species came to exist. That’s why we have dwarves, but not any elves.”

“Elves...? What are those?”

“Oh, never mind. For that reason—I don’t need to open it all the way. Just wide enough for me to fit through. That will be enough to unleash the demon lords!”

They heard Lloyd’s voice in the distance.

“Oh! I have got to stop running my mouth. Okay, Anzy! Stick that rock with the Holy Sword.” Eve wagged her fingers, forcing Anzu to move.

Anzu was sent stiffly toward the keystone.

“Damn it! I know moving this thing at all will spell doom!”

“Don’t worry! Once I’m through, you can just close it right back up. It’s only a moment! Of course, lots of demon lords will crawl out in that moment. All the scientists, transformed to achieve their dreams.”

Abaddon had been researching edible insects. The treants had once dreamed of turning the deserts green—or maybe that was just a random unlucky gardener. Eve’s mind was running over the past.

Meanwhile, Anzu was putting up a last-ditch resistance.

“Hngggggg...!”

This would plunge the world into chaos. She had to fight it.

“Oh, this is no time for a trip down memory lane! Spare me the crisis adrenaline, please.”

“If the fate of the world rests in my hands, I’m gonna do what I have to!”

“The world? Those chips will fall where they may; it hardly matters. Stabby stabby!”

Eve waved an arm like a conductor, and that forced Anzu to thrust the sword at the stone.

“Augh!”

It glowed bright—and the blade turned liquid, flowing into the cracks on the keystone.

“It’s like resin or a concrete pour.”

Soon, only the hilt remained. The rest of it was fused with the keystone.

“That hilt functions as a lever; that’s how you move it. Come, Anzy! Do what I’m doing!”

“—*Aero!*” Lloyd’s voice echoed through the Last Dungeon’s deepest chamber.

Boom! Ka-blam! Whamm! Ka-blooey!

“Wh-what the—?!”

The dungeon wall collapsed, and Lloyd and Satan flew out.

“Lloyd! Such violence! I never knew about this!”

“The chief told me about it recently! We call it the Kunlun-Style Dungeon Shortcut Technique!”

“You can’t believe anything that crazy grandma says...but this time it worked out!”

As he had grown less timid, Lloyd was starting to make bold moves—and copy things he probably shouldn’t. Satan was very much in worried dad mode.

“It worked out, right?”

“Yup! All’s well that ends well!”

Lloyd smiled at the compliment from his master.

Eve gritted her teeth, furious at this interruption. The bones in her jaw creaked unpleasantly.

“Lloyd...Belladonna!”

“This ends here, Eve Profen!”

Chapter 2

Classic Trope: The Protagonist's Secret Past Proves Pivotal!

A hole in the center of the world was spewing out mana.

This hole had been sealed with a rock known as the Eidos Keystone since days of yore; at least, that's what they determined after studying the native writings left on stone slabs on the now-deserted island.

It was standard icon worship—indigenous beliefs common in isolated locales. In the eyes of the world at large, it was nothing beyond a bit of folklore from a tribe with little outside contact... That was what the world at large thought.

But ships and planes often went missing in the area. Rumors started flying—was this a new triangle, like the ones in Bermuda and the Devil's Sea? It created quite a stir in the usual occult circles.

But it never went beyond that core crowd; time passed without any serious academics inclined to assess the veracity of the claims. The zeitgeist was fading out—when word reached the ears of Eve's old self, the fortune teller Eva.

“An unknown power that can grant any wish.”

Eva knew her occult lore and thought it would be fun to visit the island in question. She discovered the keystone, realized it was generating energy, and founded a new country around it.

It was the world's greatest black box, a global-scale untapped resource, containing everything and nothing.

In time, they started referring to the keystone and the hole beneath as “the device” to obscure the truth. Only a handful of people even knew it existed.

Had it always led to another world? Or had it only connected to one because they believed it did?

The truth was uncertain, but they proved this mana could be used via the

same principle as ancient beliefs in words of power. For that reason, the project designed to make this functionally applicable was called the New World Runes.

The native writings said opening the keystone alone would take you to the far side of the world. Moving it released a ton of mana—but at the cost of what this world offered.

Rocks, buildings, people—even ideals and memories would be lost. It was an equivalent exchange.

In time, President Eva grew sick.

She knew the risks, but in her haste, she urged Eug to move the keystone a little harder...resulting in the accident that sent the lab and the scientists within to the world where we find ourselves today.

The area around the keystone was a singularity, a portal to subspace, and a seal—and thus, it was dubbed the Last Dungeon.

This was the first time Satan had laid eyes on it after regaining Naruhiko Seta's memories. It struck him as so inherently unnatural that he was sweating with anxiety.

"To think that I was trapped in here each time I was defeated... With mana this powerful, I totally understand how it would turn ordinary humans into immortal creatures," he muttered.

"We're not that different from runemen, really," Eve responded. "Birthed by mana, our characters are expressed in a web of writings. When I alone control this power, how sweet that will be."

Just the thought made her vibrate with pleasure.

But that soon gave way to a vicious glare directed at the uninvited guest—Lloyd.

"You just can't take a hint! You keep putting your oar in! Can't you even let me get one last victory that's cool?"

Lloyd was undaunted. "I know you're up to no good! No idea what, exactly, but I know I've got to stop you!"

"I think I was pretty clear?! At least *try* to understand before you get in my

way! This just makes it worse!”

She glared at Satan.

“Seta... Oh, right, Satan! This is on you! It’s your job to explain things to him!”

She’d been his boss once, and she still played the part.

Satan looked just as put-upon, scratching his lion’s mane. “Cut me some slack, Eve. We’ve all got our failings.” The mane was getting quite mussed. “Meanwhile, there’s no one better than him at yanking the rug out from under people like you. He’s the greatest hero around. I want him to stay pure of heart.”

“Pure? Please,” Lloyd said, twisting bashfully. (This was very pure.) Eve shot him an unimpressed glare.

“This is the culmination of my life, and you’re here getting twitterpated. Fine! Already inserted the Holy Sword, just gotta make Anzy move the thing—”

Smiling, she turned to do just that.

“Owww... Hmm? I’m in control?” Anzu murmured.

“Huh?”

You may be wondering, *What just happened?* Well, when Lloyd had smashed through the wall, the impact knocked the mind-control hairpin off Anzu’s head.

“That hair ornament was the source of her control? What a stroke of luck! Well done, Lloyd.”

Eve refused to accept this twist. “You...just...got *luckyyyyyyy!*”

Satan chuckled. “That’s karma for you. And our miracle boy.”

Eve must not have liked his triumphant grin. Her lips twisted into a truly hideous expression.

“Hngg... Tch, so be it!”

She forced her face back to a neutral position, muttering to herself, “Ending with a big fight where I totally dominate isn’t the worst way to wrap things up. That’s what I’ll go with.”

Eve had always been good at improvising.

Hostility filled the Last Dungeon depths, and Lloyd, Satan, and Anzu all braced themselves for the fight.

“First—” Eve glared at Lloyd.

Assuming she was after him, he got ready to fight—but she went after Anzu instead.

“Yup, that was a feint.”

“Wha—?”

Eve fired a rune cannon light beam from her fingers.

Anzu was a seasoned warrior, but against a foe this fearsome, she was off her game. With Eve’s gaze turned away, she’d left herself exposed.

And this simplistic feint got her good.

Pshaaaaa!

The shot went through her legs. The smell of burning cloth filled the air, followed by the smell of blood.

“Sh-shit!”

“At times like these, normal people just get in the way, Anzy. What should I shoot next?”

She made a show of aiming for Anzu’s heart. She was baiting an obvious trap, but Lloyd was hardly going to stand around and watch someone die.

“Anzu—”

“Lloyd! It’s a trap!”

Satan knew Eve’s craftiness and Lloyd’s kindness well.

Satan moved before Lloyd could, waving the boy back, and putting himself in Eve’s sights.

Pshaaaaa!

“Gah!”

“S-Satan?!”

He’d smoothly placed that lion’s bulk in front of Anzu.

The shot tore open a hole in him, and blood gushed out.

As if his power was draining away, he shifted from lion form back to the sleepy-eyed man he once was.

Satan toppled over, bleeding from the side.

“Oh, goody!” Eve shrieked. “I didn’t think I’d bait *you*.”

Satan clutched his wound, and Anzu bowed her head. “Th-that’s on me, Satan. You shouldn’t have covered me.”

“Never mind that, Anzu,” he said, comforting her. Then he fixed Eve with a withering glare. “You certainly live up to your reputation. No one can match you for devious, underhanded tricks.”

“Appreciate that compliment,” Eve said, eyeing the gushing blood with her impish flair.

“Well, at least you’re having fun.”

“Naturally! I’ve already subdued the toughest foe here!”

Hannyatou allowed her to take out any Kunlun villager with ease.

Shouma, Alka, and even Pyrid had all been rendered helpless before that absolute weapon.

For that reason, she’d deemed Satan her one real threat.

But since he’d tried to protect Anzu—he was critically injured.

“But you didn’t even hesitate! Is today Anzy’s lucky day?”

“Sure doesn’t feel like it.”

He didn’t deny it, and Eve smirked.

“In terms of raw strength, I might be the strongest here,” Satan said.

“.....” Eve said nothing, and Satan kept talking.

“But that boy’s bottomless. He’s got something worth gambling on, here at

the end.”

He glanced at Lloyd.

Eve stuck a pinky in her ear. “I’ve heard that one before! From your buddy Shouma.”

“Shouma said that?” Lloyd whispered.

“And I know exactly how dangerous he is,” Eve said, glaring at Lloyd. “Asako fell in love with him and started breaking free of my possession. If he’d *meant* for that to happen, that would be a threat. But it was entirely accidental. Made me sweat harder than I ever have since crossing worlds! Still—”

Her confidence remained unshaken.

“I’ve already got him handled.”

She had the power of hannyatou.

How long till the spray took hold? How much more effective was it near the face?

She’d tested that with Shouma and Alka and had the measure of it now—and she was sure of herself.

“I’ll give him little spritz to stop any progress, then give him a nice direct shot. Gosh, that sounds like a hemorrhoid medication. I regret saying anything.”

Eve was so relaxed, she was even telling jokes. She glanced at Satan and Anzu.

“Just got to knock you out and then regain control of Anzy... Okay, victory is mine.”

Spray, mop up, done.

Bottomless? Miraculous? He was still from Kunlun and could not escape hannyatou’s effects.

She’d proven that three times over.

In her mind, victory was every bit as certain as if she were an exterminator with the bug spray.

But while she preened—

Lloyd was taking her smile to heart for this final battle.

Anzu was down. Satan was gravely wounded. Lloyd was the only one left. It was all up to him.

Excitement, tension, purpose—all of those emotions mingled together into just one.

Conviction.

Whether he could win or not—he *had* to.

It didn't matter how strong he was. He had to move; he had to struggle.

Efforts always paid off, and his efforts had to pay off here. After living through everything he had, he had faith in this.

His hands went up, relaxed, as he stood before Eve.

"Oh?"

She sensed his emotion and paused to blink at him.

"You're looking rather handsome! I supposed you always were, but you look positively resolute! My, my."

She couldn't wait to demolish that. Her vicious streak was tugging at the leash, but she raised her hands, trying to slow herself down.

"Thank you. I need to pay you back for my brother and the others—and I wasn't planning on letting you go."

"I can take you out in a single punch."

"You can throw as many as you want. I won't stop."

Lloyd breathed out. Then his eyes snapped open, and he lunged forward. "You're going down, Eve Profen!"

"Just you try, Lloyd Belladonna!"

Lloyd ran, closing the distance and swinging with the full momentum. "Rahhhh!"

And as he threw that energy into it—

"Whoops, hannyatou."

All it took was a little spritz to the face, like she was using liquid cleaner.

Despite all her talk about punches, she'd never even intended to engage in fisticuffs.

It went so well, she couldn't help but cackle.

"Mwa-ha-ha-ha!"

Satan was sick and tired of her attitude. "Can you not mock people for one second?"

Lloyd was taking this seriously, and she wasn't.

"Oh, I'm serious—seriously enjoying making a fool of you."

She meant every word; she wasn't hiding anything.

She was the ultimate hedonist, using runes, magic, and her new toys to their maximum entertainment potential. She was an aggravating antagonist, who loved tripping up a boy just as he was risking his life.

The matter was done. Eve turned her back on Lloyd, her attention on Satan and Anzu.

A satisfied smile.

"With that taken care of, it's time to go home!"

"Hyah!"

"Gah!"

Lloyd's fist connected with the back of Eve's head.

Still smiling broadly, she flew across the room and smashed into the wall.

"—————Huh?!"

Eve's voice emerged from a cartoon dent in the wall; she was so deep in there that the sound was rather muffled.

Oblivious to her confusion, Lloyd spat the hannyatou out.

"Wh-what was that spray for?! Ugh! It's got grit in it!"

The spray that weakened any Kunlun villager had been super effective against

Shouma and Alka.

But Lloyd was just taking it like any bitter fluid. Eve couldn't work it out.

".....Huh?" she said, pulling herself out of the wall, still confused, glaring at Lloyd. "Huh?"

That was all she could say.

"Don't give me that!" Lloyd snapped. "This is a serious battle! It's no time for pranks!"

Her ultimate weapon was apparently a prank.

Eve staggered. "Th-this can't be happening! You must feel different! Let's try again!"

She ran in, spraying hannyatou.

Lloyd screwed up his eyes and complained ("Eww!") but nothing worse. She might as well have been shooting him with a squirt gun in the bath.

"Seriously, cut that out!!"

His clothes were getting wet; the water was dripping from his hair. Like someone had dumped a beer on him.

Eve was lost. How had he taken that much with no effect?

"You're kidding?! You've gotta be! What's going on?!"

"That's so nasty! Argh!" Lloyd finally hit back.

The hannyatou...had not diminished his strength, and his fist smashed into her spray hand.

Crack!

Her fingers bent in the wrong direction, her arm followed them, and she was dragged back into the wall.

"Aughhh!"

Embedded again, she looked utterly lost.

"M-my fingers? The hannyatou isn't working at all?!"

“What is that?!” Anzu asked.

Eve started explaining the effects, like she was making excuses.

“Dr. Eug made it for me! It’s a poison that only works on Kunlun villagers! It’s made of runes in ancient documents and ruins, herbs, silver powder, all mixed up!”

“But he says it just tastes bad.”

“Sure, to a normal human! But it messed Shouma and Alka up bad! Nerfed them instantly!”

“So that’s how you took her out? But—”

“I know! It looks like I’m just messing with him, but this is finely honed! It’s a perfect weapon against anyone from Kunlun!”

She spilled all the beans. After reviewing the effects, the power, and the toxicity, she unleashed her fury on Lloyd himself.

“You—! A Kunlun villager should be struggling to breathe! You should be lying in a heap, writhing in agony!”

Why wasn’t it working on someone from Kunlun?

Lloyd wiped his face with his handkerchief.

“Um, I’m a bit confused...” His head tilted slightly, and he admitted, “But I’m not actually *from* Kunlun.”

“.....Uh?”

A *very* long pause, before a very stupid noise.

Satan and Anzu looked equally surprised.

“Um, I’m what you call a foundling? I mean, I’m a Kunlun villager in my heart!”

A *foundling*—that was the last word anyone had expected to hear.

“Pyrid and the other villagers are all descended from really amazing people, but not me. Kanzou and his grandpa Kanichi and the lady who controls plants and Shouma all have that blood in their veins. They just found me somewhere,

so we're not related."

At last, Eve remembered what Shouma had said.

"Lloyd's amazing. And he will beat you."

"That's it?! That's what he meant?! He knew... AUGH, that's why he's so obsessed with you!"

Shouma had been too strong and struggled out in the world.

His passion had been restored only by the sight of weak little Lloyd doing his best.

But Lloyd's new admission explained just *why* that was.

—Lloyd was an ordinary boy, taken in by Kunlun.

And watching a normal human try and keep up with Kunlun villagers had made Shouma want to cheer Lloyd on.

"Ah-ha. So that's why he's the weakest villager."

"But he had the stuff to keep up with them...the power to never give up."

Satan and Anzu were both nodding. Only Eve was still reeling.

"Th-that's ridiculous! Of all things! Of all punch lines—you're the one person it doesn't work on?!"

"It's working just fine! It got in my eyes!"

"It's not supposed to blind you!"

All the efforts she'd gone to, all dashed right at the last second. Eve was about to lose it.

But...it was only one weapon that had failed her. She soon got her mojo back, and she was once again ready to handle the one last big job before her vacay.

"So close... I'm so close... No way am I going down here!"

Fight after fight, powerful foe after powerful foe. If she let her ambitions be thwarted by some silly kid who didn't even get what she was trying to do, she'd never live it down.

She forced her fingers back in line, made a fist, and braced for combat.

“I still have the other demon lord powers! I’m strong enough to defeat a fake Kunlun villager! If I falter here, all my hard work—the centuries since I was reborn—will be for nothing!”

She was clearly trying to encourage herself.

Deep down, she knew Lloyd had already beaten her once, and that nagged at her.

And that meant she knew she had to thoroughly trash him here, or it would come back to haunt her.

“I don’t wanna be looking over my shoulder! I want to sit back and play with my new toys!”

Nothing was worse than lying awake at night revisiting her defeat.

Some people can’t stand to see a speck of dirt. Others must try every limited item. Gamers have to get 100 percent completion. All of us have things we’re fixated on—and Eve took that to the extreme.

“One compromise, and I’m finished. That’s tantamount to denying my entire life!”

She looked ferocious.

Lloyd wasn’t the least bit intimidated.

“I’m pretty lost…”

“Try to keep up, then!”

He shook his head. “I don’t want to. I don’t need to understand how the villain thinks! You’re just closing your eyes to everything and telling yourself it’s okay!”

“*You* have not lived a tenth of my life! You can’t tell me shit!”

With each phrase, she moved a step closer—then she lunged at the boy.

She buffed her arms with the golem’s power, sent treant roots writhing all over her, sprouted Abaddon’s wings on her back, and breathed Surtr’s fires—all the demon lord powers at once.

Eve was unchained.

And Lloyd simply worked through them.

All those fights had diminished Eve's powers, but that alone did not explain what was happening.

