

Toshio Satou

Illustration by
Nao Watanuki

12

Suppose

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

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Nao Watanuki



Suppose

a Kid ^{from the} LAST DUNGEON
BOONIES moved ^{to} Starter Town

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"You
leave me
with no
choice!"

"Take that hood
off and face
the music!"

Mysterious beauty Rinko
has infiltrated the royals! Inept
detective Marie is on the case!



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You're
done,
Eug.



Demon Lord Alka

Your favorite
village chief has
a second form.

Alka **transforms** into a disaster
beyond **human knowledge**?!
You really shouldn't make the **chief mad**!



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ON
NEW YORK

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SUPPOSE A KID FROM THE LAST DUNGEON BOONIES MOVED TO A STARTER TOWN 12

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 12

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Character Profiles



Lloyd Belladonna

Boy raised in the town of legend. Worried about his career path.



Marie the Witch

Mystery shopkeeper. Actually the Princess of Azami.



Alka

Immortal chief of the town of legend. Dotes on Lloyd.



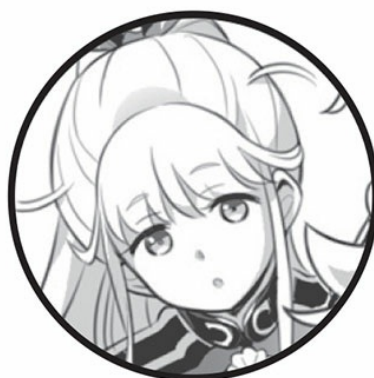
Selen Hemein

Lloyd saved her from a curse. Madly in love with the man of her destiny.



Riho Flavin

Former skilled mercenary. Joined Lloyd at the Azami Military Academy.



Phyllo Quinone

A martial artist who insists Lloyd is her master. Also in love with him.



Micono Zol

Upperclassman at Lloyd's school. In love with Marie.



Allan Lidocaine

Noble's son and follower of Lloyd. Now married to Renge.



Luke Thistle Azami

King of Azami. His wife is back, and he's devoted to her.



Rinko

The missing queen of Azami—which makes her Marie's mom.



Fumar Ketoshifen

Captain of the Maritime Guild. Old friends with the king.



Merthophan Dextro

Former Azami Army Colonel. Currently an agricultural evangelist.



Satan

The Demon Lord of the Night. Has memories of the old world.



Lena Eug

Scientist from the old world. Sees Alka as her greatest rival.



Eve Profen

King of Profen. Knows the truth behind this world.



Dwarf Demon Lord

A wild and crazy demon lord spotted up north.



Priestess of Salvation

Legends claim she defeated the dwarf demon lord.

Prologue

One day, in an Azami Kingdom military briefing room—

The plain white walls were devoid of adornments, instead covered with detailed topographical maps, photos of the lands near the border, and bookshelves filled to the brim with reports of suspicious activities. It was quite an intimidating sight.

A far cry from the cozy meeting room where the king usually brainstormed the latest festivities.

The list of attendees matched the intensity: the king himself, Chrome, guild leaders, members, and affiliates, and the top brass of the Azami military—an impressive array.

Standouts included the Adventure Guild's smart, tough proxy chief, Katsu Kondo, and the Maritime Guild's Captain Fumar Ketoshifen, the man who single-handedly kept the kingdom's trade alive while looking like a pirate. With those two around, any room would resemble a scene from a crime film.

Choline was passing out tea, looking uncharacteristically nervous.

The meeting's agenda was scrawled on a chalkboard in giant letters: *The Azami Military Exercise*. Below that was a long list of pros and cons, evidence that the meeting had been going on for a while.

Frustration was evident on the stern faces of the military brass. One of them slammed a fist on the table, spilling the freshly poured tea. What a waste.

He offered no apology for this and lashed out in anger.

"How many times must I say it? The situation is far too dire for mere exercises! We must strike at once! How else can I call myself Lieutenant General Casitas, the director of military affairs?!"

“Now, now, Lieutenant General...,” the king began, but Casitas was in no mood to be soothed.

“Even as we speak, the Jiou Empire could well be preparing a second or third attack every bit as dire as that curse! We cannot stand for it!”

The pudgy man next to him nodded.

“I agree entirely. Victory will slip from our grasp with this leisurely approach. As chief of the Weapon Merchants Guild—the name’s Hydra, by the way—I believe we should attack while we have the supplies to do so.”

But the head of the army’s diplomatic wing was less enthused.

“Mr. Hydra, Lieutenant General Casitas—I understand both your points. But launching an offensive without consulting our allies is an extremely bad move. These exercises will heighten our coordination with the guilds and allow us to assess the international response.”

He very much wanted to float an observation balloon, but Casitas was having none of that.

“Out of the question, Director. We’re past that point! We don’t need international approval when we’re already at war. Especially when the Jiou Empire is only too happy to act like an obvious villain! Every country in the world is undoubtedly horrified by what they’ve done. Don’t you think so, too, Merthophan?”

He turned to a man watching from the back, arms folded. A former colonel in the Azami military, he was now an agricultural adviser.

He responded with only silence.

“What’s this? The man who despises Jiou more than any other, the ringleader of the hawks—has his tongue tied? Merthophan Dextro, I thought your actions were driven by contempt for this infernal torpor!”

Casitas emphasized the word *actions* rather strongly, likely hinting that the wrong answer here would result in all the guild leaders learning about Merthophan’s attempted coup.

“Wha—?” Choline spluttered. Casitas knew the truth but was using it anyway,

and she seriously considered dumping the hot tea on his head. However, it only took a single flex of Chrome's square jaw for her to think better of it.

"Don't," Chrome growled. "Not while the man himself is keeping quiet."

"Urgh..."

Perhaps having seen the two whispering, Merthophan at last spoke up.

"I know what you want me to say, Lieutenant General, but I believe it is too soon."

"Oh? For what reason? It had better be a good one," Hydra said, glaring at him.

"Agriculture, of course," Merthophan said, with the utmost confidence.

A long silence settled over the room.

The unexpected invocation of farming left a bead of sweat running down Hydra's jowls.

"A-agriculture?"

"Yes! The essence of our very world!"

The scope of his remarks was expanding dramatically as he leaned across the table, his voice booming, oblivious to the uncomprehending stares.

"Starting a war at this time of year, with no guarantees or securities? Ordering farmers near the border to abandon their fields with no warning whatsoever—and doing so right before the harvest? Nothing could be worse. The whole point of this exercise is to drill the evacuation for agricultural needs—from a farming standpoint, it's an absolute necessity."

He spoke with immense passion, his love overflowing. The members of the Farmer's Guild next to him were looking rather aghast. This was their job, their specialty, yet here he was geeking out in front of them.

His point *did* make a certain amount of sense, however, so it silenced the hawks' objections.

Fumar noted that and cackled.

"Can't argue with that, can you, young soldier? Arms dealer? Provisions

always gotta come first, especially if the war looks to drag on.”

“B-but if we can end it quick—”

“Hmm?”

“Eek!”

Hydra had foolishly attempted to respond, but a single glare from Fumar put the fear of god in him.

Silence fell, and the mysterious hooded woman seated at the king’s side clapped her hands for attention.

“So we’re good to move forward with these exercises?”

“I certainly am!”

“The king approves. That settles it!”

This lady was using the royal seal of approval to push things through, but since almost nobody here knew who she was or why she was seated *there*, her presence wasn’t sitting well with the attendees. It was like an important new character getting added out of nowhere far too late into a series.

This hooded late-cast addition seemed to have the king’s absolute trust, and Chrome was raising no objections, so no one had dared protest.

But the director of military affairs was desperate to turn the tide of this meeting, and so he grasped at that straw.

“Um, Your Majesty, we’ve all been wondering...just who is this lady? She’s... rather suspicious...”

Ordinarily, Chrome would have chided him for speaking to the king like this, but he let it pass for once. He was aware the same thought was on everyone’s mind. Curious himself, he muttered, “Exactly!” after the man raised his point. Choline, Merthophan, and even Mena were all staring at the hooded lady.

She made a show of thinking it over.

“Mm, I’m...you know. A mysterious, brilliant military strategist.”

That was hardly an answer, and calling yourself mysterious never boded well.

“That’s, like, blatantly refusing to answer...,” Hydra said, rubbing his temples.

But in response, the Adventurer Guild proxy chief—Katsu Kondo—exploded.

“Hah? You heard her!” he roared, leaping to his feet. “She’s a gorgeous and enigmatic military strategist! Nothing more, nothing less! Do I need to make you a new earhole with this knife?!”

The king and Fumar both gave their support.

“Yes, a beautiful, mysterious military strategist. I say so, and I’m king, so it must be true.”

“She’s a gorgeous, enigmatic military tactician! What part of that is in doubt? Do you wanna wind up sleeping with the fishes?!”

The timing of their sentences was starting to resemble some sort of skit, and the inscrutable military strategist looked almost as appalled as Hydra.

“Beautiful?” the hooded lady muttered. “I don’t mind using that word on myself, but hearing it from others is kinda uncomfortable...”

With two of the most powerful men in the kingdom scowling at them, nobody dared press further. And with many doubts remaining, the meeting came to a close. The plan to hold a military exercise was to proceed.

“Ugh, what a hassle.”

After the meeting ended, the king, Fumar, Katsu, and the mysterious military strategist had uncorked a bottle of wine and were celebrating a job well done.

She’d dropped the hood and straightened out her hair with her fingers. She wore black-rimmed glasses and had an easygoing attitude. This was Marie’s mother, queen of the kingdom, chief of the Adventurer Guild, and in a former life, Alka’s boss—Rien Cordelia, lab chief at the Cordelia Research Institute. Now known as Rinko. What a lot of titles!

She must have found the meeting room hot, because she was fanning her chest.



The king bobbed his head apologetically.

“I know we must keep your identity a secret, but it pains me to conceal the truth from my most trusted advisers.”

Rinko slapped him on the shoulder and shook her head.

“I know just how you feel, but I’m supposed to be dead. I don’t want word getting out—especially when I’m still trying to figure out how to reconnect with my daughter.”

Aha...that would be tough.

All three of them sympathized with her there but also found themselves grinning at the thought.

And that was making Rinko squirm, so she awkwardly changed the subject.

“There’s that, but like I said, someone in that bunch is *definitely* leaking information to Jiou.”

Fumar grinned, clearly enjoying seeing her like this.

“*Sure,*” he said. “That’s why we didn’t rush to announce your return.”

Rinko cleared her throat, trying to turn their attention to the spy.

“I looked into each incident. The exhibition match, the affair with Abaddon—each time they knew far too much about us. Too many things that could only be found out if our military was an open book.”

Katsu took over here. “And there was the recent Tramadol incident. That plan would never have worked without an insider. You must act on that assumption.”

The king frowned, concerned.

“So we must assume they’ll know all about this exercise?”

Rinko grinned.

“Flushing these people out is *why* I proposed the exercise in the first place. Coordinating with the guilds is also important, but the mole hunt is the real goal here.”

“My wife *is* a genius military strategist,” the king exclaimed.

“There he goes again,” Fumar said, rolling his eyes. “Best you straighten your armies out before they wind up delivering a broadside to that silly grin.”

“Now, now, Fumar,” Katsu said.

The captain might have been a *bit* childish for his age, but that was part of what made him an inspiring leader.

Rinko chuckled—like this alone was payback.

Fumar shook his fist at her, but she went back to the subject at hand.

“As for who our moles are, there were two who were being very obvious.”

“Lieutenant General Casitas, the director of military affairs, and Hydra, the head of the Weapon Merchants Guild,” Katsu said. Rinko nodded.

Fumar—himself once a soldier—winced. They’d been all too transparent.

“The director’s position is more or less ceremonial in times of peace. He’s gotta answer to everyone, and his budget keeps getting slashed. War would give him the means to throw his weight around, and he likely believes he’s the one in control of any information he and Jiou are exchanging.”

“He is totally the type who thinks he’s playing someone and gets played instead.” Rinko bobbed her head again. “Same with that chubby arms dealer.”

Katsu adjusted his glasses, adding, “The Weapon Merchants Guild’s motivation is patently obvious. Their wares sell like hotcakes during wars.”

“So keep your eyes on the both of them. The exercise serves as good bait; if they leak it to the other side, we’ll be watching and can collect solid evidence they’ve done so. That’s the goal here anyway.”

Rinko looked confident—but the king less so.

“Still...they’ve never even let us see their shadows before. Are they really going to be caught so easily?”

Katsu stepped forward, eyes on Rinko. “All members of the Adventurer Guild are at your disposal, Chief. Just say the word.”

She slapped his head heartily. “We’re fine!” she said. “You always were

uptight about these things, Kacchin. Lemme handle it. I know just the people for a covert op.”

“You do?”

“Yup. Come on iiiin!” she yelled, like the MC of a variety show.

The door opened, and a nervous-looking man came in—and not just him. He wore noble vestments, and he had downturned eyes and hair that made you wonder just how it was even possible to get it that messy—a real bird’s nest. And inside that nest was a red tortoise.

The man and his turtle awkwardly glanced around the room, looking so untrustworthy that even Katsu objected.

“Chief, what about this guy is...covert? He’s got a turtle on his head!”

Fumar clapped him on the shoulder. “Don’t you worry, Proxy. This guy’s way... wilder than he looks.”

There was a genuine bead of sweat running down the captain’s brow.

“Oh. If you say so...I trust your judgment.”

“You do?” Fumar said, blinking. “I had you down as the type who’d insist you’d be more useful.”

“I would have done so before, but...I was just taught a harsh lesson about judging others by their appearance.”

Ah. He meant Lloyd.

“Glad you’re convinced,” Rinko said, nodding. She turned to introduce the new arrivals. “You’re up! Gimme the rundown.”

This rattled the man, but he bobbed his head.

“I dunno about all that, but... Argh, I’m not good with royalty. So, um...I’m Satan? I used to work for the lady here.”

That was back at the Cordelia Research Institute, when Satan was not a demon lord but a man named Naruhiko Seta. This wasn’t information that could be readily shared, so he picked his words carefully.

That just made him even more suspicious, but since Rinko had brought him

here and Fumar had said he could be trusted...Katsu reluctantly accepted him.

“I see, like my predecessor, then. I’m proxy chief of the Adventurer Guild, Katsu Kondo. But why the turtle?”

The reply came not from Satan but from the turtle in question.

“Hold on there, buddy! I ain’t no turtle. The name’s Surtr. I only *look* like one.”

“A t-talking turtle?!”

The king had been through a lot, but this was new. Even Fumar went for his sword.

“?! A monster? Or...he’s a monster tamer? That would explain his strength.”

Surtr did not appreciate this categorization or the assumption of subjugation.

“Do I look like a pet to you, buster?! Gimme a break. The girls used to fall all over me! And not as a pet! As a proper man!”

“Yo, Surtr, can it with the lies. Ain’t no girls ever liked you.”

Yes, the turtle here was the demon lord of fire—Surtr. In a previous life, he’d been a chubby scientist named Tony, and he and Seta had been locked in an extremely expensive battle over a cabaret girl. You could say they were both equally bad.

“Lies, my fat ass! Why I oughtta...”

“Hey! Stop eating my hair! It only *looks* like seaweed!”

“And whose fault is *that*?! You’ll never know how I feel! I figured I’d end up looking like a mascot character, but to actually become a real tortoise— There go my dreams of the cabaret girls lining up to pet me!”

Turtle shells are prone to infection, which is one reason why the creatures regularly shed the top layer.

Rinko watched them bicker with a grin, but then she clapped her hands, putting an end to it.

“Okay, enough jibber-jabber. I’ve asked these two to look into things on the sly, so help them with that.”

They might have been a dissolute nobleman and a turtle, but no one here could refuse Rinko's request. They were ride or die on her coattails. If the turtle could talk, they didn't care if it was a monster or a demon lord—they were ready to help.

"Best we call it a day or Chrome will start to fret."

"Riiight. Katsu, wanna grab a drink after?"

"The sun's still up."

All three men left, leaving Rinko with the demon lords.

She'd been waving merrily at the old-timer trio, but the instant they were gone, she wheeled round, all business.

"So I'll need you to drive out the Jiou spies in the Azami army. And you know what's next."

"Yeah. Find out if they're connected to Eve of Profen, and make that intel our priority."

"Exactly. Nothing matters more than information leading back to Eve—our former employee, President Eva. Any lead you find, mine it as deep as you can, and I don't care how."

Surtr nodded.

"That's a heavy responsibility you're laying on us. I'll do what I can, Boss—but it's hard to believe President Eva turned into a demon lord and is still with us. And up to no good at that— Well, she didn't start her own country in that political climate based on lack of derring-do."

"It's all still conjecture, but I'd say odds are high that what she's got in mind is bad news. We need to know everything we can. Including finding out if she really *is* President Eva."

That last line made them both bow.

"I know that, Lab Chief. She'll be watching out for you, so you've gotta keep a low profile. You and Alka."

"It sure ticks me off, but she never did have any respect for the two of us—

which gives us an advantage, here.”

“Thanks, boys. If she’s got both Alka and Eug fooled, her goal must lie somewhere beyond simple immortality—and *that*, we’ve gotta stop.”

The man and the turtle both nodded grimly and turned to leave.

“Our fate is in your hands...and I’ll do my part. So I can age with Luke and Maria and die like any regular person.”

Chapter 1

Academy Madonna: Given Special Treatment to Prevent Everyone Going to War Over Her

“So that’s what this exercise is about.”

A classroom in the Azami Military Academy.

Chrome was giving Lloyd and the other cadets a rundown on the meeting, but this was all too sudden, and no one looked particularly excited.

Lloyd raised his hand, voicing the question on everyone’s mind.

“Um, excuse me, but—what do we *do* during military exercises?”

“Oh, good point, Lloyd. Right, I need to explain that first.”

Nodding, Chrome turned to the blackboard and launched into a lecture. To ensure his students could follow it, he avoided the more specialized bits and gave an overall gist.

“Basically, the goal is to rehearse how we coordinate the actions of our troops with those of the guild members. The exercises take place near the borders and simulate troop movements in the event of an invasion, including logistical support. More specifically, establishing supply routes, where detours need to be, and how best to protect villages near the border.”

Riho had been a mercenary and found Chrome’s version a little lacking.

“So basically the war version of a fire drill. Not exactly good times.”

She’d been a war orphan and was only too aware of the downsides of these conflicts.

“I get where you’re coming from,” Allan said. He was the son of a local lord and had a different perspective. “But you’re a soldier now. Wars are fought to protect civilians.”

“Wow, that’s a sound argument for once. I guess you aren’t the fresh face of the army for nothing.”

Phyllo raised her hand. A martial artist, she was always inconspicuous.

“.....This isn’t just about working with the guilds. It’s also a warning to the Jiou Empire, right?”

“Much as I hate to admit it, yes. They got us pretty good with that curse incident.”

The Azami army had been purely reactive, so this *also* served to show the populace they weren’t standing idly by. Phyllo’s keen observation impressed everyone.

“.....Figured.”

“Gosh, Phyllo!” Lloyd gushed. “Is that the voice of experience?”

“.....Mm.”

She had a crush on him and responded to his effusive praise by giving a peace sign.

Naturally, one girl wasn’t about to overlook her rival scoring points—your favorite Lloyd stalker, Selen.

Without a sound, she placed herself right next to Lloyd, feigning fear.

“We may have experienced all the trials and tribulations of love, but war is still very scary. Right, Sir Lloyd?”

“What’s scary is how the smallest provocation makes you sneak up on Lloyd.”

“.....Peel her off.”

Riho and Phyllo were getting good at reining in Selen. The practiced ease with which they pried her away was a testament to how regularly she behaved abnormally.

The cursed belt around Selen’s waist—Vritra—apologized on her behalf.

“I do beg your pardon. My mistress, Selen, has caused problems again, Lloyd. I’ll ensure you receive a written apology tomorrow.”

“Vritra, you’ve got nothing to be sorry about.”



His kind words made the belt's voice tremble.

"It's my duty to restrain her eccentricities. You're a good lad, Lloyd. Mistress, if you love him, perhaps you should follow his example and *behave* for—urk!"

The instant he started reproaching her, she tied him into a bow. It was quite a tight knot and looked like it hurt.

"Vritra, have you forgotten who you belong to?"

"Yes, terribly sorry."

He might not be much of a vassal, but he had once been a man named Ishikura, a director at the Cordelia Research Institute—and rather famously strict with his subordinates. (Okay, mostly with Seta.) His infamous glare earned him the moniker Snake-Eyes Ishikura.

With his enthusiasm for education intact, he'd been reborn as a giant snake, and one twist after another had led to him possessing Selen's belt. This had left him at the mercy of her staggering stalker tendencies—rather the opposite of a success story.

"Urgh, I'm sorry I said anything—and sorry for feeling this sorry."

"You gotta cut Vritra a little slack, Selen. It's derailing the conversation, and frankly, I don't like hearing grown men cry."

Once Vritra was undone, Chrome got back to the topic at hand.

"Ahem. Naturally, both cadets and soldiers will be taking part in this exercise."

"In what role, specifically? One in which I will have a chance to score with Sir Lloyd, I assume?"

Selen was still intent on making this all about her, and Chrome was disinterested in engaging with the word *score* on any level, so he simply smiled broadly.

"I don't know what you mean, but your recent internships gave us a sense of your capabilities, and you'll be posted with the appropriate divisions."

"The internships that ended inconclusively?" Allan asked.

Chrome winced and pulled up a stack of papers.

“I’ll be handing you each a document regarding your postings. Starting tomorrow, you’ll be spending your afternoons at your placements, so be ready to follow their orders. Get your hair cut, your nails done, and your uniforms cleaned.”

He ran down the class list, handing out each sheet, and students took them while saying “Oh, there...” or “Whew, that’s what I wanted...”

“They’re based on your skills and the surveys about your preferences, so I doubt there’s anything too upsetting here, but lemme know if you’ve got any —”

Riho immediately shot her hand up.

“Objection!”

“Already?!”

She was stomping up to his podium, radiating fury. Where had he gone wrong?

“Wh-what’s the problem, Riho?”

“Why am I in the intelligence division?!”

Chrome blinked at her.

“Why wouldn’t you be? You wrote ‘anywhere you can make a buck’ as an answer on your survey, and they pay pretty well. In exchange for unstable vacation hours, though...”

Hearing that, Riho kicked herself as she recalled her answer to the questionnaire.

“Crap, you got me there, but...can we change it, Colonel Chrome?”

“Mm? What for?”

“Rol runs that place. I just know she’s gonna use and abuse me.”

Rol Calcife. She’d been like a sister to Riho at the orphanage and had grown up to be a calculated, arrogant woman—you know, the kind with no friends. She’d insisted such frivolities merely interfered with her career, but her

colleague Choline argued she was making excuses as it was unrelated to her aspirations.

“Sorry,” Chrome said. “But Rol specifically asked for you. If you’re that sure you can’t get along, maybe take it up with her directly?”

“Urgh,” Riho said and walked back to her seat, scowling.

“.....There, there,” Phyllo said, patting her shoulders. She’d also previously been in Rol’s employ.

“Thanks, Phyllo. Where’d you end up? Rol didn’t ask for you, did she?”

“.....My sister recommended me for the royal guard.”

“Seriously? Well, consider me officially jealous.”

Phyllo and Mena were close, and the royal guard paid well. Riho could only moan like a child in jealousy.

“.....I just...haven’t done anything besides fighting...,” Phyllo said, worried.

“Then it’s a learning opportunity,” Allan said, laying on the smugness.

“.....Like you’d know?”

“Ah, pardon me. I just got posted exactly where I want to be, so I’m feeling pretty good about it.”

Nobody asked, but he flaunted his document anyway.

Nobody cared, but Lloyd was nice, so he read it out loud.

“The quartermaster corps?”

“You betcha, Lloyd! Every boy dreams about being on that wide road running east and west! The wonderful quartermaster corps! A vital unit responsible for transporting supplies to where they’re needed, by land or by sea!”

Like Allan said, this division was responsible for supplying the armies and keeping said provisions safe from bandit and monster attacks. Those assigned to it spent the bulk of their time on wagons or ships, bedding down in distant inns—exactly the kind of job a family man, especially one freshly married, did *not* want.

“Men find their true strength when they leave the home they’ve always known!”

Allan kept bragging, but the girls gave withering looks.

“You just wanna get away from Renge.”

“.....Mm.”

“Calling you a disgrace is an understatement.”

I should explain. Allan was engaged to an older woman named Renge—and, well, they’d already walked down the aisle.

But that had happened because the festival program had wrapped up early, and they had inexplicably decided to fill the extra time with a wedding ceremony. Allan would have preferred to remain in the nascent romance, and coupled with her *extremely* possessive nature, he was desperate for any line of work that would get him the hell out of Dodge.

Well aware of this, the girls...were unanimously contemptuous.

Unable to bear their cold stares, Allan turned toward Selen.

“S-so where’d you wind up, Belt Princess? As a fellow member of the landed gentry, I wish to know!”

His deflection was utterly brazen, but Selen had been dying to spill the beans, so she jumped right to her feet.

“I’m with domestic security. Apparently, they are *fascinated* by my romantic approach, and this form says they want me to give them a full demonstration!”

By “romantic” she meant “professional-level stalking,” so that drew a lot of rictus smiles.

“Does that mean what I think it means?” Riho whispered.

“.....Having thieves share their techniques makes it easier to prevent crime.”

Cops hired hackers to prevent cyberterrorism for the same reason.

Selen remained blissfully oblivious, boasting away.

“If I remain within the country, I should be able to go home to my beloved on

time every day, so this may well be ideal! Sir Lloyd! Pray, tell me where you're posted. If you've been sent to the boonies, I must stage a violent protest and crush the opposition! Or are you also placed at domestic security? I remember their head was very interested in you, so it is possible!"

There were some very ominous bits hidden in that speech, but everyone wanted to know Lloyd's answer, so they let it pass.

He opened his documents, checking his posting.

"Um, so I asked to be a teacher, but... Huh? The mess reserve?"

None of them had heard of that before.

Chrome came over to explain.

"Lloyd, instructors here pretty much all work a secondary posting when the need arises. I'm in the royal guard; Choline's good at healing magic, so she's on the medic squad, et cetera."

"Oh, I get it. But mess reserve?"

Lloyd was still looking baffled, so Riho took over.

"Colonel Chrome, we've never heard of that department. What do they even do?"

Chrome was ready with a whole spiel.

"Allow me to explain. The mess reserve plays a key role in boosting morale, cooking, preparing ready-made meals, and maybe even opening refugee soup kitchens. Given your experience working at the cafeteria, I'm sure you'll understand this posting. Cold meals take their toll on our troops."

Lloyd started nodding halfway through.

"Makes sense! I can make lunches or run food banks, no problem. Nice hot meals do wonders to keep everyone's spirits up! Perfect for my skill set."

But then a flicker of ennui crossed his face.

"I did sort of dream about fighting on the front lines like a real soldier, but that'll have to wait until my fighting skills outdo my cooking!"

A tad dejected, Lloyd kept a positive outlook.

But in fact, few people alive could outfight him. Everyone here knew this and could almost hear others rubber-stamping their approval—so they looked to Chrome for answers.

“So what’s the real reason?”

“Can’t get one past you,” Chrome muttered. He nodded. “Everything I said is true. It’s an exercise, so no foes to fight. Guilds and army alike, we want to wrap this up with spirits high. And since every division is falling over themselves to get Lloyd on their team, we need him in a neutral position—a Lloyd for everyone.”

This last bit was extremely convincing.

Lloyd was as talented as he was adorable, and it was all too easy to picture the eager handwringing and the huffing and puffing; it was the perfect hell of desperation. They’d needed a way to prevent infighting, and this was the brilliant solution.

“Yeah, he had the PR guy, the top diplomat, and Rol all after him... Good work, Colonel Chrome.”

They’d whipped up this mess reserve unit specifically to maintain peace.

But Chrome himself appeared less than satisfied. Why?

“This idea...came from the mysterious genius military strategist.”

It was definitely a *good* plan. But he felt awfully unsure about jumping on board with ideas from someone whose identity he could not fathom.

“The king, Fumar, and Katsu all trust her...but they trust her a bit *too* much for comfort.”

It was one thing if someone tricked the king, but the other two were notoriously ornery...and he couldn’t help but wonder what engendered this faith.

“Some kinda hypnosis? Couldn’t be...”

It certainly never crossed Chrome’s mind that the genius strategist was Queen Rien. That one bit of information would clear up all his concerns.

But without it, he was left scratching his head.

He wasn't the only one worried.

"Hngg..."

The Witch of the East Side—Marie. She ran a small potion shop but was actually the princess. And today, she seemed extra concerned. Maybe wondering what kind of alcohol to get wasted on that evening?

Sometimes, you buy a bottle of wine, but find yourself in the mood for beer when you get home. Then once you've had a beer, you might wanna switch to *shochu*, or the other way around. So why not buy both? Well, alcoholics always *think* they know what's best for them. ※ Symptoms of alcoholism may vary.

At this point, the closet door behind her burst open and a little kid in a white robe came out—who was actually well over a hundred. Your classic kid grandma, Alka.

"Marie! I came to mooch dinner off—hoo?"

Alka had a pair of Marie's undies on her head, but Marie was so clearly upset that it took the wind out of her sails. Age did bring a certain kind of wisdom.

"Ha-ha! Yes, constipation can be the bane of us all."

Okay, if you get to that age without any meaningful learning experience, you probably don't have any *real* wisdom. Let's all try to make the most of our time.

Alka was 50 percent wrongness and 50 percent none of your business, and she was giving Marie a headache already.

Failing to notice that, Alka helped herself to some tea and cookies, all ready to offer more sage advice.

"Not that, I take it? They say you can't teach an old dog new tricks, but I got the brains to match this beauty, so lay your problems on me."

Marie was pretty sure she'd be better off asking a literal dog but thought better of saying that out loud. It couldn't hurt to talk to *someone*.

"Promise you won't tell anyone?"

"That *is* some gnarly constipation."

“Will you get off that?! You see...”

“Oh-ho...”

Marie hesitated, then started talking.

“The king of Azami...has been seen with a *lady*.”

It seemed Marie and Chrome were *both* preoccupied with this mystery genius strategist. Naturally, his daughter viewed her as a worm after her father’s power—which would be cause for concern.

“Oh-ho? To the public, your mother is officially dead but is actually missing, and the search for her continues to this day, yes?”

“Right, and supposedly, he’s still devoted to her, so I doubt he’d easily succumb to anyone new...but officially he’s single, so...”

“I get why you’d be perturbed. But why not just ask your dad?”

Marie slapped the table in protest.