Perhaps her attacks were a bit sloppy—but the biggest factor was simply that Lloyd had kept a level head.

When the golem arm came in, he deflected it with the back of his hand. When the treant roots tried to grab him, he dodged in the nick of time.

"Damn it!" Eve raged.

She tried moving unpredictably, rocketing around on her wings and breathing fire.

But Lloyd kept up with that easily, evading the flames and landing kicks as she passed him.

"Gotcha!"

"*Blegh!*"

Her rather goofy squeak was followed by a rather nasty crack. That was a broken bone.

Eve was as spooked as she was furious, thoroughly vexed.

This was her ultimate body—she could heal a break as fast as any Kunlun villager. It was no different from a minor scrape.

But her attacks were doing *nothing*. This hit had merely been a broken bone—but she feared the next blow would be life-threatening.

Frustration was setting in, the kind that comes with making the same mistake over and over.

"*Tch!*" She hid inside her shadow—Satan's patented shadow slide.

"?! My move?!" Satan yelped.

But Lloyd didn't bat an eye.

He simply waited for Eve to emerge.

—*Shpp.*

Her fingers alone slipped out above his head, and she fired a rune cannon.

“There you are!”

Lloyd easily dodged and grabbed Eve’s fingers, dragging her out of her shadow.

There was a noise like tearing fabric, but it was coming from inside her. She let out a little squeal.

“You! Little!”

Like a rodent trying to stay in her hole, Eve tried to spray Dionysos’s breath in his face. The boozy cloud should induce illusions.

But Lloyd had seen that coming and batted it aside with a little wind spell.

Eve gaped at him—and he didn’t let that opening go unpunished, slamming a second spell into her.

“Gotcha! *Aero!*”

“——Gahhhh?!”

A face full of wind sent Eve slamming back into the wall. She was still somehow upright, but she was definitely woozy.

“What is this...? What’s happening...?”

Unable to hide her irritation, she was muttering questions aloud.

He was matching her blow for blow; whatever was giving him the upper hand, it wasn’t sheer power. She was losing because of something else, some mystery force Shouma and Alka lacked.

“How can you dodge demon lord powers so easily?!”

She was a wreck by this point—screaming was all she could do.

And Lloyd was always one to answer questions.

“You want to know why I can dodge you?”

“Yes! There must be some trick! Fess up!”

“Nothing that dramatic. I’ve just fought people who can use almost all your attacks before. I know how you move, and I know how to handle it. I guess it’s

just plain old experience!”

“Huh?!”

Yep—Lloyd had fought nearly all the demon lords before.

One of Eve’s greatest strengths was their combined power. But flip that around, and it meant all her moves were things Lloyd had already beaten or watched his companions use.

And on top of that—Eve hadn’t done much fighting herself.

No matter how much she was physically capable of, no matter how hard she tried to be unpredictable—she was an amateur. She’d devoted no time to fighting or learning the techniques it required.

Lloyd had her beat on combat experience. Really, her previous victories had all been a combination of surprise skills and her forked tongue.

But her wiles didn’t work on Lloyd, and he’d already overcome all her moves—so her disadvantage was perhaps inevitable.

The finishing touch—Lloyd’s training—had been almost entirely against superior opponents.

His newfound confidence had been acquired by conquering the odds.

That little frame of his was radiating strength, the fortitude to stand his ground.

Eve had been alive for centuries, but she’d gained her powers less than a day ago.

No matter how great the power, there was a huge gulf between someone just starting to wield it and someone who’d spent the bulk of their life overcoming their own weakness to find it.

That left Eve *fragile*. Deep down, she was a con artist. Deceit was her main weapon, and that weapon didn’t work on him. All that was left was her unvarnished pride.

For the first time in her life, Eve felt helpless.

Maybe she *couldn’t* win.

And that fact made her panic.

“Augh... *Hurk...*”

She was in no state to take the lead.

“I know,” Lloyd said, nodding. “When there’s nothing you can do, you get so flustered, you just shrivel up. Used to happen to me a lot.”

Not wanting to give him any more insights, Eve did her best to act normal. “O-oh? So you’ve overcome that now? Do tell me how.”

But Lloyd’s response hit extra hard. “I just remember all my friends!”

“Huh?”

“I’m not alone. I’ve got friends backing me up, and I want to be there for them. Those feelings always get me going again!”

Lloyd smiled pleasantly.

“Having someone to protect makes you stronger.”

Eve remembered how Rinko had pushed through her injuries.

Thnk!

The memory was apparently so infuriating that Eve smacked herself upside the head, trying to physically knock it out of her mind.

“Goddammit...”

She cracked her neck, glaring at Lloyd.

“I don’t want this world getting messed up,” he said. “I want to protect my friends and the world we live in. That’s why I fight. Nothing more, nothing less. I bet your reason for fighting is awfully shallow. Tell me—why do *you* fight?”

“I just wanna have fun!”

Lloyd was in full therapist mode now. “Really?” he asked. “You don’t seem to be having any fun right now.”

Oblivious as ever, he dug right to the crux of the matter.

Mind games were Eve’s forte, and he was trouncing her. Which left her flailing.

“Any sports team puts themselves through the wringer before the big event! That’s all this is,” she said.

“If you’re so sure of that, how come you’re not attacking? I’m wide open here.”

That made her snap. “Shut up!” she roared. “You don’t—you can’t understand the suffering of someone who’s got everything and can do everything!”

It was hardly a fair retort, but Lloyd didn’t bat an eye.

“You were always kinda lonely, right?”

“Was not! Damn kid...!”

“I know better! There’s no real difference between can and can’t! If you’re too good at everything for anyone else to keep up, then I’ll keep up! That’ll end your suffering!”

“You’re *hardly* a match for me! I admire your nerve if nothing else, village wimp!”

Eve’s bellowing filled the Last Dungeon’s depths.

Her fury spilled over, and she threw every power she had at Lloyd, trying to crush him.

Lloyd raised his handkerchief.

“Here goes.”

Their eyes met. Sparks flew. And—

Bam! Ba-bam!

Both shot forward and met in a violent clash.

“Gah!”

That grunt came from Lloyd.

Eve’s fist had dug into his ribs.

“Lloyd!”

“Lloyd?!”

He was down on one knee.

Eve had finally scored, and she looked quite smug about it. “How’s that? No tricks at all! Just a straight punch, all my power behind it! I may have slipped up and let myself get hurt, but if I apply all the demon lord powers—oh?”

The smug look drained away as realization dawned.

Clnk. The golem rocks fell from her arm.

Flop. The writhing roots rotted away.

Swsh. Abaddon’s wings fell from her back.

“?”

Eve herself had no clue what was happening. She just stared at the palm of her hand.

It was drying out; its gloss and tone were gone.

But this wasn’t her first time seeing this.

This was old age.

Her palm was rapidly turning back into the wrinkled mess she’d so loathed, and she couldn’t bear it.

“Huh? Why?!” she wailed, her voice shaking. “He only brushed me! Where is my super healing? That handkerchief barely touched me! Or...*was* it his handkerchief?”

Her brain caught up, and she realized Lloyd had diligently drawn something on that cloth.

“Was that...a rune?!”

She’d been too far gone—and had totally forgotten all about that.

“Wh-what did you do?! What rune was that?!”

Lloyd got up, clutching his side, and showed her the rune on his handkerchief.

“You can’t mean...”

“Rinko just taught it to me! The rune that cancels immortality.”

Eve staggered backward. “N-no! You’ve gotta be kidding!”

It was a reasonable reaction. Rinko had made it sound like only she knew about it.

“You just learned it?!” Eve wailed. “That’s hardly enough time! There’s no way you could master this rune in less than an hour! This isn’t real! It’s just an illusion!” She wanted that to be true, but her skin was indeed aging in real time. “Fake! Smoke and mirrors! Learning new runes is not that easy!”

“No, it’s true. Rinko *just* taught it to me.”

“Huh?! Then what? You’re a secret rune master?! Please. I ain’t losing to that Gary Stu bullshit!”

Lloyd just quietly shook his head. “I’m no master. This rune is just very similar to one I use all the time. That’s why I learned it so fast.”

“All...the time?” Satan said, looking closer. “Oh! Now I see it. It’s based on the same thing as the *disenchant* rune!”

“Seriously?” Anzu said. “The same thing he used to free the king from Abaddon’s possession and cancel out Dionysos’s curse? The one he uses all the time when he’s cleaning house? Makes sense!”

Anzu started nodding.

Eve’s screech went up another octave. “How does that make *any* sense, Anzy?!”

“It cancels curses and spells. And to Rinko—immortality *was* a curse.”

Rinko had created this rune to free herself from the fate of not aging with her beloved, of seeing her child die before her. What was that but a curse?

There was nothing odd about the similarity to a *disenchant* rune. They served similar functions.

“Freedom from immortality’s curse... Lab Chief Rinko’s wish was in line with the disenchantment rune Alka had previously developed.”

“And Lloyd happened to learn that rune to help clean. That’s why we call him a miracle.”

Meanwhile, Eve was left aghast. And furious.

“I don’t think it’s a curse! No, no! That’s not my curse, mine is—”

She could do anything, acquire anything. She had power and fame, but she was never close to anyone.

“?!”

A glimpse of her old self had brought out the truth.

Her rapidly advancing age was addling her mind, making her life flash before her eyes.

But the words that had just left her mouth made her stop and think.

When she’d still been in Asako’s body—

That dreaming girl had seen the Azami girls having a pajama party, and she’d been envious. Eve had dismissed that feeling.

But had she actually shared that desire? Perhaps her impulsive rejection had been because she was a kindred spirit. She’d caught a glimpse of her old self. And— “Oh, right. That’s *why* I was able to possess her.”

It was all clear to her now.

Because they’d both shared the same dream, their minds had been able to break the laws of nature and share a body.

Her dream had never come true—and she’d rationalized it by saying she’d abandoned it for the bigger picture. She’d averted her eyes from the pain.

And immortality had made that permanent.

The rationalization was the only thing getting her through life, but it had warped her personality—what was that but a curse?

Somewhere inside, she’d always known it was. And the proof was in the aging of her body.

At last, she admitted it. She watched as the wrinkles carved themselves into her hand, and she felt a weight falling off her shoulders.

“.....”

The *anti-immortality* rune glittered.

Lloyd never took his eyes off Eve. They were shining, like the first ray of light at the end of a long night. As warm as sunlight itself.

Eve smiled and sat down on the floor, legs crossed. Like a soccer player collapsing to the field the moment the final whistle blows. Like the kind of girl who cares more about running her heart out rather than worrying about the final score.

“Enough. I’m done.” Eve waved a hand, acknowledging the loss.

Lloyd didn’t relax yet. He knew she was a liar, and he wasn’t letting his guard down easily.

She held out her hand. “See?” she said. “Look how powerful it is. That rune lifted the curse.” She managed a wistful smile. “All this time, I’ve been forcing myself in a body that wasn’t my own. I was little more than a ghost, but I clung to this world anyway. I can feel the strength escaping now, like so much hot air.”

“.....”

Lloyd said nothing, and Eve kept talking.

“I imagine canceling immortality wouldn’t ordinarily age you instantly like this. Maybe it’s because this isn’t my body? It’s being dragged up to my real age. I certainly can’t fight anymore.”

She meant every word.

Sensing she’d worked through something, Lloyd finally put his hands down.

“Okay.”

That was all he said.

This cross-world villainess had trashed his brother—yet now that it was over, he had nothing to say.

He just stood there, watching her age.

“Yeah,” she said with a feeble smile. “You never had much of a grudge against me. You barely knew who I was.”

There was a hint of spite in the words.

“That’s why I admitted my loss. You may not mean to, but you run right on in and unravel the things that are all tangled up in people’s hearts. That’s what’s good about you.”



Her gaze drifted to Satan and Anzu.

“Fill him in, will you? He needs to know just how great this accomplishment is. I can’t rest easy until that’s done.”

“We will,” Satan said.

Eve’s weathered lips formed another smile.

“Can I really trust a man who spent all night in the cabarets and rolled into work without a wink of sleep?”

“Urp.”

That silenced Satan. His old boss knew all his foibles and could easily turn the screws.

Eve smiled at the ground, talking to no one in particular.

“And do take care. A life too fulfilling is a poison all its own. Once it gets to you, you’ll give in to the pleasures and spend all your time on things that don’t matter. You’ll wind yourself all up until you have no friends and nothing you really want to do. Just rationalizations for your own actions. But—”

Having uttered the moral of the story, she turned to Anzu.

“But be friendly with them anyway, Anzy. I went too far; it’s too late for me. I wish I’d found someone like you sooner—that’s my one regret.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re simplistic, none too bright, and weirdly bashful, but nothing you did was calculated, and it never ceased to entertain me.”

“Yo, shit talking me on your deathbed?!” Anzu had tried to be stoic about this, but Eve kept poking until she had to snap back.

“See? Adorable,” Eve said, mustering a chuckle. “If we’d met earlier, a few centuries back... Let’s visit the hot springs again. This time I won’t be in a mascot costume.”

Her mind seemed to be drifting in and out now. Scenes were flashing before her eyes. And— “——”

She drifted into slumber.

As peaceful as an old lady drifting off in the sun at a windowsill.

Anzu moved over to her, speaking softly.

“I’m sure she was always putting on a brave face. She went through a whole life without anyone she could really trust, then became immortal before she’d faced the shields she’d built around her mind.”

“Her heart is long since broken, and without death—she went too far.”

“And then once she knew it was over, she could finally admit it and do what she should have done in the first place.”

“She was exhausted from an eternal life making excuses for why she was so lonely.”

Satan put his hands together. “Rest in peace. Lloyd, can you yank the Holy Sword out for us?”

“Oh, sure!”

He grabbed the handle and pulled—and the liquid blade re-formed.

“Well done. Okay, everything’s wrapped up here, but there’s still a ton of work to do.”

Anzu was a ruler herself and already focusing on the politics. They had to deal with the Profen Kingdom now and mop up everywhere else.

“It’ll work out,” Satan said with conviction, lending her a shoulder. “I mean, this boy can turn any bad end into a happy one.”

“Too true. Even gave Eve a moment of peace.”

Anzu turned her smile toward the old woman’s prone form, like she was looking at an old friend.

In Kunlun village...

The flames of war raged on, the land scarred after the slaughter.

The pastoral landscape was now a war zone. Shambling rabbit costumes were destroying everything, held back only by Sou and the Azami forces.

“Hmm,” Sou growled. “We’re losing ground. Mm?”

Mid-sentence, all the rabbit costumes began to writhe—and vanished without a trace.

Eve had made them with runes, so this could mean only one thing.

“Lloyd stopped her.”

“No signs of any demon lords escaping. It’s over,” Riho said, with a sigh of relief.

“Inevitable!” Selen declared. “My future husband was on the job!”

“.....Not happening, not ever happening... Issue a correction...”

Selen wheeled around to accost Phyllo.

“Grrr! Sir Lloyd and my possibilities are infinite! Eternal! Through the cycle of reincarnation—”

She was even more wound up than she’d been in the heat of battle.

“Now, now, future husbands aside—” Marie said.

“What now, Marie?”

“Lloyd’s become a hero. They’ll sing about him for ages to come.”

She looked a little sad—like he’d gone somewhere far away.

“Don’t be absurd!” Selen snapped. “Sir Lloyd’s accomplished all of this without even noticing! Becoming a hero will hardly change him in any meaningful way.”

She was so firm on this point, both Riho and Phyllo reeled.

“.....I envy her.”

“Yeah, gotta give her this one.”

Even a broken clock is right twice a day.

Sou joined them here, dusting his hands and gleefully pointing the camera to capture Lloyd’s return.

“Nothing will ever change his core. Lloyd can do anything for his friends, for

other people—unlike me, being a hero will never be a prison for him. Thankfully the lens isn't broken."

"Exactly," Merthophan said, tugging at his loincloth. "He was a bit weak-willed, but he was always moving forward, from the moment we met. Just like how I'm spreading appreciation for traditional farming attire!"

That was an unfortunate comparison.

The girls all thought Merthophan had changed too much, but they decided this wasn't the time to argue with him.

"Mwa-ha-ha! But Lloyd has filled out! His hamstrings have far more volume than when I first met the lad!" Nexamic said, focusing on the thing you'd expect him to focus on.

"Your perspective lacks elegance, Nexamic," Renge scolded. "But it is true you'd hardly recognize him."

"Lloyd certainly changed me," Allan mumbled next to her. "Lying to yourself and being something you're not isn't courage. Real courage means admitting your weakness and striving to be the man you want to be!"

"Allan..."

"To that end, Renge—I'm not used to women, and this marriage thing is still a lot for me. But I want to summon my own courage, take it one step at a time, and be a good husband."

"A-Allan!"

Maybe this marriage *would* work out.

"Good on ya," Mena teased. "Big difference from when that whole Dragon Slayer thing left your head spinning. Man, I had my narrator voice ready and everything—'Their happiness proved short-lived.' But guess I can't do that now!"

"M-Mena..."

"That aside, Lloyd beating me turned out to be a pretty good memory. He came right at me, and it felt pretty good to lose like that. He helped me a lot later on, and...yeah. I'm grateful."

He'd helped with Phyllo and their parents.

".....He helped clear my mind. Even if he'd been weak, I'd have respected him."

"Mwa-ha-ha! That's when your hand blades shaved my clothes away, yes?"

".....Phrasing."

Peace was restored.

The hero was coming back, a pleasant smile on his face as if he'd just been out running errands. No trace of the feat he'd accomplished.

"Thanks for waiting! I stopped Eve."

He was just as modest as ever, but he'd just saved the world.

Here he was, waving like any other day—and that brought a smile to everyone.

Chapter 3

Happy Ending: No Suppositions Required

Two years had passed since that fateful day.

I, Asako Ishikura, was now living in Azami with my father—Jin Ishikura, aka Vritra.

I woke up after everything was over, and my father filled me in.

It was all rather hard to believe—

Yet somehow, I wasn't surprised.

I'd been watching the whole time, although that was through the eyes of President Eva/Eve Profen, who'd taken control of my body.

My conscious mind was asleep the whole time, so it's like...my body remembered for me? Like how you don't remember things that happened when you were a kid, but when someone tells the story, you go, "Oh yeah. That feels right."