“That’s the problem! I *did*! And he looked super rattled and just said, ‘State secret!’ So I asked Chrome! And *he* said, ‘I’m worried, too! No clue who she is!’ And it’s all soooo suspicious I can’t stop freaking out!”

Perhaps Alka was starting to sympathize. She poured Marie a cup of tea.

“This oughtta help you calm down. The cookies are good, too! Macarons, I think?”

“That’s *my* tea and those are *my* macarons.”

But even as she grumbled, Marie took a sip and sighed.

“Fumar of the Maritime Guild and Katsu from the Adventurer Guild are notoriously hard to please, and they’re both backing this ‘mysterious genius strategist’—that’s what she calls herself. So I *guess* it’s okay...”

Alka folded her little arms, thinking.

“Hmm, you’ve got a point, Marie. But you could *also* argue she’s smartly pinned down the exact people she *has* to have backing her. Where there’s a will, there’s a way...”

But just as Alka was giving surprisingly sound advice, an unusual guest arrived.

“Excuse me, I’m here for some medicine.”

“Oh? This shop has custo— Oh, just Allan.”

“Sup, Chief Alka. Long time no see.”

Allan respected Lloyd and, thus, the chief of his hometown. He gave a deep bow.

“No need to be so formal; sit down. Have some tea; tell me how Lloyd’s doing at school.”

“Like you own the place,” Marie muttered, getting Allan’s medicine down from the shelf. “Here’s your stomach settler, Allan.”

“Oh, you’re a lifesaver, Marie.”

The amount was rather alarming, and Alka gave him a searching look.

“You’re too young to be nursing a tender belly, my boy. You can’t keep relying on meds to solve your problem! Rethink your whole diet.”

“I appreciate the concern, Chief Alka.”

He bowed, then scratched his head awkwardly.

“I really wish I *could*,” he said. “But I’m constantly being dragged to dinners with VIPs. The portions are bad enough, but the stress of these meetings is wearing a hole in my stomach.”

He rubbed his belly ruefully, like a frazzled businessman.

“Too much for any young boy!” Alka declared. “Surtr, you’ve gotta watch out for him. ’Course, given your old chubby body, you may not be the best man to help count calories.”

Alka was talking to Allan’s ax, which Surtr had once possessed. When no response came, she made an expression of surprise.

“The silent treatment?”

“Master, even demon lords get angry if you call them chubby.”

“Don’t be silly; that was an extreme understatement. He was one of those

mid-bosses who seem tough until the hero has a bright idea that totally makes them a cakewalk. Just a giant slob.”

At this point, Allan felt moved to respond.

“That’s not what’s going on here. He’s actually been moved to a real body. A small turtle—”

“Hah?! He’s *what*?!”

Alka was on her feet, her tea spilling across the table. Marie let out a strangled yelp.

“Aughhhh! Master! Quit overreacting! Such a waste of good tea...”

“You fool!” Alka snapped. “This is just that shocking! Only Eug can pull a stunt like that! You saw that infernal machine of hers back in Kunlun!”

“N-now that you mention it... Allan, did Dr. Eug steal Surtr from you?”

“Nah,” Allan said, shaking his head. “If she’d been involved, I’d have come straight to you. Before I knew it, the ax stopped talking, and a mini version of the red turtles we saw in the domain was sitting on top of Satan’s head. When I asked why, he was being evasive and answered with ‘Just say a genius military strategist did it.’ I figured if Satan was cool with it...”

““A genius military strategist?!””

That phrase again?! Alka and Marie spoke in harmony.

“Y-yes...what about it? You’re kinda freaking me out here.”

The girls looked at each other and started whispering.

“If she can do *that*...that’s way beyond ‘suspicious.’”

“*Hngg*, even more likely she’s connected to Eug. And if she’s buttering the king up, that can only be bad news.”

Marie moaned, deciding it was time to take action.

“I’ll have to contact my dad again. If I don’t get anywhere, I’ll loop you in.”

“Mm, I’ll check up on Surtr and Satan and hoist them by their petards. They’re easy enough to fool. They’re idiots, after all...”

Allan was looking rather bamboozled.

“Um, should I just pay, or...?”

But at this point, Lloyd returned home. He had stopped by the market as he had a bag of groceries in each hand.

“I’m back! Oh, Allan?”

“What’s up? I was just stopping by, Lloyd.”

Allan jumped to his feet and bowed.

Alka was never one to maintain a serious disposition once her beloved Lloyd was present; like a switch had flipped within her, she instantly went full drooling-grandma mode. Using Allan’s back as a vault pad, the white devil *pounced*.

“Llooooooyd! I missed youuuuuu!”

With both hands full, he had no way of dodging her assault and found himself relentlessly nuzzled.

“Master! Don’t turn on a dime!”

“Life is all about turns! The lab chief always used to say that.”

“So did my mom! Argh, we were in the middle of a serious conversation about this mystery strategist; where’d that go? But welcome home, Lloyd.”

Neither realized this mysterious genius was the lab chief *and* Marie’s mom, and the subject slipped from their minds as their mouths were already watering over Lloyd’s dinner.

“Um, sure— Hey, Allan, why don’t you stay for dinner?”

“Don’t mind if I do, Lloyd! I’ll help with prep.”

Allan had worked at the cafeteria, so he soon had his sleeves rolled up and was ready to cook.

“Great! First, get these peppers sliced.”

Sensing that Lloyd was in a particularly good mood, Marie asked, “Something good happen, Lloyd?”

He laughed. “Not exactly, but the next job the academy has lined up for me is a lot more manageable.”

“Manageable?”

“I’ve had nothing but stressful requests to deal with lately...like dancing with the princess. But this time, I just have to make lunches for everyone! And I mean...I can do *that!*”

Lloyd still had no idea Marie *was* the princess.

She knew how much he’d worried about it, and the reminder hit her where it hurt most.

“Uh, sorry.”

“Huh? Why are you apologizing?”

Alka was grinning broadly, as she knew of the situation from both sides. When she’d heard he’d rejected the dance from beyond a closed door because Marie was too big a disaster to leave, she’d laughed so hard it caused an earthquake.

Allan was busy scraping out the pepper seeds. “So what was the princess like anyway?” he asked. “I still haven’t met her.”

“Sorry, the door was closed, and I did all the talking, so... But I definitely got the sense she was a very serious, upstanding individual!”

He’d sure read a lot into her silence. And the dignity of the decor.

Alka snorted loudly, and Marie tried very hard not to let it show.

“Mm? Marie, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Huh...well, could you wipe the table down?”

“Sure...”

Seeing her look despondent, Alka hissed, “He’s *never* gonna figure out who you are!”

Marie made a strangled croak and started wiping the table, tears rolling down her cheeks.

Oblivious to the entire exchange, Lloyd was busy cooking with the frying pan. The stir-fry dancing over the skillet reflected his current state of mind.

“Mess reserve! Slightly disappointed I won’t be on the front lines, but I just gotta put that behind me and do the best I can! Satan said it’s always good to throw myself into things!”

“I’ve got your back, Lloyd! *Sniff!*”

Allan had moved onto cutting onions and was wiping tears of his own.

The hubbub of the military exercise was only just beginning.

The student cafeteria at the Azami Military Academy.

Although it was located on campus, it was also open to the general public. It had a reputation as one of those dining halls with generous portions and reasonable prices but horrible food quality and cleanliness. It *barely* made the list of acceptable dining options. The current owner, Chrome, was a firm believer that soldiers *ought* to be dining in such dumps. A view that probably ran him afoul of health code regulations.

But once he hired Lloyd, that impression quickly changed. Now people said it had “great food, great portions, great prices, spotless cleanliness, and impeccable service.” The ideal cafeteria.

Business was booming as students and civilians came flocking. Of course anyone who had business at the castle visited, but it was also proving to be a popular stop for tourists and was frequented by reporters for gourmet magazines.

If customers had anything to gripe about, it was the hours—short to begin with, it wasn’t open on weekends at all. But...it *was* a student cafeteria.

Lloyd prepared the food in between classes, and he often went to the markets to bring in fresh seasonal ingredients. He did all that work with a smile—anyone outside his class thought he ran the place.

Chrome himself joked that his job was just signing to confirm the ingredient deliveries. He was busy with his main job and was at the beck and call of the students and king alike. Probably the person with the second biggest debt to

Lloyd. (Marie was number one, obviously.) This situation was unlikely to change anytime soon.

Lloyd went to school again today. After class, he left his friends to swing by work.

He poked his head into the kitchen and saw a bulky figure moving around. He squinted and realized it was Chrome, struggling to sort out the ingredients.

“Oh, morning, Lloyd,” he said, stuffing meat and fish into the icebox.

“Good morning, Colonel Chrome! Shouldn’t you be in the faculty office?”

“Yeah, but there were even more deliveries today, so I’m still putting them away. Why so much?”

He lifted an extra-big bag of flour, staggered, and let out a groan.

Lloyd moved to help and explained the reason behind the extra stock of ingredients with a smile.

“I ordered more for the mess reserve work. If we’re raising morale, I can’t compromise on quality or portion size! And we’ll need meals that last, so I got more seasonings—the food needs to *smell* good.”

Lloyd showed off a pile of garlic bulbs, spices, and herbs, really looking the part.

Lloyd was clearly throwing himself into the job they’d just invented to stop people from fighting over him. Chrome looked rather guilty.

“Sorry, Lloyd, but it’s for the best.”

“No, I’m the one getting carried away!”

“Well...just don’t overdo it,” Chrome managed. It was the least he could say.

When Lloyd finished checking the new stock, he planned a menu and spent lunchtime making preserved foods along with his usual lunch preparations.

“I definitely want hot meals, but that can be hard out in the field. Should focus on stuff that’ll heat up if you just add hot water—and pass them out in small pouches!”

It was just like Lloyd to think that far ahead. He considered the user

experience and designed his product around it. If Riho had been there, she would have immediately tried to sell them in stores.

Lloyd was smoothly dicing meat, filleting fish, making beef jerky and dried fish, and drying boiled rice—Lloyd’s Special Rehydratable Meal.

“Next, I’ll just take this flour and make some instant noodles...but for those working inside the offices, maybe bread or cookies would be good? Can pass those out with tea leaves...”

Phyllo and Mena swung by, attempting to steal bites of food, but he fended them off and spent his entire afternoon baking scones and cookies.

“Okay, all done. I’ll hand these out to those working desk jobs today and prepare the dried rations to give out during the exercise itself. When is it, exactly?”

With the basic preparations complete, he then made the rounds, offering each department light refreshments consisting of tea and cookies.

“Um, first...the intelligence department is closest. I can see how Riho’s doing while I’m there.”

Cradling provisions, he made a beeline for the office.

A few minutes later, he found Riho hauling heavy things at Rol’s beck and call.

“Oh, Riho! Rol!”

“This is killing me...mm? Hey, Lloyd.”

“Oh my. A future intelligence operative, paying a visit!”

Seeing Lloyd always brightened Riho’s day—and a crafty smile spread across Rol’s face. She was clearly still bent on recruiting him.

Cheering up immensely, Riho dropped what she was carrying and took on an overly familiar manner of speaking.

“Lloyd, how’s it going? We’ve got lots to catch up on, so come on in!”

“Riho...you’re just trying to shirk your duties, aren’t you?” Rol said.

Caught red-handed, she swore under her breath. They’d been in class together that very morning so they didn’t really have anything to catch up on,

either.

“Tch, you got me...but why *am* I doing all the manual labor here? Does this have *anything* to do with the military exercises?”

“Not particularly. The exercise doesn’t really affect our department’s daily operations. However, we’re keeping our eyes peeled to see if anyone starts acting fishy during the commotion.”

“Then lemme do some of *that*. Sounds better than hauling around piles of useless documents!”

“They’re important! All our profiling data is extremely valuable. I didn’t exactly get a proper handoff from my predecessor, so this is my chance to sort through everything.”

“Damn, your predecessor needs to get their shit together,” Riho growled.

Rol’s grin broadened. Riho clearly hadn’t caught her drift.

“My predecessor was demoted without warning. And since there was an empty post, I was able to turn my showing at the festival into a promotion.”

Both Lloyd and Riho blinked at the word *demoted*.

“That sounds ominous.”

“What did they do? I mean, this is the Azami army we’re talking about. You can make Lloyd wear a nurse’s outfit and put his posters up everywhere and still not get fired for it.”

“I really wish there had been *some* consequences...”

Lloyd grimaced. Don’t tell him, but those posters were going for a pretty penny on the black market.

Even as she grumbled, Riho was unloading the cargo in Rol’s office.

“This is partly speculation,” Rol explained. “But I suspect they stuck their nose into the affairs of someone on our side...who was up to no good.”

“Meaning...?” Lloyd asked.

“That’s all I can say,” she said, waving him down. “I’ve got no evidence. Just assume I’m thinking out loud. Sometimes you follow leaked data only to be

cornered. If you keep quiet, you might get away with your life and a demotion. But it may not just be internal. If there's outside interests involved..."

"So spy stuff?" Riho ventured.

Rol leaned back against the wall, sighing.

"I got picked to head the place because they figured they could flash cash and promotions in my face, and I'd turn a blind eye. But I've had my fill of deals like that back at the Rokujou Sorcery Academy. I know my way around."

Her grin got extra crafty. She clearly knew how to probe at a suspect without them ever noticing. And was ready to turn the tables on whoever put her here.

"So that's why you wait till everyone's out, then have someone you can trust help you dig through old files? You always *were* up to no good."

"Self-defense is the better part of self-promotion. Now you know why, get to it."

"Geez, you've got no scruples," Riho grumbled, but she was already reaching for a document.

Rol nodded happily, then turned to Lloyd.

"So what brings you here?"

Lloyd had entirely forgotten. He brought out the tea leaves and cookies.

"That's right! I'm here to help raise morale as part of the mess reserve—so I brought these! Cookies and macarons. And some good black tea leaves. I'll be providing lunches on the day of the exercises, too."

He handed Rol the package, and she bowed, impressed.

"Thanks a bundle, Lloyd."

She was likely aware of how his position came to be, but whatever the cause, he was working hard, and that got to her.

"Awesome, tea! Time for a break! I need to recharge."

Riho had documents in both hands but looked ready to drop them already.

Rol scowled at her. "If you're squawking like that, you still have the strength

to continue. No tea for you.”

“Augh! You miser! Stingy Rol!”

Rol started to get annoyed, but then she had an idea and grinned.

“Sure, if you insist... Lloyd, why don’t you feed Riho a cookie?”

“Hmm? Like, by hand?”

“Yup. Riho’s got her hands full! She wants a cookie but can’t eat one, poor thing. Be a good boy and make her say ‘Ahh!’”

She had on a wicked grin, but the suggestion was tempting—Riho was turning redder by the second.

“Augh! Rol! How could you?!” she spluttered.

But Lloyd gave the matter serious thought and nodded.

“Very well! It’s a mess reservist’s duty. A say ‘Ahh’ mission!”

“Uhhhaahh! Lloyd?! Why would you—?”

Riho was making a lot of *noise* but also *not* stopping him. Performative rejection.

“Okay, Riho. Ahhh!”

“A-ahh...”

Riho turned all shades of red from being hand-fed a homemade cookie, and Rol watched with a very sisterly (yet still sinister) smirk.

“Feeling more motivated, Riho?”

“Shut. Up.”

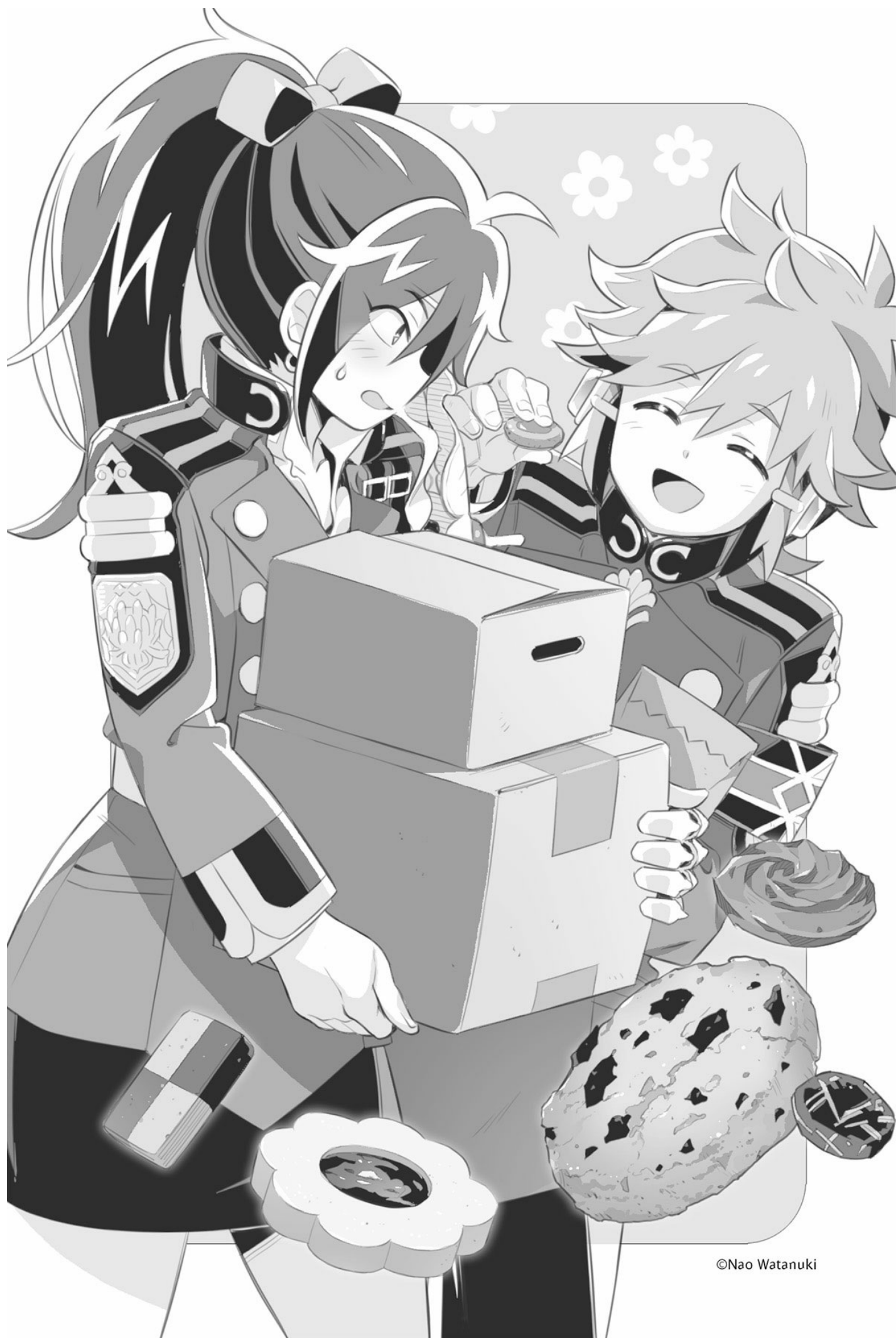
Rol always had the upper hand. Unable to protest further, Riho turned back to her documents, still blushing furiously.

“Thanks, Lloyd. Looks like she’s plenty motivated.”

“Um. That’s great.”

“Good luck with your work! We’re cheering for you.”

She waved him off, and he headed out the door.



“Um, what’s the next closest...domestic security? That’s where Selen should be working.”

His destination clear, he headed off.

Which brings us to the domestic security training facility. They were preparing for the exercise by practicing how to evacuate civilians, check for suspicious individuals, and deal with explosives. There were experts on all these subjects giving lectures.

“Um, anyone I know?”

“Oh, Lloyd! It’s been a while.”

The speaker spoke with gravitas. Lloyd spun around and found the chief of security waving at him. Another man who’d yet to give up on recruiting our boy.

“Chief! Yes, it’s been ages.”

“I heard about this mess reserve thing. I do love a zesty ruse.”

He’d been all fired up to try and snatch Lloyd from the others, but this strategy had effectively ensured his neutrality.

“Roux?” Lloyd asked. “I’m afraid I just used a marinade.”

“...Uh, never mind. Tea and cookies? Don’t mind if I do.”

The chief took one of the bundles, and Lloyd inquired about his friend.

“Um, I heard Selen would be here... Do you know where?”

For reasons lost on Lloyd, the chief’s smile grew rather strained.

“Oh, *her*. Over there.”

He pointed toward the stage, where Selen had taken over the podium. She certainly looked the part of a lecturer and was holding documents. What was it *this* time?

“Your attention please. I, Selen Hemein, am here to tell you all about the Psychology of the Suspicious.”

This seemed like a bad idea, but she had evidently been brought in to teach, not learn.

Selen was a notorious stalker on every blacklist around...so everyone listening assumed she was talking about herself.

Selen failed to notice the spiteful looks but would not have cared even if she had. Ready to exposit, her elation evident, bubbles frothing at the corners of her mouth, she began spewing words.

“No two suspicious individuals are alike. Some may be obviously odd, while others are convinced their behavior is rational. The latter type tend to portray ordinary lives, and it can be difficult to distinguish them from regular civilians. But do not imagine for one second you will be able to apprehend them in any ‘normal’ manner.”

Her entire attitude suggested she was not like *them*, which certainly made it clear she believed *herself* to be rational. The crowd was muttering now: “That’s you,” and “It already came back to haunt you!” She *was* the kind of girl who would order bottle bombs when she might need an escape route, so they weren’t wrong.

“They believe their actions are sound, for the country, for the people—stalkers are the perfect example. They believe they act because of love. That they are destined to be with their targets. A patently absurd misconception. And as one on the true road to love, I cannot tolerate their crimes.”

“So obvious... Couldn’t be more obvious...”

The chief had provided a valuable sample of their quarry and allowed her to dig her own grave. Quite impressive.

“Ahem, pardon me,” she said, realizing she’d gotten a bit carried away. But her confessi—lecture was only getting started. “The point I’m trying to make is that you cannot handle these individuals with persuasive tactics. Their minds are in a world of their own, and nothing can shake them of their convictions. It all comes back to their moral code.”

“Ah. She thinks that *she’s* in the right,” the chief muttered.

“For example...a stalker targeting a woman who’s already in a relationship. He’ll twist that fact, arguing, ‘He’s got her fooled!’ ‘She wants me to rescue her!’ ‘She was meant to be with me!’ ‘I have to!’ ‘Our fates are sealed!’ Spinning

the truth until it justifies his own actions.”

She was completely unaware of how accurately she was expounding her motivations, and the crowd had moved past muttering and was starting to shudder. To say all this without any self-awareness...she really was making her point.

“Their convictions have left them free from the constraints of our consensus. If that makes sense. As much as I hate to admit it, there are commonalities with my own true love, so I can guarantee just how tricky it is to deal with.”

Less “commonalities” and more *literally the same thing*, but...saying so would not convince her. Even the chief had given up quipping.

“If there are thieves who aim to disguise their crimes amid the upheaval of military action, we need merely increase security. Convince them ‘Now is not the time’ and their wrongdoings become preventable. But politically motivated crimes are at their most effective during military upheavals, and the perpetrators do not care if security is tight. These people are acting in accordance with deeply held beliefs. Do not let your guard down, and do not allow yourself a moment of sympathy. That is all.”

There may have been a lot of self-owns in her lecture, but she definitely wrapped it up well and got a round of applause...accompanied by concerned frowns.

Selen knocked back a cup of water onstage.

“Wow, Selen,” Lloyd said. “I had no idea she knew this much about the criminal mind.”

Effusive—and oblivious to the fact that her criminal mind was laser focused on *him*. The sheer purity and pitifulness of it made the chief suppress a sob.

“Hang in there, Lloyd.”

“Uh, okay?”

But his kind words just baffled the boy.

Looking extremely pleased with herself, Selen soon sensed Lloyd’s presence, and she tossed the empty cup aside, using her belt to vault over the crowd

toward him.

“Sir Lloyd! You came to see your beloved future bride!”

The entire crowd of security guards shuddered at the sight and sound of her creepy jump toward Lloyd. “Do we *have* to marry her off?” “You definitely need a strong will...” They did their best to learn from it. Perhaps her lecture had helped them.

But Lloyd was just piling on the compliments.

“You were really impressive, Selen! You know so much about Azami criminals! It was very educational!”

It took one to know one, but like Selen herself said, her mind was in a world of its own, and implications had no place in it. She had only room for praise.

“Oh, it was nothing. *Gasp!*”

Midway between expressing her modesty, Selen spotted the bundle in the chief’s hands and took a leap of logic.

“That must be from you, Sir Lloyd. You ordered that very packaging in the market the other day and bought flour with it— That smells like cookies!”

How did she know that? Every guard in earshot looked on in horror. “What do we do? It’s an active crime scene!”

Lloyd had never really minded Selen knowing every action he ever took, so he just kept talking.

“That’s right, I made cookies.”

“I see! And as part of your morale-boosting mess reserve work, you came to see me!”

“Yes, but I didn’t know there’d be this many people... I’ll have to come back with enough for everyone.”

Lloyd’s words were positively angelic, but filtered through the world in Selen’s mind (again), select words were rearranged into an entirely new meaning.

“I see! You’re ashamed to profess your love in front of this crowd! With motivation raised to maximum voltage, there is but one thing left for us to do!”

She seemed ready to turn this book R-rated, and the guards around wondered if they should step in—but another woman did first.

“Oh my. If it isn’t Lloyd. We meet again.”

Renge. A special army instructor from the Ascorbic Domain, she was a believer in elegance—and handy with an ax.

“Nice to see you, too, Renge.”

“I’ve heard all about this mess reservist program. Working hard to raise morale—what could be more elegant?”

“Um. Thanks?” Lloyd was ever modest.

But Selen was not about to let Renge stop her.

“Precisely, Renge! My morale is now electrified! We are about to ascend to the next stage of life, so you handle things here.”

She was being extremely extra, even by her standards. As if her speech had induced a self-suspension bridge effect. Her life sounds fun.

“U-um, Selen...you’ve definitely lost me, and...I’m still at work?”

Selen was *not* listening to Lloyd.

“Oh? And I was about to begin my lecture,” Renge said, disappointed. “It is an elegant pity.”

“It slipped my mind!” Selen said—but the prospect of Renge’s lecture did actually peel her off Lloyd. A moment for the ages. A rare instance of voluntary separation. “I do beg your pardon. Sir Lloyd, though it brings my heart sorrow, we shall have to motivate our morale later.”

“Oh...okay...”

Instinctively, he knew that could be nothing good and looked suitably relieved. But what was Renge’s lecture about? What was it that had Selen’s undivided attention?

“What topic could make Selen stop joking around and get serious about it?”

Lloyd, too, was curious. The chief knew the answer and grimaced.

“Yeah, about that...”

Renge took the stage, and the air grew tense. She began to speak. Slowly and surely.

“Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Renge Audoc. Following up on Selen’s lecture, I’ll be providing some more practical advice.”

Lloyd gulped. Selen included, the women in the audience were looking pretty grim.

“But first, I’ll be introducing my assistant. My husband, Allan.”

Allan was carried out onstage—tied to a chair. Gagged and blindfolded. An obvious crime, but clearly Renge also lived in a world of her own.

“Hmm! Mmm! *Gasp!*”

She ripped the blindfold and gag off him, and he blinked at the sudden influx of light. He’d been like that for a *while*.

“Good morning, Allan.”

“Gah?! Renge!”

Not how husbands usually greet their wives.

More like how a foot soldier reacts to the attack of a mighty general from the Warring States period. Renge paid his reaction absolutely no heed.

“Like it was mentioned in the last lecture, the minds of suspicious individuals run on worlds unique to themselves. In extreme cases, verbal communication is impossible. Even when happily married, you may find it impossible to speak to your husband or understand what he is thinking. I’m sure you’ve all experienced this.”

A number of women were nodding vigorously, hanging on every word.

“I certainly have!” Selen said. “He has me yet is still *nice* to other women! I trust him, but sometimes it *is* concerning.”

“So my lecture today is on how to interrogate the suspicious. The same approaches apply to a husband’s infidelity, so let’s all harden our hearts and do our duty.”

Ah, that explains why so many female audience members looked so invested. They must have boyfriends or husbands.

Allan was yelping the whole time, but the word *interrogate* turned that into a shriek.

“How?! Am I?! Suspicious?!”

“Marriage is like two foreign cultures clashing,” Renge said, completely ignoring him. “Two unfamiliar worlds colliding—and a certain degree of friction is to be expected. When a line is crossed, y’all gotta dish out corporal punishment! Teach ‘em a lesson!”

Her accent started coming out, and so did Allan’s tears.

“Wh-what are you so mad about this time, Renge?”

“Ya know darn well what?! I got proof you dined at some witch’s place on the East Side! An evening meal—blatant infidelity!”

“I-it is not! I just bought some medicine...and that’s where Lloyd lives!”

“That doesn’t help your case! And furthermore! I heard you were downright desperate to get posted to the quartermasters during this upcoming exercise! So you can cheat all you like?!”

Renge had tightly bound him to the point he couldn’t do much but sit there and cry. But really, they were both to blame.

“Can’t even argue, huh? Are you cheating on me daily? Or are you into boys now?! This interrogation will uncover the truth! Notes ready, everyone!”

All the ladies in relationships (and also Selen) took out notebooks, watching intently. Quite a number of the men were starting to shiver in their boots.

“First, make a bright light flash every five seconds, heightening their stress levels!”

“Noooo! You can’t waste a quality lighting stone on this!”

Oh, I forgot to mention: Don’t try this at home.

Watching her demonstrate interrogation techniques still in use by modern police (yet technically classified as torture), Lloyd glanced at the security chief,

wondering if this was a problem.

The chief did not meet his eye.

“So, uh...Selen was bad enough, but Renge’s words and actions are technically effective, and this is very educational. The style of it may not be quite our thing, but we *did* ask her to speak, and...some people are into it...”

He wasn’t in a position to criticize, so he was forced to laugh it off.

“We’ll make sure to free Allan when we get the chance, so you stick to your mess reserve work.”

“Oh, okay. Thanks.”

The chief sent Lloyd packing, like a dad not wanting to show his kid anything too unpleasant.

Back on the road, Lloyd put it all behind him, wondering where to go next.

“Um...okay! I should check in on the royal guards. Colonel Chrome and Mena should be there, and hopefully they’ll know the exact day of the exercises. I’ll need to have the meals prepared in time.”

With that in mind, he headed across the Central District to the castle.

He wove his way through the throngs of tourists and citizens around it, imposing buildings looming on either side.

“Do I need an appointment?”

But his fears proved unfounded. His deeds had made him extremely recognizable, and as he drew near, the gate guards waved him right on in.

Bowing in return for their generosity, he headed for the castle offices. At the top of the stairs, a voice called his name, and soldiers he’d never even met came over to chat—he was getting more famous. But strangers acting like they know you is very tiring.

When he finally made it past the red carpets to the royal guard’s office, he found it teeming with hardworking soldiers. He bowed once and looked around for someone he knew—and soon spotted the Quinone sisters.

“Um...oh, Mena! And Phyllo, too.”

Phyllo was at a desk, doing paperwork—and clearly struggling with it. Mena was quietly correcting her, like a home tutor.

Lloyd gave them a little wave, and Mena spotted him. “C’mere,” she said, beckoning him. He tiptoed over. Though he knew *some* people here, he definitely wasn’t used to being in an office.

“Sup, Lloyd! Oh, mess reserve work? Bringing some coal for Chrome’s engines?”

Chrome was working in the back and shot her a scowl.

“I’m still human! I run on *food*.”

“You are? With your square jaw and sturdiness, I just assumed you were burning *some* sort of solid fuel.”

Chrome heaved a sigh, put his paperwork away, and walked over.

“More importantly, Lloyd, what have you got there?”

Lloyd beamed, handing over a bundle.

“Mess reserve refreshments! These should help keep you motivated!”

“.....Refreshments.”

Phyllo’s nostrils flared, catching the whiff of tea and cookies. She rose from her seat and staggered toward him like a warrior at the end of a fierce battle.

“Ph-Phyllo? Are you still with us?”

“.....Etiquette.....aughhh...”

It was rare for Phyllo to show any sort of pain on her face.

“Ah-ha-ha,” Mena said. “Royal guards work with the king himself, so we have to meet all kinds of people. I’ve been trying to drum some basic etiquette into her.”

She shot Phyllo a sidelong glance, but her sister just drooped, muttering, “..... You can’t challenge strong people to duels. I had no idea.”

“Yeah, it’s like an unwritten rule. Just because they’re strong doesn’t mean they crave blood all the time.”

It seemed like they hadn't yet reached adding and subtracting but were still at "What *are* numbers?" Mena may have let Phyllo grow up a bit too freely, but she was gamely trying to correct course.

Lloyd was glad to see Mena being very patient with her younger sister.

"Wow, that sounds tough," Lloyd said. "I know I've struggled with city etiquette. Like, who knew you couldn't run on roofs?"

"Ah-ha-ha...probably just you..."

Even Mena flinched at that one.

Choline saw them chatting and scurried over. "Let me in!" she said. "Lloyd, you brought us snacks? Thanks, I'll just get this kettle going. Join us for a break?"

"Thank you. I'd be happy to."

Lloyd had been running around all day. He found a chair and sat down.

When Choline brought the tea back, Phyllo closed in like someone who'd been stranded on a snowy mountain. Clearly, discovering how great the gulf was between her and the rest of the world had hit home.

".....Etiquette is terrifying."

"G-good luck with that, Phyllo."

".....Mm."

She did seem to have perked up a bit.

"If you learn a bit more common sense, you'll become a real asset, I guarantee it," Chrome said.

"For real," Choline chimed in. "Hang in there, Phyllo!"

Her teachers' encouragement seemed to help her regain motivation.

".....Aim for invincibility!"

"That's the spirit, Phyllo. Oh—" Lloyd realized this was his chance to ask about the exercises. "Um, I still haven't heard about the dates or schedule for the drills. Has that been decided yet?"

A simple question, but their teachers' expressions clouded over.

"Er, um? Should I not have asked that?" Lloyd spluttered.

"Nah," Choline said, shaking her head. "It's just, you see...the details are being kept from us, too. We don't even know if things are progressing at all."

"Really? Even though you're a royal guard?"

Chrome was the king's right-hand man and usually the first to know.

Neither he nor Mena looked pleased about it.

"We need date and time, location, scale of the enemy we're supposedly responding to—but none of that's come through. I'm starting to wonder if this is even happening at all."

Mena's eyes had opened slightly, and she sounded pretty serious.

"This strategist wants to keep the details secret until right before it happens. That *is* more like real combat, but since the point of the exercise is to make things easier on the guilds involved..."

Lloyd blinked. There was a word in there that was news to him.

"Strategist?"

"Yeah, wears a hood, suspicious as heck, calls herself a 'mysterious genius military strategist.' Sketchy as hell, but the king and Fumar are both at her beck and call..."

"And everything she actually says checks out. It's just...weird."

"The king won't answer any questions about her. I really hope he's not brainwashed again...*hngg*."

A gloom settled over the room. Lloyd wasn't sure what to make of it.

"Uh, that sounds rough. I was just hoping to figure out how many provisions to prepare."

"Sorry, Lloyd. We'll let you know as soon as we hear anything. Keep up these deliveries until then."

"Yeah, they're a real help! I feel much better. Don't you, Phyllo?"

“.....Mm.”

Their gratitude put a smile on Lloyd’s face, and he left the castle.

Outside, he considered which division to visit next.

“Hmm, well, the PR department is close...but that sounds like bad news, so maybe some other day.”

Good instincts. The PR head and the second-year glasses girl—Pamela—had heard about his deliveries and were lying in wait.

“Lloyd can pull off both this formal military look *and* this fresh fall fashion! It’ll help improve the army’s image!” Pamela pushed up her glasses.

“It’s a lot more reasonable than the nurse’s outfit...but when we choose looks like this, he never shows.”

“We’ll have to bait him here with girls’ clothes! The more he protests, the more it shows he likes it! A glimpse into the abyss of his soul.” Pamela pushed up her frames again.

But enough about them.

Even staying away did not really improve his standing, but unaware of that, he started wondering if it might be worth making the trek to border security.

Just then—there was a rustle from the nearby bush.

A very suspicious individual, hiding in the shadows, was observing something through binoculars. He was wearing an unseasonably long coat, a mask, and sunglasses. He looked like a comic book detective who was terrible at tailing criminals. Beneath the coat, he was wearing aristocratic finery, which made him stand out even more. Wearing this full set took away from the stealth.

Even worse was his head. The hair itself was messy, like unmown grass in a sunny field, and in the center of that...sat a red turtle. The only reasonable conclusion was that they *wanted* everyone to spot them.

But Lloyd had seen hair like this before and trotted happily over.

“Whatcha doing, Satan?”

“Aiiiee!” “Noooo!”

Yes, Satan and Surtr were failing at tailing, and a voice from behind was all it took to make them scream bloody murder.

Lloyd himself was rather rattled by their sudden screams.

“Huh?”

“You’ve got the wrong man, officer! Oh, wait, it’s just Lloyd.”

Satan swung round and looked relieved to see a familiar face.

“Uh, sorry...were you working?”

“Pay that no mind. Right, Surtr?”

“Exactly, my boy! We were never here.”

Realizing who the turtle was, Lloyd brightened up. “Oh, Surtr! You’ve got a real body now? I’d heard as much, but this is a much more practical size.”

“That it is! I’m embracing the mascot lifestyle, trying to get all the ladies to dole out pets! It’s gonna take a bit of trial and error, but it’ll be worth it!”

This was a bit much. Lloyd and Satan glanced at each other and winced.

“So? Why are you here, boy?”

“I’m passing out refreshments. Part of my mess reservist job. Here, have some.”

Satan took the tea and cookies and smiled.

“Why, thank you. So this is that scheme to prevent them from fighting over you? A difficult feat.”

Rinko had told him the plan herself, and he’d thought, *Lloyd’s the girl all the boys fight over.*

Surtr was clearly keen on cookies and had his head fully extended.

“Yo, Seta! You know I can’t say no to cookies!”

The turtle was thrashing around, biting at his hair, and Satan chided him like he was a toddler.

“Now, now! Knock that off! Here, have one.”

“Thanks! Ohhh, that’s good. Like my country mama used to make! I wonder how she’s doing...”

The cookies brought a tear to the turtle’s eye and sent him on a trip down memory lane.

But Lloyd couldn’t contain his curiosity.

“Um, if this isn’t work...why *are* you here?”

Satan glanced up at the turtle and shifted awkwardly.

“What do we do, Surtr?”

“Don’t ask me! Just gotta tell him the truth. Sorry, Lloyd, but this is top secret. Don’t tell anyone you saw us here.”

Lloyd nodded gravely, taking his words seriously.

“At a time like this...I shouldn’t have interrupted.”

“No, no, no, don’t worry about that. Oh, quick question for you...,” Satan said, trying to lighten the mood.

“Yes? I’m happy to share anything I know.”

“You ever met the director of military affairs? Lieutenant General Casitas. I’ve got my eye on him...”

Lloyd folded his arms, thinking.

“Um, not really. I think Chrome once said he always makes a scene about his budget.”

He was clearly digging deep to pull that up.

“Seta, Lloyd’s not gonna know anything about this mole hunt.”

“He’s apparently been sowing seeds of trouble specifically to raise his budget, so this might actually have helped. The lab chief said clues could come from the least likely places.”

“She was probably talking about videos games...but we ain’t exactly getting anywhere, so might as well clutch at straws.”

This investigation was clearly doomed.

Lloyd was still thinking but couldn't come up with anything else.

"Sorry, that's all I got."

"Don't worry about it, Lloyd," Satan said, feeling sorry he'd ever asked.

"Oh," Lloyd said, remembering something else. "Rol from intelligence said she was going through old documents, sorting out the profiling. Maybe she can help."

"Rol Calcife?"

"Yes, supposedly her predecessor was demoted abruptly, and she wants to know why."

Surtr and Satan twitched at the word *demoted*.

"Interesting...right, Seta?"

"Yeah, the previous intelligence bureau head... We should follow up on that. Thanks, Lloyd. We'll touch base with Rol."

Lloyd scratched his head sheepishly.

"I barely did anything. I think a good soldier needs to know way more."

A bit of a backslide into his old habits, but after seeing how hard his friends were working, he was once again wishing he'd been placed on the front lines.

Satan patted him on the shoulder.

"Don't be silly, Lloyd. The harder you work, the happier everyone around you is. You're getting closer and closer to your ideals."

"I—I am?"

Surtr bobbed his turtle head.

"That's right, Lloyd, baby. You make the best cookies!"

"Your resourcefulness is what draws people to you. Not just cooking and cleaning, but the way you never give up."

"People are drawn to me?"

"You should probably have worked that out by now."

Lloyd followed Satan's gaze—to his armband. He nodded.

Satan popped a cookie in his mouth.

"Hmm, these cookies are another side of that. Everyone else may be doing more typical military jobs, but you shouldn't put yourself down because of it. You're plenty strong now, but you keep comparing yourself to Kunlun villagers, and that's holding you back."

"Given what those villagers are like, no one can blame you," Surtr said, mouth full of cookies.

"But me, Surtr, Alka...none of us are as resourceful as you. When someone needs help, you step up. You didn't want your hard work to go to waste, so you worked even harder. You made that strength yours. And you should be proud of it."

Satan tapped Lloyd's chest.

"Th-thank you. Having you say that really means a lot, Satan."

"Keep up the good work, Lloyd."

"I will! I'll keep on studying hard!"

"That's what I like to hear!" Surtr said.

Satan picked his next words carefully.

"The days to come might be hard for you. But if you don't forget this feeling and keep it in your heart, you'll be just fine."

"Okay! Thank you. But I'm the one who's supposed to be boosting morale!"

"We're all good, Lloyd. Get on back out there."

"Will do. Oh—I was gonna hit up the border security! I'd better hurry. Bye!"

He bowed low and ran off.

Surtr watched him go, muttering, "Hard on him, huh? That's about all we *can* say."

"Yeah. It's too soon to tell him the truth. He'd just be confused."

Surtr extended his head, looking down at Satan.

“I’m surprised, Seta. You really are looking after that kid.”

“Yeah. I mean...he kinda reminds me of us, you know? The way we were at the lab and the way he is in Kunlun.”

That hit home, and Surtr’s head retracted. He let out a long sigh.

“Mm, I guess so. So many brilliant minds, all a few steps smarter than me. It hurt, sometimes. If you’re talking to your old self, I can understand why you’ll want to say—‘Don’t let it get to you.’”

“Exactly. And he’s my first ever student. Finally someone I can show the ropes.”

“Mm? Didn’t you do that with Alka and Eug?”

Satan winced, then shuddered.

“They do *not* count. They came in as big shots and never listened to anyone else.”

“They didn’t know the meaning of the word *respect*.”

“Not at all! It’s nice being respected. Makes you feel like your inadequacies don’t matter so much. All the stuff I was compensating for at the cabaret.”

Surtr laughed in agreement.

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha! I’m not gonna say anything about that! But you can prove you’re worth respecting now, right? Wake Eug’s dumb ass up and tell Alka how hard you worked.”

“Exactly. May have taken a few centuries, but I can finally earn it.”

These two were definitely on the same wavelength today. They turned toward the intelligence department.

“Wait, did Lloyd say he was in a hurry to reach the border? At his speed, it’s not that far away.”

“Maybe he needs time to prepare the refreshments?”

“He’s not gonna accidentally go to a Jiou frontline base, is he? He’d *need* to hurry if he’s going that far.”

“No way. Not even Lloyd would get that mixed up.”

Unaware how badly they’d jinxed themselves, they shared a laugh.

Chapter 2

Sporting Mishap: Like a Player Who Camped with the Opposition and Didn't Realize it Until the Last Day

Our story has mentioned Azami's enemy many times before, and it's high time we discussed them in greater depth.

The Jiou Empire lay to the northeast of the continent. Originally a small country with few land resources, for their own survival, they allied and merged with bordering nations, gradually expanding their territories.

Their lack of resources forced them to develop magic, which aided their military conquests. It bolstered the living standards of the population and had far-reaching political ramifications.

As the military tightened their grip on the nation, they absorbed a temple near the border—known for a closely-guarded technique allowing them to seal an opponent's magic. With those monks conscripted, Jiou's might was ensured.

In any country where magic was an inextricable part of the people's lives, magic skills become synonymous with individual merit. Jiou was no exception, and the strength of your magic was directly proportional to your rank and fame.

But once their armies could *seal* that magic—it was like stripping mages of their rank. With their political enemies defanged, the army implemented a number of policies that strengthened their influence and solidified their position of power.

With no one left to stop them, they established an imperial regime, and henceforth, nearly all rulers came from a military background.

Conquest for survival gave way to invasions for conquest's sake. In search of more fertile lands, Jiou expanded to the south, swallowing up the countries in their path.

Through their expansion, they gained more natural resources, increasing their

wealth, and their lives became less dependent on magic and the advancement thereof. Magic itself became less valued.

All that remained was military authority. Jiou was no longer a magical powerhouse. Rokujou alone held claim to that title—mining magic stones and founding schools for sorcery and finding all manner of ways to profit from it.

When Eug and her compatriots realized how easy it would be to control the military, Jiou's fate was sealed.

The sinister Sou's very appearance depended on the eye of the beholder. Shouma was from Kunlun and boasted unparalleled physical abilities. And Eug possessed the power of science *and* magic, the fusion of which could raise the technological standards of their very world. The Jiou army was theirs in no time, and they started making their moves—specifically, attacking Azami to turn themselves into an enemy of the world with an eye toward advancing technology, turning Lloyd into a hero, et cetera. Even video games these days don't make such simple villains.

Their vassal states were in turmoil, the people abandoning their overtaxed fields and seeking refuge in Azami. Poor working conditions led to soldiers deserting and becoming bandits. The capital had a dystopian social hierarchy preventing any social mobility, breeding corruption. Worst of all, Sou—in his guise as their emperor—had used some mysterious power to convince the capital citizens they were the chosen people, heightening their extant exclusionist tendencies. These were intentional choices to ensure they would be seen as villains—which naturally made it all the more diabolical.

The existing authority was *just* enough to keep the government somewhat functional, but all it would take was a single push for things to spiral out of control to an inevitable collapse.

But the vast majority of the empire's citizens were from smaller nations it had absorbed. They felt no loyalty toward the country and knew full well they would be left to their own devices.

The Jiou Empire forces stationed along the Azami border were no exception. They sent their modest wages to their folks back home and supported themselves by planting fields on the sides of mountains and hunting.

If war broke out, they knew they'd bear the brunt of it. So when fear and frustration threatened to crush their spirits, they remembered their families still under their oppressor's thumb and forced themselves to endure.

A Jiou Empire frontline base between the mountains on the Azami border, staffed entirely by browbeaten rank and file...

On the watchtower of a building so run-down no one could even tell when it had last been repaired, a soldier was glumly watching the border.

Although his uniform might be a fiery shade of red, he clearly felt no passion for his duties. His binoculars often turned away from the border toward better views or wild birds— Ripe for a chewing out, really.

"Shift's up."

A superior officer in a similar uniform came up the ladder. His subordinate managed a halfhearted salute.

"At last?" he said. "Guess I'll just go scribble *All's well* on the report."

"You could write something else for a change. Something more specific?"

"Like there's anything else to report. My observations on the migratory patterns of local birds?"

The officer stroked his whiskers, searching for an answer—and finding none.

"You can say that again," he admitted.

"We all took the reports seriously at first, but nobody ever replies, so why bother?"

The officer raised a brow. "Central has bigger problems than our little outpost."

"I bet they do. Nobody's seen the emperor in ages! Rumor has it he's dead. It seems some doctor he had on staff is running things in his absence?"

By "emperor," he meant Sou. But after his defeat at Lloyd's hands, he'd fallen into a long slumber and was currently safely in bed in Kunlun.

"And said emperor was recently coronated and of unknown origins. When I heard he wasn't part of the military, I got my hopes up, but somehow it was

even worse than my wildest fears.”

“He seemed less like an emperor and more like some weird cult leader. Central folk all got carried away, buying into his whole ‘Jiou is *meant* to control the world!’ nonsense. They were always crazy, but now they’re even worse.”

“They had their hearts set on him, and he died. They’re in a blind panic. Anger with no place to go, and their inflated egos ready to pop.”

“I’ve heard they’re trying to blame Azami and start a war over it. And we’ll be the ones who have to fight. It’ll suck if that’s true. Think it’ll really come down to that?”

The mustachioed officer frowned even harder.

“Sadly, they seem hell-bent on it. Look at this!”

He took out a document rolled up in his back pocket (like pulling out the horse racing newspaper) and showed his subordinate.

“The Azami Kingdom is holding military exercises... Shit, they want a fight, too?”

“And Jiou Central Command are planning to use this to launch a surprise attack and turn it into all-out war. And guess who’s on the front lines.”

“Ugh,” the subordinate said, hanging his head. “So it really is happening. But how’d they even know? They got spies in Azami?”

“Maybe. Central can be clever like that. You know how they’ve got bandits attacking Azami merchant caravans.”

“Oh, yeah. We got that weird order from the higher-ups, telling us to leave the bandits alone.”

“Apparently the attacks are a cover for handing over weapons. It *looks* like theft, but they’re actually smuggling arms.”

Recent history had left the two countries in a cold war, with trade between them suspended. Jiou couldn’t import weapons *or* food.

The soldier were aghast. “Then the Jiou Empire and the Azami Weapon Merchants Guild are in cahoots? Betraying their own country in the name of

profit...”

“I got no proof, and they might have other spies. But if that is true, then war is likely inevitable.”

“Ugh. I should’ve quit this job long ago and slipped out during the hubbub about the child ghost.”

His boss rubbed his mustache again. “I hate to keep asking this, but did that really happen? Only you’re talking about it.”

His man took on a grave look, like a seasoned horror storyteller.

“I swear, every word is true. I was on lookout, like today. And I heard footsteps come running up and my men screaming. Wondering what it was—and getting scared—I focused my binoculars downward and saw a boy in an Azami military uniform. Everyone at the guard post was freaking out. The boy turned and was gone in the blink of an eye, and I assumed I must have been tired— Then a little girl in a white robe appeared and started grabbing each guard’s head in turn. I rushed down the ladder—”

“And...?”

“And not one of them remembered a thing! Only I saw the soldier boy and the little girl. But their footprints were right there, in the dirt. I’m telling you, I was freaking scared.”

“The girl in the robe seems excessive. The boy alone would have made for a story.”

“Siiiiir! I’m not making it up!”

The officer just calmly stroked his mustache.

“Then I see how that would be scary enough to make you wanna quit.”

“Like that’s why?!” the soldier fumed. “They treat us like shit! The food sucks! We can’t even eat if we don’t hunt and gather! What kind of army is that?!”

“But we’ve got wives and kids back home. If you don’t care what happens to them, quit right now.”

“I know...” The soldier hung his head. “Without our kids, our hearts won’t

have anywhere to call home. Anyway, the watchtower's yours."

Their country might not have existed anymore, but it lived on inside them—and working for those who had conquered them meant each day was an act of resignation.

The officer took the binoculars and started his shift. For a while, he watched the border intently...but eventually he got bored and gazed up at the sky or looked at the reddening mountains reflected in the river.

"Another peaceful day...*hngg*?"

A flock of birds took to the air, squawking.

"Uh...a monster on a rampage?"

Thinking this couldn't be anything good, he turned his binoculars in that direction—and heard his underling let out a strangled shriek.

That was not a good sign. The officer quickly dropped down the ladder to the guard post below.

"What? What's going on?"

He found his subordinate sitting on the ground, screaming.

When the officer ran over, his man turned to him for help.

"Sir! Look—look!"

His finger quivered. Pointing at...

"Oh, hello! Sorry to intrude."

A very polite boy, wearing an Azami military uniform.

As green as the Jiou uniforms were red, he was incredibly out of place.

"Wh-why...?"

In response, the boy—obviously, Lloyd—smiled pleasantly.

"I'm Lloyd Belladonna. I've been assigned to mess reserve duties, so I brought you some things."

"Mess? Nobody told us..."

They wouldn't have. It was the wrong country.

Why had Lloyd followed up on that jinx and come all the way to the Jiou front lines? Well, that takes us all the way back— To the midterms, held not long after his hotel adventure.

Part of their test was to deliver supplies to a frontline base, and Lloyd thought, *That's not much of a test if it's that close*, and brushed right past the Azami base, crossed the border, and delivered items to the Jiou Empire's base instead.

A few months passed (a few years in real time), and that setup finally pays off. Maybe a bit overdue.

But no one present was capable of following that leap in logic—so the officer started inventing his own crazy theory.

“Calm down. This is just a hunch but...he must be their spy.”

“Spy? Oh, like you just said.”

“Yeah.” The officer nodded. “We know the Jiou Empire has an agent within the Azami army, and if you think about it rationally, no one else would ever dare walk in here dressed in the uniform of our enemy.”

This finally convinced the subordinate. It sounded far more plausible than the ghost theory. (Though it was about as far from the truth.) “O-okay, then. No other reason he'd be dressed like this.”

Neither were quite ready to relax just yet, though.

Meanwhile, Lloyd seemed...oddly annoyed.

“Um! Excuse me?”

““Yes?!””

His loud voice made the two jump, and they spoke over each other, then turned slowly toward him.

He had a hand on his hip, looking as if he were their mother.

“Why is this kitchen so filthy? Why is there nothing but canned goods?”

He was pointing at a mountain of cans that were distributed to the low-

ranking soldiers. Food that was neither nutritionally balanced nor contained healthy levels of salt.

“Um...that’s what the government gave us...”

“But you can’t live on that! Do you know what’ll happen to you if you eat nothing but this without cooking it? Soldiers need strong bodies! You’ll end up as immobile as Marie!”

Neither had ever heard of Marie, but Lloyd was hopping mad, and he started rummaging through the items he’d brought with him.

“I’m glad I brought cleaning supplies! Honestly, do canned goods turn everyone into a Marie?”

No, she was just a disaster. We can all make good use of canned goods in moderation.

The soldiers were still wondering who Marie was, but Lloyd busily cleaned up the kitchen, took provisions out of his mess reserve kit, and opened a few cans, cooking away.

“You don’t just eat them straight up! You heat them with vegetables. You don’t want your insides getting cold!”

In mere minutes, there were piping hot meals before them. Neither soldier could believe canned goods could turn into this. Unable to resist the temptation, they sat down and started eating.

Consuming food cooked by a man in their enemy’s uniform... They probably should have been on the lookout for poison, but the scent of it was so tantalizing that such thoughts were driven out of their minds.

Their brains were promising the food would be life-changing, and they each took a big bite—and let out a cry of joy. “So good!” The kind of reaction you’ll find in cooking manga, where the special effects fill the room.

It had been far too long since they’d eaten *anything* worthwhile, so they instantly dropped their guard. The flavor alone turned their opinion of Lloyd 180 degrees from “bad news” to “angel.”

“Sir, this is actually *good*. He just added a couple of things—is it that easy to

turn these cans into fine dining?”

“Someone who can cook like this can’t possibly be a bad guy.”

“You’re an excellent judge of character, sir! With a smile like that, he’s gotta be an angel.”

They weren’t wrong there—just not right about the whole spy thing.

Hearing their cries of joy, the rest of the Jiou soldiers started filing in. They were surprised by Lloyd’s presence, but the officer briefed each soldier on the situation, clearing the air—or possibly muddying the waters.

The same pattern repeated. Lloyd cooked → an overreaction occurred with every bite → Lloyd’s irresistible smile sealed the deal. A formula designed to generate unconditional trust. Before anyone knew it, he had the whole base charmed.

The cafeteria soon started serving dinner, and the soldiers wound up throwing a party for Lloyd. The festivities started late in the evening and continued until the date rolled over. It just showed how bad their rations usually were.

The mustachioed officer hoisted his drink high, standing on the table.

“A toast to Lloyd—and an apology. I’m sorry I ever thought you were a spy!”

“Huh...a spy?”

Lloyd was still blissfully unaware this was not an Azami base, so this was lost on him.

“Don’t you worry about it, Lloyd. He’s always like this when he drinks.”

“Yup! But this food is so good! Do you have professional experience?”

“Well, I did all the housework back in my hometown. I’m afraid I was only ever good at cooking. I was hopeless at monster hunting.”

Lloyd scratched his cheek, but then a light ignited within him.

“But I didn’t give up! Now I’m in the army and doing my bit! Someday I hope I can be a real soldier like all of you!”

These words brought tears to the officer’s eyes. He patted Lloyd heartily on

the shoulders.

The other soldiers looked ready to cry, too. Then they began whispering to each other.

“Making a kid go undercover in enemy territory... What is Central thinking?”

“Such a dangerous mission.”

“They probably promised him a posting in the rear. Told him he could work in Central. Liars!”

“When he said he did all the housework back home, I knew he must have gone through a lot of hardships.”

“I bet they were conquered just like we were. Poor guy.”

Not one person here believed he was *really* with Azami. But they were very concerned about him—and certain he’d be sacrificed the moment anything went wrong, just like them.

Lloyd was equally horrified by their tales of how they supplemented their provisions and by the state of their building and furniture. One look told him how inadequate this border station was.

“Frontline bases sure are rough. The others are so much better! I can’t believe you have so little food.”

Well, it was a different country, so...

But the officer just thought Lloyd was comparing them to Jiou’s capital. Letting the frustration and disappointment show, he said, “We started planting crops and hunting to get more to eat, but before that, it was so bad that people used to drop out and become bandits, arguing crime had to pay better.”

“Gosh...that sounds awful. First I’ve heard of anything like that!”

Nothing like that had happened in Lloyd’s country.

With a boozy belch, another soldier chimed in.

“But it’s all for the folks we got back home. We can’t ever turn to crime! Swear to god!”

“True. I’m always doing what I can for my country and homeland!”

“Oh? That’s great!”

Lloyd was talking about Azami, though.

Everyone was feeling pretty content, and it was well past dark out, so Lloyd got ready to leave.

“Sorry, I’d better run. If I’m back too late, Marie’ll be worried.”

“Aww, Lloyd! Who is this Marie? Your lady?”

The soldier rubbed his ring finger.

“Ah-ha-ha, no, more like...if I don’t cook for her, she’ll fall to pieces.”

Everyone listening assumed she must be an elderly parent or possibly a sickly sister. Not really. She was *just* a basket case.

“You’re such a good kid! Can’t help but like him. Right, boys?”

Lloyd didn’t get it, but they seemed to be having fun.

Once he finished packing and was ready to go, they all saw him off.

“Come again, Lloyd!”

“Oh, sure. Happy to!”

With that, he ran off toward Azami.

“Frontline bases sure are rough! I’ll have to make sure they get more food. Maybe talk to the king if I get a chance,” Lloyd muttered, running across mountains and valleys teeming with monsters. “But I didn’t know the border guards wore red uniforms!”

Never once realizing all the soldiers he’d met were from the Jiou Empire, or that he’d won over the enemy through their stomachs, he headed back home—having cleared a mission worthy of the very best spies.

In the Central Command Headquarters—also called the axis of evil by Jiou’s own troops—Eug was sprawled out, scanning documents. She had her boots off and was clapping her bare feet together, thinking.

This room had been intended as a comfortable relaxation zone. It was no longer entirely intact. The iron walls were bent and torn as if assaulted by some

wild thing. Chairs were upended, tables split in two—like a storm had come and gone. Yet, Eug was totally calm—almost as if *she'd* been the one who'd gone wild, blowing off some steam.

Paying no attention to the shambles around her, she was poring over a detailed blueprint, scowling fixedly at it.

Squeak. Squeak.

Eve came in—in her adorable bunny costume. The king of Profen, she'd once been president of the country that sponsored the laboratory where the others worked. And she was the one who'd baited Sou into trying to kill Lloyd. Her presence only made things more ominous.

“Hello...mm? Mm? Oh. Ah. Heeyyyy! Eugy, how are you feeling?”

Changing her greeting to sound even cheerier, she bounded in.

This got Eug to sit up, put her boots on, and look dignified.

“Hi, Eve.”

“Yoo-hoo! What's with this room, though?!”

Eve dramatically shoved her hand in the costume's mouth.

Eug looked around as if she'd only just now noticed, then sighed.

“Oh, I did it again.”

“Again?”

Eug waved like she didn't wanna be asked. Eve let it go and started helping herself to drinks, squeaking across the floor to the relatively intact back.

“...Fine! I'll just put the kettle on. Whaaat?! A machine that makes carbonated beverages?! Okay, I'm totally making sparkling tea, then.”

This room was filled with anachronistic gadgetry, and Eve came here a lot. Like a classmate who constantly shows up at your house after you get the new popular game console.

“Oh, yeah, I thought you'd like that. Made it in my spare time.”

“Did you now? Something like this, in your spare time? That's our Eugy. And

why I always liked you better than Alky.”

Eug bared her fangs, then rubbed her nose. She was the kind of girl who loved getting compliments— No, Eve just knew how to flatter her to further manipulate the girl. Her sponsor offering a positive comparison to her great rival...buttering up her self-respect, eliciting feelings of trust without Eug ever realizing it.

There was a whoosh of carbonated water.

“You’ve been coming over a lot,” Eug said.

“Yeah. The guards just let me in now!”