Anyway, I quickly caught on to the whole fantasy world thing, and I took a job in the Azami castle to get myself back up to speed.

You gotta work to eat—well, that was just my excuse. Secretly, I wanted to be close to *him*.

But not too close, or Azami's scariest stalker would manifest out of nowhere and give me the stink eye. Best to employ some moderation.

I'm not that worried, though. Just a matter of what happens first: Do I learn to control my demon lord powers, or does she get arrested and thrown in Hell's Lock?

"But she's technically an Azami City Guard...like how law enforcement used to recruit potentially dangerous individuals back in my old world?"

I grumbled, but I was also getting ready to push my luck.

Then—

“You’re up, Asako?”

That deep voice made me flinch.

“Dad! I said knock!” I snapped, not hiding my frustration.

The key here was to frown just a smidgen. That always made him squirm.

“Oops, sorry. You’ll receive an apology in writing!”

A former scientist, my father was now the snake demon lord—Vritra. He was now working as an aide to Rinko, the queen of Azami.

He’d worked hard to negotiate peace during the civil war in the former Jiou Empire—now a kingdom—and settle the unrest in Profen. Now he was researching how to employ runes to improve everyone’s lives.

Back in our world, he’d been such a workaholic, it had put a strain on our relationship, but these days, we get along great.

...My mother in heaven would roll her eyes if she found out that it had taken us centuries.

“Plans for the day?” my father asked over breakfast. “You’re dressed to go out...”

With my mouth full of toast lathered in tomato dipping sauce, I said, “Mm-hmm.”

“Hey, swallow first.”

“*Gulp.* I told you! Research.” I washed the toast down with some coffee.

“You’re still working on that?” he said, scratching his cheek. His tone suggested I shouldn’t be.

“You bet!” I said, indignant. “I’m barely getting started!”

“You’ve been saying that for a year now. Shouldn’t you have something to show for it?”

“I’m immortal. A year is nothing.”

“Too much time can rob us of our sense of urgency,” my father scolded. Guess he had strong feelings on this subject. “A man named Seta always got same-day jobs in, but if I gave him a week, they’d never materialize.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. I’m outta here!”

“H-hey! Don’t forget our afternoon plans.”

“Never! Bye!”

As I left, I heard him mutter, “Writing novels... You’ve gotta finish a draft at least...”

His voice was just quiet enough, I wasn’t sure if he meant for me to hear...but it was still obnoxious!

I spun around and leaned back in the doorway.

“I know being a perfectionist is delaying the completion, but it’s worth the effort!”

“Aren’t you doing too much research a bit too often? Losing track of your real goal?”

“Firsthand accounts are vital!”

And the evidence of my own eyes, too.

Nothing’s better than being there myself in person. There’s nothing wrong with looking at scenic footage online, but the videographer’s POV is always present.

And moving a finger just enough to click is never as good as walking there and *looking*, turning your head to whatever angle you like, inhaling the scents, feeling the air on your skin. Even the sounds are far more real than any 5.1 surround system.

And paying your own way adds to the experience, too. You don’t want to waste that, right? Or is that just me?

But my father just doesn’t get the pain of creation.

“You’ve never finished a draft, but you’ve got a title! And it’s unnecessarily long and filled with game jargon—who’s going to understand that? Make it

short!”

“I’ll be publishing it in our old world, so it’s fine. Long titles are all the rage back there!”

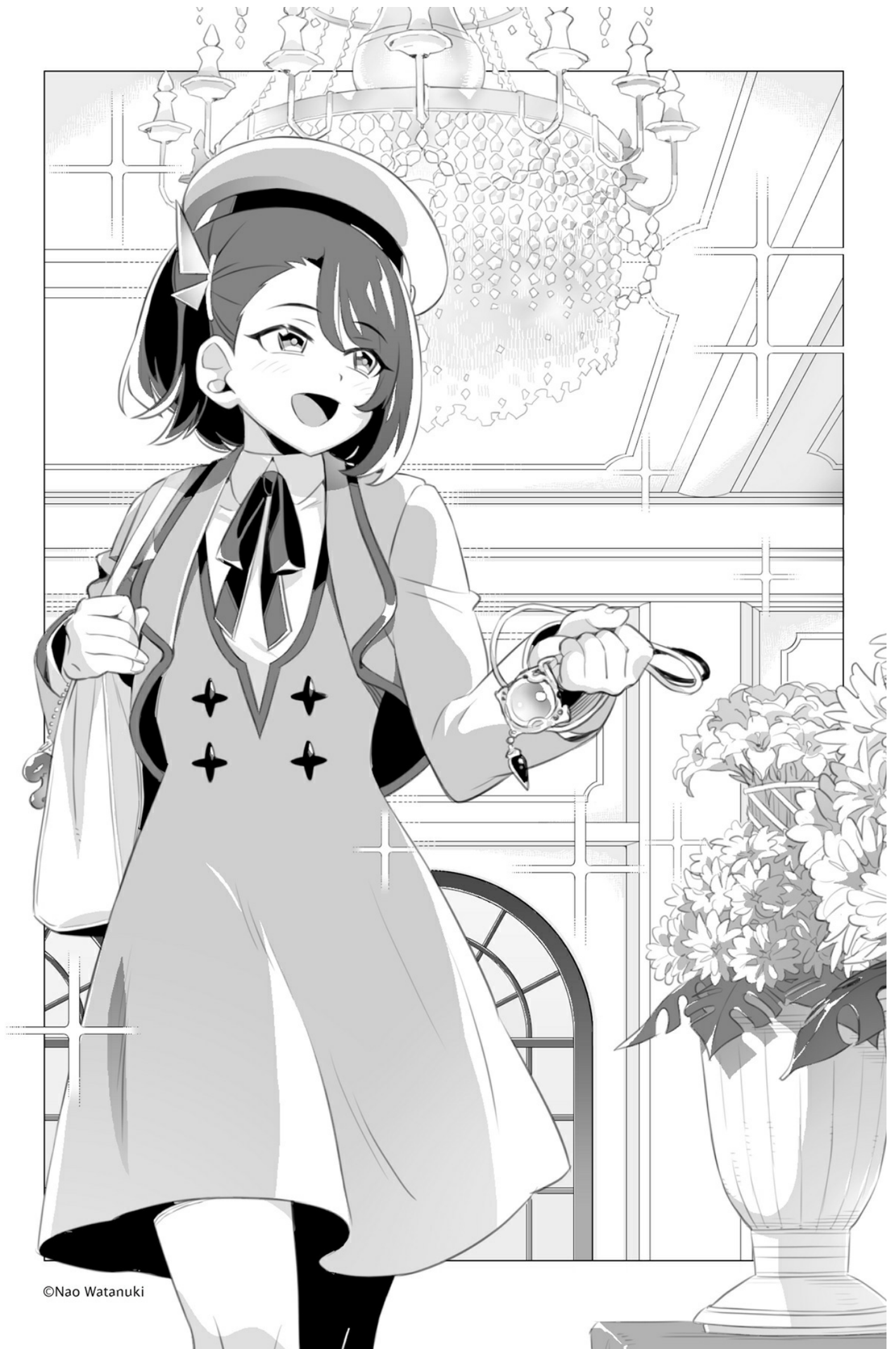
“It’s still unintelligible! And centuries have passed back there; the trends are —”

“Argh! I’m leaving!”

Pouting a bit, I pulled a crystal from my pocket and used the *teleportation* rune that Akizuki—Alka—had taught me to use in order to leave Azami behind.

Psshtt.

And there I was, before the imposing exterior and gorgeous entrance of Hotel Reiyokaku.



It was luxurious enough that a girl like me hesitated to step inside.

With the fancy decor, you knew this place was built for local lords, wealthy merchants, and royalty to do business and confer. Even a single cup of coffee would cost so much, you could easily buy two or three beef bowls instead.

I strode through that fancy-pants foyer with a notebook in my hand. Naturally, I had an appointment; this was my second visit here, so things went smoothly at the counter.

A bellboy appeared and led me from the lobby to the lounge.

“Wish I could have seen *him* working here,” I muttered.

“Yo, Asako!” a hearty voice called.

It belonged to a former Azami royal guard with a shiny head—Coba.

“Been a while,” said the leader of the local lords, Allan’s father—Threonine.

And—

“Glad you’re doing well.”

Another local lord, Selen’s father—Robin.

A certain incident had brought the three of them together, and they now met up once a month. They’d chat about their kids, recent events, the latest deals they’d made—trading information, basically.

So why was I here? To inquire further about the incident in question.

“Thanks for having me. You’re sure you don’t mind me prying further?”

“Not at all! Happy to share Lloyd’s exploits. How far did we get?”

“To where my fool of a son passed out in the sauna.”

“I remember that. He’d just overheated, but you were sure it was a treant...”

They began eagerly sharing.

“That’s when Threonine’s secretary went wild. Everyone was in a panic.”

I was scribbling in my notebook.

Eventually, Threonine glanced at the clock. “Hmm, it’s about that time.”

“Oh? Got somewhere to be?” Robin asked.

“Not really.” Threonine chuckled. “The secretary in question is due to join us shortly— Ah.”

“Speak of the devil.”

As Threonine stroked his 'stache, an old man entered the lounge.

“Oh dear, sorry to keep you waiting, sir. Coba, Robin—oh, and might you be Asako?”

Threonine's former secretary, Minox, bowed repeatedly on his way over.

Why “former”? Well, Minox got possessed by the treant demon lord, went a little nuts, and trashed the hotel before Lloyd beat him.

After that, he left the secretarial line, serving time in Hell's Lock. I had not expected him to appear here, and I bowed my head.

“It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Asako Ishikura.”

“Oh, I've heard all about you. My name's Minox, former secretary to Lord Threonine, but these days...”

He handed me a card. It said, HELL'S LOCK, ASSOCIATE WARDEN.

“Associate warden?”

“Yes, the incident here resulted in my incarceration, but...one thing led to another, and now I've taken a job there.”

Apparently, he'd helped stop Warden Urgd's rampage with Lloyd and the other prisoners while Hell's Lock was still doing human experiments.

That success and his own character had led the new warden to offer him a job, putting his experience as an inmate to use in helping rehabilitate the current crop of prisoners.

“I would have happily taken you back as my secretary. That offer still stands!”

“You honor me, sir! Ta-ha-ha!” Minox seemed tickled pink by Threonine's warm words.

Robin adjusted his glasses, adding to the praise.

“I’ve heard you’re turning criminals into productive members of society. Impressive work, indeed. It can’t be easy working out there with some of the toughest cases around.”

“Not at all. No matter how tough they are, share a few of Lloyd’s exploits and they soon fall in line.”

He gave another small laugh. He wasn’t nearly as servile as the rumors suggested—he just seemed *nice*. Perhaps his new job had helped him, too.

“Robin,” Coba said, curious. “You sure know a lot about Hell’s Lock.”

Robin took a long time to answer that. “.....Uh, well, my daughter... might have to avail herself of those facilities, so...I thought it prudent to inform myself. You know, one of those late-night fears.”

“““Ohh...”””

Robin’s daughter might be part of the Azami City Guard, but she was also on their blacklist as the city’s scariest stalker. She was likely hired so they could keep a close eye on her.

He phrased the idea like it was a remote possibility, but clearly he was pretty sure she’d wind up in Minox’s care.

“Minox,” he said, bowing his head. “As associate warden, if my daughter winds up in your care, I hope you’ll provide her a cell with some sunlight.”

“Oh, no. I’m afraid I know little about women’s prisons.”

Not many people attempted to place reservations on prison cells...but no one else here dared breathe a word.

“How you doing on time, Asako?” Threonine said.

“Oh, good point,” I said, getting up.

“More interviews?” Coba asked. “You certainly are working hard.”

Putting my notebook away, I nodded.

“Yes, I’m off to the Ascorbic Domain next.”

Threonine smiled and stroked his ‘stache. “Ah, Allan and Renge are over there. Say hi for me.”

“Got it. They’re still home for the delivery?”

“Yes. Tell them photos aren’t enough, and we’re eager to meet the child in person. My wife has spoken of little else.”

Clearly, they were going to be doting grandparents.

“Will do. Well...”

“So to reserve this cell... How large a donation...?”

“I’d say it’s best to prevent crimes from taking place at all.”

Minox was as lost as Robin was desperate. I hovered, unsure if I should interrupt, but Coda waved me off.

“Go,” he said. “They’ll be at this awhile.”

I bowed quietly and teleported away—

Pssht.

—to the Ascorbic Domain.

Bamboo forests and snow-capped peaks, like the landscapes depicted in ink wash paintings. No matter how many times I visit, I have to stop and stare.

This is the holy land of training, and the clans here are constantly competing. It’s become quite a tourist attraction.

I was visiting the manor of the leader of the sword clan’s domain.

A woman in training garb led me inside.

The screens opened, and the room smelled of plum blossoms and tatami.

Lady Anzu sat cross-legged on a raised section.

“Been far too long, Asako,” she said, ever the generous soul.

I sat down on my knees, and she said, “Make yourself comfortable.”

“Thank you,” I said, adjusting to a more comfortable position.

“How are you doing?”

“Much better. Hard at work learning to control the power itself.”

“Always good to train regularly.” Anzu grinned. “Always keep an eye on your

physical needs.”

Exactly the sort of advice you *would* hear in this place. She didn’t rule the domain for nothing.

“Yes, I’ll do my— Oh?”

I’d spotted a futon through the screens in back.

“She’s sleeping in here?”

“Yeah, it’s plum season. Figured she could smell them even with her eyes closed.”

There was an old lady slumbering there—President Eva/Eve Profen.

She’d remained fast asleep since the day she had rapidly aged; unable to leave her be, Anzu was taking care of her.

“...After her last words, I couldn’t bring myself to cut her loose.”

Her last words— She’d asked Anzu to be kind to people like her. And Anzu had taken that to heart.

“What’s that smile for?”

“Oh, nothing.”

Eve had spent a lot of time with Anzu in my body; I might not remember it, but I knew just how warm her heart was. I couldn’t help smiling.

And I knew Eve was genuinely grateful to her.

Anzu scratched her head. “I’m talking to Rinko and Chief Alka about what we do with her long term. Gonna let her rest until we make up our minds...but that ain’t why you’re here, is it?”

“No. I’m still chasing Lloyd’s miracles.” I took out my notebook to start the interview.

“Anzu!” someone shouted. “You ain’t fooling me! I know yer in there!”

“Pipe down!” Anzu scowled, visibly tired already.

I turned to find Renge and Allan heading in.

“Heya, Anzy! Oh? How ya been, Asako?”

“It’s been a while, Renge.”

“Oh, Asako! You’re visiting?”

“I sure am, Allan. And—” I stood up to get a better look at the baby in Renge’s arms.

“.....Goo?” A plump-cheeked baby gave me a look of wonder.

This was Allan and Renge’s child—Leila.

“She’s so cute! How long’s it been?”

“Three months,” Anzu answered for them.

“Oh?” Renge raised a brow. “You seem to know a lot about Leila.”

“Yeah, ’cause you bring her over every day.”

Allan bobbed his head. “Sorry! But our daughter loves you, Anzu.”

“Goo...”

“And that’s why I can’t say no! There, there.” Anzu was making faces.

Renge was just *that* pleased by this and constantly coming to show off her daughter...but this just made Anzu go full auntie mode.

“Asako, are you here doing interviews?”

“Yes. I’m visiting Anzu and fleshing out what Lloyd did here. Oh, and Threonine said they’re eager to meet their grandkid. Photos aren’t enough!”

“Dads!” Anzu said, shaking her head.

“Ha-ha-ha, tell ’em it won’t be much longer.”

Surtr popped his turtle head over Allan’s brow.

“Whoops, nodded off there... Yo, Asako! Whazzzup?”

“Tony... Oh, Surtr, right? Glad you’re doing well.”

“Same to you. I knew you when you were just a sickly little thing! It brings a tear to my eye.”



Surtr was indeed tearing up, although crying in this body made him look like a sea turtle laying eggs.

Tony had once been a scientist and was now the demon lord of fire—Surtr. He was a good partner for Allan, and they worked together in the Azami army.

“Feast your eyes, Asako. Allan actually made a baby! She’s got his eyes.”

“Ah-ha-ha... You sound like a proud uncle, Surtr.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Don’t mind calling her my niece.”

Renge gave the turtle demon lord a glare. “Surtr, I hope you’re disinfecting those hands before you touch our child.”

“Uh, right.”

“Turtle shells are covered in germs! Small children run fevers so easily. Keep that shell dry and sterile.”

“Of course...”

No demon lord stood a chance against a mom.

Once that was settled, Renge took a sip—not of her usual black tea, but of noncaffeinated *houjicha*. She was kicking back here...in Anzu’s house.

Sipping her homemade tea, Renge shot me a smile.

“Ain’t you here for some of them interviews, Asako?”

“Yes, I am.”

“You ain’t gonna get much worth hearing outta Anzu. Lemme bend yer ear, too! I can talk the whole night through ’bout how my hubby and I met and what a mess poor Anzu was back then.”

“I wasn’t a mess. I did my leader thing!”

Anzu pouted, which made Leila laugh.

“That wasn’t supposed to be a silly face!”

With everyone settled in, I asked Renge a direct question. “Um, you’ve been speaking with your accent this whole time. What changed? Before, it only came out when you were upset, and you seemed to think it wasn’t elegant.”

“Yeah, I dropped that the moment I had the kid. Ain’t much point fakin’ it for a baby. Right?”

Allan nodded.

“Lloyd taught me that appearances will never matter as much as what’s inside. And I want to pass that lesson on to my children and future graduating classes.”

As he realized what he was saying, a bashful smile played about his lips.

“So, Asako—go right ahead and tell everyone what a screwup I was.”

“Got it! I’ll spill all the beans!” I said cheerily.

“Uh...,” he ventured. “You can smooth out a few wrinkles...”

“Don’t back down now, doofus! Asako, lay all my hubby’s tomfoolery out there.”

He shot her a teary-eyed look, but Renge, Anzu, Surtr, and Leila all laughed merrily.

“Leila sure laughs a lot these days!” Surtr said. “They weren’t kidding about three months being when all those sleepless nights start paying off.”

He gave the happy couple an envious look.

“If only I could find someone...”