“Do they? Our security has some issues, then. Are they checking the person inside?”

Eve hummed in lieu of answering, focusing on her sparkling tea.

Once that was done, she put the entire cup inside the costume’s mouth, took a sip, and went, “Ooh, that tingles.” A very unsettling sight. “*Burp*...that hardly matters. Why the long face? Something go wrong again?”

Given the state of the room, that seemed the obvious question. Eve was clearly showing a willingness to listen but did not ask in a pushy way.

That made it easy for Eug, who turned toward her, looking grim. She folded her arms, making the mood more serious.

“Azami’s planning a large-scale military exercise.”

“Oh my!” Eve gasped, immediately destroying the mood. “Prepping for war with Jiou while strengthening ties to guilds... But wouldn’t that be a secret? Why do *you* know?”

Clearly, Eug had some sort of pipeline into Azami’s inner sanctum, and it made Eve tilt her head so far it almost fell off.

“The army and guilds have always had their hawks. In this case, they’re more like vultures.”

“Oh, scavengers. War profiteers.”

“Yup. For their budgets and wallets, they’re desperate for war and keep

leaking information to us.”

“I see! Well, the army and the weapon guilds *would* make bank.”

She’d already guessed who these hawks were.

“You weren’t president for nothing. Or king of Profen, I guess.”

“True.” Eve flung open her arms, basking in the praise. She looked as though she were working in an amusement park.

“Hence, we got plenty of details. I mean, they’re pretty sure they’re the ones manipulating us, but they’re way too obvious about it. You can’t help but laugh.”

“So you’ve got plans in place to cut them loose. It’s nice having people who can be easily manipulated. You know exactly how to use them. And how to *end* them.”

Eve’s voice took a dark turn there, and Eug shuddered.

Picking up on that, Eve quickly perked herself back up.

“But that can’t be all! Are you struggling without Sou around to play emperor?”

“Not in the slightest,” Eug insisted.

That was clearly a lie.

“You’re that far gone?” Eve said. “I can tell.”

She glanced at the gouges in the wall and picked up some...fur. It was white and stiff.

Eug looked like a toddler regretting their tantrum.

“Yeah, well. It hasn’t been this bad in a while. But it looks like that thing hiding inside me snuck out for a bit.”

Eug scratched her head, wincing.

“To make the whole evil empire thing work, we got this place’s policies seeded pretty well. I could just leave it be...but if it actually ceases functioning entirely, that’s another problem. Not having Sou around to play puppet king or

Shouma around to actually *do* stuff—it's a big blow. I dunno why they suddenly decided *their* goals were more important and went off to fight."

"That's what people do."

Eve wasn't offering even a hint that this had been *her* doing. In that costume, it was hard to read her expressions—but likely her face hadn't betrayed a thing, either.

Her partners going off to fight without so much as a by-your-leave had definitely been a shock. "Humans," Eug muttered. Like she was trying to convince herself. "We know the exercise is coming, but the date ain't set yet. Maybe the whole thing is just a smoke screen to flush out the spies."

"Oh! Aren't they clever."

"Might be time to scrap these hawks. They're done. Gotta get some new spies..."

Eve started thinking, then asked, "What about just *starting* the war during the exercise?"

She suggested it so casually, as if she were saying "Shall we eat?"

Even Eug was rather rattled by this.

"Um...huh? Yeah?"

Eve kept pressing the suggestion, like *she* was the Jiou emperor.

"Use this exercise to have Jiou's troops invade Azami."

"W-wait, Eve... What? This isn't the right time!"

Eug recoiled, but it was not enough to discourage the costumed clown.

"Seriously?" Eve scoffed. "What are you afraid of, Lena Eug? The old you would have gone for it!"

She knocked back some sparkling tea, like someone at a reunion who's discovered their past partner in crime had gone soft. But you can't just chug carbonated drinks. She ended up coughing and spluttering.

Eug handed her a tissue and, once she'd recovered somewhat, gave her counterargument.

“With Sou and Shouma out of the picture, I can’t afford to make a careless move. It’s bad enough that they know half my plans and are watching me like a hawk.”

But none of that was lost on Eve. She was here to poke her finger right into Eug’s insecurities.

“But you don’t want it all to go to waste. You could deal if it was *your* fault—but not if it’s someone else’s.”

Sou’s and Shouma’s rash actions had *caused* this crisis.

This reminder left Eug grinding her teeth, her face twisting in anger.

Eve was the one who’d put them on that path, but beneath her costume, she likely never batted an eye.

“That’s why you’re struggling right now,” she continued in a measured tone. “I saw you reading over that weapon’s data. That proves what’s going through your mind. The Godslayer Arrow? With the rune of *destruction*?”

“Well...with Sou gone, I need a new symbol of terror. It’s not finished yet anyway.”

“How far are you?”

“Eighty percent.”

“Then let’s make quick work of that last twenty percent! This is you; it’ll take, what, a couple of evenings?”

This was like a client making unreasonable demands to an engineer.

They were equals now, but in a former life, Eve had been Eug’s boss, and she was being careful with her language, subliminally implanting that sense of superiority in Eug’s mind.

And like a rookie engineer with no job security, Eug was forced to say, “I *could*...”

“Deep down, I think you knew this might happen. That’s why you made something this terrifying. A weapon far beyond anything we had before the world ended.”

“I didn’t know they’d betray—”

“Your gut told you they might. An instinctive danger sense. That’s always been one of your best features, Lena Eug.”

Eug’s rational mind was telling her this was *not* the time for war.

That’s *why* Eve was heaping on the praise—while insisting that her subconscious *wanted* the war. She was carefully manipulating Eug into believing this was the truth, and she was slowly starting to buy into it.

Using Eug’s anger as the trigger, Eve’s brainwashing had laid out a fuse—and lit a fire under Eug.

Once that ignited, it was easy.

“I already mass-produced weapons using historical technologies. But Alka and Lloyd always outdo my wildest expectations! They’re gonna pull the rug out from under me again. If I’m gonna make this war happen...this is the best time for it. The *only* time.”

Eve kept fanning the flames of Eug’s motivation.

“No need to declare war! The Jiou Empire is *supposed* to be evil! When Azami rolls out this exercise, you annihilate them! Ensure they never even consider a peaceful solution! And before they can recover, you steal the Holy Sword, free the demon lords, and force every country in the world to band together against Jiou! A flawless plan.”

“The humans will be helpless before the demon lords—and then I’ll offer up weapons far beyond their science. Even when the demon lords are gone, they’ll be forced to continue developing weapons to compete against other countries at that technological level. If they combine science, magic, and runes—in a century or two, they’ll easily surpass the standards of the 2000s.”

“And a few centuries beyond that—we should have no trouble controlling the device.”

Eug grinned like a mischievous child...but that smile soon faded to grim desperation.

And Eve knew exactly what was on her mind.

“But Lloyd’s gonna put a stop to it?”

Eug nodded glumly.

“Worst-case scenario, he stops me from doing *anything* to Azami. If this ends as a minor skirmish, it’ll never lead to war.”

“You can’t call it a war if it doesn’t leave gaping wounds and unbearable grief. Death breeds vengeance and fans the flames of war. Buuuurn! Buuuuuuurn! Fire is beautiful as long as you’re just looking.”

Eve was singing now, like she was seated by a campfire with an acoustic guitar.

Eug didn’t even object.

“If only Alka had understood me. None of this would have happened.”

“Yes! That’s my point!”

Eve closed in on her, as if she’d been waiting to pounce on these words. She was audibly panting inside the rabbit costume.

“Er, Eve? What’s going on? That costume is too adorable, but at this distance, it’s downright alarming!”

“Whoops, my bad, my bad. Just funny how easily I led you here,” Eve muttered, backing off a bit.

Eug blinked, and Eve made a further proposition.

“It’s better if Alka is on our side. You get more motivated when she is, right?”

“I mean, if she’d been on board since the beginning, I wouldn’t be in this mess.”

Eug let out a sigh with a century of history behind it.

“I’ve got the solution to your woes!” Eve said, like the host of an infomercial. “You just need to change your perspective, Eug!”

“My...perspective?”

“Yes! This attack isn’t about starting a war... It’s about killing Lloyd!”

“K-killing Lloyd?!”

“That’s right!” Eve nodded. “If he dies, Alka will stop at nothing to bring him back. She made Sou out of runes already! And given what her original research topic was...”

“She’s trying to bring back the little brother who died when she was nine.”

“Indeeeed!” Eve crowed—with vibrato. The suit muffled her voice, so it was hard to tell, but she was likely aiming for dulcet tones. “She’s fixated on it to the point it’s left her looking nine years old to this day. And Lloyd looks exactly like that brother—hence her creepy drool— Er, he is where her heart lies. But what would happen if he perished?”

“She’d join hands with the devil himself—or me. That *might* happen, yeah. But she’ll be furious. That’s not how I wanted to beat her. Lloyd certainly is infuriating, but he’s also a good kid...”

Eug was dithering, so Eve gave a compromise.

“It’s just a plan B. If you can destroy Azami’s forces, cool. If Lloyd pops up and ruins everything—then switch to taking him out. Yes...”

Eve picked up the documents Eug had been poring over and gestured to them dramatically.

“Consider it a test of this new weapon. It was designed for use against Alka or Alka-class demon lords, right? That’s why it’s called the Godslayer Arrow. Perfect for your needs.”

“Kill a boy with a weapons test...”

“I mean, if it can’t even kill Lloyd, that’s a big problem. The *destruction* rune—well, the meaning of that word changes in the eye of the beholder. It could mean physical, mental, or even their home. If you take a vague rune like that, point it at someone, and pull the trigger—it could be the ultimate weapon to a new future. You might even be able to open the Last Dungeon without the Holy Sword. You’ve gotta try!”



Eve was *relentless*.

Eug was silent for a while. When she finally spoke, she was talking to herself—convincing herself, pushing herself forward.

“That’s true. Why stop now? I’ve already killed so many. I altered the world, the earth, the shape of the continent, the nature of civilization itself... What’s one more boy? That’s just...the margin of error.”

Eug’s eyes were focused on the horizon, her mind fixated on the idea of restoring the science of old—to give meaning to the people and culture they had lost.

“Yes, yes, that’s the spirit!”

“Develop the world, gain control of the device in the Last Dungeon—only *then* will I have honored those noble sacrifices!”

Eug’s determination stemmed from tragedy, while Eve seemed to be having the time of her life. Her face might not be visible, but it was likely that of a child’s spotting a new toy.

“Thanks, Eve. Even without Sou and Shouma, I know what I can do—what I have to do!”

Eug turned her attention back to the Godslayer Arrow schematics, her mind already going over the final adjustments needed to complete it.

As she muttered away, Eve turned and left the room without another word.

In the hall outside, Eve looked down at the white fur in her clenched hand.

“She’s got plans to cut them loose? Never even considered that someone might be cutting *her* loose. That’s where her limitation lies.”

Comparing the unknown Azami spies to Eug herself, Eve moved her hand like she was tossing out the trash.

She glanced back at Eug’s room once, then pranced squeakily down the hall.

“Mwa-ha-ha-ha!” she laughed. “But now I’ll have a weapon that can fight Alky, the Kunlun villagers, even Lab Chief Cordelia! Then we just need to get this war going! If she kills Lloyd, awesome! If she steals the Holy Sword, great! If she

gets some middling war started, well, Profen are Azami's allies, and we can argue they should entrust the sword to us instead! Every outcome works in my favor!"

She was spinning her head back and forth, but this was totally a horror show.

Then she stopped dead in her tracks, her shoulders shaking with laughter.

"Poor thing. She didn't kill a single soul but thinks those 'noble sacrifices' are on her! And having her cornered makes her easier to *control*."

Making sure there were no guards, Eve got ready to exit through the window—careful not to get her head stuck on the frame. She jumped down into the garden.

"Escape complete! Okay, okay, Eug's primed and ready to go, now I just gotta settle everything else before Lab Chief Cordelia makes her move."

An evil aura exuded from the rabbit costume. Not being able to see the look on her face just made it even more sinister.

But she suddenly clutched her chest, reeling.

".....?!"

She knelt down, her body quivering, her voice raspy.

"Not now! Sleep awhile longer. Remember who you *killed*."

It took a while to catch her breath again, but then she staggered to her feet and squeaked off down the deserted mountain path.

A few days after Eug and Eve's meeting...

The brand-new Godslayer Arrow was delivered to the Jiou border base.

Like a delivery of explosives, it was packed into a wooden crate and delivered under tight security.

The trigger was affixed directly to the cannon, with several handholds on each side. It took four or five men to move it, and it looked like nothing they'd seen before.

But their attention was less focused on the shape than the metallic, futuristic coloring, the likes of which they'd never seen before. One glance made it clear

this was an anachronism, and with the geometrical patterns decorating it, the weapon was not something you handled lightly. The visuals alone made it clear this was a cannon that could kill demon lords or free men from the fear of god.

They'd been excited that Central had finally sent them supplies...but they'd gotten this uncanny object instead. The officer in charge of the border base stroked his distinctive mustache and turned to the soldiers who'd delivered it.

"What is it?" he asked.

"No clue" was the curt reply.

The officer reeled. Like a kid who's been eagerly waiting for Christmas only for Santa to give him the wrong present.

"You don't know, either? Then what do we do with it? No supplies?"

"I'm just the delivery guy. Read the documents I gave you."

"I don't need them to know this is bad news... This ain't a weapon meant for human hands."

"Supposedly it's key to staving off Azami. They're doing that exercise thing, right? We're probably gonna fire this at 'em, scare 'em off. Better than stickin' 'em with wooden spears, I guess."

"I'd rather use a wooden javelin. I know what those *do*. And I'd rather have food and tools than either."

The delivery man tugged the brim of his hat sympathetically.

"I feel you there. Our supplies ain't much better."

"Yet, some divisions get to feast on meat and alcohol, then start raving about 'avenging the king' or a 'holy war.' I dunno what ails Central."

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that."

The soldier saluted, and he and his men boarded the wagon and drove away.

No sooner was he gone than the rest of the border guards piled out of the guardroom, milling around the Godslayer Arrow. It was like a village coming to gape at a newly opened convenience store.

"What is this thing?" someone asked, pointing into the box.

The officer was rifling through the papers.

“I don’t get most of this, but...it’s some sort of superweapon.”

“Really? Ugh...”

The less they knew, the more it spooked them. They all took a step away.

“Downright creepy. Have they lost it over at Central Command? Or has the whole empire lost it?” the officer grumbled, stroking his whiskers. Then he started barking orders.

“It’s sure got lots of decorations... Trying to make it *look* impressive?”

“Too overdesigned, so maybe. But if we don’t know what that thing is, best choice is not to touch it until we’re given orders. The thing scares me.”

The Godslayer Arrow weaponized the *destruction* rune, and that alone gave it an ominous vibe every one of them picked up on. The officer put the lid back on and had a few men stow it away safely.

Of the men who remained behind, one turned hopefully toward him.

“Any supplies? I mean, we’re already tending fields better than most farmers...”

This would likely earn a protest from the loincloth man, but they *had* figured some things out. Growing their own crops, making their own farm implements, and repairing their own base...it was all DIY.

The officer bowed like all of this was his fault, telling them the truth.

“Sorry, none.”

“Hah?! None?!”

A silence settled over the Jiou base. Shock, dismay, disgust, and disappointment.

After a minute, someone said, “If they’re like this *before* the war...they’re trying to have fewer mouths to feed.”

In times of famine, desperate governments might choose to *let* their outlying regions starve. Given this history, and the utter lack of supplies, they might well be little more than sacrificial pawns, sent out to die.

Another soldier nodded, grumbling, “Instead of food and water, they send us some mystery weapon?”

“Gimme a break.”

Their resentment wasn't *just* directed at the weapon. It was the empire's policies, how they treated the lowest rungs of society. From their perspective, Central had clearly gone stark raving mad, and that made everyone angry. The other soldiers were swearing, too.

“Go out and die? Act as their meat shields? What is this, some sick joke?!”

“You can't get us food, but you can give us strange weapons? How are we supposed to eat?!”

“I'm done! To hell with the Jiou army!”

Seeing everyone ready to surrender to Azami on the spot, the officer scratched his head.

“I get wanting to yell, but...settle down. We need to talk this over.”

Calming them down, he ushered them all back inside.

Inside the cafeteria, he gathered all the soldiers together to speak freely. This did not seem to abate their fury.

“Sir! What are supposed to do? They're basically telling us to die!”

The officer contemplated while stroking his mustache.

“Settle down. It hasn't been that long since the last shipment of supplies.”

This was likely referring to Lloyd. But the men took issue with that.

“Sir, you know better. That was Lloyd acting on his own!”

“It sounded like he had no idea how we're treated out here! He was just dropping off snacks!”

“And keeps coming back 'cause of how bad it is... Augh, he's an angel!”

Their fury was interrupted only by that sentiment. Their officer urged them to remain calm once more.

“And we want kids like him living with their heads held up high. That's why we

can't do anything rash."

That earned a sullen silence.

Feeling like they were finally thinking straight, he changed tactics.

"But...we can't just do *nothing*."

"What do you mean?"

His mind made up, the officer leaned forward. "I'm gonna go appeal to the higher-ups at Central."

""""Y-you are?!""""

Now it was *their* turn to try and talk him out of it. What he was suggesting was a direct petition to the emperor himself. In many worlds, that could well lead to your head being cut off.

Seeing his men flustered, the officer launched into a speech.

"Conquering smaller countries and leaving them to fend for themselves is too much. You gotta feed the fish you catch! At the very least, we have a right to know if anyone in Central even *wants* to treat us like human beings."

"But there's no telling what'll happen to you, sir."

"I like my odds. I bet it's a small group of people pilfering our supplies to line their own pockets. Like that arms running deal."

It was clear he felt this was *necessary*. If there was any chance Central Command was unaware of their straits, then maaaybe a direct appeal could get them somewhere.

"There's even higher odds the bad guys'll silence you."

"But if we can improve things for everyone, it's worth a shot. If no one has any better ideas, I'll leave for Central today."

The officer showed everyone his records of all their poor treatment.

"I've been gathering evidence. I dunno how much it'll be considered as proof, but it accounts for the lack of food and supplies, and it has dates and records of the arms dealing incidents. We'll just have to pray this isn't what the higher-ups wanted."

Several soldiers put their hands up, volunteering.

“Sir, bring me along! I can’t stomach any more of this!”

Their officer’s voice trembled, and he teared up.

“M-men...”

But before he could say another word, a cheery voice echoed through the hall.

“Good morning!”

Lloyd’s arrival relaxed the furrows on every brow. They all turned, beaming like their grandson had just run in.

Lloyd had no idea he was interrupting a serious conversation, so he just started explaining the menu.

“Today I brought cheese, mustard, and bacon sandwiches using toasted bread, and I thought I’d add a little honey to that. The wonderful taste just spreads through your mouth—mm? Everyone’s here. What’s the occasion?”

They’d normally have been lining up to eat, but today the border guards were all looking reluctant. Their emotions were too riled for their appetites to kick in.

“Sorry, Lloyd. I know it’s better to eat these things fresh...but can you get us a doggie bag? I don’t think anyone feels like eating right now.”

“Wh-what happened? Food poisoning?”

“Uh, no, not— Argh, no use hiding it. Maybe a boy like you *oughtta* know.”

Since the officer was convinced that Lloyd was campaigning for a post as a proper Jiou soldier, he figured he had a right to know how corrupt the army really was.

Figuring this would be a long story, he sat Lloyd down and told him about their petition and the conditions here. There was some griping mixed in and a few sighs about his own inability to fix things.

He’d meant this to be informative, but it was increasingly just bellyaching about how bad they had it. He told the boy about how they’d been ordered to overlook the arms dealings, about the inadequate food supplies, the mysterious

weapon they'd received instead, and the records he'd kept of all this. His soldiers became angry again about their situation and were clapping their hands, fuming.

Lloyd was a righteous young man to begin with, and their fury got to him. He grew more solemn by the second. At first, he was just listening intently, but he was soon joining the other soldiers in their vocal protests.

When the officer finished, Lloyd couldn't stand it anymore and leaped to his feet.

"That's awful! That's too much! What are the top brass thinking?!"

"We find it hard to believe Central Command meant for this to happen. That's why we're planning on lodging a direct complaint. Maybe someone's profiting off our misery, and maybe we can't stop them. We might not even be able to get an audience at the castle, but we've gotta try."

Lloyd thumped his chest. "Leave that to me!" he said. "I hear your pleas, and I'll figure something out!"

"Huh? You will?"

Lloyd nodded.

"I've met several very important people. They were all very understanding! I'll bring your complaint to someone I trust and make sure no one prevents it from getting through."

"R-really? Well, you're Lloyd. I'm sure they'll listen."

Everyone liked him, so the Jiou soldiers were certain he could find someone to listen. Normally, it would be impossible for a boy who was not even a private yet, but...well, they already had a high opinion of him.

Not ever realizing that he was talking about Azami and they were talking about Jiou, Lloyd gave them all a confident grin.

"I'll handle this," he said. "We can't let these people get away with this. I'm sure someone else is responsible. If we haven't heard the truth about the state of things, they might be very cunning. So I'll take this directly to someone important and show them this evidence! Tell them they have to look after their

rank and file!”

“B-but if you do that...what’ll happen to your dream of being a soldier?”

Lloyd thought about that for a moment, then shook his head. He wasn’t dissuaded that easily.

He looked at the state of the office, then at each of the men in turn.

“Maybe someone will scold me for it. Maybe...I won’t get to be a soldier. But the kind of soldier I want to be would never stand for this.”

“L-Lloyd...”

The Jiou guards’ eyes misted over. A few even sniffled.

“Hard work deserves to be rewarded. That’s what matters here! My own future is of no concern. I’ll take this directly to someone who can make a difference!”

Huffing, he took the evidence from the officer and left the Jiou border base.



Furious with the Azami king—who genuinely had nothing to do with the shabby conditions of the enemy army—he ran across border and mountains, with top secret documents about the Jiou military situation in his hand.

Lloyd was convinced the king was failing his men, and Marie believed he'd fallen into a honey trap. The Azami king was working very hard, and no one was appreciating it.

Chapter 3

Beyond Reactions: No Ordinary Response Will Suffice

While Lloyd was indignantly racing back across the fields to Azami...

Some other characters were feeling equally incensed.

“Who is that woman?”

Marie, known for her laziness and tendency to eat canned goods.

“Good question...”

Chrome, scratching his infamous square jaw.

They both had their arms folded, groaning, like they were in a meeting that was going nowhere. Stuck on a pressing issue with no clear solution like, say, “Improve sales.”

But can you blame them for worrying? A woman suddenly appeared and became involved in the country’s day-to-day operations, clearly aiming for the king’s hand.

“What do you mean you can’t catch her out? Chrome, you’re not letting her weave a web of words around you, surely?”

“Absolutely not,” Chrome said, his expression becoming stern. “I’ve barely spoken to her at all.”

“Right...” Marie sighed and went back to groaning. “With the king, Fumar, and Katsu forming an iron wall in the way, I can’t get close enough to catch her. They scare me.”

Fumar and Katsu did have faces like straight-to-video criminals, and the king’s authority was absolute—one glare from him was all it took to make anyone back off, even Chrome.

Their consultation went nowhere except forward in time.

“What should we do? Punch her?”

A very Marie-like idea, but Chrome had to shake his head.

“With no proof of brainwashing, that would be a bit...”

“Oh, no. Out of pure spite.”

“That’s...worse.”

“I beg to differ! This is a matter of my mental health. Anyone who’d cause this much consternation deserves a good smack! You know you agree.”

This elicited a groan. “*Hngg*...well...light exercise *is* good for your health. If I just...convince myself she is brainwashing him, that this is *for* the king...and insist the princess led me astray...”

Chrome’s mental health was pretty far gone, too.

The conversation was moving in a dangerous direction—but then Lloyd arrived, out of breath.

“Excuse me! I just got back!”

“Oh, Lloyd. Welcome back.”

“I’m just stopping by.”

Normally, spotting these two would prompt a “What’s going on? Oh, let me get you some tea,” but today Lloyd just put his things down and turned to exit the shop.

“W-w-wait, Lloyd? What’s the rush?” Marie said, getting a bad feeling about this.

Realizing he wasn’t quite himself, Lloyd took a deep breath.

“S-sorry, I’m getting ahead of myself.”

“What’s wrong? Sit down; have a cup. Chrome?”

“Uh, right.”

Marie was the one who offered tea, but apparently Chrome had to make it.

“No, no, I’ve got it. Don’t get up, Chrome.”

In the end, Lloyd wound up making tea for everyone, and that calmed him down. It was very Lloyd to cool his head by making tea rather than drinking it. The power of routine.

After regaining his composure, he started to explain.

“I went to the base by the border today.”

Jiou’s.

“Oh, right, the mess reserve thing. You’re certainly throwing yourself into that... Is there a girl involved?!”

“Marie, you’ve got an overactive imagination,” Chrome said, baffled by this jump in thought. “But what *is* going on? You’re clearly upset.”

Lloyd nodded and began explaining the conditions at the base.

Since he was talking about the wrong country, everything he said was news to Chrome, and he looked shocked.

“Wh-what?”

The more he heard, the more horrified he was.

Marie couldn’t believe this was happening in her country (it wasn’t, so...) and her frown deepened.

“Chrome, could this be...?”

“She might be brainwashing her way through the army. Conditions that bad, it’s like an entirely different country.”

Horrific conditions he knew nothing about, coupled with a mysterious hooded interloper— If this were a novel, it would be downright cliché. If this were an old video game, that hooded figure would *definitely* be working for the last boss.

“This exercise was *her* idea...but if she’s sending orders to the front line like war is inevitable—this is just like Abaddon. Taking over the country to force us into war.”

Marie and Chrome were fully convinced the hooded woman was to blame.

Lloyd was still talking.

“I’d like to take this directly to the king! Maybe a bit out of line for a mere cadet, but...I can’t just do nothing!”

His eyes narrowed.

“Even if I wind up discharged from the military, I can’t overlook this. I can’t believe any Azami citizens are allowed to live like that.”

Good thing they were Jiou citizens.

Seeing his determination, both moved to stop him.

“Wait, Lloyd...!”

“You don’t have to bear this burden.”

“But...!”

They both sprang to their feet.

“We’re coming with you, Lloyd.”

“Yes, time is of the essence.”

Thrilled by their offer, Lloyd stood up and bowed.

“Th-thank you so much! I...I assumed it would be better if I alone was punished for this, but with Colonel Chrome and the secret savior of Azami with me, I feel much more confident!”

Lloyd was still unable to believe Marie could be the princess, so all evidence in that direction was getting twisted into this secret savior theory.

“Oh, you still believe that...,” she said, wincing.

“I sympathize,” Chrome said. “But hang in there.”

She glared at him, then refocused, rolling up her sleeve.

“Right, let’s kick in the castle doors!”

“Um...literally? I wasn’t planning on using violence!”

But she was already on her way, and Lloyd had to hustle to keep up.

Meanwhile, Satan was giving a report to Rinko, Fumar, Katsu, and the not-actually-brainwashed king.

He was standing upright like an office worker getting reprimanded. Surtr was on his head but fully retracted into his shell, not moving at all.

Rinko looked unimpressed, like a boss listening to a boring report.

“So you mean you’ve achieved absolutely nothing, then?”

“We’ve confirmed they’re suspicious!” Surtr’s voice echoed inside his shell.

Satan glared upward. “Then come out of your shell, Surtr! At least show your face!”

“You shut up! You spent the whole time hanging with Rol and poring over files... It’s not fair! This scolding’s all on you!”

Rinko let out a long sigh.

“I thought these two were supposed to be good?” Fumar growled.

“They’ve got the skills but are fundamentally unreliable. Truly frustrating,” Katsu said, speaking from experience. Running the Adventurer Guild had left him dealing with this type a lot.

“Argh,” Rinko said. “Satan, with your powers, you can hide in any shadow to eavesdrop! Why are you wasting money on coats and newspapers you’ll never even read, playing a bad detective?”

“Lab Chief...”

“It, uh...”

““Sounded like fun.””

Both their eyes were sparkling. They looked pleased as punch to have put the truth out there. Truly birds of a feather.

They might have been demon lords, but their inner children were alive and well, and Rinko had only one response.

“I’d have done the same thing!”

Perhaps not one fitting her role in this scene.

The king glared at each of them, then shook his head.

“That’s always been part of your charm, Rien.”

Clearly, nothing could ever shake him from taking her side. You'd think his old friend Fumar or the notoriously uptight Katsu would intervene here, but...

"You can say that again."

"Rinko always takes the high ground."

Nope, they just enabled it. Just like having the tendencies that old die-hard fans have. Really, brainwashing wasn't that far off base.

"Well, do your best this time."

"Rinko vouches for ya, so make sure you don't dash her hopes."

"You have her trust, demon lords. Do not disappoint."

Encouragement and chastisement went hand in hand, but Satan and Surtr were acutely aware of the preferential treatment here.

"Right...we trailed their underlings, but Lieutenant General Casitas and Guild Chief Hydra are keeping their cards close to their chest."

Rinko folded her arms, nodding. "I figured if you were obvious about following them, then it might actually force their hand—but they aren't getting tripped up that easy."

Aha—she was *expecting* them to be lousy at tailing. She hadn't spent all that time in charge of Alka and Eug for nothing.

"We've gotta assume they've destroyed all evidence and are communicating via some unorthodox means."

"But what? Can't be anything as obvious as semaphore flags."

Fumar rubbed his goatee, frowning.

"If only there were evidence besides that—proof they were connected to our enemy. A nice log of smuggling operations."

"Kacchin, they're acting so confident because they *know* they got rid of evidence like that. They'll have swapped those out for dummy logs ages ago."

"But supposedly they were stolen, right? Logs like that would surely seal the deal, but if any exist, they'll be on the Jiou side. If we know how they stole things, we can compare 'em to the fake logs and uncover their lies."

“Hmm, but can’t really count on Jiou accidentally sending us their evidence,” the king sighed. But no sooner had this wishful thinking escaped his lips—“Mwa-ha-ha! Petition time, criminal scum! Hands against the wall!”

Marie kicked down the door sounding like a postapocalyptic thug. No one was able to conceal their astonishment.

This was less a petition than an assault, the kind of move SWAT teams used to raid a drug syndicate, but Marie had a lot of stress and pent-up emotions that now became full-blown venting.

Chrome and Lloyd were behind her, their sanity intact. Marie had been getting more and more furious on their way to the castle, and that had forced them to calm down. *This is not how I thought this would go!* was echoing through both their minds. Neither was the type who could vent when they needed to.

But Marie was the type who could, especially when it would come back to haunt her, and she was still going on strong.