“If I see any nice turtles, I’ll put in a word,” I said.

“Turtles, huh?” Surtr winced. “I do plan to get my human body back one day. Even if the whole pet thing does seem to be working in my favor... All these pretty ladies like to rub my head.”

As long as Surtr was snapping up the short-term benefits, he’d always be a turtle.

Anzu shot him a stern look. “Just don’t do what Eve did and get them to make you a dapper bod so you can score.”

“True...love stories oughtta be *fair*. But I used to be so chubby... *Argh...*”

We kept talking, and the time just flew by.

I rose to my feet, bowing. "Sorry, I've gotta be on my way."

"So soon? Okay, sweetie, wave to the nice lady!"

"Goo-gaa!"

I smiled back at Leila.

"Where to next, Asako?" Anzu asked.

"Rokujou! What with everything this afternoon, I want to get there early."

"Oh, I heard about that. Tell everyone hi for me! I'll be there myself next time," Allan said.

"Uh, sorry, Asako," Anzu said. "But, uh..."

"Yes?"

"Can you tell Satan I'd like to see him again? I still ain't thanked him for last time, so I'd like to have him over for dinner."

Taking the hint, I shot her a big smile and nodded.

Renge didn't miss the exchange and grinned. "Anzuuu...is it finally your time? Tell me more."

"Sh-shut up! Asako! See ya."

Anzu waved and rushed out of there, and I teleported off to Rokujou.

Pssst.

I was there instantly.

The Kingdom of Sorcery was famed for its magic stone mines and its thriving entertainment business/film industry. Economically, it was second only to Azami itself.

The people here were firm believers in profit, so in four or five more years, they'd likely have created some entirely different new big thing. Fingers crossed it would be bubble tea.

King Sardin was fanning the flames, helping their magic industry get back up to speed. "We bring the magic on-and off-screen! Bwa-ha-ha!" he'd said with his customary overbearing presence.

But that goofy streak made him lovable, too. Trusted by his citizens, he'd managed to star in several films alongside his royal duties. You had to respect the work ethic.

What kept him going? Family.

He had the stamina to play the clown year-round for his wife and daughters—That was King Sardin in a nutshell.

"Mm! Greetings, Asako! It's your dazzling Sardin!" He grinned.

The king himself came to the castle gates to welcome me. *Don't you have a million other things on your plate? Even the guards look appalled.*

"It's been too long, King Sardin."

"Spare me the formalities, Asako. This is us talking! Or does my smile blind you? Let's head inside."

This was all a performance. Deep down, he was a very serious man, and I still struggled to reconcile the two.

The king led me into a parlor.

His wife and bodyguard, Ubi, was waiting for us there.

"Sup, you been good?" I asked.

"Ha-ha-ha! I am *always* good, dear!"

"Not you."

I ignored Sardin's attempt to instigate a comedy routine, bowing to Ubi.

"It's been too long, Ubi. I'm doing very well, and I see you're keeping yourself young."

"She is!" Sardin pounced. "That's why I love her so! The other day she was chugging wine—"

Snap.

"Don't share that."

"Hoof!"

His neck was bent at a very wrong angle. Even owls can't do that!

“Such a violent way of covering an embarrassing moment.”

“Ha-ha-ha! She’s raised it to an art form!” Accustomed to this, King Sardin simply put his head back right and waved me to the couch. *I think making short work of a neck injury is its own kind of art.*

“This the interview thing? Is it going well?” Ubi asked.

“Yes.” I nodded. “I want to get a record of everything written down, so I’m doing my homework in every country.”

“Lovely,” King Sardin said, beaming. “I’ve heard! We’ve even discussed the potential of doing a movie tie-in. Once you’re ready to launch the media blitz, you’ll have the full support of Rokujou.”

“I’ll be sure to tell my producer.”

At this point, a very pretty girl came in.

“Sup, Asako!”

Mena made those sharp eyes work for her. Today she wasn’t dressed down or in her Azami uniform but in a frilly gown. It took my breath away.

“W-wow, Mena.”

Mena Quinone.

A former mercenary, she was actually King Sardin and Ubi’s child—and next in line for the Rokujou throne. Once the crisis was over, she’d left the Azami royal guard and gone full-time princess. She was currently buried in a mountain of educational materials.

“You’re a vision, Mena. Really growing into this princess thing.”

She flopped down on the couch, sighing. “I can make a show of it, but therein lies the rub.”

“You’re a famous actress, too! You can play any part.”

“It’s killing my shoulders! I miss kicking back with Phyllo and Choline.” She leaned forward, raising an eyebrow at me. “So this novel of yours... It’s gonna cover my acting career?”

“Of course! How can I leave a lovely story like that out? Disguising yourself as

a movie star to track down your missing mother, right under your own father's nose! And then Lloyd got involved—that alone makes it a must!"

The more forceful I got, the harder she cringed.

"I never wanted fame! Having this all made public knowledge is just excruciating."

But King Sardin beamed proudly. "Don't be absurd, my darling daughter! Your chance to make them all fall in love with you! I'm even working on a script for a film with you as the sole star!"

"You are?!"

"Believe it! We're the movie magic land! Written and directed by Sardin himself! Lights by Allan probably!"

He was shoring up the specifics, and even Ubi was on board.

"Nice. We could also rope Lloyd in and make it a love story?"

"Mom! Not you, too!"

This conversation was getting out of hand, so I jumped in.

"That aside, I do have news!"

They turned toward me.

King Sardin shook his head, looking crestfallen.

"Ha-ha-ha! Feelings for me? I'm afraid I'm happily married—"

I jumped in before his neck bent again.

"About Amadine."

".....Oh. *Him.*"

Amadine Oxo.

He'd been a successful movie star while secretly controlling Roukjou through his underworld connections. He was the boss of the Rising Blue Dragon's mafia, and King Sardin's friend.

I filled them in on how he'd helped Lloyd defeat the evil warden at Hell's Lock.

“That’s what Minox said. He and Zalko—a thief active in Azami—are still incarcerated.”

“Ah.”

“But he no longer lusts for power. Both of them are hard at work paving roads in the penal labor program. Allegedly he’s even voiced regret for his actions here.”

King Sardin sighed.

“I’ve heard he’s serving his time diligently. Ever since the warden incident, he’s stopped asking to be pardoned and has learned to love an honest day’s work. He regrets not being born under better circumstances.”

He paused, then looked up at me.

“Tell him to apologize to my face. I’ll consider paying a visit.”

“Oh?” Ubi said.

“If that helps improve his mindset.” Sardin shrugged. Very generous of him.

“Okay, I’ll tell him.”

“Welp,” Mena said. Realizing this subject had lowered the mood a little, her voice got a bit too bright. “How’s the novel going, Asako? Tell us everything!”

She was like a classmate trying to get a peek at someone else’s report card, and that helped ease the tension.

“Still working on the plot—or the outline. So much happened. It’s a lot to process!”

Ubi gave me a rare smile. “Then there’s still time to flesh out the Nat/Lloyd pairing! Make it a spicy one!”

“I approve! He’d make a great future king of Rokujou!” the current king said, upping the stakes dramatically.

I was vehemently against this.

“I’m afraid I must refuse. This volume is intended to serve as an account of historical fact.”

“My, my.”

I might have been exaggerating a bit, but Ubi knew I meant business and shrugged.

“Nonfiction, hmm? We’ve got a Rokujou native who specializes in nonfiction books. That may speed up the completion.”

But this advice just made Mena frown. “Mm, I’m gonna say no. It’d be at least sixty percent bragging. Less a historical account than self-mythologizing.”

“True.”

Mena and I exchanged a chuckle, and I gathered up my things.

“Leaving so soon?”

“Yes. I want to visit Profen and Jiou and be back in Azami this afternoon.”

“This afternoon...? Ah, I suppose it’s that time. Would have liked to be there with Choline... Shame I can’t just teleport like you do, Asako.”

“I can teach you how. It’s pretty simple.”

“Ah-ha-ha. It does sound more fun than being a Rokujou princess.”

I bowed and left Rokujou behind—

Psssht.

—and arrived in Profen.

It’s been two years since Eve’s fall, and this is not a country I have fond memories of.

I may have been possessed, but I spent years here, ruling in a bunny costume and turning citizens into accomplices, only to betray them. Those weren’t *my* actions, but they left me with a pang of guilt nonetheless.

Eve... Perhaps somewhere deep in her heart, she *did* have affection for the country she’d founded.

Immigration proceedings here were notoriously stringent, but since I could just warp inside, I headed right for the Profen palace.

My body remembered the way, and I made it to the conference room without

getting lost.

My father's rampage had half demolished it, but it had long since been rebuilt. The new king had likely worked very hard, but he was not alone.

The conference room was even nicer than before. I took a seat and waited.

Not long after...

"Oh, fancy meeting you here."

Of all people, Micona had to be the one to walk in.

She'd long dreamed of becoming a diplomat, and she was currently bouncing between Azami, Profen, and Jiou in the process of building friendly ties.

"Here for work, Micona?"

"Yes, a diplomatic mission. I'm off to Jiou next, won't be in Azami for a while yet."

"Sounds rough. I can just teleport, which does make it easy."

Micona smiled, shaking her head. "It's not that bad. My demon lord powers give me flight—but I do sort of have to avoid getting spotted."

She certainly made great use of those post-congenital powers. I made a face, but she wasn't paying attention.

"Nothing like jobs only *I* can do." She grinned. "I've got a need to rise through the ranks."

"Do you?"

She chuckled. "The king of Azami is married again—to Marie's mom, Rinko. That makes Marie a princess! I've gotta get promoted to keep up."

"Ah. Ha-ha-ha."

My laugh was rather hollow. She and Lloyd were pretty much the only people who remained blissfully unaware that Marie had always been royalty.

It was one of the few things she and Lloyd had in common. I actually found it rather adorable.

At that point, someone else came in.

“Micona, Asako!”

“Mm? Alka!” Micona cried.

Alka was wearing her usual white robes and black ponytails.

Micona ran over and gave her a high five. They hung out a lot; I guess they were pretty close. Riho said they had equally dirty minds.

This was beside the point, but Micona’s social circles were quite wide. She knew so many people, from weirdos—er, big names like Chief Alka and Selen—to Renge, Mena, and Rol. She hadn’t become a diplomat by chance. As long as Lloyd’s not in the picture, she’s quite talented.

“I didn’t know you were *this* close,” I said. Last time I’d seen them, they hadn’t been quite this tight.

“How observant!” Alka said, looking impressed. “You always were, Asako.”

“Praise will get you nowhere, but...can I ask how this happened?” I took the modest approach.

“But of course,” Micona said, clearly pleased I’d asked. Had she been hoping for this? “Add it to your novel, please!”

“Mm, indeed! Thing is, we—”

“We both...”

They overlapped, glanced at each other, and then harmonized.

““Got sidelined in the last war!””

“.....”

Their voices were gloomy indeed.

Oblivious to my look of horror, they began unloading their woes.

“I fought so hard to delay Eve all on my own!”

“I was at the heart of this entire enterprise! But at the end of the whole thing—I didn’t even get to be there! Tragic!”

“Yeah, we couldn’t join the final battle! We never even saw what happened to the last boss! What about closure for *us*?!”

They were basically talking like a culturefest monitor who'd worked themselves to exhaustion getting the festival ready but then missed out on the after-party.

"Huh..." was all I could manage.

They really wanted my seal of approval here, though.

"You get it, Asako! You didn't even wake up till it was all over!"

"Yeah, but escaping Eve's clutches was more on my mind than being left out."

Honestly, I did not want to join their little pity party. Leave me out of this!

I decided to feign sympathy until we moved on. Like grown-ups do.

"I do get it, though. It's like, I have this energy, where do I put it?"

"Exactly, Asako!"

"Wow! We're the sidelined squad!"

Now I was being forced into their huddle as they licked each other's wounds... I definitely didn't want Lloyd to see the look on my face now.

But neither of them noticed.

"And when it was all over, Eve went and offered Lloyd the moral of the story or whatever! I'm honestly impressed that happened without me to instigate it!"

"I should have been there, too! Lloyd Belladonna and I were neck and neck, competing for love! He has no greater rival than Micono Zol! Morals, delivered without me?!"

"A climax without the mentor and rival around? That's just bad writing!"

"Exactly! If I'd been there, I could have played the 'rival finally acknowledges him at the last possible second' card, and it would have been much more satisfying! I had lines written!"

She'd probably have been better off just bringing her own beer.

But before their unproductive griping could go in circles for too much longer, the doors swung open.

"....."

And in came a mysterious individual in a bunny costume.

Whoever it was stomped over to us, flopped down in a chair, and collapsed on the table.

“I’m so tired...”

The voice inside the head definitely sounded exhausted.

Alka responded rather harshly, “You’re giving up that easy? You oughta be used to this by now!”

The rabbit yanked off their head and flung it to the floor.

“Used to *this*?!”

The head bounced a few times.

Inside—was Eug. Her hair was plastered to her head with sweat. Clearly, it was hot in there.

Her face was beet red, although whether that was from heat or fury, no one could tell.

“Excellent work, Dr. Eug,” Micona said, bowing. “Or should I say—King Profen. I see your health is with you.”

That last one sounded like a dig, and her smile betrayed the intent—clearly bearing a grudge against the whole forcibly-given-demon-lord-powers thing.

“Proxy Profen King!” Eug corrected. “Proxy! I’m just pretending to be Eve until things settle down!”

Eve had run this kingdom single-handedly. Now that she was in deep sleep, they’d feared the whole place would come crashing down—and Eug had decided to play the role of Eve Profen, to help atone for her own misdeeds. Only a few knew the truth.

She’d chosen this atonement, but being Eve meant wearing her costume and acting like a goofball while running the place—a delicate balance that left her pretty worn out.

“Arghh...” Eug had her head down again, muttering to no one in particular. Clearly, she was faring even worse than I thought. “I mean, it’s my fault we all

got blown to this world, and I let Eve trick me into believing this *was* our world... and the more I tried to fix that, the worse I made things, so I know this is what I deserve. But this costume is political torture!”

She clearly didn’t think she deserved *that*. The stress must be really getting to her. Even Alka seemed to feel sorry for her.

“Running things, you could handle, but doing it Eve-style would be rough. You gotta dance through the council chambers!”

“And if you start acting normal, they’ll suspect someone else is in the costume! Azami’s coordinating with you until you’ve got a successor, so it’s just till that happens.”

Micona came in with a diplomatic answer, not letting her off the hook until things were stable here.

Eug looked heartbroken. “I’m doing what I can! Step in if anything goes wrong, please.”

“Very good,” Alka said, grinning. “Your inability to ask for help has always held you back. If you’ve overcome that, I don’t mind lending you a bit of my intellect. All this was caused by your attempts to do it all alone!”

No one was better at turning any situation into a show of dominance.

Eug glared at her. “That was almost nice before your arrogance ruined it, Alka! Just you watch! I’ll make Profen so big, we annex Kunlun!”

“Um, I wouldn’t advise declaring war in front of an Azami diplomat...,” Micona said before the rant could continue.

But Eug knew Micona too well to buy that one. She was in full devil’s temptation mode.

“Hypothetically? You help Profen unify the continent; I could arrange a political marriage to Princess Marie. What do you say? Hypothetically?”

“Hypothetically, I’m in.”

Treason was playing out before my eyes.

If they were left to their own devices, this could spiral. Hoping to stop that, I

reminded Eug why I was here.

“Not to interfere with your fun, Eug, but can I get those documents? My producers want to comb through what happened in Profen.”

Eug pulled a sheaf of papers out of her costume.

“Sure, right here. They’re really calling themselves that?”

“Who are we talking about, Asako?” Micona asked.

Alka made a face, answering for me. “The usual suspects. I found the strangest thing to justify their existence.”

That alone cleared things up for Micona.

“They certainly live life on their own terms. I’ve heard they’ve roped one of my former classmates into it.”

“Best we just watch and wish them well. Nothing wrong with hollow souls finding a new purpose in life.”

“Yes, having Marie as my ultimate goal has allowed all of this.”

“You never change, huh,” Eug muttered. I agreed. Who knows where Micona will end up... Maybe it’s best we don’t find out.

But time was passing, so I gathered up the papers and rose from my seat. “I still have to hit up Jiou, Kunlun, and then this afternoon’s event.”

“I’ll be there, welcoming new faces—it’s our duty to point out how flawed they all are.”

“You can abandon that duty, Micona.”

This crowd was no better than my producers.

Eug bobbed her head at me with a wince. “Jiou, huh? Good luck... I really messed that place up.”

“I know,” I said, nodding gravely.

“I hear it’s getting better. But not the way you’d think.”

“No cause for concern,” Micona said, bringing some diplomatic knowledge to bear. “It’s more prosperous than ever. Technically.”

“Oh, with those two around...,” Alka said, looking shifty. “Well, try to rein them in as best you can. I mean, I know they’re totally serious, just...”

I pursed my lips and equivocated. “I’ll do what I can.”

With that, I teleported out of Profen.

Pssht.

This took me to the Jiou Empire...but they’d cast off the shackles of imperialism and were now a democracy. It was the Jiou Kingdom in name only.

The sinister Sou had once replaced their emperor, turning Jiou into an axis of evil, all to make Lloyd look good. The poor things had been forced into serving as foils for heroism. They’d been pretty corrupt to begin with, but Sou, Shouma, and Eug stirring the pot had actually proven the wake-up call they needed.

For years, the empire’s center had lined their pockets while the rest of the people starved, but now— “An Agricultural ☆ Typhoon, flying across the world! Welcome to the Farming Paradise, Jiou!”

“.....”

I had never heard a worse slogan in all my life. It immediately made visitors want to turn around and leave.

This was the new Jiou.

The political revolution was playing second fiddle to the agricultural one.

Jiou central command had been pouring the bulk of their resources into the military budget, and with their removal, the man Azami sent to fix things had turned the entire country on its head.

According to him, “Removing imperial rule and converting to democracy is merely a start. To prevent upheaval, we need a steady food supply. In other words—farms.”

I’m sure you know who I mean. As I walked through the sea of wheat, I had to admit his love for fieldwork paid dividends.

They had definitely managed to create amber waves.

Soon, my eyes found a strange sight.

“Hoo! Ha! Hoo! Ha! Thank the wheat and the soil! On one...”

““““Agricultural! Typhoon!””””

“Yes! Spin her up! The horticultural hurricane!”

“.....Wish I hadn’t looked.”

Keep your eyes straight ahead. You’ll regret looking back.

Merthophan was out there, harvesting with the youth of Jiou.

His tanned skin and now-standard loincloth looked slightly less out of place since everyone around him was dressed the same.

“Hoo! Ha... Hm?”

Mopping the sweat from his brow with a towel, Merthophan spotted me and smiled breezily.

“Oh, is that you, Asako?”

His handsome face was charming and stalwart. If only he were wearing clothes, he’d be a catch.

“It’s been a while, Ex-Colonel Merthophan.”

He wagged a finger at that. “Sorry, Asako—that title isn’t wrong, but I’m going by another here.”

“Yeah?”

He’d changed roles? Did an Azami military title work against him in Jiou? That was my assumption.

“Yes, these days, I’m—” He summoned a hoe and scythe from somewhere, brandishing both dramatically. “Agricultural Meister ☆ Merthophan Dextro!”

That title needs shortening.

I elected not to inquire how this had come to pass.

“That’s so long. Can I just call you Merthophan?”

“Mm, sans title? Suits me fine.”

My goal was not to be disrespectful, but...I mean, I do respect a lot of what he

does.

For now, I just changed the subject.

“Ah-ha-ha...is it time to harvest already?”

It was spring, so this harvest was entirely out of season. I wasn't sure why these young men were out here battling with the ripened wheat.

Merthophan's smile was positively dazzling. “Indeed! Thanks to the special breeds provided by Kunlun and my own research into farming techniques—at last we can go from seed to harvest in three months even outside the Last Dungeon boonies! The goal is to one day reach the one-month rotation Kunlun itself has.”

“Three is plenty crazy.”

Yup—the cold war between Azami and Jiou had not yet thawed, but they'd welcomed the ex-colonel here—and were functionally worshipping the ground he walked on—because of this three-month wheat.

If he labored in the fields to keep them from starving—well, given the way the government had poured money into the army, they'd flock to him, enemy or not.

Smiling broadly, Merthophan ran his fingers across the freshly harvested wheat. Did it not prick his hand?

“Proof again of the power of farming! Azami—and I—had plenty of hard feelings toward Jiou, but those are things of the past.”

“Huh...”

His eyes had turned into hearts, and I abstained from comment.

“And Jiou is gradually—or rapidly, I should say—turning into a breadbasket. How could I not be impressed? I never imagined I'd harbor such love for our former enemies. Wheat cures all ills. Viva la...agriculture...”

He choked up on the last phrase.

The young men around him were wiping tears from their eyes.

“I'm right there with you, Meister Merthophan!”

Watching the flapping loincloths and streaming tears, it occurred to me that the average citizen must have been *very* short on provisions here. Food, clothing, and shelter are all necessary. They had the first one all squared away, so hopefully they'd remember the second soon.

"Right on, comrade! On one!"

""""Agricultural typhoon!""""

"Yes, the horticultural hurricane!"

"....."

Members of the emotional loincloth crew were now giving each other hugs. They'd called him Meister, but honestly, this was starting to feel more like a cult. The Cult of the Loincloth. I would not join, even if it was free.

This all-male cuddle—sorry, sweaty, masculine contact—was hardly the wildest thing here.

"Mwa-ha-ha! Let your body absorb this soy ☆ protein!"

"Yikes."

I must have looked horrified; I should really learn to school my face in the future. Oh well.

The former head of the Ascorbic Domain's fist clan, Tiger Nexamic, carried a basket of grain on each arm. He was wearing short tights pulled way up his crack. Is there some oppressive law here that men must all sport a wedgie?

The man in his homemade thong spotted me and flashed a muscly smile.

"Mwa-ha?! You're Asako! Did your heart yearn for my hamstrings?"

Nexamic didn't hesitate to flaunt his buttocks in front of the fairer sex. You could tell he did this all the time.

Having thoroughly shown off his ass with no noticeable interest in anything I said, he directed my attention to the harvest in the baskets.

"Mwa-hah! Observe, Asako!"

"Soybeans?"

“Got it in one! Behold my hamstrings! Soy protein builds a wiry body!”

He looked thoroughly pleased with himself.

I wasn’t sure what to say, but Merthophan didn’t wait for me.

“Flesh of the fields and in such quantities! Wheat, soy, tomatoes, leafy vegetables—if we can stabilize them all, they’ll be far more self-sufficient.”

“Mwa-ha-ha! In due time, we’ll get the wheat and corn needed for feeding livestock, and that’ll be all she wrote! Get that milk and make some whey protein! Watch my hamstrings grow!”

The presentation was appalling, but the plan seemed sound. I was impressed despite myself.

Much like in Profen, their role was to keep things stable, ensure a steady food supply, and hold down the fort till a new ruler took control. Still...

“Agriculture!”

“““Typhoon!”””

It kinda felt like Merthophan already *was* their new king. Given the abject poverty here, the populace would care about food more than anything else.

While I was thinking this, the people I was *actually* here to see arrived.

“Merthophan, Nexamic, you’d best get back to the castle— Oh, Asako.”

“My! It’s been ages.”

Choline and Rol were also on loan from Azami.

Thrilled to finally meet someone sensible, I bowed. “It’s been a while, Choline, Rol,” I said.

Well aware of my predicament, they shot me sympathetic smiles.

“You got accosted by these two right after you hit Jiou? Don’t you wanna tell ’em to at least put some dang clothes on?” Choline spat.

“I know.” Rol smirked. “I can’t imagine anyone falling in love with *them*.”

“You shush.”

Choline was torn between pleasure at Merthophan’s success and exhaustion

that the Cult of the Loincloth had been accepted.

“I’d love to take it to the next level, but not if he don’t put some pants on.”

“Might as well ask him to sprout wings and fly.”

It was tragic to think how faint that hope was.

But before she wore herself out, I got down to business. “Do you have the documents I asked for?”

“Oh, you bet! You’re one eager beaver, Asako.”

Choline handed over a booklet summing up what had happened in Jiou. She’d readily agreed to my request.

Rol was nodding along. “That’s a promising start, Asako. The imagination alone will not suffice. You’ve gotta read some hard numbers, pick where to add color. That’s when it gets worth reading.”

The opinion was a mite patronizing, but I faked a smile.

“Why so smug?” Choline asked.

“What, has your brain shrunk? Do you know how much my books earned?”

“Oh...those books...” She grimaced.

“I’m a bestseller.”

Rol had written an autobiographical account of Rokujou’s corruption, especially at the Sorcery Academy and Ministry of Magic. It had proven a big hit.

And the explosive sales of her tell-all had made the publishing industry eager to release more books like it, which had resulted in chaos.

As Rol preened, Choline muttered under her breath, “One-hit wonder.”

The rawest nerve she could hit.

Rol’s face instantly turned near demonic, veins throbbing. “Am *not*! My second book just stumbled a bit! I got two—*three* ready to go!”

But Choline sounded very sure.

“The first was nonfiction. You were fueled by vengeance against Rokujou’s corruption! Now that your goal is achieved and your wallet is fat, you’ve gotten

soft.”

“Hrghh...”

“The vitriol in your words was the whole point—and it’s gone. Your second book was neither nasty nor nice. So nobody cared.”

She had really hit the nail on the head.

Rol was reeling, trying to argue the point, but it was clearly a blow. “Yeah, so I’m going back to my roots for the next work!”

“I know better, Rol. You’re writing a *romance*. Whose roots are these?”

“Urghh!”

Rol was the one making bank, but it wasn’t doing her any favors at the moment.

Merthophan and Nexamic spotted them bickering, and they joined us. Choline didn’t even flinch at their half-naked approach. She was inured to it, I guess.

“Mwa-ha-ha! Humans crave money most—but influence and power are close behind.”

This was an unusually astute remark from the muscleman—which meant it landed extra hard.

“What?!” Rol pounced at once, finger pointed accusatively. “How dare you, you mound of muscle!”

“Mm? Why the sudden flattery?”

“I wasn’t flattering you, I was—! Yes, the money I earned from that book fulfilled my long-held dream of remodeling the orphanage. But you think I’m after power?! Influence? Those come my way without trying.”

That was a supremely confident declaration, so why did she look so sad? No, you don’t need to explain.

“Oh, right,” I said, electing to salt the wound. “Anzu asked me to pass along a message to Satan.”

“Hrghh?! ”

Exactly the reaction I'd hoped for.

"Anything I should tell him for you, Rol?"

Choline was not one to let a train of cruelty leave without her.

"Yup, you gotta stick your oar in, Rol."

"Wh-wh-whatever do you mean, Choline?" Rol dithered a moment, then turned back to me. "T-tell Satan hi for me, then."

"That's all?"

"Mwa-ha-ha! Just like your daily toning, relationships require the little things."

".....You two stay the hell out of this one," Choline growled.

I'm sure those words failed to make any impact on Merthophan.

But while they were arguing, Rol said, "A-and next time..."

"There's a next time?"

"Perhaps...dinner? Just a suggestion."

I heard her out, then glanced at Choline. "What's the score?"

"I'd go with sixty-five, normally," she said, "but given Rol's ass-backwards personality, I'll go as high as eighty-five."

"Mwa-ha-ha! Add a decent reason for the dinner, and you might break ninety!" Nexamic commented.

"Pick a restaurant with tasty veggies, and it's a perfect score," added Merthophan.

No one asked either of them, so we ignored their input. I waved the documents and bowed to the ladies.

"Choline, thanks for the data. Rol, I'll let Satan know."

"Tell me if you need anything. I'll be back in Azami before too long, so let's have tea."

".....Actually, forget I said anything."

It's a bit late for that, Rol, I said with a look.

She clearly got the message, but I couldn't quite read her response; Choline later claimed it was a *meal* and she'd feasted on it for days.

I started getting ready to go.

"Heh-heh."

"Mwa-ha-ha."

Merthophan and Nexamic were getting suspiciously mirthful.

That couldn't lead anywhere good, so I hastily bade farewell. "I'd better—"

Before I could finish, Nexamic interrupted, "Wait ☆ A ☆ Hamstring ☆ Building ☆ Minute! Listen to yourself, Asako!"

"You're going back to Azami through Kunlun, right?" Merthophan added. "I'd like to burn his gallant figure into my eyes and loincloth. You must take me with you."

Clearly, they both wanted to come.

"Uh, do I have to?" *At least get dressed first...*

"Come on, Asako."

"Mwa-ha-ha! Safe ☆ Driving, please!"

The point didn't seem worth arguing.

Pssst.

"....."

Kunlun, the edge of the world, a pastoral landscape.

I took a deep breath. The air always felt so clean here.

"Mwa-ha-ha! My Kunlun ☆ Arrival!"

"Agriculture! Kunlun! I have returned!"

I'd have enjoyed that deep breath were it not for *them*. Two shirtless dudes in their skivvies just made that impossible.

With the half-naked men in tow, I headed into Kunlun proper.

The villagers soon spotted us coming.

“Oh, Asako! How you been?”

This was Grandpa Pyrid, the man who’d raised Lloyd.

“Fine, Pyrid. Glad to see you looking hale and hearty.”

“Gah-ha-ha! That is my middle name! Mm? You’ve brought familiar faces with you, I see.”

“I’ve returned, Boss.”

“Mwa-ha! Boss, you never change!”

Pyrid didn’t bat an eye at their attire, or lack thereof. The entire village seemed to be used to their shtick, which was terrifying. Who gets used to all that bare skin?

“Where you off to, Pyrid?” I asked, figuring that was less a mystery than where these two might end up.

He answered readily, “Oh, just a spot of fishing. We’ve got company! Gotta host in Alka’s stead.”

Pyrid looked pleased.

“Company? All the way out here?” Merthophan asked.

“Yeah, been a regular lately. The kids all go play at the chief’s house, I guess? What are we to do?!”

He didn’t seem at all bothered. I’d figured out who it was.

“Ah, him?”

Pyrid nodded. “Sounds like he’s finally found something worth living for.”

“Mwa-ha? Someone you’ve known awhile?”

“.....Can’t remember. Well, whatever happened in the old days, he’s having fun now, and he’s not alone. What could be better? Gah-ha-ha!”

“Mwa-ha-ha! No matter how scrawny you start, muscles can be obtained! Muscle memory!”

Pyrid ignored this, turning back to me.

“So you sit with them awhile, Asako. They’re with you, yes?”

“Yep. Friends of mine, and I’ll make sure they don’t go too far.”

“Thanks.”

With that, he headed off toward the river, and we headed for the chief’s house.

Where we found—

“Mm? My, look here!”

“Oh! Some passionate guests!”

Shouma, Sou, and—

“What a coincidence.”

—glasses.

“Oh, hi.”

It was Micona’s former classmate and current military PR rep, Pamela. Merthophan and Nexamic looked surprised to see her.

But I knew exactly what had brought her here.

“She’s one of us,” I said.

“What ‘us’ are you referring to...?”

“Mwa-ha-ha, what muscle group are you strengthening? Tell me, muscle!”

Ignoring Nexamic’s irrelevant comment, I answered Merthophan’s query.

“We’re collaborating to turn Lloyd’s heroics into a movie.”

“Mwa-ha?!”

Nexamic shot me a quizzical look around a most muscular pose.

Shouma shot to his feet, mouth already running so fast, there was spittle.

“Exactly! We’ve banded together to spread word of Lloyd’s wonders!”

“In a movie?”

“Yes, Merthophan!” Shouma cried, introducing the band. “I’m the director,

and Sou's the producer/cameraman. Pamela's in charge of wardrobe. And our source novel/screenwriter—"

"Would be me," I said. Not that I'd finished the source yet.

It was a grand project to tell the world about Lloyd—

Shouma had been filling in for Alka a lot lately, so we were meeting once a month at this house, reporting on our progress.

That might not sound like often, but Sou was so delighted by his new purpose in life, he often came over to shoot the breeze. Did he live here or something?

"You just happened to be visiting, Pamela?"

She adjusted her trademark spectacles, nodding.

"I was hoping to discuss costumes and props for the movie, and I happened to bump into our producer, Sou. I rather invited myself along."

"I'd been just about to teleport from Azami to Kunlun when I felt her wavelength. Do not worry yourself, Pamela; it's like sharing a carriage."

"Hats off to our producer's generosity." Glasses shove.

Pamela didn't even bat an eye at the teleport carriage remark. We could all learn from her fortitude.

"Mwa-ha-ha! She's mastered the teleport ride-along? So much for common sense!"

No one without a shirt had a right to speak.

"The secrets of the ancients are but a means of conveyance, are they?" said the loincloth man using artifacts as farm tools.

Thinking up comebacks was getting exhausting, so I changed tacks.

"I knew Sou visited often, but I'm surprised to see Pamela here."

This was a stroke of luck, having us all assembled.

Light glaring off her glasses, Pamela nodded. "I never imagined I would regularly visit the village from fairy tales."

"It's not that bad. The villagers lack common sense, but they're otherwise

normal. Compared to the city, there's little in the way of entertainment."

Plenty of stimulation otherwise, though. Violent monster stimulation was in plentiful supply.

Meanwhile Pamela was still doing the glasses thing.

"Perhaps it was fate that led me to this legendary village! I can see the appeal of opening a branch of my family's boutique chain here." Shove.

"Huh..."

That sounded pretty wild; I wasn't sure how to reply.

Incidentally, this Lloyd project involved Shouma, a Kunlun villager; Sou, a runeman; and myself—technically a demon lord. Quite a lineup.

"Indeed!" Shove.

And Pamela was the one "ordinary" human—the outlier. Arguably, that placed her in the same league as Lloyd and Selen. If only the nudists weren't ruining the moment.

"I feel like someone somewhere is insulting farmwork!"

"Mwa-ha-ha! Whoever it is, is just envious of the perfect build it provides."

Damn it.

While I was swearing inside, Shouma, Sou, and Pamela were amping it up.

"Passion! Fashion, in Kunlun? Perhaps we'll become trendsetters!"

"It'll liven up the place! And if we attach the village name, we can get the new fad rolling. Lloyd's the model, naturally."

"Manufacturing earth spider silk could give us a stable income, and the world might accept Kunlun like it does Lloyd. And if I've got the fashion world in my clutches, I can make my cosplaying hobby a standard across the land!" Glasses push.

Pamela spread her hobbies like she was seeking world domination...but cosplay was plenty popular back home.

Glad she wasn't *actually* conquering anything, I moved to the shelves,

searching for the reason I was here.

“Gonna borrow this,” I said, picking up a monochrome camera with a big lens.

“Why that one?” Shouma asked, tilting his head. “Asako, you can capture crystal footage. Why choose black and white?”

Sou put his hand to his chin. “Ah...you don’t want footage. You want a photograph.”

“Today’s Lloyd’s big day. I figured it would be more effective to take a proper photo and sell it to the papers.”

Pamela adjusted her glasses like she’d just remembered. “Yes, the PR department was all in a fuss. This is the year Lloyd steps into the limelight!”

“Um, don’t you work for them? Can you afford time away?” I asked.

“I’m on a long lunch break.” Shove.

“So you’re slacking.”

“Bringing Lloyd’s word to the world is all part of a PR girl’s work, dear.” Shove.

She made that sound positively poetic, but anyone skipping out of work to hang in the Last Dungeon boonies was every bit as out there as Lloyd, Selen, and Eve herself.

At this point, Shouma and Sou both leapt to their feet.

“Let us capture both photographs and moving pictures at once for the true passion!”

“Indeed. Film is fantastic, but still images have a grandeur all their own.”

Sou already had his own camera out, and Shouma seemed equally keen.

“Exactly! Asako, your passion has cleared my vision.”

“I take it you’re both coming to watch?”

“Naturally. I had planned on letting you handle this one, but the more we talked, the less I could sit still.”

“If we get too close, Lloyd’ll yell at us again—but that’s too bad! This is what passion is all about!”

So they *had* pissed him off before. I shook my head. *Shouma, you're verging on Alka's territory here.*

Pamela started getting ready, too (by which I mean she adjusted her glasses). "If he objects, merely say the PR department requested it. Our boss is really only good at putting out fires without anyone noticing."