“I’ve got your proof right here, lowlives! Say your goddamn prayers!”

Not to go on a tangent, but in later days, this would be known as the Shopkeeper’s Castle Assault.

Lloyd was already moving to put a stop to it.

“Uh, Marie...I think you’ve crossed a lot of lines here!”



She turned toward him and pulled a silly face.

“Yeah, I might have been a bit stressed out. And I always wanted to bust through a door like a loose-cannon cop. And maybe tail someone in a long coat... You know the deal!”

“You’re not eight anymore! Let’s act like adults.”

Marie’s line made everyone in the know think the same thing— *Just like her mom!*

Meanwhile, Lloyd’s “Grow up!” pierced the hearts of the demon lords. They’d been alive for over a hundred years and were suddenly mortified, staring at their toes. Remembering how to play was by no means a bad thing, but there was a time and place.

Why was Marie embarrassing herself? Why were Lloyd and Chrome with her? No one on the castle side knew.

“Chrome, what is the meaning of this?” the king asked. “I am honestly very lost.”

While he was asking, the other two led Rinko to the corner, putting her hood back up. Their smooth teamwork bought more than enough time.

Chrome had one eye on that but was done beating around the bush.

“Your Majesty, is there something you’re hiding from me?”

This rattled the king, and Fumar stepped in to cover.

“Now, now, Royal Guard, do you have a reason to suspect Luke? He’s the king!”

“That’s *why* I’m suspicious.”

“Oh. Oh? Right.”

Chrome’s confidence was rather alarming, and even Fumar was thrown off stride.

“His Majesty’s actions are frequently misguided, but lately he’s been particularly odd. To the point that anyone would suspect he’s been brainwashed by a demon lord. For quite a while now, I’ve been stuck in

situations that made me *wish* he'd be possessed again, wondering if a demon lord would have done a better job. And where I swear my paycheck isn't worth the orders I have to execute and want to howl out the window that he needs to let his daughter go, but *this* time he's crossed the line!"

Chrome had clearly decided *this* was his turn to vent.

"Your Majesty, how bad *are* you at this?" Katsu asked, adjusting his glasses.

"Ahem. I was at least aware that I was placing an unusual burden on Chrome in times of crisis."

"Yet, you didn't stop."

Katsu was always the type to go for the finishing blow rather than offer a helping hand.

At this point, Marie barged back in.

"Exactly! I was *done* with your typical weird dumb suspicious crap to begin with, but now you're cheating on your missing wife?! I'm here to pass judgment on your infidelity!"

"The first half is undeniable, but...cheating?! Luke! How could you?!"

Fumar got derailed mid-defense. Accusations of infidelity were clearly his Achilles' heel. This man's first and only priority was always his beloved Rinko.

The king had no idea where these accusations were coming from and could only shake his head.

"No! No, no, what? Cheating?!"

"QED!" she yelled, huffing. "Unfaithful! Brainwashed! Manipulated—by this mysterious hooded woman!"

She pointed at Rinko. Unaware that this lady was in fact her actual mother and not some new paramour.

Rinko was scratching her head, confused, and everyone who knew the truth—
""""Oh, okay.""""

—settled down immediately. If you didn't know who she was, it *would* seem suspicious. Anyone would think she was some strange interloping harlot

bending the king's ear.

But this just lit a fire under Marie.

"What?! You don't even deny it?!"

Katsu was starting to feel sorry for her, and he whispered to Rinko, "Guild Chief, maybe you oughtta fess up here? You *are* her mother."

"Can't," Rinko squeaked, pulling the hood down. "I'm not ready! How can I face her after all this time?"

Rinko was immortal, and the realization that she'd outlive her daughter had led her to flee from her family. Well aware of this, Satan and Surtr were rather sympathetic.

"She *does* know what really matters."

"Family brings out her true colors. And she was such a wild child when she was single..."

Having kids put many a troublemaker's feet back on solid ground.

Their whispering caught Lloyd's attention.

"Oh? Satan and Surtr! Why are you here?"

"Sup, Lloyd. Fancy meeting you here."

"You tagging along with Marie? Sounds rough," Surtr said.

But Lloyd shook his head, looking grim.

"The other way around. I'm here to give the king a piece of my mind."

"Huh? You're adding to this, too?!" the king gasped. If you didn't know what you'd done wrong, getting defensive would be a natural reaction. The same way people start acting shifty when cops are around no matter how good they've been.

"Oh? Well, anything Lloyd has to say is worth listening to. Speak up, boy!"

"Oh dear. What did you do to Lloyd, Your Majesty?"

"Hah? Is no one on my side?!"

Fumar and Katsu were both glaring at him— They loved Lloyd almost as much

as they loved Rinko.

But even as the king reeled, Lloyd stepped forward.

He'd never looked this serious. It was downright grim.

"Your Majesty!"

"Is something wrong, Lloyd?!" the king cried, taking a step backward.

Lloyd took a step closer.

"Everything is wrong!" he snapped.

Most of them had never seen him like this, and silence fell over the room.

"Gosh, this takes me back. He got mad at me like this once...at the hotel... I wriggled out eventually..."

Not really something to be smug about, Marie. It's like a veteran part-timer saying, "We haven't been this busy since..." or "Running the place short on staff..." like they've been through the trenches.

Earnestly clutching the evidence to his chest, Lloyd picked his next words carefully.

"I'm currently posted to the mess reserve, delivering refreshments to every department."

"Yes?" the king said, nodding avidly.

"I've been to all sorts of places and learned a lot. But..."

"But?"

"The way people live at the bases near the border—it was far worse than I could have imagined. The place is so run-down. Their food is a pile of canned goods— They're forced to grow crops nearby to have enough to eat!"

"What? That's news to me!"

"And they received orders to overlook a smuggling operation! What's that about? Negligence is inexcusable!"

The king looked as shocked as if Lloyd had been talking about another country. Which he was.

“Uh...I went to check on them personally myself and saw nothing like that! The buildings are overhauled annually! Crops? Where?”

The king looked at Chrome, who nodded gravely.

“If Lloyd says it’s true, it must be. Your Majesty, are you sure you haven’t been possessed again and issued destructive orders?”

“No, no, not at all! There must be some mistake!”

But Marie pressed further. “Liar! This woman’s got you all turned around! Take off that suspicious-ass hood— She’s a villain! One look at her should tell you that!”

That’s your mom.

But the king insisted he was innocent.

Unable to stand it anymore, Lloyd slammed the evidence down on the table.

“Wh-what’s this?”

“The documents they gave me! A full account of how bad the border guards are treated! Proof!”

Shocked by hard evidence, the king took the documents and began to read.

“Mm? Mm...mmm?”

At first he looked shaken...but the more he read, the more something felt off.

It was like buying the new volume of your favorite manga, and once you start reading, you realize it is a totally different title with a similar name.

The format of the documents, the conventions, and the unfamiliar place names—it all felt wrong. He started passing them around to Fumar, Katsu, Chrome, and Satan, saying, “Read this over.”

As they read, realization dawned on them. “This...is Jiou.”

“Lloyd, what is this?” the king asked, pointing at the papers.

“I just said! Evidence! How many times must I say it? I went over the mountain, across the valley, and talked to the soldiers at the base beyond!”

““““Across the valley?!“““““

Everyone realized the same thing. Lloyd had mistaken the Jiou border base for an Azami one.

“Still...how did you get all this?” the king inquired.

Lloyd was still furious. “Allowing smuggling is bad enough, but you’ve also got a young boy working as a spy in enemy territory?! That’s so dangerous! I must have reminded these soldiers of him because they were really nice to me!”

“Cool, that answers all our questions,” Satan said, like the case was closed.

Everyone knew this was one of Lloyd’s misunderstandings.

This was Surtr’s first time witnessing the full scale of Lloyd’s genius, and he muttered, “It’s straight up miraculous...but who would ever suspect this nice kid accidentally invaded the enemy country?”

“He’s unparalleled at getting things wrong in the right way. But what do you make of it, Surtr?”

The turtle nodded. “I agree. This miracle works in our favor. He brought us the evidence we needed.”

With that statement in mind, Fumar scanned the documents again.

“Oh, yes...these thefts they’re not responding to are clear smuggling operations. If we compare the data here and lists of what was stolen to the Weapon Merchants Guild’s statements and logs, we can expose their crimes.”

“Faking incidents to send weapons and supplies to the Jiou Empire—and the guild then claims damages, helping the military affairs increase their defense budget. It all connects. They’re probably turning a pretty profit. Collecting insurance payments *and* avoiding taxes. Clever.”

As a proxy guild chief, Katsu was rather impressed.

While the old men were all convinced, Lloyd, Chrome, and Marie were starting to look puzzled.

“Um, why are you all nodding?”

“All this talk about Lloyd’s miracles aside, remember why we’re here.”

“Right! The woman hiding behind you! We aren’t leaving till we find out who

she is!”

Marie alone was unshakable, and the king winced.

He leaned over and whispered in Rinko’s ear.

“Rien, maybe it’s time you gave in and fessed up.”

“...Nope. Maybe later.”

She was acting like a child.

“Don’t be like that,” Fumar said, wincing himself. “If you blow this chance, when will you get another?”

“Exactly,” Katsu chimed in. “Have you ever put something unpleasant off till tomorrow and actually done it then?”

That argument hit a lot of people where it hurt, and Rinko let out a groan.

Satan left them to it, doing his best to calm Lloyd down.

“Lloyd, I promise I’ll make sure the king uses this evidence to fix these issues.”

“You will? Well, you’re a man of your word, Satan! Look after those border guards for me!”

The boy was instantly radiating unwavering trust. *Wait, Lloyd trusts him more than me?* Marie thought, but that was not relevant now.

“Okay, I’ll scold him for it later.”

“Er, wait, Satan—can’t we clear up this whole misunderstanding?”

While it was helping Lloyd settle down, the king was not pleased to be framed for crimes he hadn’t committed.

But Marie wasn’t going to let things go that easily.

“I think you’d better explain some things first! Like that woman!”

“R-right...I mean, I don’t mind saying it myself, but...”

His daughter’s words sure had a lot of sway, and Fumar started cackling.

“You’re a king with no morals!” he jeered.

“Fumar!” Lloyd snapped. “There are people in trouble! This is no time for

jest!”

“F-fair. Sorry.”

Fumar folded quickly. He was no match for Lloyd.

“There’s a time and a place, Fumar!” Lloyd snorted.

Chrome, meanwhile, had been relieved to find the king was *not* brainwashed—but that just made the hooded woman more mysterious.

“Um, so I’ll take it you aren’t possessed by a demon lord this time, but that doesn’t shed any light on who this is. Why are you insisting on hiding her identity?”

But as levelheaded as he was, Marie was full-on fuming, like she had a ringside seat at a pro wrestling match.

“We all know she’s a gold digger! Aiming for the inheritance! And I’m not letting this marriage happen!”

They were already married—but pretty much anyone would assume the same thing here.

Suppressing a grin at the irony, Katsu looked at Rinko, certain it was time to pay the piper. Satan and Surtr were also pushing her.

“It’s now or never! The mysterious military strategist thing has already failed. If you do it here, we can back you up. It’s time to tell the truth!”

“*Hngg...the day I need help from Seta...*”

She’d never had the highest opinion of Satan, but he was right this time, and Rinko finally rose to her feet. She couldn’t quite bring herself to face Marie—or take off her hood.

“Halfway there. Now just turn around! Drop the hood!”

“Wait, Lou! I’m...searching for the right words. I don’t wanna make it mawkish! Gotta keep this positive.”

“When it was Luke and me, you didn’t even sweat it!”

But she was a mother and loved her child and felt guilt over abandoning her.

But Lloyd was getting curious, too, and leaned in to take a peek.

“Oh? Is that you, Rinko?”

Cover blown! She gave Lloyd an awkward look.

“Welp. Ah-ha-ha. Yup. It’s me, Rinko.”

Marie’s scowl was only getting deeper.

“What? You know her, Lloyd? He has a promising future, so you’ve got a good eye—or you’re aiming for more people to fall into your clutches?!”

Part of that was just a compliment.

“She’s not a bad person!” Lloyd said. “She’s the head of the Adventurer Guild. She’s super nice! Not dangerous or anything.”

“Huh...then why is she hiding her face? Rinko, if that is your real name—good people don’t go hiding behind hoods! Take that off and face the music!”

Marie was advancing on her, hackles raised.

Rinko knew the game was up. She spun around.

“Heh-heh-heh...you leave me with no choice!” she cried.

She sure spun on a dime. But that laugh definitely sounded like one from an “evil mastermind.”

“Can she not say anything without making it a performance?”

“The lab chief has *issues*.”

Satan and Surtr had known her since their days as scientists, and she had always been like this. The king was watching on warmly, admiring the effort she was putting in.

A dramatic pause...could only last so long. Then the truth started spilling out.

“The true nature of this mysterious beautiful enchantress military strategist is —”

“More adjectives don’t make it better.”

“Just let her have this one, Fumar. She’s really into those words right now.”

Rinko shot Fumar and Katsu a glare. She did not have the leeway to deal with their running commentary.

Brushing them off, she dramatically dropped her hood. Her back still turned.

“Um, my true nature is—the head of the Adventurer Guild!”

There was another very long silence. Finally, she did an about-face, turning toward the audience. Looking very awkward, like she’d just acted foolishly.

“Mm?”

“Hmm?”

Marie and Chrome both felt as if they’d seen her somewhere before.

Rinko flashed a peace sign with both hands as if she were throwing herself at the mercy of god and Buddha.

“That’s right! It’s your long-lost mom, Rinko—aka Rien!”

Her voice loud and bright— A maternity reveal!

The shocking news sent Lloyd and Chrome staggering! Chrome in particular was astonished to see her looking just as young as he remembered and was swinging wildly between dazed and confused.

He took a step forward.

“That certainly explains why the king dotes on you and why Fumar was being weirdly nice. However!”

He did not succeed in forming an actual question. No further words emerged from his mouth.

And...

“.....Mom?”

You’d expect a big reaction from Marie, who often screeches, as she just learned the suspicious strategist was actually her long-lost mom, but— Instead, she fainted—blowing snot bubbles. Apparently the shock was too great, and she’d moved beyond reactions. If this was a candid camera show, the director would be clutching their head, having failed to get the shot they needed.



With Marie unconscious but still standing upright, the entire room descended into chaos.

“M-Marie?! Hello, Marie?!”

“At least lay her down!”

A few minutes later...

They’d found a bed for her, wiped her nose, and she’d eventually gathered her wits again.

“Um...Mom...um...”

“Her brain’s definitely overheating. Can’t blame her. I did kinda spring it on her.”

Rinko had a hand on her daughter’s forehead, taking her temperature. She got a wet towel ready and wiped Mare’s face with it—looking every bit like a mother.

Leaning back in a chair, Fumar nodded. “All that ruckus— You made a mess of things. Like Luke does.”

“Yeah, I definitely never wanna stoop to his level ever again,” Rinko said grimly.

The king looked ready to cry.

“Chrome...am I *that* bad? Do I make a mess of everything?”

“Yes, you pretty much never know when to switch on or off. It’s all or nothing with you.”

Chrome was relentless today.

But no one here had time for the king’s tears. Chrome bowed to Fumar and Katsu.

“I’m sorry I suspected you, gentlemen. You did seem brainwashed, but it makes sense when it comes to her.”

“Heh...you’re making me blush, Chrome.”

“It wasn’t a compliment.”

Even Katsu played the clown when Rinko was involved.

“Sorry...Chrome, was it? We can't have word getting out just yet. You can imagine why.”

“I certainly can. But that said...if she knows Kunlun folk and Satan...the immortality thing makes sense.”

He'd been hit by a wave of information, but “connected to Alka and Kunlun” was a magic phrase that could make him swallow anything. He sure has built up a tolerance over time.

“You're friends with the chief?! That explains why you're so young!”

Lloyd hadn't skipped a beat. He'd been born and raised in Kunlun and seemed to think immortals grew on trees. And maybe didn't distinguish between them and demon lords.

Rinko put a finger to her lips, urging secrecy.

“For now, I really don't want Alka knowing about me.”

“Makes sense. She can be a real handful.”

He agreed so readily that Rinko couldn't help but laugh.

“That's our Alka. She wasn't always like that, though.”

She nodded.

Meanwhile, Satan and Surtr were poring over the evidence Lloyd had brought.

“Okay, Surtr. We've got clear unassailable proof, and based on this evidence, they're making some sort of self-propelled artillery.”

“Ha-ha-ha! That they are, Satan. With this, we can do whatever we like to them!”

They had so many options now.

But the king interrupted their gloating.

“I hate to be a spoilsport, but the first thing we must do is cancel this exercise. If they know all our plans, odds are high they'll attack during it. It's best to be

cautious. Especially if they plan to use that to start a war.”

The king put the safety of his citizens first—until Rinko said otherwise.

“It’s the other way around, Lou. Even if we stave off a Jiou invasion here, they’ll just be even smarter about their next move. We’ve gotta hit ‘em *now*.”

“You mean...start the war ourselves?”

“No, no, we can stop the war from happening at all. While we know everything up their sleeve. Weaken them with no casualties on either side by drawing out their head—Eug—and crushing her.”

“No casualties on *either* side?” Katsu gasped.

Rinko flashed him a grin, then glanced out the window, her smile fading. “She tends to get carried away. Best to hit her hard before she calms down again.”

Half the people here had no idea who she meant and were just gaping, but the demon lords were entirely in agreement.

“Sounds right. No way she’s not watching every move being made.”

“And if we can stop her from causing trouble, that frees us up for other business.”

Rinko perked back up and struck a pose. “Therefore!” she cried. “The exercise must continue! Though it won’t be an exercise anymore. This is more a prelude now.”

“A what?”

“The curtains are going up, Lloyd. It’s time we hashed out a plan. Chrome, you too. We won’t be sidelining you anymore. First up, we gotta arrest Casitas and Hydra.”

“Huh...,” Chrome said. Having never been worried about being left out, he was feeling apprehensive about the whole situation.

Lloyd looked at Marie, thinking.

“Mm? What’s up, Lloyd?” Satan asked.

“Marie’s mom seems awfully close to the king. Does that mean...?”

Has he finally worked out Marie was the princess?

“I guess that would make you swoon! Finding out the king might be your stepfather? Even I might pass out from that!”

Nothing could shake him from his beliefs. Just how un-princess-like was she?! Everyone was very worried about her.

Let’s shine our spotlight on our two spies, Lieutenant General Casitas—director of military affairs—and Hydra, the head of the Weapon Merchants Guild.

There was less than a week to go before the military exercise.

In a room in a large mansion in the Central District, the two hawks were sipping drinks together.

This luxurious room belonged to the merchant who earned more than any general. Your classic corrupt minister and duplicitous dealer pairing. They looked ready to let money pour through their fingers while insisting the other was the real villain.

“You’ve kept things moving right along, Lieutenant General.”

“Indeed. I could not believe my ears when they proposed this daft exercise, but...the result have taken a turn in our favor. Trust the Jiou Empire, eh?”

Swap out a few proper nouns and you’d have “the villains about to be defeated in an old samurai show.”

Each took a sip of wine and shared a sinister chuckle, their breaths boozy—they were well into their cups and deep in their crimes. Like players going over the results of a shogi game or middle-aged men at a reunion remembering how wild they’d once been.

“When the intelligence department made their move, it did unnerve me.”

“Agreed. But when he failed to find proof of our connection, his luck ran out.”

“The former intelligence head remains lucky, though. He got to keep his life.”

“Yes, merely a demotion. The look on his face!”

The lieutenant general’s shoulders shook, but the guild chief frowned.

“Are we sure about his replacement?”

“Quite,” Casitas said, smirking. He crossed his legs, leaning back. “She’s the former headmistress of Rokujou Sorcery Academy. The woman doesn’t know the meaning of morals.”

“Ah, the ambitious one. Yes.”

She was infamous—and her name alone alleviated his fears.

“She’ll do anything to avoid a drop in rank. Odds are high she’s feeling around under the table to protect herself, but all relevant documents are forged or destroyed, so she’ll find nothing.”

“And even if she does, she’s easily controlled. Wave money or chance of career advancement in front of her, and she’s ours.”

Both men threw back their heads and laughed. If they’d had mustaches, they’d have twirled them.

As their drinks made them bolder, their lips loosened.

“But the Jiou side seems out of control. They didn’t used to be this bad,” Hydra said, voicing his concern. Some people find alcohol makes them let slip fears and anxieties they normally keep to themselves.

Casitas was of the type who got steadily more confident, so he just snorted.

“Who cares what they’re thinking? Whatever plan they’ve got is fine with us! You, at least, will turn a profit.”

“That I will. Well, if they prove to be up to no good, we’ll just turn the tables on them.”

“Yes, squeeze them for all they’re worth. And when war finally breaks out, we will be the ones who win. We know all about them, and our might will prevail.”

“Dr. Eug may be directly serving the emperor, but she’s simply an *inventor*.”

She was actually running the entire country and had a brain full of scientific knowledge far beyond the current norms—but it was a tall order for them to determine that based on the information at hand.

“They’ll serve as excellent villains to kick up a fuss and then at the end allow

us to win. That will leave my position secure for life.”

“Indeed. If skirmishes continue indefinitely, my sales will stay solid.”

Neither were aware that the enemy was making an automatic gun—the self-propelled artillery. Just then— “Look who’s here!”

““Who?!””

The door opened, and Rinko, Satan, and Rol waltzed in, like invited guests.

“Still think I’m easily controlled?” Rol snarled, a vein throbbing on her forehead.

Hydra fell off his chair. Casitas raised a hand, fingers shaking.

“What is this?” he yelled. “Why were you in the next room? Where are the guards?”

That was what busted evil minsters *always* said.

Satan shot them a grin. “That’s gonna be our secret.”

“If we tell them we were hiding in your shadow, they just won’t believe us,” the turtle on his head muttered.

“Yeah, explaining takes too long, and it’s cooler if we just act mysterious.”

Ignoring the demon lords, Rinko walked over to the lieutenant general.

“Y-you’re the genius military strategist!”

“You forgot the ‘beautiful’ part, but I’ll let that slide.”

She looked at the two trembling spies and glanced at Rol.

“Yes, your testimony just now matched with my bureau’s audits,” Rol said. “They’ll be sentenced to capital punishment.”

This threat seemed to help Casitas recover, and he asked, “Oh? Based on what? We had a few drinks, imagined a few hypotheticals, and enjoyed a small villainous performance.”

No one would buy that excuse. But it was the only one they had, so Hydra chimed in.

“Yes! We were simply pretending to be evil! Such bad timing for a surprise

audit during our little game.”

They were so brazen that it drew shocked looks—and the lieutenant general seemed hell-bent on erasing this whole thing.

He was so certain of his authority that he started threatening them right back.

“Since when do surprise audits allow for breaking and entering—and eavesdropping? I must say I’m disappointed in your job performance, Rol.”

“This...ridiculous...”

Combined with their earlier trash-talking, Rol was now so angry she was ready to take a swing.

Satan stopped her.

“Rol, they’re trying to bait you into violence, hoping that’ll help their current situation.”

She bit her lip and backed down.

But this interaction just made Casitas look even more sure of himself.

“Now then, what crimes should we charge you with? Oh, I know! We caught you stealing, and you tried to use this audit as an excuse. Makes perfect sense!”

He glanced at Hydra, who nodded so hard his belly shook.

“And the moment things turned against you, you all started blithering about this ridiculous spy nonsense. As if a little alcohol would make us buy that!”

They’d already abandoned their original excuse.

“Clearly, you’re at a disadvantage here. When the military police arrive, I’m sure they’ll find a few things missing... I have the power to order that. Unless you have evidence that we’ve dealt with Jiou, that won’t change.”

He wasn’t even trying to hide his plans to frame them; he was utterly confident he’d destroyed all evidence of his misdeeds.

You’d think this would be a prime moment to shove Lloyd’s evidence in his face, but Rinko let it slide.

“Wow, you two didn’t get put in command for nothing! What are we

supposed to do now? I've got no proof and just impulsively tried to arrest you!"

"Heh-heh-heh, finally you see the light. Yes, without evidence, we're in control."

"You sure got us good. Welp, show some mercy to the fallen— Would you mind telling us who you were in contact with from Jiou?"

Confident they'd won, Casitas and Hydra let their guards down—perhaps the booze speaking—and began spilling the beans.

"You'll never believe it! We've spoken directly to the Jiou emperor and his attendants."

"Names? Dr. Eug, perhaps?"

"You're aware of her? Impressive."

Casitas praised her, unaware they were hanging themselves.

"We've accepted off-the-record funds from them and exported goods their way," Hydra added. "Ores we'd normally never be allowed to ship to an enemy but are vital for weapon production."

"We had fake bandits attack to cover the exchange. And I used those as an excuse to increase my budgets! A classic confidence scam."

"Anything else you can tell us? Like connections between Jiou and Profen?"

"Mm? Are they involved...? I suppose that little Eug lady did mention an Eve once or twice."

A smile bloomed across Rinko's face.

"That's all I need to know! The details we can save for the full questioning later. Surtr, take it away."

"Questioning? What do you mean? With no evidence...mm?"

Surtr had said, "Finally," and hopped off Satan's head, landing on the window frame. He breathed two or three puffs of fire.

Both villains glanced at each other. That sure looked like a signal.

"What's with this turtle...? How dare you bring a filthy animal into my home?"

“If it had resale value, I’d happily accept it! But who would want a *red* turtle?”

“Piss off,” Surtr snarled. “Filthy? Please. I scrub my shell with soap every day to keep myself from getting smelly! If you’ve got a line on a pretty lady buyer, I might be willing to talk, though.”

They both gaped.

“It’s talking?! I-is it a monster? You brought a monster here to threaten us?”

“Don’t worry, this ain’t that. We’re doing this by the book.”

No sooner had the words left Rinko’s mouth than a servant hustled in, yelping, “P-pardon me!” Not even a knock.

“Wh-what’s this? Not now!”

But the servant was desperately spluttering, “Sir! The intelligence bureau’s auditors are here with lots of soldiers! They have the house surrounded!”

““Whaaat?!””

Both men rushed to the window, unable to believe their ears.

The lights of the luminescent stones showed a line of uniforms.

“Wow, they’re plastered against the glass like a couple of frogs! Let’s get ‘em,” Riho said— She was temporarily assigned to the intelligence department.

The soldiers came charging into the mansion—if this were a samurai drama, they’d have been yelling “Submit! Submit!”

Riho brushed off the servant’s attempt to stop her and led the way into the room.

“Yeah, yeah, coming through. Yo, we got that juicy info, Rol.”

“Yes, along with a great deal of insults I’d rather not have heard.”

Frothing with rage, Lieutenant General Casitas leaned forward, roaring at Riho and the other soldiers.

“H-how dare you? Who gave you permission?! Without a warrant, there will be consequences!”

Rol grinned like she’d been waiting for just that moment and took something

out of her pocket—a document full of legalese.

“With all your rude talk, I clean forgot! I’ve got a warrant for your arrest.”

Casitas and Hydra stared at it in disbelief, but they soon realized it was real and started screeching.

“Th-that’s impossible!” Hydra yelled. “Proof! Proof! You can’t get a warrant without it! If this is real, then the proof is fake! You faked it!”

“You seem quite sure you destroyed all the evidence,” Satan said, almost impressed.

“I did look into it, but fair—I found absolutely *nothing* on the Azami side. We buckled down and dug through all the old files but came up empty.”

“And by we, you mean me,” Riho snapped.

Rol ignored this.

“Naturally!” Casitas said, sounding increasingly desperate. “So how are you here? You’ve got nothing more than circumstantial evidence, and you can’t get a warrant based on that!”

Rinko was enjoying watching him squirm but figured it was time to step in.

“You heard the lady, Lieutenant General. Nothing on the *Azami* side. Rihocchi, bring it in.”

“What *is* that nickname? And you mean this?”

Still wincing at Rinko’s flippancy, Riho held out the evidence Lloyd had brought back from the Jiou Empire.

“What is that?”

“You wouldn’t recognize it, no. This evidence was borrowed from Jiou.”

““Wha...?!””

Both jaws dropped.

“That’s more like it!” Rol gloated. “Well worth drawing it out this long.”

“But you said you had no proof!” Hydra squeaked.

“I said *I* had no proof!” Rinko smirked. “Sorry, Rol, I’m sure you wanted to

throw that at them right away.”

“If I got more wrinkles from this, I’ll send the bill for the beautician visit.”

Rol made a show of rubbing the edges of her eyes.

Rinko flipped through the documents, reading highlights aloud. Less like a cop listing charges than a teacher scolding a wayward student.

“Obviously you cleaned up the mess in your yards, but you didn’t make it over to their side of the fence. Still, every time the Azami Weapon Merchants Guild got attacked by bandits, it was in enemy territory! How odd. Your reports say these were all in *our* lands, totally different locations. Oh, and it sounds like they stole a *lot* more than military rations.”

“Got any more excuses, Hydra?” Satan sneered. “These account logs seem really clear.”

Hydra had nothing and could only sit in silence, sweat rolling down his brow.

But Casitas was laughing loudly.

“Ha-ha-ha! A dirty trick, indeed. As if evidence would ever make it here from Jiou! You’re so desperate to be rid of me you’re forging evidence now? You wish to be the new lieutenant general?”

“Wow, I’ve seen that on TV.”

“Boss, they’re not familiar with the formulaic beauty of Japanese samurai TV shows.”

Casitas’s adamant resistance was just making everyone shake their heads.

“I wouldn’t say no to it,” Rol admitted. “But you’re clinging to the chair so hard it’ll have teeth marks in it, and that’s just unsanitary. It’s time we escorted you out, Lieutenant General.”

“Careful, Rol,” Rinko said. “This is where TV villains usually resort to violence.”

“TV? I have no clue what you people are talking about.”

While everyone was focused on the lieutenant general—Hydra had been edging toward the closet.

“Yeah, best grab a coat before we head out,” Satan said, assuming he was

resigned to his fate. “It’s getting pretty chilly these days.”

But Hydra’s face twisted into a malicious grin.

“Mwa-ha-ha-ha! As if I’d come along quietly! Dr. Eug gave us a card to play for this eventuality! Ready, Lieutenant General?”

“Mm, this situation is dire and leaves us with no choice! Use those armored dolls and eliminate them all!”

Rinko had been smirking at their desperate ploy, but the weapon Casitas named made that smile fade.

“Not even trying to hide— Wait, Dr. Eug’s armored dolls?”

That sounded ominous, and she braced herself. Satan and Surtr knew Eug all too well, and Riho knew enough to be on guard.

Hydra’s belly wobbling, he opened the closet door. Behind a row of expensive clothes—was a fake backing, which he yanked aside.