That is a genuinely alarming statement, Pamela.

Merthophan was arguably also getting ready (by which I mean adjusting his loincloth).

"Takes me back. It's like an oracle of the Azami army's future. And with Lloyd involved..."

Nexamic, meanwhile, had no clue what we were talking about, so he swallowed his shame and— Okay, look, I know he has no shame; anyone who's ever seen him is aware of that. Anyway. He asked a question.

"Mwa-ha-ha. Incidentally, what's going on today? A bodybuilding competition?"

"That would hardly predict the future of the Azami army."

"Mwa! Ha! Beautiful bodies belong on film! And you said steel images—what else would those be but rock-hard muscles?!"

Ignorance had never hindered this man's enthusiasm.

Everyone here was far too busy with their own shticks, so it fell to me to get Nexamic up to speed.

"Today's the entrance exam for the Azami Military Academy."

"Oh?"

In other words—

"It's Lloyd's first day as an instructor."

In the square outside the Azami castle...

There was a mildly beautified statue of the king—back when he'd been possessed by Abaddon, they'd called it a symbol of his vanity, but he'd lost weight since, and nobody really said that anymore. Everyone knew how hard he

worked for the people, and they knew just how good a king he was.

The square itself was packed with so many people, you'd assume it was a festival—were it not for the crackling tension.

Every boy and girl here was confident in their own strength.

This was the Azami Military Academy's enrollment exam, and these were the army's future cadets.

"More than last year," I said, surprised. Last year, you could still move around, but this year I saw no gaps anywhere.

"Of course," Pamela said with a dramatic spectacle shove. "After all, this year Lloyd is a teacher. Those who wish to learn from him are flocking in from Rokujou, Jiou, and the domain."

"Mwa-ha-ha! I certainly recognize several faces from back home."

"Impressive, Lloyd. The future of farming rests on your shoulders."

Ex-Colonel Merthophan seemed no longer capable of distinguishing the army from agriculture.

Not about to let this moment pass, our talented director—Shouma—already had the camera rolling. "Passion! All these people are Lloyd's fans?!"

"Oh, where's our producer?" I said. "Sou?"

The elderly runeman had vanished. I looked around but didn't see him anywhere.

One eye on the viewfinder, Shouma answered, "Sou teleported away on an errand. He'll be back soon."

"An errand? He does those?"

I found Sou rather hard to read, but since most things he did were for Lloyd, I was sure it was something fun.

"I'll take my leave," said Pamela.

"You've got an errand, too?"

She turned back, pushing her glasses up her nose. "No, I was sl—taking a long

lunch in Kunlun, so I'd better get back to work."

"Oh. Right."

"Given the sights here, I'm worried my boss will get carried away and do something rash. Later!"

"Ah-ha-ha..."

Her boss was rather self-absorbed and often let his enthusiasm get the best of him.

Pamela bowed, and with that, she was gone.

"Mwa-ha-ha! All these people here make me want to strut my stuff!"

"This is the perfect chance to extol the virtues of farmwork! But this is an exam—best we restrain ourselves."

The two most likely to go running off seemed to be staying put. Life doesn't go as planned.

"Life goes where it will, and that's why passion is so important, Asako."

"Please don't read my mind, Shouma... Oh?"

Pamela was soon replaced by more familiar faces.

"Yo, Asako."

".....Yo."

"Riho, Phyllo."

Both had graduated and were proper soldiers now.

Riho had joined the intelligence department, and Rol was running her ragged. We often had lunch together, and she grumbled about it a lot. The work itself was fulfilling, but she was always on the lookout for a side hustle.

Phyllo was now a royal guard trainee. She'd stepped up when Mena left. Her Rokujou lineage had helped her secure a prime position. Apparently, it paid pretty well, which only made Riho grumble harder. Nepotism exists in every world.

"Riho Flavin! Phyllo Quinone!" sayeth the loincloth man.

“Mwa-ha-ha! Did my hamstrings draw you over?” sayeth the briefs-sporting macho man.

“Passion! Keep it going!” sayeth the suspicious courier with the camera.

Riho already looked exhausted.

“Just don’t put any extra pressure on the candidates. If they fail because of you, that would just be sad.”

“.....Put some clothes on,” Phyllo growled.

Nexamic objected immediately. “Impossible, Phyllo Quinone! I am always half naked—if I dressed properly, that would arouse suspicion!”

What a backward idea. He definitely pulled that out of his ass.

Riho scratched her head with that mithril arm.

“I ain’t one to scold, but these days, becoming an Azami cadet is a big deal. Intelligence has their hands full making sure nobody tries anything stupid...so don’t make it harder.”

Clearly, she figured they were likely to cause trouble.

“.....Hang in there,” Phyllo encouraged.

“Jeez, all this for less pay than you. Any good side hustles, Asako?”

Merthophan pounced. “Fieldwork—”

“Other than that, Merthophan.”

She’d known him long enough to cancel his attacks.

Shouma stopped filming, smiled, and offered a suggestion. “Then write novels like your sister. Could be a passionate hit!”

Riho made a face. “Ain’t got the passion, Shouma. I know what would happen if I try— Rol would lord it over me, offering unwarranted advice— I’ve got goose bumps already.”

“.....I wouldn’t listen to Rol’s writing theories.....if she paid me.”

A sister figure to one, and a former boss to the other, but neither showed mercy. Rol brought it on herself.

And imagining Rol turning up the screws left Riho looking worn out.

For that reason, Phyllo attempted to change the subject. Had becoming a royal guard made her better at subtle consideration?

“.....So, Asako, how’s my sister?”

“Mena? She’s good. Definitely misses the freedom of mercenary work or chilling with Choline, though.”

Phyllo put a hand to her forehead. “.....Even trainees are worked so hard..... how is this freedom?”

She was like a son who only realized how hard his mom worked when he moved out.

While she grappled with this newfound respect, Riho and Merthophan were whispering furiously.

“Um, we probably shouldn’t tell her how much Mena skipped out on work, right?”

“Best to let sleeping dogs lie.”

And they were like grown-ups conspiring to let children keep believing in Santa.

Shouma was filming all of this, grinning. “Good faces! You’ve got passion now! Much more expressive than when we first met.”

“.....Well, a lot happened.”

“That passion toughened you up! Wanna come work in Kunlun? Serve as acting chief for me?”

“.....No, thanks.”

Shouma made a subtle attempt to delegate. Was he struggling with his duties, too?

“What say you, Riho?” he asked.

“Only taking side gigs I feel confident I can pull off.” Riho did not take work above her level. I think she knew Shouma would not stop trying to foist something off on her, so she changed the subject. “So if you ran into Mena and

these bozos, you been hopping all over the map, I reckon. Who else?”

“I popped by Profen to hear Eug shriek, and I also visited Hotel Reiyokaku... where Robin worried about his daughter.”

“.....It’s Selen; we know why.”

Sharp as a tack, Phyllo.

Riho folded her arms behind her head, chuckling.

“You can say that again. How did someone on the blacklist get hired by the guards? Someone who oughtta be in jail is out there putting people in jail—that ain’t right.”

“It’s a good thing,” Shouma said unconvincingly. “She knows every criminal trick in the book! Having her on your side—now that’s some passion! She can profile any of them!”

He’s just calling her a criminal outright... She might not have been arrested yet, but if she tried to sue him for defamation, she wouldn’t win.

“Same as a vegetable farmer makes the best vegetarian meals.”

“Mwa-ha-ha! And how my focus on muscle care makes me a muscle evangelist!”

These two should be arrested for indecent exposure, so let’s ignore them.

“——Oh?”

Speak of the devil.

The very topic at hand, Azami’s scariest stalker, Selen Hemein.

She was already at peak crazy.

“My, everyone’s here! Do not leave me out! If you’re plotting anything, I’ll abuse my powers and toss you all in the clink!”

Her belt started wriggling, ready to tie us up. She’d spent years alone, cursed by a belt, and the trauma for those years made her extra sensitive when people didn’t invite her to things.

“Confess exactly what you were discussing! Has Riho been illegally

moonlighting again? Spare me the tragedy of arresting a friend!”

In other words, she was a pain in the ass.

Selen was now a city guard—so basically a cop. I imagine she’s a loose cannon, but apparently she’s also getting the job done.

Her profiling skills are legit, and the cursed belt makes her great at trussing up criminals, so she’s got a strong arrest rate—and since her dad’s a local lord, she can work his connections and has cultivated her own with the adventure guild and the black market. She’s got what it takes to investigate most crimes.

“Eh-heh-heh, there’s no escaping top cop Selen!”

This has obviously gone straight to her head, and all agree the only outcome is her own arrest. Lady Luck builds you up and tears you down.

Selen must have caught a whiff of hostility from me, because she wheeled round and moved in way too close.

“Hello, Asako.”

“I see you’re in high spirits, Selen.”

Ignoring the sparks flying, she stepped even closer.

“Look, this was so obvious, I never said it aloud, but let me do so now.”

“Yes?”

“You call it research, but you’re getting far too close to Lloyd’s personal life.”

You are the last person who can accuse anyone of that.

I faced this despicable stalker down.

“I have no ulterior intent. It is pure research. I merely want to accurately convey Lloyd’s wonders to the world. And if we happen to get close along the way, that’s *our* business.”

“You would stick your oar in between me and him? Though you have not known him nearly as long?”

“You don’t even know how wide that gap is, which proves you’ve already lost.”

This entire exchange accelerated until we were firing back and forth.

Shouma was forced to pull us part. “I’ve known Lloyd longer than both of you combined!”

Not to mediate, but to brag.

“Length of time ain’t what matters.”

“.....Mm.”

Riho and Phyllo weren’t standing idly by.

Not ready to see blood spill at the exam site, Merthophan and Nexamic stepped in. Were we so menacing that these freaks had to be the normal ones?

“Now, now, it’s a joyous occasion.”

“Mwa-ha... Not a day when anyone needs to die.”

Apparently, they weren’t the only ones sensing danger.

The fight over Lloyd raged on, and he wasn’t even here.

“What’s going on? This may require more than paperwork!” said my father, Vritra/Jin Ishikura.

“Wh-what’s up, Asako? Selen? Let’s try and take today in stride, at least,” said Satan/Seta.

The former’s grim glare made me straighten up. The snake-eyed gaze of the once-strict director was still alive and well.

But one of us, Selen, did not change her attitude at all. She took a run right at him.

“Ohhhhhh? Showing up with threats of paperwork, Vritra? When you haven’t even educated your own daughter properly! Write paperwork for *that!*”

I couldn’t let that pass.

“I’m more educated than *you!*”

Caught between his daughter and the girl who’d owned him during his artifact years, my father got distressingly shifty.

“Er, um...education is...something I’ve endeavored to instill...”

Ignoring his feeble protests, I got right up in stalker Selen's face.

"My father may have been devoted to his research, the epitome of an absentee parent! But as bad a father as he was, he was always thinking about me!"

"Urgh!"

The bad father phrase was like a stake to the heart, and he clutched his chest like he'd been hit by sniper fire.

Satan caught him before he fell. "I think that's about enough," he said meekly. "The paperwork is genuinely a chore; best we stop before it's required. It's so tough to come up with new ways to convincingly express contrition."

Satan had rolled into work after an all-night bender so many times, he'd written a whole novel's worth of these letters, and he should know.

Which reminded me, I had messages for him.

"Oh, right, Satan. Anzu says hi."

"Mm? Oh, she did say to join her for some tea the next time I'm in the domain. And maybe help her train."

Anzu was doing solid work trying to lure him her way. Good for her.

Everyone else was grinning. Only Satan had missed the point.

Clearly, he was as dense as any harem manga protagonist, so I figured I'd pile on.

"And I ran into Rol in Jiou, who wants to have dinner with you."

The grins widened, but he just looked baffled.

"Dinner?" he said. "I mean, sure...but I dunno what meal would be good enough for a bestselling author."

".....Hoo boy," Phyllo muttered.

Then a boisterous laugh echoed over us.

"Ah-ha-ha! You see? A man who has never gotten any action will never realize his time has come!"

This came from Rinko. Next to her was the king, and behind them was Katsu Kondou from the Adventurer Guild, as well as the low-ranking Gaston.

“Ho-ho-ho, Satan— You need merely try, and you can find a love as grand as mine.”

“Uh...okay...”

The king was already bragging, and Satan clearly didn’t get it. He shoved a hand into his mop of hair and scratched his head.

The recruits were all stirring at the king’s presence, a sight Rinko clearly enjoyed.

“Mm? An enchantress can’t go anywhere without causing a scene. Right, Katchin?”

“Odds are high that is the cause.”

Katsu was very much her yes-man.

Since Rinko had rejoined the royal family, Katsu had fully taken over the guild and was running his head off trying to handle all the problems cropping up in the area.

The shield guy, Gaston...was still a mook. According to Katsu, he cleared a solid 80 percent of the quests he was given...

But the man himself just insisted he was right where his talents meant him to be, and he thoroughly enjoyed his work. Lloyd seemed to respect his gusto for the dirty jobs.

He bashed his trademark shields together, laughing.

“Rinko showers in beauty products on the daily! She sends me out shopping for more all the ti— Owww!”

Rinko’s fist had scored a clean hit on his jaw, with a loud crack. “The key to beauty is to not let the work show, Gaston.”

“Good manners means leaving these things unsaid, you fool,” Katsu spat.

This was why Gaston never got promoted.

Once the war ended, Rinko had used the *anti-immortality* rune on herself and

was now gracefully aging.

But she soon started fussing over little wrinkles and spending lots of money on beauty products. Apparently, she frequently lamented her decision to remove the anti-aging part of immortality.

“Ho-ho-ho! You’re wonderful, no matter your age, Rinko! Let us grow old together!”

“Lou!”

But love conquers all. Isn’t that lovely? Bastards. Enjoy.

Then a rough-looking old man appeared. “Why are you flirting in public, Your Majesty?”

“Oh, Fumar.”

Fumar Ketoshifen was in charge of sea cargo ships in Azami. He’d quit the army to search for Rinko when she’d vanished, and upon her return, he’d reenlisted to help run naval security and ocean trade.

“You don’t wear your uniform, Fumar?” Merthophan asked.

Fumar made a face. That wasn’t a question a man in a loincloth should be asking.

“I spend the better part of the month at sea,” Fumar said. “Even business types dress down when they’re not in the office.”

“True! Even I don’t wear the loincloth outside of the field.”

“It’s sort of become your default look, though...?”

The king threw an arm over Fumar’s shoulder. “Ho-ho-ho! He reenlisted but is being very stubborn. Should I introduce you to someone? That might help you soften up.”

“Don’t! The sea is my one true love.”

Rinko was watching them happily.

“Nice! Old, but still friends! As pure as any teenagers.”

She turned to the cowards.

“Would-be cadets, even as you protect Azami, remember to enjoy your own lives. If the young are not happy, the country has no future.”

She was down to earth, yet she had all the majesty a queen should have. Her words hit home. She’d once run a whole research laboratory and knew how to butter people up.

“A lovely speech,” Katsu said.

“And a valuable lesson,” said Rinko. “If you become disillusioned after failing to make the most of your life, you’ll end up like her.”

“Her?”

“Yes, her... Speak of the devil.”

I followed Rinko’s gaze.

“Hahhh...hahhh...”

Lurching in like a dilapidated zombie...

“Oh, Marie.”

Yes, Maria Azami, also known as Marie. No longer in her exotic witch garb but in a proper royal-looking fancy gown. She was shuffling along as if this dress were made of iron shackles.

“She’s nigh dead.”

“I bet I know why.”

“.....Same condition as my sister.”

Yes, Marie had fully resumed her duties as the Azami princess.

Lloyd was still living in her shop, but she’d moved back to the castle and was busy with her royal training... The fact that she’d been allowed to live with Lloyd this long was really quite bizarre.

Since others were still cooking and doing her laundry, it was arguably an equally pampered lifestyle, so why did she look so dead?

“Mwa-ha? Why the weary countenance?” Nexamic bluntly asked what everyone else was delicately avoiding.

Marie's head turned with an audible creak. "Booze," she said.

Sadly, that was enough for all of us.

It was an even dumber reason than we'd expected, but Marie was gesticulating wildly.

"I can't just have a drink whenever I want! I've never suffered this much in all my life!"

That is not suffering. It is *normal*.

Oblivious to the winces on our faces, Marie kept griping.

"Worse, the neighbors learned I was a princess, and they're all saying, 'Your mama a gold digger?' 'Must be hard to become princess this late in life.' Not one of them believes I was born into it!"

Her clothes might be luxurious, but inside she had the soul of a pauper.

Marie could not believe how many people refused to believe she'd always been the princess, and they insisted she must have stumbled into it ass-backward. I did not blame them.

"I knew I was good at blending in with a rough crowd, but I got *too* good at it! What a shock!"

This lie was clearly all that was keeping her together. A grave condition, indeed.

".....You just lack good deeds."

"I blame the overwhelming aura of crassness."

"Arguably she'd have been better off renouncing her claim to the throne."

Her alleged friends were all merciless. Clearly, they were holding those two years of Lloyd cohabitation against her.

Her gripe-filled and deeply sad stand-up comedy routine seemed liable to go on awhile, and we all grew concerned that the potential cadets here would lose hope in the country's future. But that was when the instructor/head of the royal guards, Chrome, came running over.

"Uh, Princess Maria, you're rather loud..."

He was responsible for her education and was doing his best to pull her back to the realm of appropriate behavior.

Merthophan, who had been his colleague once, helpfully snapped his loincloth strap. “Been a while, Chrome. Your workload has earned my sympathy.”

“Has it? Then put your clothes on. This is Lloyd’s big day.”

“Mm? That’s why I’m in my dress uniform. I brought a daikon, too!”

“Are you a complete clown? What good would that do?”

Chrome was past picking words, clearly. And none of it got to Merthophan, so perhaps they were made for each other. (Snerk.) Chrome rubbed his brow, his square frame shrinking. “Anyway, Princess Maria, don’t make this any worse. I’m busy enough as it is.”

“Ho-ho-ho! You are a dedicated worker, Chrome. Show Maria no mercy and forge her into a proper royal. She’s got too much East Side in her.”

“I feel like she had these qualities before she got there...”

Marie was born a disaster.