Casitas was also pushing through the clothes, helping to remove the boards.

“Can’t believe we’re forced to resort to this!”

Through the clothes, they could see two large dolls, the size of a suit of armor, seated with their arms clutching their knees. The dull metallic gleam of their ellipsoid heads, fragile-looking bodies studded with green glass, folded compactly into the hidden space.

“What are these things?” Riho said, her mithril arm held out in front of her, ready to fight at any time.

“Hmph,” Rol scoffed. “Playing with dolls? At your age? That won’t—”

“Yo! Stand back, Rol!”

But even as Riho shouted—

There was a whine, and the dolls’ lenses lit up. Even Rol flinched at the sound.

“Wh-what the—?”

“Not good! Rol, get outta here!” Surtr roared.

As he did, the dolls rose and attacked. Their wrists rotated, and sharp blades

flew out.

“Wha—?!”

Rol could not believe the speed of them.

Satan threw himself in front of her, taking the blow.

“You still with us, Rol? Uh...”

“Satan?!”

“A little surprise gift from Eug,” he groaned, clutching his shoulder. “Those are no ordinary blades.”

The other armored doll was attacking soldiers and servants alike. Several went down, spraying blood.

“Rah!” Riho took a swing with her mithril fist—but the doll didn’t even stagger, striking back with its wrist blades. “Damn tough—are these things mithril, too?!”

That was enough to make Rinko change tactics.

“They are? Nicely spotted, Rihocchi! Soldiers, do not engage. Keep your distance!”

This convinced Hydra that he’d turned the tables. He started chortling maniacally.

“Har-har-har! Well? How do you like the specs on Eug’s murder dolls? They won’t hesitate to mow a human down! New weapons for a new age that will alter the course of hist—mm?”

He’d launched into a sales pitch like an infomercial host, but his new-age weapons didn’t seem to have any compunctions about targeting *him*, too.

“Mragh! My arm! It huuuuurts!”

Quite a pathetic whine—and enough to make the color drain from Casitas’s face.

“O-oh? What’s this? These defective contraptions are attacking your servants! C-cease that! How rude, attacking your masters!”

But an armored doll turned its sights on him.

Rinko was crouched over a pool of blood, using a healing spell on a wounded servant. She looked up, shaking her head.

“Clearly, she meant for these to rub you both out. Classic Eug.”

Eug really covered all her bases. Rinko glanced at the demon lords.

“Satan, bind ‘em. Surtr, don’t burn the house down, but use your fire to hit their joints. Given their construction, those’ll be the weak points.”

“That’s asking a lot, Boss! Satan, hold ‘em still.”

“Trust me, I know my job better than you ever will.”

Black shadows rose, twisting themselves tightly around the two dolls. Creaking, they ground to a halt.

“Hmm, impressive strength for such spindly frames. Surtr, do your worst.”

“Yeah, yeah, knees and elbows.”

Like a veteran welder, the turtle’s flames melted the joints away. The more the dolls tried to move, the more their joints became disfigured.

“Now just gotta crack their lenses. Riho, I’ll heat up the green glass, so chill ‘em with an ice spell.”

“O-okay, got it.”

Not used to having a turtle bark commands, Riho looked a bit rattled. However, she was getting used to weird things in general and quickly adjusted, snapping the dolls’ lenses.

This finally made them stop moving, and Rinko looked relieved.

“We need demon lords to stop them... With the lens gone, they can’t find us to attack. That helps, but if there was more, they’d be a real threat.”

She sounded impressed despite herself.

Satan had other concerns. “You okay there, Rol?”

“Th-thanks...,” Rol said, acting quite unlike herself.

Riho smirked at that. “Oh-ho? What’s this, Rol? Are we seeing a new side of

you?”

“Sh-shut your mouth, girl! Those dolls were dangerous.”

Riho quit teasing readily enough.

“Rinko,” she asked. “Is this armor mithril?”

“...Probably an inferior type, better suited for mass production. And the fuel source—”

She bent down and tore off a lens. Inside...

“Eek!”

“Hngg?!”

The two men responsible for the doll attack flinched. Inside were malformed humans, covered in insectoid armor, their skin wound by moss-covered roots like a mummy’s bandages.

“A copy of what Micona got into...but way worse.”

“They’re as thin as mummies, so I almost didn’t notice—but those are humans? Hard to tell if they’re alive or totally taken over by the parasites.”

Without pause, Rinko inspected them closely.

“She probably forcibly injected the power of the demon lords she was studying. Humans as the host, Dionysos’s power for combat instincts, and...mm, the shells are a fusion of mithril and the golem’s power. Once you turn them on, they kill indefinitely. The only person who can control ’em is their creator, Eug herself.”

“Okaaay...so she told them these would save them but was really planning to rub ’em out if they were in trouble.”

Riho shuddered.

Paying no attention to the horrified looks around her, Rinko rubbed her chin, pondering her former subordinate’s heinous acts.

“Eug...is this really you? Are you that desperate?”

“For now, Rinko, we’ll give these two the third degree.”

Rol's voice had a hint of glee, especially with that last phrase.

"Fair, find out what they know. But it likely won't be anything important."

"I figured. Come on! These villains deserve a fate worse than death, so let's take 'em to it!"

"Hmph, after all the corpses you meddled with in Rokujou—how dare you call us villains?"

"What was that?"

"You were so desperate for power, you toyed with life itself. It makes me sick you're living scot-free here. Even a dog knows when to wag its tail."

"You keep your mouth—"

Rol's hand rose into the air, but Satan stopped her.

"Leave 'em, Rol. Same as before. If they get hit, it works in their favor. They're just trying to lighten their sentence any way they can."

"I know, but..."

"And it'll hurt your position. Is hitting these clowns worth losing everything you've achieved here in Azami?"

Seeing Rol still fuming, Casitas doubled down.

"Hmph, she's nothing but a dog—"

But before another word left his mouth, Satan backhanded him.

"Bphm?!"

His front teeth broke, and his nose started bleeding. Casitas could not hide his shock at who'd punched them.

Satan grabbed a fistful of his shirt, pulling him off his feet.

The lieutenant general quivered and started protesting.

"H-how dare you? Unhand me! You've no right—"

"I can do whatever I want. I don't work for Azami. I'm a *demon lord*."

"Wha—?!"

“Consider yourself lucky your filthy words didn’t get you killed. I’d suggest you fess up and admit your crimes, because if you don’t, you might wake up to find yourself short an arm or two.”

Satan did not make threats lightly, and Casitas looked suitably intimidated. Considering he’d just called Rol a dog, she looked extra pleased to see him quivering like a terrified puppy.

“Got it? Then tell them everything. Sorry to interrupt! Take him away.”

As the tension in the air peaked, Satan turned to the soldiers and smiled.

Casitas and Hydra were fully cooperative now, and Riho slapped Satan on the back.

“Well said, Satan. Very satisfying.”

“Truth is, I’ve always wanted to get all up in the face of one of these arrogant assholes. Glad I got the chance.”

“Ah-ha-ha!” Riho laughed out loud, nodding. These two were friendly now—a far cry from their first encounter back in Kunlun. “True that. We all dream of telling off some asshole or an awful boss.”

“Uh, mm. Can’t really agree while standing in front of my former boss, can I?”

But while they were joking around and laughing, Rol was acting out of character.

She was normally the type to get mad at someone who took a swing in her stead, but...she wasn’t moving at all.

And Riho noticed first.

“What’s up, Rol?”

“Hngg...”

She was making a face, like she couldn’t quite bring herself to thank him.

Satan misunderstood her expression. “Sorry, Rol, I know you wanted to take care of it yourself.”

Now he was being *considerate*. Rol couldn’t handle *that* at all.

“I’ll remember this!”

“Again, sorry, Rol.”

Her personality and vocabulary got the best of her, and she ended up acting like a retreating villain. The intended implication was “I will not forget this debt, and I intend to repay it.” But understandably, Satan could not have been expected to get that.

While they were doing a bad romcom routine, Rinko’s wheels were spinning.

“If these things attack during the exercise...not good.”

“Are you sure we shouldn’t cancel it, Boss? An attack from these will mean war.”

Rinko didn’t answer. She folded her arms, frowning. Muttering to herself as she thought things over.

“If she’s hell-bent on starting a war, she will use the armored dolls. And our options are...”

“Lab Chief, there’s no need to play Jiou’s game,” Satan said. “We’ve achieved our goals now that we’ve flushed out the spies.”

But Rinko shook her head.

“The exercise is still gonna happen.”

“No, no. We know we’ll be up against these things, and she’s got worse weapons in store. If we don’t want casualties, we’ve gotta cancel. Since the war *is* her goal, she’s not gonna care how many die on *either* side.”

Satan had a point, but Rinko’s mind was made up, and she shot him a grin.

“I ain’t letting her start a war. We’ll minimize our damages, swiftly take out all her weapons, minimize *their* personnel losses, and settle things—you can’t really call that war. We’ll be saying, ‘What? That? That wasn’t a *war*.’ We can’t give her time to mass-produce those dolls.”

“I mean, that all *sounds* great...”

But also too optimistic.

Rinko slapped Satan on the shoulder. “Like I said, she thinks she’s way ahead

of us, and that's the best time to weaken her forces. The situation's dicey—but we have might on our side."

"We do?"

"Minimize both sides' casualties and score an easy win—with Lloyd at the fore. They've got armored dolls; we've got a boy who doesn't know his own strength."

She was so confident she actually *winked*.

Satan and Surtr assumed she must have a plan.

"That sinister smile— The lab chief's about to do something *crazy*."

"Yeah, that's the smile she uses when she's about to give another *mission*. Like one of her games."

Surtr hung his turtle head. Bad memories. But Rinko was too busy relishing her own scheme to notice.

"Well worth a try. Always did like adding new rules! Very hard mode, no kills, no damage—all extra missions!"

Rinko started flexing her fingers, typing away like she and Eug were in an online deathmatch.

At the same time, in a room in the castle...

A series of shocking reveals had left Marie bedridden.

It must have hit her hard. Judging from her groans, she was having nightmares about their emotional reunion.

The king, Fumar, Chrome, Katsu, Choline, and Lloyd were all worriedly watching over her.

She didn't have a fever or anything, so there was no need to keep changing the wet towel on her forehead, which meant Lloyd was left with nothing to do but fidget.

"Um, is Marie okay?"

Choline had been examining her, and she grinned up at him.

“She’s in no danger. It was just too much for her to process, and she needed rest. That was quite a lot.”

Scratching her head, she looked at the king.

“I know I should have eased her into it,” he said. “But what did I do to make her so worried?”

“Beats the hell outta me.”

“Likewise.”

The three old men were such devout Rinko believers that they could not see what they’d looked like to others. They’d simply backed her fully like always.

“See, that right there. You don’t even realize how excessive it is? Anyone would think you were brainwashed.”

“I’m with you, Chrome. Especially since they’re competent people.”

It was hard to point out a talented superior’s minor flaws.

Relieved Marie was doing all right, Lloyd started asking about Rinko.

“So where is Rinko—Marie’s mom?”

“She went out with Satan and Rol. They should be back soon enough if everything goes well.”

Mid-sentence, the door slammed open, and Rinko came in.

“Speak of the devil... How’d it go?” Fumar asked.

“Perfectly, of course. How’s my girl doing?”

Marie groaned, and Rinko scratched her cheek.

“Yup, she’s mine all right.”

Riho, Satan, and Rol came in behind her—and were shocked to see Rinko already looking sheepish.

“That was fast... What’s going on here? You’re Marie’s mom...?”

Rol had been briefed on the royal status of both Rinko and Marie but still wasn’t used to the truth.

“Yup!” Rinko said, flashing her a peace sign. “I’m her mom!”

You’d never imagine how reluctant she’d been to face the music. Once you got past the first hurdle...

“I wonder if she’s having nightmares because of how you revealed it...”

“I do feel bad about it. But momentum is everything!”

Rinko slipped down to her hands and knees into a deep bow, so smoothly it astonished all.

Riho had been having a tough time buying this, but this sight convinced her.

“Only Marie’s mom could genuflect so gracefully!”

“Seems like an odd basis to use.”

Kowtowing commitment was certainly not the most orthodox maternity test.

Seeing Riho here, Lloyd came over to congratulate them.

“Riho, Satan, I hear you’ve been helping out at intelligence. Was it tough?”

“Mm? Well, we saw some weird stuff, and it was a hassle, but it went pretty well. Right, Rol?”

Riho shot her a grin. “Shhh,” Rol hissed but couldn’t really argue.

Their usual power balance was reversed, and everyone marveled at that, but when they grinned at Rol, she glared at them.

“Leave it! Rinko, report to the king. It’s important.”

“Oh, right. How’d it go, Rien?”

Rinko flashed another peace sign his way.

“Arrested Casitas and Hydra. Only got a bit of the information I was after, though. Shame.”

“But...?” the king asked.

“The ‘but’ is bad news, too. Oh!”

Rinko spun toward Lloyd and started clapping his shoulders. Like a boss who gets too close for comfort.

“Lloyd! My boy! Just who I wanted to see!”

“Uh, huh?”

He didn’t sound that enthused. Rinko switched to acting like a military boss barking orders.

“Lloyd Belladonna! As of today, you’re relieved from mess reserve duties!”

“Huh? I am? Did I do something wrong?” he gasped.

She shook her head.

“Nope, not a thing.”

He had no idea what to make of this, then.

“Rinko,” Riho said. “You’re confusing the boy. Just say what you mean already! You can’t rely on him to get the joke.”

“Right you are, Riho,” Rinko said, grinning even harder.

She cleared her throat dramatically, then gave Lloyd a grave look.

“Young Lloyd, I have a special mission for you.”

“Y-you do? What is it?”

He had no idea why anything important would be dropped on him.

A grin spread across Rinko’s face. She explained her plan.

“Will you do it, Lloyd?”

“Sure. But...”

When the briefing was over, he looked even more perplexed.

“What is it? Ask me anything!”

He plucked up his courage.

“Um, I ordered a lot of stock to make lunches and field rations for everyone, and I really don’t want to let it go to waste. Do you mind if I keep distributing those?”

That concern was very much like Lloyd, and everyone broke out laughing.

Chapter 4

Galaxy Brain Chess: The Opponent's Pieces Were on Your Side of the Board Before the Game Even Began

Rinko's former subordinate—Eug—had left the Jiou capital and was visiting the border base. The one Lloyd had been feeding.

The mustachioed officer and his men stood at attention, unused to visits from anyone this high up—especially a dubious doctor whose identity was shrouded in mystery.

Eug jumped down out of her wagon and airily waved a hand.

“You’re in charge here? I’m Eug. What’s up?”

This girl looked *far* too young to be a doctor, and the soldiers were all baffled. But they did their best to hide that, holding their salutes.

Eug herself seemed to be in high spirits. Maybe she’d had some good news. She peered at their faces, inspecting each one in turn.

“Hmm, you boys are so stiff! Go on, relax. Buuuut, I *am* in a hurry. You’ve heard about the job?”

“Uh, yes. The plan to attack during the Azami army’s military exercise?”

“That’s the one!”

Eug nodded, smiling broadly, then her little hands pointed over yonder.

“A few miles that way—they’ll be setting up camps and doing their exercises where we can *just* about see ’em from up high.”

“You’re...well informed.”

“Yup,” Eug said, looking extremely smug. “And there’s lots you’ll need to do while that happens, so I’m here to make sure you’re up to speed.”

The officer brushed his ’stache, perplexed.

“Um...may I ask, has the mess reserve boy brought a petition—?”

Eug was already unloading stuff from the wagon and not really listening.

“Okay... Petition? What? First I’ve heard of it.”

“O-oh no... Then he must be...”

The officer reeled. Eug glanced at him, then at the dilapidated buildings, and she flashed her canines.

“You’re short on supplies? Well, if we win this battle, I’ll have this place rebuilt from the ground up. And make our border bases look like the gates of hell!”

Like that was no big deal. Definitely not a promise the officer could hold her to. Fearing for Lloyd’s safety, all he could do was stare at the ground, hiding the pain on his face.

Paying no attention to such trifles, Eug opened her baggage, like a kid showing off her new stuff.

“This is my brand-new autonomous weapon. Just assume it’s like a doll that fights for you if you switch it on. Don’t take it apart, though; the insides are a trade secret.”

The officer’s face clearly suggested he had no intention of inspecting inside the weird, armored doll even if she asked him to. The row of soldiers took one look at the sheen of faux mithril and flinched.

“You deploy these babies, we’ve as good as won. All I gotta do is fire ‘em up, and they’ll turn all our enemies into mincemeat.”

That sounded gross, and a shiver went down everyone’s spine but hers.

“Here’s a detailed map of the enemy placements; make sure everyone remembers it.”

Clearly also top secret intel, and by this point the officer’s jaw was open so wide he could no longer hide it.

Eug seemed to get a kick out of that reaction.

“Lloyd was my biggest concern, but he’s busy on the back lines making *soup*,”

she cackled, talking to herself. “Heh-heh-heh, they really emphasized *that*. Casitas and Hydra must have blabbed all my plans...but you ain’t pulling the rug out from under me *that* easy.”

This explained her enthusiasm. She was convinced she’d seen through her opponent’s trick.

But her smile soon faded. Frowning, she bared her fangs, grinding her teeth.

“I’m gonna turn it against them! Your star hope, Lloyd, will fall before your eyes, not to any monster or demon lord but to other humans! To the Godslayer Arrow! Right, Officer ‘Stache?”

“Uh, right.”

“The present I sent earlier—you know how to use it, right?”

“.....Yes.”

That was a long silence and a very quiet response. He couldn’t exactly admit they’d been too scared to touch it.

Eug didn’t press the issue and just told him what she wanted to happen, as if that was all that mattered.

“That’s reserved for a specific individual. The last thing we need is you fumbling the operations on it, okay?”

“Reserved for...who?”

Eug pulled a picture out of her pocket, grinning.

“He’s bound to show up eventually, so if you see this face, don’t you hesitate. Grab the Godslayer Arrow and fire it at him. That’s your number one priority.”

The photo was of a gently smiling boy—Lloyd.

None of the border guards had expected that and were left speechless.

Eug just assumed they didn’t get why a weapon like that would be needed for a mere kid and continued venting all the frustrations and rage pent up from his previous disruptions.

“You’re thinking he’s just some kid? But I promise, this boy ain’t even human. You ask me—he’s the devil incarnate.”

That was too much for the officer, and he couldn't help himself.

"B-but a good boy like this could never harm Jiou—"

"Wrong."

"Huh?"

Eug ignored the *good boy* part. Her eyes locked on the photo, jaw clenching.

"Didn't you hear me? To hell with the Jiou Empire. This boy is *my* enemy. If it weren't for him, Alka would be— And he had the nerve to lecture me about working hard to make sure hard work isn't in vain! I've lived over a century, and this kid is still in his teens—"

Words Lloyd had said in their last encounter were still stuck in her mind, and she was fuming away.

This was clearly not natural behavior—

Then there was a snap. Like bones cracking. The officer looked for the source—and it came from Eug's *hand*.

In her rage, she'd clenched her fist so hard she'd broken her own fingers.

There were visible bones poking out of the skin on the back of her hand—but then white hairs started growing in, coating her entire hand.

The officer gasped, unable to tear his eyes away.

Eug caught his gaze and returned to her senses, swearing under her breath and ripping the hairs out.

Doing her best to act calm again, she forced a smile, sweat pouring down her brow.

"...So I'm counting on you boys!" she chirped. "And remember, this is war. Don't hesitate. No telling what'll happen if your nerves get the best of you. If you can take him out, I don't mind putting you all back at your old jobs— You were all royal guards for that minor kingdom, right? I can make you royal guards in Central! A huge promotion!"

The first part could be taken as a threat, then she dangled an obvious reward—the whole carrot-and-stick routine, and the moment she'd dropped that on

them, she hopped in her wagon and drove away.

Left to their own devices, the guards took another look at Lloyd's photo, blanching. A boy they all knew and liked—and had been ordered to target.

"This boy's the devil incarnate? He had us all fooled?"

That would explain why their petition never made it to the top. The men exchanged glances, but clearly nobody believed that.

The officer looked ready to pull his whiskers out but then made up his mind.

"What's our greatest strength?" he asked.

No one had any idea where this was going.

"Um, the way we don't take lookouts seriously and send half-assed reports?"

"How we plowed half this mountain to grow crops?"

"I'm a pretty decent carpenter now."

One of those answers would delight Merthophan, but they all just made this officer sigh.

"We know how to judge one's character," he said. "When Jiou told us what we wanted to hear and tried to conquer our home, we were the ones who kept sounding the alarm."

These soldiers had a dark past, and the reminder of it brought a grim look to every countenance.

"That's what got us sent to this dead-end post. But I still think we were right. They tightened the screws on the royals so far...nobody even knows what happened to 'em."

With that impassioned declaration, he pointed to where the Godslayer Arrow was stowed.

"We put our faith in what we've seen. We trust Lloyd. I dunno what this Godslayer Arrow is, so no way I'm using that. No way I'm getting involved in any war if I can help it. Jiou ain't worth giving my life for."

Everyone nodded and was on board. The officer nodded as well, looking pleased.

“That weird Godslayer Arrow’s scary, but so are these armored dolls.”

“And that lady was no doctor. Why should we listen to her?”

“Yeah. The fact that she’s got it in for Lloyd proves she’s crazy.”

“That felt more like a personal grudge. I’m scared for him.”

Each voiced their concerns—like a post-meeting talk after the important guests have left.

Yet another one of Eug’s plans crushed before it began. Now, how would *that* change things? You’ll find out!

Well, it may have hit a few snags, but the day of the exercise was finally here.

Training done in preparation for war, with the guilds mixed in—the whole of Azami was involved.

Fundamentally, it was a very expensive disaster-preparedness drill. All sorts of motivations lay behind it, and quite a few people were looking extra stressed.

The mithril and demon lord powers behind the armored dolls, and the existence of weapons powered by human corpses, left Chrome and company looking every bit as tense as if the war had already begun.

“Your face’s too stiff, Chrome,” Choline hissed.

“Right, sorry.”

He started rubbing his face.

Merthophan and Mena had been caught up to speed and sympathized with him.

“I took a look at the armored doll myself. Odds are high we’ll be up against those abominations.”

“That *would* make Chrome’s face squarer.”

Mena always tried to keep the mood light, but all it earned her was a sigh.

“It’s always been square,” Chrome said.

“But looking all stressed will make people suspect something’s up. A select few aside, this is supposed to be a surprise turn up during a routine exercise—

allowing us to process Jiou's attack as an accident."

Mena opened her eyes, shaking her head at this.

"We're supposed to stop their attack without anyone dying. This queen sure has cojones. Some spicy meatballs."

Chrome had been equally shocked by her plan but seemed weirdly sure of himself now.

"But the plan has every chance of succeeding. Why—?"

"Lloyd."

"Lloyd?"

"Lloyd!"

Everyone was on the same page and spoke as one.

That made Chrome turn rather red. He cleared his throat. "Ahem...yes, Lloyd. With his abilities..."

"It'll probably work out just fine."

Choline finished his sentence for him, and Chrome awkwardly scratched his cheek. Words alone could hardly explain Lloyd's potential, so Mena and Merthophan could only nod in agreement.

"That kid made it so I got my mom back."

"Mm. He freed me and introduced me to the wonders of agriculture. He changed my very life. He's not only strong—he has the power to bring us together."

The *farming changed my life* statement just made the others wince.

So...how were others doing outside Azami's Central District? Well, everywhere was different.

The West Side was mostly residential and still quiet. They were learning evacuation routes and practicing setting up emergency shelters in case anything untoward happened to surrounding villages. Very much a "disaster drill" with elegant ladies going, "What's this? A camp? Pine cones make starting campfires a trifle." Everyone was enjoying sharing bits of knowledge.

The North Side was a lot more on edge, as the entrance to the kingdom and the center of trade. Cannons and supplies from Central passed through here and regularly disrupted traffic. Anyone who made a living from the flow of merchandise was furious about it.

Like holiday construction, it just read as “a waste of our taxes” and led to lashing out. Traffic jams annoy everyone.

But anyone angrily moving goods around found themselves stared down by stone-faced soldiers and burly guild adventurers.

The latter were especially intimidating...and the weapons on their hips and backs had clearly beaten countless monsters. It was like a filtration device for unrest. “I’m gonna punch who’s in charge!” → Pass by the guild’s glares. → “Violence is not a solution.” Eyes clear. A very obvious change in attitude.

The East Side, meanwhile, was the same as always. There were certainly more soldiers on patrol, forcing the purveyors of dubious wares to fold up shop and hide—a stealth game that benefited nobody. The local roustabouts watched while drinking their afternoon beers, yelling, “Hide better! They’ll find you!” The soldiers were basically doing what they’d be doing anyway.

As for the South Side—

Markets and stalls and a banner-festooned harbor. The navy and Fumar’s Maritime Guild had all their ships in dock; there was barely room left for ordinary fishing vessels.

“Sorry, but it’s gotta be done.”

Fumar was visiting the fishing vessels left out of the exercise preparations, making sure they knew where things stood. Part of what made him the face of Azami.

Between meetings, Fumar looked down the row of military vessels and whistled.

“Sure is a sight to behold,” he said. “A month ago, I’d never have believed our ships would be side by side with the navy’s.”

Shouldering the liquor bottle he was carrying (to grease a few wheels), he

paused to admire the view.

“Between Rien and that boy—he really is a marvel.”

He took a swig and spotted Lloyd scurrying about the deck.

“Yo! Lloyd! Sure you ain’t up to quitting the army and joining my guild? We’d welcome you with open arms!”

“Fumar! I can see you’re drunk, but that’s not something to joke about!”

“Fair enough,” Fumar said, not looking the slightest bit apologetic.

The king of Azami and Rinko appeared.

“How are the ships?”

“Mm? A date at this hour?” Fumar growled.

Rather than deny it, Rinko giggled.

“Not the most romantic of views, though,” she admitted. “How are the preparations going, Fu?”

“Ha? Who do you think I am? We checked our routes, and we’re ready to sail when the order comes.”

He shot the royal couple a cocky smirk, and they both laughed.

“All as planned then. It’ll work out, right? Ow.”

When the king sounded worried, Rinko flicked his forehead.

“It will. His men know their business. They’ll be right on time. We’d best head to our posts.”

She spoke with confidence—her eyes on Lloyd.

Time passed. The exercise was about to begin, and we find ourselves near the border between Azami and Jiou.

On high, dry, rocky ground, the Azami army lined up soldiers and cannons, surrounding the Jiou border.

Eug was observing their formations through binoculars, gloating.

“Such an underhanded method! And so obvious! Bait the Jiou forces out, then

retreat—and once they're exposed, surround them, and pulverize. Send in their elite—Selen, Riho, et cetera—and conquer.”

She glanced over her armored dolls and made a shuffling motion with her hands, like she was dealing cards.

“Then in go my dolls. Even those girls can’t handle them in the chaos of battle. When they’re on the ropes—they’ll send in Lloyd.”

She pulled a photo of him out of her pocket, like it was her opponent’s hand when playing cards.

“That’s the last thing he’ll ever do. The symbol of fear—the Godslayer Arrow. Lloyd will die at the hands of humans—not demon lords. And it’s all too easy to predict how they’ll react. The Jiou Empire will be evil, with a capital *E*, forever.”

Eug knew they’d used her spies to feed her false information and was patting herself on the back for figuring it out, drunk on her own brilliance.

Nobody had asked her to critique the plan, but she was doing so anyway—to an audience of one.

“I mean, they wrote it out *so many* times. ‘Lloyd will be on back line support.’ That’s like advertising that he’ll be thrown to the front lines at the perfect moment. Only an idiot wouldn’t be ready for it.”

There was a crackle from her pocket, and she pulled out a brightly colored, gaudy wireless comm.

“Heyho,” she said, putting it to her ear.

The voice on the other side was clearly still nervous about using these gadgets.

“W-we’re in position. In sight of the Azami forces.”

“Cool beans. Y’all just do whatever, then.”

“Y-you’re sure? I mean, I know Jiou has these moving cannons and guns that shoot really fast, but...”

“The self-propelled artillery and the machine guns, yup. Remember those names!” she snapped.

“Y-yes, ma’am!” the voice on the line quivered.

“Go all out and get yourself used to these weapons. Don’t worry, the armored dolls will have your back.”

Definitely not the tone you used when starting a war, and it did not reassure the man on the other end, either.

“You’ve got them ready to go? You’re sure they won’t attack us, too?”

“Not unless you turn traitor! They do what I tell ’em to.”

“S-still...”

The more he fretted, the angrier Eug got.

“Argh, stop sputtering and follow orders!”

“R-rog—”

Before he even finished answering, she cut the power, clicking her tongue.

“Tch... No matter how good the weapons I give them are, if they can’t understand them, they’ll just act scared.”

She glared down at the rows of autocannons and armored dolls, like she was admiring the figures in a display case.

“My lovely weapons... They’re wasted on *you*. They won’t let anyone leave intact. Not Selen, nor Riho, not Lloyd, not any of ’em. Go crazy and hurt others; let loose the dogs of war. And once Lloyd’s dead—”

As she said the word, her eyes momentarily dilated. She grabbed her arm, holding it back—and had to brush off the white fur.

“I am *Eug*. A genius overflowing with talent. I am rational, not some wild thing. That’s *not* who I really am.”

As she argued with herself, the fit left her panting.

After a minute, she calmed down and turned her gaze back to the Azami camp.

Chrome had just given the order. The Azami army moved out. It was time.

Boom! Boom! Boom...

Whistles sounded. The exercise began. Cannons fired toward an empty wasteland. Once that volley died down—the Jiou Empire advanced with their self-propelled artillery.

“Go! Show them the power of science!”

Eug was hopping with delight—like she was cheering for a ball game.

“I bet she’s admiring her weapons and patting herself on the back.”

At the back of the Azami camp, Rinko was sitting in a chair, doing her best “military strategist” pose, and watching the exercise play out. She even had a fan made of feathers, to use and signal when she needed to adjust the troop placements.

“The time is ripe,” she purred, clearly into her role. “Soldiers! Retreat to your next positions! Abandon those cannons and run for the hills!”

The Azami army scattered like baby spiders. A few of them were putting on very bad performances. Okay, just Allan.

The Jiou forces advanced, firing warning shots above the fleeing troops.

“Everyone back to safety? Then time we play our first card. Move out!”

“Flags out! Send the signal!” Katsu barked. The Adventurer Guild members started waving banners around.

In response—tree roots began to grow, closing in on both sides of the Jiou autonomous artillery squad.

They split the dry land, propelling up like devils from hell—the hybrid of Abaddon and the treant’s powers, our very own Micona.