“That just proves she’s *my* daughter!” Rinko beamed.

Marie was getting pummeled from all sides, but her time living with Lloyd was a sin so great, she probably deserved it.

Fumar and Katsu were watching and laughing.

“I see we’ve got peace again, Katsu,” said Fumar.

“Yes, I never imagined this day would come, and I can’t help but rejoice.”

Chrome figured it would be hard for the applicants to do their thing with the princess sobbing nearby, so he ushered the royal family back to the VIP seats.

“We’ve got seats prepared for you. Your Majesties, please return to them. Princess Maria, stand up straight... The rest of you, stop chitchatting and get back to your patrols.”

“That’s the way it’s done, Chrome. I’m proud to be your former colleague.”

“Really? Then take your half-naked partner, and go where no one can see you.”

“Mwa-ha-ha! My fellow square-jawed compatriot, do you think my muscles can escape notice anywhere?”

“Just do your best. Also never call me that again.”

The exam hadn’t even started yet, and Chrome was running on fumes. If I’d been a soldier, I’d have saluted him.

Once the royals were gone, he mopped his brow.

“Lord...I never...”

“Deep breaths, Chrome! Passion!” Shouma cried, rolling cameras.

Chrome glared at him. “Please don’t do anything to disrupt the proceedings, Shouma.”

“I’ll do my best to respect that passionate workaholic soul of yours!”

These two had history...but before they could speak further, a stir ran through the square.

“Mm? What’s going on?”

“.....Look.” Phyllo pointed to an extra-large recruit swaggering around, glaring at other candidates. Oh, and a smaller boy was shrinking away from him.

Chrome awkwardly scratched his neck.

“There’s always someone who’s gotta try and act intimidating. Given the focus on individual strength, it’s not all that surprising.”

This seemed to jog Riho’s memories. “Oh, right... Allan did the same shit.”

“He wasn’t trying to intimidate anyone else,” Selen said. “He just had it in for me. Meanwhile, I was so overjoyed to find Sir Lloyd again, I forgot such trifles.”

Her brain is excessively flexible, I think— Perhaps I should have my father examine her to see if he learns anything of value.

“Oh, Sir Lloyd...just the memory of that joy is so fulfilling, I could go four, five meals without food!”

Maybe what my father would discover would risk humanity evolving in the wrong direction. Best he stay far away from her. He should leave her brain a black box and spare the species.

As they talked, the scene in the square was getting worse. It looked like a fight was about to break out.

“Passion’s all good, but this ain’t. They’re all wound up before the exam.”

That wasn’t Shouma’s problem, so he just glanced at Chrome, clearly suggesting he step in.

“I could stop them for you, Chrome— We don’t squash this, it could affect the outcome.” Merthophan had served as an instructor here for a while and had run these exams—he saw the dangers.

“.....Chastising is our job.”

“Jeez, I just wanna make money.”

“Emergency action required!”

The soldiers were all putting their work faces on.

But Chrome waved them off. “Don’t be hasty.”

“Since when are you the voice of reason, Chrome? Panicking is your main role!”

“Rude! I don’t spend all my time at the mercy of events.”

Shrugging his broad shoulders, he pointed across the square.

“*He’s* here. It’ll be fine.”

We followed his finger—and saw a gentle boy in a starched uniform, not a wrinkle to be seen.

He’d grown tall enough now that “boy” no longer felt quite right. He now had the dignity required of a leader.

Instructor Lloyd was on the job.

A new stir ran through the crowd—possibly even a buzz.

“L-Lloyd!” “That’s Lloyd Belladonna?!” “He’s really here!”

The ugly tension vanished. Candidates who'd been ready to throw down all lowered their fists.

Just showing his face changed everything; that's who Lloyd was. It wasn't about confidence. His feet took him where he should go before he'd even sighted his goal.

Of course, if I said that to his face, he'd act all modest.

"——But that's what's so good about him."

Whoops. I'd said that out loud.

"Oh, sorry, coming through. Good luck, everyone!" Lloyd cut through the square, reporting in to Chrome. No arrogance, just his trademark niceness. "Instructor Chrome, the exam's ready to begin."

"Well done, Lloyd."

"Thanks... Gosh, everyone's here."

He looked faintly surprised. His newfound authority failed to diminish the cute factor, and that contrast really did it for me. He was really unparalleled.

"We ain't slackin'," Riho said, grinning. "We're on patrol, watching for any troublemaking. And they're—"

".....They say they're here to witness your big day, Master."

"Such shameful behavior, Sir Lloyd," said Selen. "All your days are big days! Everyone knows that."

No clue what made her so sure she was rising above this fray, but that's Selen for you.

"Mwa-ha-ha! A most muscular pose to commemorate your Big ☆ Day, young Lloyd!"

"I brought you a celebratory daikon! Ready to dance whenever!"

That was a dancing daikon? And why is Nexamic trying to summon a muscle beam?

"Merthophan and Nexamic, you've got passion, but this ain't that scene," said Shouma. Even he was turning on them here. Never a dull moment with these

guys.

I fixed my bangs, addressing Lloyd. "It's been too long, Lloyd."

"Same, Asako. Here for research?"

"Yes! I want to make sure I get it all written down. This is your first day as a teacher! How can I miss that?"

I'd taken a step too close—Riho and Phyllo each grabbed an arm, pulling me away.

"Down, girl."

".....Safe distance."

Let gooo! Even handshake event staff give you longer than that!

"Ah-ha-ha..." Lloyd was scratching his cheek awkwardly. He was adorable!

Marie couldn't stand being left out of this and came stalking back from the stands. "Heyyy! Good luck, Lloyd! I'm not giving up yet!"

She had her skirts hoisted high, but this just made her look positively thuggish.

"Oh, Marie."

"Go, Lloyd! Your dream's come true! One day you'll be king—"

"Leave your delusions out of this, Marie."

I'd never agreed with Selen more. She was the last person that should be offering that advice, but we chose to let it pass here.

"My dream..." He thought about that for a moment, then nodded. Glancing around the square, he added, "I didn't know my left from my right when I arrived. I've only made it this far because you were all there for me. Even Marie."

"Sir Lloyd..."

Isn't it nice how he always has a kind word for everyone?

"I was a wimp with no confidence, but you let me gain the experience I needed. On the exam day, I remember sitting right over there, my heart beating

a mile a minute.”

“Heh-heh, that’s right. You started talking to me, and then Selen and Allan got involved...”

“Yes, though he’s gone so far away.”

Let’s not talk about him like he’s dead; he’s just gone with Renge so she can have her kid back home.

“So much time has passed! I never imagined I’d see my mother again,” Marie said.

“.....I only found my mother because of you, Master. And that dumb dandy dad.” Phyllo smiled slightly. I felt a pang of pity for Sardin, but...her words were not without love.

“You freed me from the cursed belt and let me reconcile with my father, too!” Selen was blissfully unaware of her father’s current state of mind.

“Rol and I... We’re doing okay.” Riho wasn’t about to gush, but she was clearly happy with how that had turned out.

“I only awakened to the joy of the farm because of you, Lloyd! The Agriculture ☆ Joy Dance!”

“Mwa-ha! Double biceps and hamstrings!”

“This is a passionate scene; don’t make it weird. It’s hard to edit you out.”

These three never took a hint.

But Lloyd just beamed happily. “I’m rooting for you, Marie!”

“L-Lloyd...!”

She blushed. But—

“I know they randomly made you a princess out of nowhere, but you’ve got this!”

“Hurp!”

Lloyd meant no harm, but his words scored a critical hit on Marie’s spirit. She simply could not believe he still didn’t get that she really *was* a princess.

“S-still...all this time, and he doesn’t know?!”

She collapsed, and Riho and Selen started pushing her back to the stands.

“Okay, you’re underfoot. Sit yerself down.”

“Rinko is howling with laughter.”

Marie was regressing to her toddler phase. “Don’t wanna! I wanna be with everyone! I’m done being a princess!”

“Where’s this coming from? Why are all those frustrations suddenly pouring out?”

“There’s no point in booze if I can’t drink it whenever I want!”

“.....Then stop drinking.”

“That solves nothing!”

What would solve this?

Was she just feeling left out and pouting about it?

But letting the princess have a tantrum in public would be a bad influence on the exam candidates, so she was dragged away.

At last, the exam got underway.

“Um, okay, everyone! Let’s do this!”

“““Thank you, sir!””””

Lloyd was up in front of the crowd, looking a bit nervous.

He was a legend in his own time, so the crowd looked pretty nervous, too.

Clnk clnk clnk—

They were wheeling in large training dummies covered in metal plates and boxes filled with all manner of weaponry.

The dummies were too heavy to lift alone—if they fell on you, you’d be in bad shape. Some candidates looked intimidated, while others were getting even more fired up. You could tell a lot about them by their reactions.

“Takes you back, right, Merthophan?” said Riho.

“Mm, I had no clue who Lloyd was and felt like there was a monster in our midst.”

“I could tell how strong he was, and I went running to you for intel.”

“And I had none.”

“You got your answer now?”

“We all do. He’s the future of Azami.”

“Heh-heh-heh, true enough.”

Riho and Merthophan were laughing and reminiscing.

“Yes, yes, enough of that!” Selen barked. “Get to work! Burn Sir Lloyd’s heroic visage into your eyes while ensuring no lowlifes interfere with his work.”

“.....Roger that.”

Astoundingly, Selen took her job seriously. Perhaps giving her responsibility reformed her?

“Take whichever weapons you’re best with and strike these dummies,” said Lloyd. “We’re observing how you move. If you can smash them to bits, go right ahead.”

No one could tell if he was joking or not.

With that, the exam got underway. One candidate after another took a run at the dummies.

Among them was the timid-looking candidate from earlier. He was holding a weapon...but not moving.

The previous incident must have robbed him of his nerve...or perhaps seeing so many people more proficient than him had taken the wind out of his sails. He seemed unlikely to even take a turn.

The crowd around was starting to notice—and some of them were snickering.

But Lloyd wasn’t about to stand for that.

“Are you okay?” he asked him.

“I’m fine,” the boy said, his voice breaking.

Maybe he looked up to Lloyd— His knees were shaking.

Lloyd gave him a gentle smile.

“It’s pretty stressful, right? I was so nervous! Everyone around me seemed so strong, and it really got to me.”

Sharing his own experience would help the kid settle down. Soon, everyone around had paused to listen.

“I’m sure you worked hard to get here. So what matters now is working hard to make sure your efforts weren’t in vain. Don’t lose track of your goal, of who’s helped you, and who you want to help.”

I’m not Shouma, but even I could sense real passion in those words.

“Pursuing those goals is what real strength is all about. Keeping track of them will give you more confidence. I don’t mean to lecture—I’m still working on that myself.”

“Lord, is he planning on getting even stronger?” Riho chuckled.

But that’s what we all love about him.

“I learned at the academy, worked at the cafeteria, cultivated friendships, and kept my eye on my goals. I know you’ve got connections and bonds of your own. Remember them.”

“Passion! Passion!!”

Shut up, Shouma—but also, I agree.

Lloyd turned to Chrome with a questioning glance.

Chrome got it and nodded slowly.

Lloyd plucked a smallish knife from the crate and took a step toward the dummy.

“Take that goal to heart, and put all the work you’ve done toward it. Like this!”

With uncanny speed, he slashed at the dummy.

A moment later—

It was gone.

It was dusted so hard, what was left of it fell without a sound, leaving a little pile behind.

Turning back to the boy, Lloyd smiled.

“You’ll be able to do the same someday.”

There was a long silence.

That gradually turned to a murmur and then to thunderous applause.

“The stories were true!” “Hot damn, Instructor Lloyd!” “He pulverized steel plate!”

He’d used a dagger, and his slashes hadn’t looked that powerful—but they had easily turned that sturdy dummy to dust. Everyone gasped.

“Now then, this exam is all about seeing how you move. Even if you can do what I did, there’s no need to go that far. Sorry!”

With that, he easily hefted up a replacement dummy.

A living legend was showing just where his reputation came from—and he was promising they could all be that good someday. The crowd went wild.

Soon the exam resumed. The timid boy went at the dummy and showed what he could do.

Lloyd smiled happily, probably seeing himself in the kid.

The mood was much improved.

“I like the way this is going. Lloyd is a wonder.”

It was my mission to spread word of his feats to the world, so I couldn’t help but grin.

My comrade Shouma had captured this all on film. “Azami alone isn’t enough! The whole world needs to know about him!”

But as we spoke...

“___?!”

...I sensed something malicious rocketing our way.

“Shouma!”

“I know, Asako. She *would* pick her moment.”

Phyllo’s eyes were on the sky, too. “.....Bad news..... A new foe? Obviously not.”

She soon corrected herself. I’m sure readers know who the embodiment of malice truly is.

Everyone around me knew who was coming—and they were all scowling accordingly.

We wanted to share Lloyd’s wonders with the world. And this menace was the biggest impediment to that.

She was so hell-bent on monopolizing Lloyd, she’d pay no heed to propriety.

You guessed it, this was—

“Aughhh! Lloooooooyd! I missed youuuuuuu!”

“Gah! The kid grandma! I knew she’d come!”

The white devil was flying our way! Alka was a constant threat to Lloyd’s innocence!

“I knew the priestess of perversion would show up.”

“Selen, you are the last person— Ugh, not the time to quibble.”

“.....I *will* protect my Master’s big day.”

Alka could never, ever make a normal entrance—I almost respected her consistency.

“Passion! The white devil, moral turpitude personified! Sorry, but I’m gonna stop you ruining Lloyd’s teaching debut *and* pay you back for foisting your village work off on me!”

Shouma was making it personal. But it was hard to fend off Alka while also filming Lloyd. Since I hadn’t mastered my demon lord powers, we might well be in trouble.

“Hokay! Freshly minted instructor Lloyd’s ready for the plucking!”

“Don’t just drop in and freak out! People have rights!” Marie shrieked.

“Lloyd is the manifestation of my motivations as a demon lord!” Alka said, meaning every word. “I have the right to dote on him!”

That was a sudden revelation about her backstory, but nobody believed it. Even if it was true, everyone has the right to love. It’s the only fight worth taking. All you have to do is win.

“Damn kid grandma, still saying this crap after all this time...,” Marie swore.

“Ah-ha-ha! Keep going, Alky!” Rinko cheered. She really did make the most of life.

Oblivious to the hate she was accruing, Alka was on a rampage—and we weren’t enough to stop her. Poor Lloyd was about to get her poisonous fangs in him in front of all the future cadets— “I’m swiping Lloyd’s lips in pub—*guh*!”

—when someone tackled her hard.

Who could it be?

“You always were a damn fool!”

“Huh?! P-Pyrid?!”

Yes, the elderly man who *should* have been back in Kunlun.

A blow from someone every bit as powerful as her sent Alka careening off into the sky. She landed on the castle roof, reeling with shock.

“Wh-why are you...?”

Then Sou popped up, like he was just wandering by. “I brought him.”

“Huh?! Sou?!”

So this was the errand he’d mentioned.

“That’s our producer! He sensed Alka’s rampage coming!”

“It was nothing,” Sou said, shaking his head. “I’ve known her so long, I can predict these things.”

“I am *not* predictable! Whoa!” Alka grunted as Pyrid’s next blow left her swimming in air.

He grinned, winking at Lloyd. “Lloyd! I’ll handle this nitwit! You do your job!”

“Ah-ha-ha, thanks, Grandpa.”

That was Lloyd’s grandfather? A stir went ’round the crowd. Obviously—nobody else fought in the air.

“Damn you, Pyrid! *Hngggg!*”

This time, a bundle of tree roots had bound her tight.

“Stop it, Alka.”

Of all people—Micona was intervening.

“You would betray me now?!”

Holding Alka tight in her treant roots, Micona shook her head. “I have done no such thing,” she insisted. “I knew all along that interfering with your plans here would score me mad points with Marie. Hurr-hurr.”

It was a clever strategy, even if the cause was hopeless. But it worked in our favor.

“*Hurk...* If our positions were reversed, I’d have done the same!”

These two really thought alike.

Tightening the vines round Alka, Micona yelled down at Lloyd.

“Lloyd Belladonna! You’re a teacher—teach!”

“Micona! I’ll do my best!”

“.....”

Micona just shot him a silent thumbs-up. Nobody wanted their first day on the job to be a nightmare.

Anyway, while that was going on, more folks arrived.

“We’re here, Phyllo.”

“Sardin! In! Azami Military Academy’s entrance exam!”

“.....Mom, Dad.”

The Rokujou royals, and—

“Wow, the party never stops hopping here, huh?” Mena said, back in street clothes.

That got some genuine surprise from Phyllo. “.....You, too?!”

“Nah-ha-ha! Look again, Phyllo. It’s not just us! Right, Choline?”

Choline was right there with her. Merthophan looked so shocked, he almost dropped his daikon.

“Mm? Why are you here, Choline?”

“What, you ain’t happy to see me? Ditch the daikon and gimme a hug!”

Sou chuckled. “It’s Lloyd’s big day; I imagined the more the merrier. Brought them all along.”

“That’s the passion I love, Sou!” Shouma agreed.

Sou closed his eyes, smiling.

“But I learned this from Alka and Pyrid. Right?”

Pyrid had been cryogenically frozen and had lost those memories—so he just looked baffled.

“Mm? It rings a bell, but... Do you know more, Alka?”

Alka sighed but smiled. “You still can’t recall? I guess you said something like that. My rune son always was the lonely type.”

While they were going on, the familiar faces flocked together, watching Lloyd work.

Threonine’s voice was especially loud. “Whoaaa! I’m finally holding my granddaughter! Lloyd’s thing is nice, but this is far better!”

“Dad, you’re interrupting... Oh, Lloyd! Congrats on the new job!”

“Lloyd, stay elegant!”

Allan and Renge were there with him.

“I’d like a grandchild myself, but if I say anything, she’s liable to take drastic action...,” Robin muttered.

“I—I share that concern, Lord Robin. I imagine Lloyd could handle it, though,”

Minox said.

“Satan, I know Asako told you, but what’s the word?”

“Oh, Anzu, I asked him first.”

“Anzu, Rol, what say we all go together?”

““Never!””

They were off to the races. Satan had gone full harem manga protag.

And that got under a certain turtle’s shell.