“Mwa-ha-ha-ha! I’m the head of the Azami Military Academy’s upperclassmen, Micona Zol! If you value your lives, lay down your arms!”

Quite a threat considering she’d been ordered not to kill anyone.

Her entrance screamed “last boss” but...even Micona wasn’t usually this excited. Her cheeks were flushed. Her breathing ragged. What was on her mind?

“Leave this to me, military strategist! Looking so similar to Marie, I feel I am

capable of *anything* at your command!”

Aha, that would explain it. She’d spotted the resemblance right away.

Equal parts hustle and muscle, Micona received an automatic boost of motivation from any orders Rinko gave due to her resemblance to Marie. She had a one-track mind.

Abaddon provided the locust shell and flight.

The treant gave her roots that could bind and absorb one’s vitality.

Micona originally had the strength-enhancing spell called *Godspeed*. Between the three, she was now a monster who could wreck any battlefield.

“She’s crazy.”

“That she is.”

Micona’s hustle was now actively alarming Rinko.

Naturally, the Jiou side had not been expecting a monster attack and were too rattled to turn their machine guns on it.

“Wh-what is that monster?!”

“Calm down! It’s only Micona!”

Frankly, her allies were just as spooked. It was an involuntary reflex, really. She was that far gone.

“Mariiiiiiiiie! Banzaaaaaaai!”

At the least, you should be cheering for *Azami*.

“A-augh!”

A few Jiou soldiers finally had the wherewithal to point their machine guns her way, but her roots soon hoisted them skyward.

“A-aiiiiieeee! R-roots! A monster!”

“Silence, infidels!”

“Arghhhhhh! Ah...mmph.”

His scream petered out—the treant’s roots had drained his energy, and he

went limp.

Next, Micona's tentacles went for the artillery's caterpillar treads, rendering unit after unit inert.

"Maybe we can just let her finish it..."

Katsu had wrangled his fair share of rough customers, but this display had left a sheen of sweat on his brow.

Rinko clenched her hands tightly. "Micona dominance! AOE continuous drain powers make her mad broken for a playable character, but our goal here is a no miss, no kill, perfect game, so in with the second striker! Signal, please!"

The guild members might have been frightened, but they started waving the flags again.

This time—a man in a dazzling loincloth took the stage.

The flap of the loincloth wove its way through the gaps between Micona's roots.

Flicking away bullets, it snagged one machine gun after another—truly a terrifying sight.

"Rise up! It's time for an agricultural revolution!"

Splitting the ground with his hoe, Merthophan took out another autocannon. A monster of a very different color.

"Do your best to harm no one! Our goal is bloodless victory! We shall not let this battle lead to war!"

With a cloth wedged between his butt cheeks, Merthophan landed on the front lines and started barking orders. He still had colonel blood in him and was quite commanding—he'd be perfect, if it weren't for his attire.

"Another weirdo!" the Jiou soldiers wailed. Anyone would. Even the Azami side felt the same.

"Traditional ☆ Farming ☆ Attire™!!! Extend, loincloth! Skywaaaard!"

Merthophan was very insistent about how a loincloth was part of the traditional farming style, and it was going every which way. By the time the Jiou

soldiers recovered enough to resist, they were already bound...not really unharmed, though. Getting tied up in a loincloth would mentally scar you for life.

“Farming forever! Agriculture...Banzaaiiiii!”

Another misplaced cheer.

One wielded demon lord powers and another used artifacts from Kunlun. Between the two of them, they were neutralizing weapons far beyond the world’s technology level.

The powerful new allies that arrived on their heels—were even worse.

“Mwa-ha-ha! Brother Merthophan is putting the Jiou rank and file in a soft bind! We must use our hips to smash these adorable weapons hard! Thigh press!”

Flaunting his hamstrings, who should appear but the champion of the Ascorbic Domain’s Fist clan, self-proclaimed little brother to Merthophan—Tiger Nexamic (M40+).

Wearing nothing but bikini briefs and a tiger mask, he had bulging muscles that glistened with oil; his physique was chiseled.

“Mwa-ha-ha! No, that’s not a giant pumpkin! It’s my glutes!”

This display of body-building bravado earned him a horrified look from Renge, who was also from the Ascorbic Domain.

“It’s been a while, but I see you have not gained any elegance in the meantime. Why are you so shiny?”

“Excellent question, Comrade Renge! This is safflower oil—and I grew the ingredients myself! I have smeared myself in the oil of my children, and my hamstrings are PUMPED UP!”

Even his body oil had an origin story.

“Honestly, elegance dictates you use proper beauty creams. And perhaps that I cease engaging in this discourse with you. Secret art! Dragonfly!”

“Hmm! Let me join you! Secret art! Rock Hawk! Suuuuper! Haaaard!”

Renge's Dragonfly allowed her to hurl her axes, controlling them at will.

Nexamic's Rock Hawk turned his own body into steel.

The two Ascorbic chiefs' onslaught pulverized an autocannon.

The operators fled without a second's thought.

Then Selen stepped to the fore.

"Let the Jiou soldiers flee, and just focus on destroying their weaponry."

"Why you—"

A soldier turned a machine gun on her.

"That gun won't work on me! Vritra! You're up."

"Indeed!"

Her cursed belt was a perfect guard, blocking every bullet. That sight alone was so uncanny it struck fear in the soldier's heart.

"Mwa-ha-ha! I am invincible! And Sir Lloyd is flawless!"

"Don't get carried away. One false move *will* get you killed," Riho grumbled.

".....You're a worrywart, Riho," Phyllo said.

"I—I am not! We've got work to do!"

She sure changed the subject fast. Phyllo grinned.

"Guard's down!"

One of the few remaining Jiou soldiers chose that moment to take aim—

".....Too slow."

Phyllo slashed at the air, and a shock wave shattered the gun. Trivializing the task at hand.

"Wow, Phyllo! You've gotten better at controlling the strength of that. How'd you practice?"

".....Doing office work.....helped make fine adjustments. Surprised myself."

"I...can see why."

You never know where life will take you.

But while Riho gaped, a haughty voice rang out.

“Now, Riho, don’t just stand there,” Rol said. “We have work of our own. The magic crew are on these autocannons.”

“Slave driver,” Riho grumbled, scratching her head. “Fine, fine, I’m working.”

Rol’s former classmate Choline and former subordinate Mena gave Riho sympathetic looks.



“You ain’t in charge, snake lady.”

“Ah-ha-ha, same old Rol.”

“If you act like you’re in charge, you get the credit later. Did that all the time back at school.”

Rol heard this and hissed, just like a snake.

“I’m not just barking orders! I’m also doing my part!”

With that, she fired an ice spell, freezing the caterpillar threads on a cannon.

“See? Keep that up!”

“I know. Ha!”

The sorcery squad took down cannon after cannon. The Jiou soldiers panicked and fled.

Micono wrapped them up in her roots, laughing maniacally.

“Mwa-ha-ha-ha! No matter how good your weapons are, if your men aren’t motivated, they’re worthless! The opposite of me! My love for Marie has made me unstoppable!”

She reigned triumphant. So unstoppable even her own side feared her, but let’s just ignore that.

The Azami army had the advantage—or really, it was a rout. Yet, neither side had lost a single soldier.

The weapons’ powers were rendered useless, and Rinko saw dismay on the Jiou soldiers’ faces.

She grinned, and Katsu joined her.

“A great success.”

“It’s still just phase one. I bet she’s a bit annoyed these soldiers can’t make good use of those weapons she’s so proud of but is still telling herself that she expected everything.”

“So…”

“She’ll soon start the second wave. The armored dolls. That’s where the real

fight begins.”

Back to Eug...

“Heh. Heh-heh-heh. All just as I expected.”

Rinko sure *read* her like a book. To an uncanny degree.

The appalling speed with which her forces had gone down definitely engendered some spite.

“Pretty galling they couldn’t even demonstrate the weapons’ might, but you had a good hand and played it well. Was that Chrome’s work? Or that Rol lady from Rokujou?”

Eug had not read her opponents at all. To be fair, her old lab chief, Rinko/Rien Cordelia, was a total wild card.

As a loner scientist, she had no grasp of the concept of troop morale and didn’t understand why they’d be freaking out when the weapons she’d given them *should* have made them invincible.

“Whatever! Whatever, whatever. The armored dolls are what really matter!”

She pulled out a controller, grinning wickedly.

“I’ve got these on the Jiou back lines. You’re trying to minimize casualties to stop this war from escalating, but I’m not gonna let you! Once these activate, *both* sides die!”

This was Eug’s true plan all along.

To have her dolls attack both Azami and Jiou and plunge the battlefield into chaos.

Then blame the whole situation on Azami and force the world into war.

“After a tragedy like this, the blame will fall on Casitas and Hydra—but whatever they say, we’ll already be at war. How do ya like dem apples?”

Canines bared, she flipped the switch.

And the dolls behind her sprang to life.

“Lady Rien, the dolls appear to have activated,” Katsu said. He’d been

watching through binoculars.

“Here we go! Sign for the second wave!”

The banners brigade sent the signal, and the intelligence department shot fireworks skyward.

A series of pops, colorful sparks—and the Azami forces looked grim.

“Now for the real deal,” Mena muttered.

“Yup, against the armored dolls,” Choline said.

Chrome nodded gravely. “The strategist says they’ll attack indiscriminately, trying to force a war nobody wants.”

“This will be critical,” Merthophan said, loincloth flapping. “We’ll have to keep the Jiou forces safe as we fight.”

“We got this, Merthophan.” Riho smirked.

“*Hngg?* How is that, Riho Flavin?”

“Exactly. Our side has—”

“.....An ace up our sleeve.”

Eug saw fireworks go up just as her dolls sprang to life, and she did not take it well.

“What? A signal here...like they knew what I was up to? Are they sending in Lloyd?!”

She had not expected him to appear this fast, but she shook her head, trying to regain her composure.

“Should I assume they know the dolls will attack both sides, too? But if he’s coming in from the rear, it’ll be too late! The dolls will already have hit the rear of the Jiou troops! It’ll be a slaughterhouse! An attack by a new force from their blind spot! Chaos! They’ll never stop the—”

But Eug’s optimism ended there.

“—*Aero!*”

“————!!!! Why?!”

Lloyd appeared from the Jiou border base.

“Wh-wh-wha...?”

Eug’s helmet slipped sideways; her lab coat slipped off one shoulder.

“What is he doing theeeeeeeeeere?!”

Eug let out a screech for the ages. The enemy ace had been hidden in *her* base. And the ace was *Lloyd*. Incapable of fooling anyone, the last person in the world capable of an infiltration.

The dolls were launching themselves at the Jiou back line.

Azami had to keep both sides alive to prevent a war; Eug’s plan should have made that impossible.

But this was the last thing she’d expected. Lloyd, on standby, *behind* the dolls.

Every move she’d made had been predicted. They’d known she would attack her own soldiers when the chips were down. Eug couldn’t figure out how they’d known. Her teeth ground together.

She stamped the ground like a child, her nails digging into the skin below her eyes, desperation settling in.

“Flawless measures against the cannons, every move I made.....Wait... The lab chief? Augh?!”

It all suddenly added up. Before her eyes, Lloyd was shattering doll after doll.

Let’s back up a bit.

The day of the exercise, after Eug had left the border base, while the Jiou soldiers were still grumbling.

“Oh, everyone’s here!”

Eug had just called this boy the devil incarnate, and the mustachioed officer was surprised to see him.

But that guileless smile soon disarmed him.

“Oh, Lloyd! What brings you here?”

“Mm, about that. Today, I thought I’d fix the plumbing in the kitchen and

make a light meal.”

“Officer, this kid can’t be our enemy.”

“He’s a good kid. A real good kid. I’d let my daughter marry him.”

The officer’s daughter was four and the apple of his eye, so the fact he’d still arrange that marriage was a pretty big deal. Back to the point, though.

“Lloyd, if you’re here...”

“You haven’t heard about the war with Azami?”

Coming here today sure was bad timing, but nobody here wanted him to get hurt.

“If we try and turn him away now, it could be risky. It’ll just muddy the waters. Best to act natural.”

“Yeah...and if anything does happen, we’ll keep him safe.”

Everyone nodded. Looking way prouder than they did doing their actual jobs.

“But what was Dr. Eug thinking?” the officer said, stroking his whiskers. “Aiming something as gnarly sounding as the Godslayer Arrow at this kid? Please.”

By now, Lloyd was happily cooking.

“That doctor might think he’s the devil, but to us, he’s a god—no, an angel.”

“““““Agreed.”””””

“If she wants us targeting him, that weapon can’t be good. We were right to pack it away.”

“Yup. I’m afraid to even touch it. That said, those armored dolls are pretty bad, too...”

Eug had likely made those, and she’d been acting very odd. With that in mind, the officer said, “Keep an eye on ’em in case they attack *us*. That doctor—”

He was cut off by the low boom of distant cannons, echoing in their ears. The Azami army had started their exercise. The next thing they heard was the Jiou self-propelled artillery moving out.

“It’s begun.”

“Yeah.”

They all rushed to the watchtower, speaking to the soldier on duty.

“How’s it looking?”

The lookout’s face was a sight to behold.

“What? What’s going on?”

“It’s *nuts*.”

“Have your words failed you? Be more specific!”

The soldier looked from the officer to the battlefield, rubbed his eyes, then steeled himself to report the situation.

“Specifically, this girl making tree roots and a man in a loincloth are smashing all our army’s weapons.”

“.....”

The officer stared at him in silence. Convinced he must be lying.

But everyone else in the tower started agreeing. “Tree root girl and loincloth man are unstoppable!”

“Officer! A muscly macho man wearing only undies just butt-stomped a cannon! I swear I’m still sane!”

“Then it must be your eyes. See an optometrist! Nonsense aside—we’re *clearly* at a disadvantage, right?”

The border guards were not exactly loyal to Jiou, so he didn’t sound worried. The officer’s one concern was ensuring the safety of Lloyd and his men. But before he barked any further orders— *V...vvvnn...*

With no warning whatsoever, the armored dolls started moving out. The sinister glow of the mono-eye sensors likely meant they were already scanning for targets.

All of the border guards trembled in their boots. This was like nothing they’d ever seen.

The dolls' sensors locked on to *them*.

They all stepped back, feeling as if a pack of monsters had just turned their way.

"Uh-oh... Does this mean...they think we're their enemies, too?"

The Jiou border base was not prepared to handle an armored doll attack.

"Sir?! The dolls are on the move but are headed this way!"

"What the hell, Dr. Eug? I know that lady was up to no good. Hmm?"

——Not unless— Eug's words echoed through his mind, and he started yelling frantically.

"Shit! Men, retreat! Central wants us dead to justify their war with Azami!"

In the distance, there was a faint series of pops.

"Oh, the signal!"

Lloyd popped his head out of the kitchen, wiping his hands on his apron. Like a housewife stepping out to sign the neighborhood circular. His appearance was totally out of place here.

"Oh dear."

"L-Lloyd! Look out! Run before—"

The officer was prepared to throw himself between Lloyd and the dolls' blades.

"So those are the moving dummies Rinko told me about!" CRASH. (Destroying them with a beaming smile.) "H-howwww?!"

Your standard Lloyd-outta-nowhere explosive routine.

Smiling as he demolished the murder dolls. Not one soldier here could believe their eyes.

Junkyards took more time to dismember stuff than Lloyd did, and he still had his apron on. Working methodically through one doll after another.

"Is this really a good idea? They're really well made! If I break them apart like this, we can't ever use them again. I bet whoever made them is sobbing right

now.”

She was definitely doing that. As well as screaming, “You idiot!” as she grieved.

The Jiou border guards were still gaping as Lloyd wiped the oil splatter off his dimples. If that had been the blood of his enemies, it would have been downright bone-chilling.

“See, these dolls are a surprise part of the exercise. The whole idea was to scare everybody—even in drill, you should never feel too safe. But it was my job to take them out! So don’t worry!”

“A what for the what?”

Lloyd effortlessly bent a doll until it snapped, then dusted his hands on his apron.

“A s-surprise?!”

The officer was frantically stroking his mustache. When faced with spectacle beyond the ken of humankind, people fall back on ingrained habits.

“Okay! Lots more dummies to clean up! I’d better go. I’ll be back as soon as they’re all scrapped!”

“Er, um...oh. Aughh?!”

Lloyd had wreathed himself in *Aero* and lifted off, the backdraft buffeting the guards.

“Wh-who are you, Lloyd?!”

“I’m here under orders from Rinko! Lloyd Belladonna, head of the first-years at the Azami Military Academy!”

“Th-the *Azami* Military Academy?”

“Yep! I’m studying to be a great soldier one day! I’m gonna work hard today, too! Later!”

With one last smile, he literally flew away to the next group of armored dolls.

The officer’s jaw was hanging wide open. His men came running over.

“Sir, did...did he say *Azami*?”

Apparently Lloyd’s ability to fly was secondary to their entire friendship being built on a lie.

The officer was now trying to pull his whiskers out.

“You think he *meant* to trick us?”

“Of course not! He’s been nothing but helpful! I’m just very confused!”

“Same!” the officer said. “I dunno what he’s after, but the fact remains. He *just* saved us again.”

“I bet that boy isn’t someone any one country can contain.”

He could fly, so borders literally meant nothing to him.

“He’s, you know...not to state the obvious, but—the boy’s a *hero*.”

“Oh. Yeah, that sounds right.”

The officer turned back to the speck in the distance.

“Thank you, Lloyd,” he said.

Whatever country the boy may be from, that sentiment was true.

They knew not what he was thinking or why he’d saved them. But every Jiou guard saluted their new hero.

The Jiou soldiers in general were bewildered by the sight of their own weapons attacking them.

When that was followed by a boy in an Azami uniform rocketing in—their confusion became astonishment.

“Okay! Lloyd’s here! Let’s do our bit and smash these dolls up!”

Allan saw his master going to town in the distance and got the troops around him fired up.

Micona wasn’t about to get shown up and started whipping her tentacles even harder.

“Lloyd Belladonna isn’t hogging the limelight this time!”

“Micona, focus on disarming and protecting the Jiou soldiers! Can’t have them holding this against us!”

“I’m aware, Colonel Choline! I’m just draining enough life energy so they can’t argue.”

“You’d better be...”

The armored dolls had clearly come after the Jiou side, too.

The Azami army had stepped in to save them. A few Jiou soldiers had still tried to fight but were swiftly neutralized.

Rinko was watching the whole thing with a smile.

“Mwa-ha-ha. Eug, I’ve known you long enough. You’re the kinda gal who wants to figure out your enemy’s plan and crush it. So you’re caught off guard by ideas you don’t expect and can’t predict. Nobody would ever imagine we had Lloyd on standby in a Jiou base, ready to attack from behind enemy lines.”

That was Eug’s nature.

She would seize on any opportunity to prove her superiority.

She’d simulate every possible outcome and loved nothing more when it worked out as planned.

But when her schemes went awry, she’d panic and pin the blame on everyone but herself.

“If this was a game, you’re the type who’d reset until you got the perfect result. But in an online match, you’d rage quit the second things went wrong for you.”

She waved her feathered fan dramatically. Katsu was hanging on her every word, but this last metaphor was lost on him.

“Huh...well, you’ve certainly got her dead to rights, Lady Rien.”

She laughed at his forced response, then turned her eyes back to the battlefield, looking slightly sad.

“And that weakness lets people take advantage of you. President Eva must have told her this was her chance to make up for all the crimes weighing on her

shoulders.”

Eug hurled her controller at the ground. That wasn’t enough, and she started stomping on it, jumping up and down until only shards were left.

“You idiot! You shit! You’re not just predicting my plans! You’re making perfect use of Lloyd and everyone else with talent to spare, intercepting my every move!”

Her angry outburst left her panting for breath. With victory snatched from under her, her eyes became hollow.

“This won’t start a war... It has to *hurt*. They have to *hate* each other!”

It wasn’t even a contest. She felt like a player watching a one-sided game, left grinding her teeth and wailing.

“Since when does Azami have analysts this good? Alka? No, she’d be on the front lines herself. They know every trick I’ve got! It has to be the lab chief...but outta nowhere?!”

Overthinking about her foe’s perfect strategy rekindled her fury, and she started stomping the controller pieces again.

“And my troops have all got one foot out the door for the road home... Don’t drop your damn weapons, you morons! They’re worth way more than you’ll ever be! Useless idiots, they can’t accept new ideas...”

She’d passed the stage of anger and became despondent.

“And the Godslayer Arrow... Why didn’t they use it?! They were at point-blank range! Did Lloyd’s strength stun them stupid? Or did he already do something to them?!”

He had. Not the way she thought, but...Eug never once realized he’d just *fed* them. Or that he had never intended for that to help him.

Eug had been sure her superweapons would be destructive and that sending in killer robots would turn the place into a living hell—to the point that even if Lloyd and Alka came running, they’d never sort things out.

But the exact opposite had happened. Her own side had no faith in the weapons they didn’t understand and had been terrified of the dolls they should

have cheered for. Eug simply couldn't believe it.

"Why? None of this should have been a problem!"

Not for her. Eug was the kind of girl who could do *anything*.

She couldn't comprehend the people who wouldn't understand, wouldn't *try* to understand. She never realized the contradiction that Rinko had exploited.

"Dammit...dammit!"

Squeak. Squeak.

"Overconfident. Takes shortcuts. Easy to manipulate. That's *exactly* what Lab Chief Cordelia put on your evaluation!"

Words from her time as a scientist came back to haunt her. Eug swung around to face the speaker.

"Who—?"

"Me!"

Eve. In a rabbit costume, striking a silly pose.

Not a look you often encountered halfway up a mountain, and Eug could not conceal her shock.

"E-Eve?! Why are you—?"

"Don't sweat the details! That don't matter now."

It was never easy to tell what Eve was actually thinking inside that costume, but...this time, anger, disappointment, and disgust were clearly audible in her tone.

Back at the lab, Eva had been president—and Eug had met her enough times to know how she acted when someone let her down. A chill ran down her spine. Incidentally, this approach—showing *hints* of anger rather than outright expressing it and making people work it out for themselves—was a highly effective means of terrorizing someone.

Their history together was enough to fill Eug with guilt and fear of a scolding. Yet, even in light of that, the question was worth asking.

“Uh, no... If you’re here at a time like this, it must be urgent or—”

“You’re not the one who should be worried here!” Eve snapped. Clearly seeing through Eug’s rationale.

Eug drooped. “Urgh...”

“Do you have another card to play?” Eve asked. “Do you? Or don’t you?”

She started hopping around Eug, mocking her.

Eug was forced to raise the white flag.

“I—I don’t.”

“You do, though!”

Eve batted the white flag aside, leaning in close. These rapid switches between earnest and whimsical made Eug waver.

“E-Eve, this isn’t the time—,” Eug tried to argue.

“You’ve got a card. A joker up your sleeve that nobody here stands a chance against.”

She said it matter-of-factly. Like this was Eug’s only choice.

“Uh, but...I’ve used up all the weapons I have. I can’t do anything with demon lords until I’m back at the lab, and that’ll be too late—”

She knew she was just making excuses. Eve slipped into kind-manager mode, putting an arm around her shoulder. Ever so *nice*. But her face was unreadable, obscured behind the mask. As grim as an HR manager informing someone they’d been demoted and transferred away.

“I’m talking right here,” she purred.

“Here? You can’t mean—”

As realization dawned, the color drained from Eug’s face. Eve didn’t seem to care what she thought.

“Yes.” She nodded. “Lloyd’s interference won’t matter. You’ll easily take him out of commission. Lena Eug is the dwarf demon lord. It’s time to mobilize your second form! The time is close! You *must* unleash it!”

Her second form. While her human body was defined as her “first form,” demon lords that abandoned their humanity (like Surtr) were capable of using *all* their power—by becoming literal monsters.

In that case, you might wonder why someone wouldn’t *start* using their second form from the beginning. Eug seemed to have a good reason to refuse and was shaking her head.

“Wait. I can’t just—”

“Mm? What’s the problem?”

Eve still sounded nice, like she was talking to a child. And that kept her in *charge*; Eug’s voice got quiet.

“I still...can’t control my second form.”

“You can’t? Aww. That’s too bad.”

Eve acted all shocked, like she’d had no idea. The costume’s eyes swirled comically.

Eug was looking very glum, not reacting to this at all.

“You know that, Eve. Alka and I both have second forms too powerful for our minds to handle. Until I recovered my memories, I was like a beast...”

Eve dug a finger into the rabbit’s ear, going, “Uh-huh...”

“Eve!! It’s caused me major trauma! Those burly arms and hair everywhere! No glimmer of intelligence! Munching on raw deer and boar every time I got hungry... Just remembering it...”

Her time as a demon lord was so far removed from her ideal self-image that she didn’t even want to think about it.

But Eve breezily ignored her protests, laying on the pressure. Every bit of whimsy drained, her arms hanging limp, like a creature from a horror film. If you turned a corner and saw her, your kids would probably start to cry.

“Then answer me this. You’ve spent years on your plan to raise the technological levels by turning Jiou into an empire to be frightened of, and all that work is about to go to waste. Unless you have a plan to fix things?”

“N-not yet,” Eug mumbled. “But Jiou still has value. It can still inspire fear!”

“You blew things big time here, and you still think that’ll work out?”

Eve sighed. Then she poked Eug in the forehead.

“Look around. Your arms and legs—the Jiou Empire’s own citizens. You gave them weapons that could overpower anyone—and they’re just *scared* of them. While the Azami forces know exactly what you can do and never backed down. You think that’s a one-time deal?”

“Well...”

“It wasn’t strong enough. You need a symbol of fear. You need them to *know* they’ll die if they don’t strike first.”

“I need...a symbol.”

“Yes. Jiou lacks that. But Azami has one. They’ve got a symbol of *hope*. That Lloyd boy. The one you hate so much.”

Eug recalled her soldiers, fleeing with bulky weapons on their backs, jumping off the artillery and surrendering.

Eve kept talking. Brainwashing her into believing this was her only option.

“You didn’t make them scary enough. It’s gotta be kill or get killed. You give them unknown, inhuman weapons, but if they don’t *want* to kill... Well, it might have made Jiou seem scary to *other* countries, but you failed to use that fear to keep your own citizens under control.”

Now she had Eug feeling down, and Eve gently picked her up.

“But don’t worry. If you trample on those cowardly deserters, yell ‘Get back in that fight!’ then *kill Lloyd* yourself—it’ll all be within the margin of error.”

“I’ll be the symbol...”

“You can do it. I know you’re trying to honor everyone who died.”

“I...”

Eug was whispering the same thing to herself, in a trance. Like when you wear yourself out crying from anger.

Eve gave her one last push. Like words of salvation—but for her own benefit.

“You can still pull it off. Teach everyone what happens if you don’t fight, if you dare take up arms against Jiou. Prove that you are what they should fear— The moment is ripe.”

“I...”

“Let it out, Lena Eug. All the anger you have inside. Or will you let all your hard work go to waste? And abandon everyone who perished along with the civilized world?”

“Hard work... Work harder...so it’s not in vain...”

Eug’s mind was leaning the way she was leading it, and Eve started cheering her on. Like a mother clapping for a child that’s just learned to crawl.

“That’s right. Good, good, just like that! Work hard for what you want! Don’t let the past decades and centuries go to waste!”

She *had* to. Never realizing the blinders she had on, thinking all other options were eliminated.

An implanted obsession that cornered her, pushing her further in, and forcing her to her feet.

“I’ll do it... I have to...force Alka to admit it. To admit I’m great. To admit I’m *right*.”

“Yesss! Go get ’em, Eugyyy! Woo!”

Eug moved unsteadily toward the battlefield and Lloyd. Eve watched her go, doubling over, shoulders shaking—and finally laughing out loud.

“Such a pushover! Never a trace of objectivity! That’s why you were never much of a scientist.”

When she was done rolling across the ground laughing, she brushed the dirt off her costume, and her voice grew calm.

“You could never be a politician. No sense of *purpose*. For the big goals, you’ve gotta cut the little things, the medium things, and the stupendous things. Alka understood that. She was always better.”

Eve said one last line for Eug.

“You crave recognition—but a flimsy goal like that is no good at all. Not like mine or Alka’s. Or even Lab Chief Cordelia’s.”

With that, she squeaked off toward the mountain peak—like it was a box seat with a perfect view of the battle’s finale.

Unaware that any of this was happening, Lloyd scrapped the final armored doll and relaxed.

“Is that all of them? They sure were tough! A real exercise is definitely a step or two above what we do in class. And so expensive!”

Lloyd never quite worked out the dolls weren’t part of the exercise. As always, he had a knack for misunderstanding things. His task done, he wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand.

“Whew...now what? Should I bring everyone some tea?”

He took a step toward his allies—

Thud.

“Wh-what was that?”

A hideous monster fell from the sky.

A cloud of dust billowed from the impact. He squinted and saw a beast with giant horns— No, it looked more like a Viking helmet. It had razor-sharp fangs and was covered in white fur.

Round eyes and body shape, with arms like tree trunks bolted on—the figure was deeply unbalanced, like a child’s scribbles.

A gorilla? Bigfoot? Reminiscent of a number of world-famous cryptids but none that Lloyd was familiar with.

“A m-monster?! It heard the noise and came down from the mountains?!”

The giant beast’s eyes were locked on Lloyd and looked at him with scorn.

It clucked its tongue, swearing in a very human way.

“Tch... You sure know how to tick me off.”

“Huh? That voice...are you...?”

The tomboyish voice was familiar.

But before he found the answer, the white-coated monster turned toward him, introducing itself.

“That’s right! I’m Eug.”

“I—I thought so. But why do you look like *that*?”

Ignoring his question, Eug stomped toward him. She picked up a broken doll with two fingertips.

“So aggravating... If it weren’t for you, everything would have gone great. *Everything.*”

“What’s going on? Is this some—?”

“I’m not here to show off my new costume!”

“You aren’t? Oh, okay.”

Eug was getting the hang of how Lloyd’s mind worked. She let out a guttural sigh.

“Ughhh...and here I was gonna use this exercise to start a war. I can’t believe you made such short work of my beautiful *dolls*!”

Thdd. Crack.

A flare of temper, and she punched the doll away.

The sheer volume of the impact noise and the distance the fragments flew—both made Lloyd’s hairs stand on end.

“...?! So strong!”

“I like that look! Shame I couldn’t get it from you without turning into this.”

With that, the urge overtook her. She leaped toward Lloyd, swinging her massive arms down upon him.

He just barely managed to block the attack with his arms but could not withstand the power of a demon lord’s second form. Like the armored doll before him, he went flying.

“Whoa!”

He managed to right himself midair, and Eug started cracking her knuckles.