“Dear lord...why only Seta? Why none for me?” Surtr grumbled.

“Heh-heh-heh... Want me to make you human? I could use a mad science break.” Eug pounced on the opportunity in the most ominous way.

“Isn’t this nice? Everyone’s here. This is such fun, Lou! Let’s enjoy the rest of our lives like this.”

“Precisely, Rinko. Until death do us part.”

Rinko and the king looked happy.

“Jeez, you can’t ever get bored with Lloyd around...or you, Selen.”

“Agreed! But I’m not letting anyone else have him.”

“Heh-heh. Talk’s cheap.”

Riho and Selen were old friends now, laughing together.

It was chaos...but everyone was having fun. I was smiling despite myself.

“This day’s supposed to be about the candidates,” Lloyd said—but he was also smiling.

Marie had somehow switched back to her witch robes and was clinging to his side.

“Score! Let’s use this as cover and slip back to the shop! Make me dinner, Lloyd!”

“Er, are you sure, Marie?”

“To me, that’s what home cooking is.”

Lloyd could hardly take offense to that.

“Then once work’s over, let me cook for everyone! I’ll show you how I’ve grown!”

“.....In.”

“Agreed!”

“Lloyd’s cooking? Been far too long.”

...We’ve supposed a lot of things in this series, but this ending needs none.

Each of our stories will go on, but I hope they’ll always be this merry. You see—this is a happy ending, no suppositions required.



Afterword

When I finished this last volume, I wasn't nearly as sad as I thought I'd be.

I'm definitely the kind of guy who gets into a funk after finishing games, novels, manga, *etc.* Once that rush of emotion goes away, I can't do anything else for a while. I figured my own work would take me out of commission for even longer—but instead, I just feel pleased with myself. Like I've achieved something.

Games these days have a lot to do after the last dungeon. Sometimes I feel like the post-game is where things really begin. The same thing happened with my own work... That's my current theory anyway.

The series isn't *done*; it's merely reached a stopping point.

If I feel like it, I can always write more about these characters; whether I can publish it or not doesn't matter. I can write for myself, for fun, for its own reward. I can make my own post-game whenever I like.

But since I have reached that stopping point, let me say this—I'm so grateful you let my first series get this far.

Since this is the last volume, I'm taking a much more serious tone here. Without further ado, the acknowledgments.

To my editor, Maizou— Thank you for being there from the very beginning. I may not be the best writer, but I hope we can work together again.

To my illustrator, Watanuki.

Thank you for all your lovely drawings. This final cover is truly a treasure. It's gone in my vault! I can tell how much love you've got for every character. Thank you so much.

To the manga artist, Fusemachi.

You're directly responsible for bringing in a ton of new readers. I was forever

impressed by how cute and funny and serious (when it should be) you made the series. Can't wait to see how you end things!

To the spin-off artist, Souchu. Thank you so much for drawing this. I gave you prose scripts, and you brought them to life. I can't be grateful enough.

And one last thank-you to my editors and everyone at Square Enix or involved in the anime.

Since this is the last volume, I thought I'd write a bit more about the cast.

This is a little present to readers who've followed me through this journey.

Lloyd Belladonna

When I started writing, I thought there'd be some novelty in having a "good boy" protagonist, so he's an amalgamation of all those "good boy" traits I'm lacking. You know how King Piccolo was created when the Dragonball Kami drove all the evil parts of himself out? Think that but backward.

His name comes from belladonna total alkaloids, which are found in medicine for runny noses.

I felt like he wasn't exactly the belladonna type, but I was going for a new writer award, so I didn't want to overthink it. I've gone five years on the "good enough for now" principle, so he's just a belladonna forever.

From the start, I had this story planned around Lloyd, Alka, and Sou [the Japanese word for "total"]...but, well, plans don't always work out, lol.

Alka (Ruka Akizuki)

The personification of evil, she's basically a deus ex machina. She's Leopardon in the Toei Spider-Man series. Anytime she shows up, the problem's solved.

I'd seen the prize editor tweet about how cute kid grandmas are on Twitter, so I figured I'd put one in, and that's her origin story.

She's never gonna get a happy ending, so I might as well do whatever I want with her, I thought, and she indulged her id until the bitter end.

Marie (Maria Azami)

She's based on the local cops in the Mitsuhiro Asami series. They're dismissive of Mitsuhiro's attempts to involve himself in their cases but do an about-face the second they learn he's the brother of the chief detective. One of those characters who start out hostile but quickly end up bowing and scraping.

I wound up with a girl who can't do housework and a boy who mothers her, and to breathe a little more life in, I gave her all my worst traits, and she became really easy to stick in anywhere.

Selen Hemein

Her name came from zinc [*aen* in Japanese, sounds like "ein"] and other health supplement ingredients. She's one of *those* characters—many people have told me they preferred her as the cursed belt princess.

When I was writing a sci-fi series, she was an information broker whose disguises came from wrapping herself in full-body memory alloy, but when I moved to RPG jokes, I thought, *Then she's got cursed equipment*, and the cursed belt princess was born.

I thought having her be in love with the main character would help mix things up, and I piled stuff on until she escalated... By Volume 4, she was completely out of my control.

Riho Flavin

Her name comes from Vitamin B₂. An obvious baddie, out to trick the protagonist—but instead is the first to sense his true power. Entirely created so I could do that scene.

But as the character fleshed out, she got awfully cute on me. I know!

And her love for money gave me a nice recurring punch line. She's great at mocking the other characters, and legit smart, so she helped move the plot along. Very helpful to have around.

Allan Toin Lidocaine

His name comes from things used to repair the mucus membrane, *etc.*

He's there to be the brunt of jokes. In my mind, those characters always carry axes.

He wound up idolizing Lloyd, but there was also a timeline where he was a big brother type, always looking after the innocent powerhouse. Riho wound up swiping that role, and he went straight to hell. But he did come through in a pinch and got a happy ending. An average Joe who lived a solid life.

Merthophan Dextro

Dextromethorphan is used in cough medicines. I meant him to be a strong ally, the guy who knew just how strong the lead was...so I made him pretty funny to start.

But when he reentered the plot, he went from “pretty funny” to “total clown,” dressing like that for the sake of the farm. He's a reflection of my sense of humor, so he was easy to throw in. I did propose a spin-off series about Merthophan's farming life, and Square Enix said I must be kidding. Only, you know, more nicely than that.

Choline Sterase

I just needed someone for Merthophan to bounce off of and had no plan for her at all.

Since I planned to have her deliver a lot of exposition, I figured it should be obvious who was talking, so I gave her an accent. That was really it...but if you give yourself a blank canvas, you can fill it up quick. Before I knew it, she was in love with Merthophan and had a history with Rol back in Rokujou—and once I saw how cute Watanuki made her, I figured she had more potential. I made her a regular and teamed her up with Mena. The Watanuki magic.

Chrome Molybdenum

Like the name implies, he's all stiff and sturdy.

He was born entirely for the skit where the job applicant is clearly not normal.

Since anyone who can tell how good Lloyd is must be strong themselves, I figured, *Why not make him the former head of the royal guards?*

Since he was at the mercy of the plot a lot, I figured a drill sergeant base would make things easy for me. I didn't write him any rewards, but I hope he gets them someday.

King Azami (Luke Thistle Azami)

Since this was written for a contest, I didn't consider sequels and didn't originally name him. Azami means "thistle," and Luke came from the Japanese pronunciation of milk [*miruku*]"—“milk thistle.” I had no plans for him after he was freed from Abaddon, so his entire personality was made up to give Chrome a headache. (Snerk.) He wound up being a boss who's motivated but mostly makes trouble for everyone.

Phyllo Quinone

She and Mena are the Vitamin K sisters. They were originally thug brothers with Phyllo as the strong but dumb one, but my editor said, “That won't sell.” One thing led to another, and I ended up reusing a character from an older submission.

A monosyllabic mutterer works well on setup and punch line, and having “.....” before every line made things easy. She wound up teamed with Riho and Selen. Quietly effective. I really like her.

Mena Quinone

If Phyllo was all-natural, Mena cultivated her goofy side. She acts wacky and plays dumb but is actually pretty sensible; when things get too wild, her true self comes out. That was the plan, anyway... Traits got piled on later, and she wound up being a mercenary actress princess, and I regret letting things get that out of hand.

I like her enough that I sort of wish I'd done more romantic scenes between her and Lloyd.

Rol Calcife

The mean girl. Her name comes from calcium. You know the whole “not enough calcium makes you irritable” thing? She’s always frustrated about *something*.

Since I was adding a beef with Choline, I figured she had a Western/Kansai accent...so then why does her sister figure, Riho, talk normally? Well, they must have been orphans collected from all over! That’s how lots of details get decided in this house.

She was manipulated into evil and later reformed. I didn’t have a plan for after that, but since my main cast weren’t conceited, gunning for promotions, or obsessed, she wound up coming back a lot.

She was easy to use, never gave me trouble—promoted herself to prime time.

Kikyou

I’d originally planned Volume 3 to star Mena in her role, but Volume 2 seemed a bit lacking, so I moved Mena up a volume—and the gulf was filled with Kikyou. She plays dumb when she needs to, a variation on Mena.

I had her penciled in as a classmate to Choline and Rol. All Rokujou Sorcery Academy graduates and friends. Traveling together, Kikyou yells at the sea as Choline comforts her. Kikyou envies Choline’s thing with Merthophan. When Rol sneers at her, she snaps, “Maybe you should try making your own friends.” Critical hit.

I did have ideas along those lines, but sorry, they never came to fruition.

Coba Lamin

Former head of the royal guards, current hotel owner. That suggests he’s the most successful cast member! Just invented for the hotel skits, but definitely a character I wish I’d used more.

Threonine

Wasn’t originally Allan’s father but a Jiou Empire minister.

I was thinking of having an enemy minister take a liking to Lloyd, allowing him to act as a mediator despite being a cadet, but my editor wisely pointed out it was weird to have an arranged marriage without any of Allan's family present, so his background changed fast.

I kept the same personality, and he proved a weirdly great match with Allan's, so in hindsight, brilliant (snerk) move.

Robin Hemein

His name comes from *hemoglobin*. He and Selen make for an iron-like family. Originally, he was an unnamed background character but wound up playing a pretty major part to balance Allan out.

Since I had ideas for both fathers, the story itself became a dad arc, then also a Selen arc. He's that classic "dotes on his daughter but doesn't know how to deal with girls her age" trope.

Incidentally, while I've got no notes on Allan's mother, Selen's mother is off somewhere leading the resistance.

"You need strength to remove the cursed belt? Cool, then I'd better become a country-saving hero!" She's a legend in merc circles. When she found out her daughter was free, she lost the motivation to lead that resistance and started thinking up ways to have Lloyd save the place for her—but I never wound up using that idea. Selen gets her hustle from her mom.

Minoxi

He didn't get a name in the original novel; he was just the secretary. But he needed a name for the anime, so I grabbed this from hair loss treatment products.

Just between us, the reason there were many bald characters in Volume 3 was because I'd lost hair from stress, and I wanted to write off the hair growth products as a business expense. I had this silly idea I would wedge in a scene of them testing different gels to justify that. (See also Zanoff in the spin-off.)

But the times being what they are, that ran afoul of rules and regulations, I

abandoned the idea of getting nitty-gritty, and we just wound up with loads of baldies.

Fusemachi's manga made him seem like a pretty swell guy and made me want to give him another shot, so he got to strut his stuff in Volume 13. Feats I never expected from him—betraying the author's expectations in a good way.

Micono Zol

She became a sub-regular on me, showing up nearly every time since her intro.

Since she was the only character who didn't like Lloyd, that made her real easy to use; add that to her freak show side, and she proved unstoppable.

And nobody felt sorry for her if she met with a little pain, which was fun.

Shouma

Lloyd's fan 1.

My editor said it would be cool if there was a villainous Kunlun villager, and he's the result—but I struggled to think of a motivation and wound up with a handsome dude who loved Lloyd so much, he did exactly what Lloyd didn't want him to. Not really the plan, and I have regrets, but it largely worked out.

Sou

Lloyd's fan 2.

An ancient hero unable to vanish, trying to make Lloyd into a new hero to free himself. Originally the last boss of this series. He wound up being an old man who dotes on Lloyd. He started out as a sinister figure asking, "Who do you see me as?" like some kind of urban legend, and wound up with a camera in hand, chasing his bias around. What went wrong?

The Sou-Alka-Lloyd narrative disintegrated. He got dragged off the last boss throne, but I feel like this role fit him better.

Anzu Kyounin

After the big changes in Volume 5, I thought it would be fun to pull a One Piece and have all the world powers meet up. This swordswoman was born just to fill out that crowd.

I just happen to really like Asian big-sister-type sword girls, but when she took a lead role in Volume 7, I found myself short on characters who would react to things, and she became a bit of a disaster. Never imagined she'd wind up playing a critical role in the climax (albeit one entirely improvised). That's the fun of writing.

Eve Profen (President Eva)

Somehow, she turned into the last boss. I just threw in a mystery mascot character to fill out the crowd, no plans for her at all, but since she was a blank slate, there was room to work with, and I ended up giving her the heel turn. Didn't have any clue what was inside her until the back half of the story.

The idea that she had animal minions went nowhere, and in my mind, she turned into a hedonist who lied and tricked her way through life.

She became an old woman on the brink of death, obsessed with life and her regrets, who attained immortality just as she reached peak panic—and that twisted her permanently. She knew what she lacked was companionship but had lived her whole life using everyone and couldn't find a way to stop. Her own conflicts led her to extremes—quite a tragic history for our main villain.

King Sardin

Sucks up to everyone, can't be read, acts like an idiot, holds all the power, but actually—one of *those* characters.

He played the dumb dandy a bit too much, and my own worst impulses left him being a dumbass most of the time.

Ubi Quinone

Assassin mommy, but also there to roast Sardin. If Sardin has traits in common with Mena, then she's a match for Phyllo, I thought. That's why they both ended up unable to hold their booze, too. Possibly my personal favorite

character design.

Tiger ☆ Nexamic

His name comes from Tranexamic. [In katakana, “tra” is “tora” or “tiger.”]

One of the domain’s fistfighters—which means he’s all about muscle! That was all the thought I put into him. He was the single character I had to put the least effort into—he was always right there where I needed him. Really forced me to admit I have an addiction to dumb jokes.

On the technical side, having “Mwa-ha-ha” made him so easy to distinguish—in my heart, he’s part of the main cast.

Renge Audoc

Her name’s an anagram of Ouren Gedokuto, a Chinese herbal medicine used to treat hot flashes. That’s why she spent so much time beet red!

Unable to match Anzu, ashamed of her country origins and forcing herself to act elegant—that was the core concept. That side of her blew up on me, and she wound up trying to get Anzu back by allying with the dashing city hero, Allan, and that went too far, and they got married... She and Allan probably got the happiest ending.

Satan (Seta)

I may have been the most emotionally invested in him. My favorite wussy demon lord.

He functions as a story milestone, and after his awakening, I started intentionally inserting him into flashbacks from Volume 8 on. Good in school, crap on the job, head full of dreams, too weak-willed to be much of a demon lord.

At one point, I planned to have him working with Shouma behind the scenes. Since Shouma was the hero who knows his own strength type, I made Satan a light novel cliché—terrible on the job but a demon lord in another world.

Can’t achieve results and carried by the rest of his team, but in a different

setting, his talents show... He's really living the *isekai* hero dream. Then our heroine (Lloyd, lol) fell in love with him, and he turned into a mentor character.

He was supposed to die so Lloyd could awaken, but I got too attached and couldn't bring myself to off him. I wanted to take advantage of the "demon lords come back awhile after they die" so we could end with Satan showing back up to go, "You've grown so strong, Lloyd!"

Pamela

Watanuki drew a bunch of extras for the Volume 4 crowd scene, and they were so cute, I wound up giving the glasses girl lines here and there, and before I knew it, she had a name.

Adjusting her glasses as she makes Lloyd dress up, she serves as my proxy in the world. The most confident in her own deal, and totally capable of matching pace with Sou and Shouma—perhaps she was the most terrifying creation of all.

Vritra (Jin Ishikura)

He started out as just a name given to the cursed belt and somehow became critical to everything. I like the human version quite a bit; in the old world, he was every bit as put upon as Chrome.

"Apologize in writing at a later date" was actually what got the ball rolling on my ideas for the old world and for the relationships between Alka, Satan, Eug, *etc.*

Asako Ishikura

I only decided Eve should be inside Ishikura's daughter in the second half of the series. Like her father, her name comes from the kanji in Chinese medicine's Ma Ze Ren Wan. All after the fact (lol).

Originally, I had it in my head that the narration for this series was Riho telling the story to the kids in the orphanage, but a thought struck me near the end, and I gave that bit to her. It actually works out pretty well...I think.

Last Dungeon's improvisation in action.

I had things to write about other characters, too, but...sorry, I want to share a personal message here.

To my father, who fell sick while I was writing this afterword.

I'm shocked to learn you can no longer move around. I knew it was coming eventually, but not this fast. I can't bear to watch you enduring the pain and resting at home, so I'm choosing this way to talk to you. For that, I'm sorry.

You were the best father I could imagine.

You might love the horses and your drink, and crack jokes about what a lousy dad you were, but when I was at a crossroads, you said to do what I wanted as long as I had my health. And that proved to be the push I needed.

Those words—and having you as a father—helped me keep going and become the author I am today.

That didn't stop once I got published; you were never one for compliments, but you told me in so many words how impressed you were, and I'll treasure that moment for the rest of my life.

You said, "Please," and meant volumes with it, and I'm doing everything I can to live up to that request.

I'm hardly a model son, but I'm gonna do what I can. Thank you so much. Please rest.

Sorry to put something that personal in this afterword.

I'm here because of my readers, the publishing staff, and my family.

I never planned on it, but reading back through *Last Dungeon*, there sure are a lot of moms and dads working for their families.

I'm sure people making the effort for those closest to them were the ones I unconsciously wanted to write about. I wrote about an oblivious boy, while I myself was blind to my own goals.

Now that I know better, I want to return the favor, both to my own parents, and to the friends who were there for me.

And to my readers—I'm going to work even harder to bring you fun stories. I

hope you'll join me again someday.

Thank you.

Toshio Satou

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