“Careless! I’m your enemy, the one controlling Jiou from the shadows, the former accomplice of your brother figure.”

“Y-you are...?!”

This was all clearly news to him, a fact that made her hang her head.

“You didn’t even *know*?! Shouma, you gotta tell people things... Everyone in Alka’s camp is equally infuriating. But that ends *today*!”

As she shouted that last word, she pounced, chasing after Lloyd.

Not trying to kill him—her attacks were more like saying hello.

“Hnk! *Aero*!”

Not wanting to take a hit like that again, Lloyd wisely used wind magic to avoid them all.

He flew across the sky and put his back into a mighty swing.

Whmm! The sound shook the very air.

Lloyd’s strongest punch made Eug stagger—but only that.

“Oh-ho! Not half bad.”

“That’s it?!”

Eug seemed put out by his shock.

“Don’t look so surprised! I’m all-out second-form demon lord going no-holds-barred. There’s only one way this *ends*!”

Her speech became fragmented, a stream of words spoken as they crossed her mind, and they ended in a sudden tantrum during which she kept raining blows upon Lloyd.

Bewildered by her churning emotions, he was slammed into the ground, defenseless.

She swung her arms out like a junkyard compactor, pounding Lloyd into the dirt. The ground beneath him cracked, and a cloud of dust plumed out.

The finishing blow— She raised an arm high and slammed the ground.

An attack so powerful the impact alone sent Lloyd into the air.

“Not done yet!”

Eug leaped after him. Both hands grabbed hold, squeezing him tight—and then hurled him toward the ground below.

“Gahhhh!”

Unable to keep *Aero* going, Lloyd crashed into the ground hard, sinking deep into the soil.

“Gimme a sitrep.”

Back at the Jiou border base, after Lloyd’s departure. The soldiers were cleaning up the remains of the dolls, and a lookout was up on the tower, watching the battle through binoculars.

“The Jiou Empire is freaking out about the armored doll rampage...but the Azami side is making swift work of them. Looks to be only minimal casualties.”

“Azami knew just what would happen, huh?”

Jiou had wanted mayhem, leading to war—but Azami was here to keep both sides safe. Demonstrating not just military might, but *honor*.

“Wow... Is Lloyd still okay?”

“H-he’s, um. Done taking out all the dolls, but...a giant monster jumped in, and he’s not doing well. Monster might be a bit of an understatement, really...”



The lookout wasn't sounding too confident. There were other soldiers with binoculars, and they all looked equally unsure.

Frustrated, the whiskered officer grabbed a pair and took a look himself.

He found Eug in beast form and Lloyd battered before her—and he let out a squeak.

“That’s not a monster—that’s a demon lord!”

“““A demon lord!!!!”””

Everyone gasped, and the officer wiped the sweat from his brow.

“I’ve heard the tales. The dwarf demon lord, Lena, who lived in the woods up north, raided farms, and stole their livestock. Alka, the Priestess of Salvation, defeated her—and since that day, the dwarves grew clever and skilled at artifice.”

“Y-you’re well informed, sir.”

“Grandma used to scare me as a kid. That helmet and hair are just like she described— What else could it be? Can Lloyd handle it? Is there anything we can do?”

As worried as he was about the boy, the demon lord before him left his knees shaking.

This was why she had insisted on being called Dr. Eug, not Lena.

Folktales about that time she rampaged like a wild animal, without so much as a glimmer of intelligence, ended when she was subdued by Alka’s hand.

The world may have been transformed, but her inferiority complex remained and led her down the path to evil.

“Infuriating. A whole new world, ready for me to prove I’m better than Alka, but this stupid legend won’t go away! I mean, I did rampage like an idiot, but Alka wasn’t much better! Having your hard work spoiled by the mediocre is intolerable.”

Her round eyes gleamed, glaring down at Lloyd.

Her strength was overwhelming. Clearly far stronger than any demon lord

he'd faced—and Lloyd was helpless before her.

"You once told me you were trying to make sure your hard work wasn't in vain," Eug muttered, as he lay in the dirt. "The nerve! But I get it now. You had a point. You're in vain! And it matters. Even if my mind goes, if I'm the symbol of fear, it won't be meaningless. Eve'll handle it. I'll be this world's symbol of fear. Sorry if I mess the world up. Sorry I ended civilization. I owe them. I owe everyone who was sacrificed."

"Not yet!"

As Eug grew increasingly incoherent, Lloyd summoned his mettle and retaliated.

There was a dull thunk.

That seemed to wake her up. Her eyes focused again.

"You can still move? Boy, you know you stand no chance."

But Lloyd was undaunted. He glared at Eug.

"I don't get a lot of things! What you're saying and doing— You just sound like you've lost it! I think you're really mixed up."

"How dare you!" Eug growled.

"I mean," Lloyd yelled, looking very upset. "You just seem so sad!"

"I know that! Better! Than anyone! You nincompoop!"

Eug swung at Lloyd as if that was a way out of her conundrum. He wound up kissing dirt again.

"Ha! All you have going for you is lectures and not knowing when to quit! You were the weakest kid in that village, and you can never beat me! Watch and weep!"

She was spitting words, gloating over the downed boy.

But even half-buried, Lloyd was arguing back, his voice a groan.

"I *was* the weakest back home. But now...I'm a little bit stronger!"

"You sure don't look it buried in the dirt," Eug scoffed.

Lloyd didn't care. His words were half meant for his own self.

"And the part of me that's grown the most...that I'm most proud of...is my heart!"

He was waist deep in the ground, and all he could move was his hands. Despite that, he fired a powerful *Aero*.

The winds whooshed toward Eug—and missed, sailing harmlessly off to the sky above and punching a hole in the clouds.

A clear whiff. It had made Eug's heart skip a beat, but she recovered quickly, palms up and her arms wagging.

"Ooooooh," she said, rolling her eyes at the patch of sky. "You sure are good at desperate last-ditch efforts, and I guess that's one definition of 'heart.' Just a *useless* one."

She looked back down at him and snarled.

"It's been a pleasure, but it's time you said good-bye."

At that exact moment, the other Azami soldiers were busy polishing off the armored dolls—and getting the Jiou forces to safety, though they were extremely confused, since the former were supposed to be their enemies and the latter their backup. Some went willingly, while others fought back...and Micona fed on all of *them*.

"Quit resisting and let the new star of the Azami army—me, Micona Zol—escort you to safety."

All that life energy she was absorbing made her skin glow. She could fight twenty-four seven.

"Excuse me, please calm down! I promise we're not scary," Riho said, side-eyeing Hustle Micona.

"R-right, but...that thing's a demon lord? And you got this weird belt girl..."

"Pay *them* no attention! This way!"

As Riho grimly tried to straighten things out, a hole opened in the clouds. Like a burst of errant winds—clearly emanating from Lloyd.

Selen looked up past her wriggling belt.

“That was Sir Lloyd’s *Aero*!” she yelled.

“Yeah...but what for? Is he going to town over there? Something bad enough that he has to bust out a spell that big?”

Phyllo heard that and squinted, then yelped. “——!”

“What, Phyllo? That wasn’t like you.”

“.....Master’s fighting something *bad*. A really huge monster...and he’s in trouble.”

It was rare to see her this expressive or hear her sound that agitated.

Selen and Riho exchanged glances.

“If Phyllo’s rattled—”

“It’s a demon lord.”

This *was* the Jiou Empire—and they wouldn’t put that past Eug. This might be a bit more than Lloyd could handle.

“What now? Should we back him up?”

“My beloved is in danger! I must do *something*!”

“.....Mm!”

But a man in a loincloth stood in their way.

“Fear not, ladies. We must focus on our own tasks,” Merthophan intoned.

This all sounded noble, but that loincloth was riding way up his crotch.

“He has a point, Mistress,” Vritra said, nodding. “Our task is—urk!”

“What are you saying? This is an opportunity! The perfect chance to raise our affection levels if I go save him! Even if I must face a demon lord!”

Selen’s romantic heart could not be shaken by mere war. She swiftly tied Vritra into a bow.

“Do your job, Belt Princess,” Allan snapped. “Or did you forget we had people on standby just in case this happened?”

“Precisely, Mistress,” Vritra rasped. “Leave this to them...and untie me...”

Merthophan nodded, smiling, with his loincloth flapping in the breeze and eyes focused on where Lloyd was fighting.

“That *Aero* was Lloyd’s signal. We can leave it to them— They’ve got this.”

He looked up, saw a shadow hurtling toward the young boy, and looked relieved.

“Time to end this. Hmph!”

The muscles in Eug’s arms bulged, veins looking ready to pop, clearly readying for a very powerful blow.

This attack would finish him off, but before it landed...

She sensed something above and looked up.

“What the—?”

“Too late, Eug!”

“Burn, baby, burn!”

A ball of fire came at her. Eug was forced to abandon her attack and throw up her arms to defend herself.

The fire was followed by a barrage of slashes from a lion with pitch-black wings.

The whoosh of wind from each blow echoed in her ears—and blood splattered from each graze.

“You two? I forgot you clowns even existed.”

Eug’s voice was awfully calm, barely surprised at all. Between her and Lloyd stood Satan and Surtr, both in their second forms.

The turtle’s mouth moved, chattering happily. “Ain’t my flames grand? Thank me later, Lloyd!”

“Don’t take all the credit, Surtr. I’m the one who carried you here, and it was my attack that made her back off!”

“Huh? On your own, she’d have blocked it all! Your straight punch only

worked because my flames made her flinch! And I can make them even hotter!”

“If you do that, you’ll scorch the ground Lloyd’s lying on!”

Their comedy routine started, and Eug couldn’t hide her irritation.

“I hate to send you packing when you just got here, but we don’t need your bad jokes.”

“We ain’t going anywhere,” Satan said. “Lloyd was nice enough to invite us— We were waiting on standby just for this.”

“——?! That *Aero* was a smoke signal?! Truly infuriating to the bitter end.”

She glared balefully down at Lloyd.

Covered in dirt and barely conscious, he muttered, “I have...friends I can rely on... That allows me to go all out.”

Even in his state, the boy wasn’t giving up.

“Tch!” Eug snapped. “Geez, waiting for me to show up? You sure are some die-hard fans.”

“Does Lloyd’s obstinance stem from you, Satan?” Surtr asked. “He’s like you and your futile pursuit of love!”

“My love was pure. Yours was entirely in your head. All you did was worry her.”

✂ They’re talking about a cabaret girl.

Seeing them dragging up old romances and about to bicker about the amount of Dom Pérignon they’d ordered, Eug narrowed her round eyes, grinding her teeth.

“You’re both still the worst! Two degenerates wasting their lives. Too busy blowing off steam at nightclubs to appreciate my genius.”

“I knew all about that!” Satan said. “The lamentations of a brilliant mind! And how you struggled in the face of a *super* genius.”

“...Hmph.”

He didn’t actually say “Alka,” but it was enough to make her swear.

Recalling memories of his time as Naruhiko Seta, Satan added, “The new hire with a chip on her shoulder, Lena Eung. But I didn’t think you’d still be dragging that around with you, not after all this.”

Surtr—Tony—had worked in a different department, but he was nodding, too.

“It’s our job to step in and stop you from going out of control. And it’s two against one! Cool your head and hear us out. President Eva—”

“Shut up.”

Eug swung an arm.

Satan twisted his body, taking to the air and using his shadows to avoid her flurry. The demon lord of the night bounced into action.

Those shadows materialized into blades, and they went after Eug, but— “No use!”

Her white fur stood on end, hardening and blocking every blow.

“Got a trick like *this*?” she asked, her mouth twisting into a grin.

And she howled.

A bestial roar that blasted away all the shadow blades.

“Jesus H. Christ,” Surtr swore. “Who said two against one would work? She’s clearly got the upper hand!”

“That was *you*, Surtr! Do you have the brain of a turtle, too? Aughh!”

Eug’s howl wasn’t a mere shout. It was a concentrated bullet of sound that chased after Satan in the air—and when it hit, his wings failed, and he was sent into a tailspin.

Eug’s animalistic body easily intercepted their descent.

“My current hypothesis is that anyone who was within a few dozen kilometers of that lab on the day in question was turned into a demon lord.”

Eug glanced down at her bulging arms and palms.

“But clearly, the powers gained are not equal. Nor are the abilities gained by

taking a second form. For some reason, I have almost no mana—but you both have a ton. I keep wondering why that is.”

“Uh...it *is* fascinating...,” Satan said, struggling to his feet.

“But if we assume mana is ‘dreams’—in other words, magic itself is the conversion of the imagination into otherwise impossible phenomenon—then it all adds up. I know exactly what caused the world to wind up like this, and I was a die-hard realist to begin with, so of course my mana supply is paltry.”

“I get your point there. Delusional idiots wind up with more mana, then?”

“And the discrepancies between first and second forms are what you’re repressing. You and Alka always lived for your desires—which is why my second form gains a power far beyond your own.”

“You, repressed?” Satan shrugged. “I’m not so sure, but let’s call it that for now.”

“I suppress a lot. My feelings for Alka...for this world...for this hairy raw-meat-eating animal body...my instincts...failure as an animal...the human error that made this world...”

Eug trailed off into muttered fragments, confusing everyone around her.

“Yo, Seta. This ain’t looking good.”

“I sure didn’t think she was *this* powerful. What now? Grab Lloyd and run for it?”

Rescuing Lloyd was their real priority. But as they debated the timing, Eug was losing her sense of reason.

“Reason just stops demon lords from using their full power. To surpass Alka, I’ve gotta be a wild thing!”

Her muscles were bulging bigger by the second.

“Don’t do it, Eug!” Satan cried. “If you act like Alka and let your desires loose, there’ll be no saving you!”

“Yeah! Everyone’ll stare at you in horror! You’ll be acres away from dignity and respect!”

“Mm? Since when am I that bad? I just get *slightly*, a bit, too giddy around Lloyd.”

“What?!”

Eug’s voice sounded quite put out—and a meteor fell from the sky.

The flaming rock scored a direct hit at Eug, and the shock wave was so great it exposed the ground’s bare rock face.

Eug went spinning like a car in a traffic accident but managed to jam her arms into the ground and stop herself.

Coughing, she glared ahead—where Alka stood.

“Well? Did that meteor cool your head down?”

“Al...ka?!”

Eug’s eyes locked on to her—and before any further words could be exchanged, she flicked her finger, attacking Alka with air bullets. Basically finger pistols.

Each arm was the size of an elephant’s leg, and the projectiles aimed at Alka were no laughing matter, but she gracefully dodged each one like a bullfighter.

Satan had to cover his face to block the air pressure, and Alka scowled at him.

“Why’re you two letting her toy with you?”

“Alka? Why are you here?”

“Like I’d fail to notice a dustup of this scale? Okay, so I heard Marie collapsed, went to the castle, heard there was some exercise thing, and came to watch Lloyd strut his stuff— Sure didn’t expect *this*.”

She glared coldly at Eug’s transformation.

When the woman still said nothing, Alka sighed.

“Honestly, all your talk about how you never wanted to take that form again, how you couldn’t control it...”

“You knew Eug could take this shape?!” Surtr asked.

Alka nodded grimly. “I had to stop her rampage a long time ago— It nearly

killed me.”

“Yikes!”

Surtr was gaping at that piece of information, but Alka flashed him a confident grin.

“Don’t worry, I ain’t been resting on my laurels. Last time I wasn’t protecting much of anything, but now I’ve got Lloyd. I can’t afford to lose.”

This confidence appeared to be entirely based on her love for Lloyd, a level of doting that sent chills down her companions’ spines. Beyond obsession lies *madness*.

Satan’s black fur was standing on end.

“Talk about your one-sided loves,” he muttered. “You may be worse than Selen.”

Then again, Selen had reached this level in mere months, while Alka had built up to it over a century, so...if there was a prize for these things, Selen would win.

Clearly all fired up, Eug roared, “Alkaaa! Time we settled this once and for all! I am better than you! Look at meee!”

She took a deep breath, using the full force of her powerful lungs behind that roar.

And the impact was like a truck tire blowing out.

“Too much!”

Satan and Surtr retreated to the sky, trying to get out of harm’s way.

But for some reason, Alka hopped on Satan’s back, too.

“Uh, Alka? Why are you with us? She’s after you! You’ll put us in danger!”

“Don’t be such a baby!”

Eug must have taken this as a pathetic retreat. She started laughing wildly and firing her finger pistols.

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! It’s like you painted a target on yourself, Alkaaaa!”

Satan was only just dodging the compressed air bullets, but that didn't mean he was maintaining his balance in the air; any second now, he'd come crashing down.

"We're in trouble here! C'mon, Alka! Show us those laurels!"

"Please. You're enjoying a pleasant sky voyage with an adorable child. Revel in it!"

"I don't care how adorable you look! It's the insides that count! Kid grandmas are too unorthodox for my tastes! And this voyage is anything but pleasant!"

All perfectly understandable opinions.

"*Hngg*, I'd love to give you the beating of your life for that, but...it's not the time. Ears up, boys."

Alka started whispering a plan—and Eug laughed again, taking it as a sign of desperation.

"Huddle up all you like; it won't make a difference."

Was she always like this, or was it the influence of her second form? Eug was confident, and her every gesture radiated contempt.

But her emotions were terribly unstable. One second, she was showboating like her victory was expected, and the next, she was impatiently firing finger pistols.

"You can't stop me—so let's get right to the grand finale! Ohhh?"

Up above, on Satan's head, Surtr had opened his mouth wide and was making a giant fireball.

"This...is the biggest...I got!"

It lit up the ground like a second sun.

"Bigger ain't better," Eug taunted. "Try and hit me, I'll just dodge. Or what, you think the heat'll dry me out?"

But Surtr ignored the question, making the fireball even larger.

Rather than unleash it, Satan began wheeling slowly around Eug.

Unsure what the point of that was, she snarled, “What, are you taunting me? If you’re not coming, I’ll come to—hmm?”

Squinting against the light of the fireball, Eug looked at Satan and noticed someone was missing.

Alka was no longer on his back.

“Wait, where’s Alka? Where is she?!”

A distraction to set up a surprise attack. Eug scanned her surroundings, assuming she’d be attacking while Eug’s attention was on the fireball.

But there was no sign of Alka anywhere.

“Please! I know what you’re planning! Come on out! Where are you?!”

Satan was still wheeling above. Shadows lengthening in the light of the fireball...all the way to Eug’s feet.

“I’m right here, Eug.”

A woman appeared from *within* those shadows.

“Crap, Satan’s shadow portal ability— He can send others through it? Wait, you’re—”

Behind Eug was a slender woman with long black hair and an iron mask.

Devilish horns, angelic wings. Long, slim, bare legs covered in a mystic pattern of darkest black.

A devil *and* angel, an amalgamation of the two sides of the human mind.

Alka had been called the human demon lord because of her second form.

“Your second form?! Are you willing to sacrifice reason and never be yourself again, Alka?!”

“Like I said, I’ve been training. I can take on this form for a few minutes without losing anything. Hmph!”

Alka’s voice had changed, sounding like a young woman. As Eug gaped, Alka’s arms reached out from the shadow.

Her beautiful fingernails were painted a toxic color—and she spread out her

fingers, raking her nails down Eug's broad back.

Eug went *flying*. With no clue what had happened, her round eyes blinked furiously—and she crashed into the side of the mountain, toppling tree after tree.

The scratches blistered like burns, running deep enough to show bone.

“Uh...but simply knocking me away won't—”

“You're *done*, Eug.”

Eug had stood back up and was ready to leap into the fray again—but someone kicked her in the back. She went flying once more.

“Gahhh! Again?!”

Eug crashed into a different mountain, got up, and braced herself for another attack.

“An impact strong enough to hurt me, and it blocks my healing ability—is this the *destruction* rune?”

Even with her guard up, she got hit in the back again. She was flung back to where she started.

“Still, why?! What for?! My back, every time?! My bones...breaking...aughhh!”

She hadn't even made it to her feet that time. The blow to her back pounded her straight down into the dirt.

Satan and Surtr didn't launch the fireball and landed back onto the ground, certain it was over.

Alka turned back to her kid form and came running over.

“Whew, been a few years since I did that! Sure gives you a stiff shoulder.”

She started spinning one arm, trying to work the knot out.

“Riiight,” Surtr said. “Alka, what's going on? Eug's body is *still* getting flung around like a pinball.”

One second she was in the dirt, and the next, in the upper atmosphere.

Satan and Surtr couldn't believe their eyes, and Alka looked extra smug.

“I carved a rune into her back.”

“With your nails?! You can *do* that?!”

Alka wiggled her fingers and took on the tone of a teacher.

“Yep, it’s a little trick I can do in my ravishing second form in the minute or so before my mind escapes me. I charge my nails with magic, quickly draw a rune—and until the mana I’ve charged it with runs out, the effect remains. Ordinarily, the *destruction* rune is a one-off thing, but this way— Well, you see what happens.”

“It just keeps going?”

“The *destruction* rune hurts *anything*. The concept underlying it is ill-defined, so it’s tricky to handle, but if I keep polishing this technique, it could be quite ruthless. I’ll be able to keep it going until it kills them.”

Satan swallowed hard.

“So when’ll it end this time?”

“Like half an hour from now? She should be pretty banged up by then. Particularly her back.”

Eug was doing her best to pick herself up each time, but to no avail—she kept getting flung aside. The longer this went on, the limper she got.

“Ready to give up yet, Eug? I bet you got tricked into this mess by Eve—President Eva.”

“Alka? How did you—?”

“What, are *you* surprised? Wait, you mean you’ve worked out that Eve of Profen is President Eva and the real bad guy here?”

“Yeah, I guess... If she knows all that, maybe we oughtta tell her. Surtr?”

“Not our place to decide. Our source is top secret.”

Not doing a thing without the boss’s say-so is a domesticated move of a servant.

“Top secret, is it?! I thought you two were being sneaky!”

There was a gleam in Alka's eye, and she stepped closer, and the demon lords looked nervous.

——And they were all a bit *too* confident they'd won. Which gave Eug the chance she needed.

Battered, shielding her broken back—she took off running.

"*Hngg?* Eug, you aren't getting anywhere like that!"

"No— Crap, Alka, she's going for—"

Eug's destination—the spot where Lloyd lay buried.

Eug yanked him out of the dirt and bared her teeth, flashing a smirk at Alka.

"How's that...for turned tables?"

Alka had not even been aware Lloyd was in that dirt.

"What?! Why is Lloyd—?"

"Argh, we totally forgot about him!"

Seeing Alka flustered, Eug's grin widened. Her hand closed around Lloyd's head, squeezing it.

They heard bone cracking. Nobody dared move.

"Yes, any sudden movements, and I'll squish him! Even with my bones broken, his head will explode like a tomato!"

She stepped slowly forward, away from anything where Satan's shadows could reach.

"She's wary of shadows— There's nothing I can do. Owwww..."

Alka was yanking on his hair, yelling, "Then why'd you leave Lloyd buried there?! Why was he here at all?! He's supposed to be cooking for people on the back line! You can't cook in the middle of a battlefield!"

Having the boy she doted on in mortal peril seemed to have left her thoughts a bit muddled.

Wincing from the pain of her broken body, Eug chuckled. "I don't mind killing him! But I'd like to see your other form a bit longer."

“...What now...? What do we do?” Surtr gasped.

“You do what I say,” Eug said. “If you want him to live, you’d better listen. This works out! I had a demon lord shortage.”

“You did?” Satan asked.

That was certainly a powerful turn of phrase. Eug’s grin grew very wicked.

“You’ll be the Jiou Empire’s demon lord. The symbol of fear that destroys Azami! Go out and kill them all!”

“““Huh?!”””

Their surprise seemed to annoy Eug.

“I’m gonna *make* this war happen! This war will make Jiou the world’s enemy, and fear will force people to use the weapons I give them! That’ll advance the world’s technological level! Alka, you may have carved your name into history, but I’ll do you one better and tell the world my failure was a necessary evil... No, I’ll tell them they owe me for making the world like this! Everyone’ll forgive me for destroying civilization, for breaking a world or two! They’ll forgive me for it—Please forgive me for it.”

She started repeating this last phrase. Her last shred of reason running out.

“Alka, this is real bad.”

“I can’t do it, but if Lloyd...”

“I can’t think of anything! We’re doomed!”

As they all wailed, Eug thrust Lloyd’s limp body out in front of her.

“See? I’m past holding back! I can feel myself starting to think I’ll be just *fine* as long I get to make Alka miserable. Like that’s all I’m really after!”

Eug was definitely losing it.

Faced with an impossible choice and no good solution, they could only tense up.

“If we can distract her for a second, I can fly in and grab him... Could someone surprise attack her?”

Not a promising strategy, Alka.

Eug seemed to lose interest. Her excitement faded.

“Fine. I’ll just kill him, then.”

She clearly didn’t care one way or the other.

“Wait!” Alka yelled. “Eug!”

“No more waiting! I’ve waited over a hundred years! Centuries! I was only twenty when my life’s goal became sticking it to you! And finally! I’ve achieved my *life’s purpose*!”

Her voice was giving way to a growl.

In that instant—

A bolt of light struck her back.

“————!!!”

Her body ignited. Her flesh scorched. Eug went up in flames.

Taking damage just like she had from the *destruction* rune.

An attack from the direction she’d least expected had left her defenseless—and she let go of Lloyd.

Not missing that chance, Satan swooped in, caught him, and passed him to Alka.

“Secured!”

Alka cradled him in her arms, rubbing her cheek against the boy.

“Ahhh! Lloyd! But what was that attack?”

A blast that could even hurt a demon lord’s second form was pretty shocking.

She squinted—

And saw a metallic gleam, blue LED lights—the Godslayer Arrow. Along with the desperate faces of the Jiou base guards who’d fired it.

Eug was rolling on the ground, desperately trying to quell the flames.

But even as she lay on the brink of death, smoke rising—she realized that her

downfall had come at the hand of the weapon she'd made.

"Fools!" she yelled. "Fools! Fools! Why would you do that?!"

Her roar shook the very air.

"They're the enemies! I told you to shoot the boy! And you show up now? Did you *miss*?!"

A literal monster, raging at them.

But the Jiou soldiers were past being scared. They came running down the mountain, surrounding Eug. Aiming every weapon they had at her.

"I'm as confused as Eug," Alka said. "What's going on?"

"So you are Dr. Eug," the mustachioed officer said, glaring at the monster. "We did not miss, fiend. Nor did we mistake friend for foe. In a word—we're on Lloyd's side."

"Huh...huh?!"

Every Jiou soldier was nodding.

"Of course! Do you know what that boy's done for us?!"

"We heard your plans! Using this war to develop the world? Nobody asked! We just want *peace*!"

Eug's chest was heaving, gasping for air. Her face might've been that of an animal, but her expression made it clear how dumbfounded she was.

The chorus of support made Satan turn to Lloyd, admiration in his eyes.

"This boy caused another miracle. You're something else, Lloyd."

"I'm pretty confused, but it sounds like Lloyd saved us all!"

"Mm! That's what he does! I'm...so glad you're safe, Lloyd."

The boy himself was sound asleep, oblivious to Alka's snot and tears and drool. A regular consolation consommé.

Despite the mess on her face, the officer came up and saluted.

"We saw your battle from a distance. I take it you are with Azami?"

“Yes, forgive my current appearance,” Satan said, bowing. The soldier looked relieved.

“As representative of the Jiou border base, I’d like to tender our surrender. We have no intention of fighting any of you. And we would be happy to testify to anything that took place here.”

The evidence they’d given Lloyd was already more than enough—but Satan and Surtr weren’t about to spoil the moment. They just thanked the man.

Alka looked down at Eug, who was gasping, with a look of pity.

“Eug...is this on me? No, you were just dancing in President Eva’s palm. You always were.”

Without offering an answer—Eug fell into a deep slumber.

Noting that, Satan turned back to the Jiou soldiers.

“Well, once we sort a few things out, we’ll work out where to take you.”

“Okay. Can I ask one thing?”

“Sure,” Satan said. “What is it?”

“Um...who is that boy?”

That would be the first thing on any mind. Satan laughed. But because he looked like a giant lion, it made everyone quiver.

Alka looked up and grinned.

“Like you said—he’s a very good boy. Just a bit stronger than most. His smile has saved me more times than you can know.”

She glanced down at Eug again.

“If she’d had someone like him...maybe she wouldn’t have wound up like this.”

Her eyes were staring into the distant past, at her old friend Eung.

Chapter 5

Boastful Testament: Last Words Promising a Cliché Success Story in Your Future

The Jiou Empire's attack on the Azami military exercise drew to a close.

There were hardly any personnel damages—though a few Jiou soldiers were left with a lifelong fear of tree roots, thanks to Micon. But nothing worse happened.

The testimony of the Jiou border guards shored up the espionage case against Casitas and Hydra. They could no longer argue they hadn't been leaking army and guild secrets; the investigation was now looking for additional charges. They'd been at it for a while, and the intelligence division had their work cut out for them.

As for the empire itself—Sou, Shouma, and Eug had all been eliminated, their reign brought to an end, and with it the driving force behind the war. Rumor had it their government was currently divided between retribution and reconciliation.

“With Dr. Eug's weapons, we can win!” certainly proved a rallying cry for the retributionists, but...the weapons she'd left behind were impossible to manufacture or even use effectively without her. And the vast majority had been emboldened purely by having weapons the likes of which the world had never seen, so as time went on, those who sought reconciliation gained the upper hand.

Testimony that Dr. Eug had been a demon lord proved the finishing blow. Azami's warm reception for refugees and defectors turned the tide of public opinion, and at long last, they accepted the terms of peace Azami offered.

Jiou had grown by absorbing a variety of smaller countries. This affair had sparked long-held resentments. That had been part of Eug's plan to make them

undoubtedly evil...but we can only hope it helps them reinvent themselves as a *good* place to live.

Eug herself was in Azami, locked away in an underground containment facility designed by Rinko herself.

She'd been in critical condition, but Rinko's healing abilities had kept her alive, and she was slowly morphing back into the regular Eug.

In that basement room...

Rinko was sitting in a chair, gazing at Eug's sleeping body as it floated surrounded by air bubbles, in a glass tank filled with some sort of culture fluid.

"She's not to blame. This is on President Eva—and on me, for knowing and failing to stop it."

"Lab chief." "Boss."

Satan was in human form, and Surtr was resting on his head. Both tried speaking at once, but Rinko waved them off. She didn't need consoling.

"Still, I didn't think she'd let herself be this easily manipulated. And the fact she felt responsible for an unknowable number of deaths and then this fantasy world on top of that—it must have eaten away at her and provided the opening Eva needed. Everyone she passed on the street reminded her of folks from that old world, whose lives she'd likely claimed— Anyone would find themselves wishing they could wake from this nightmare. And that desire just drove her deeper into a corner."

"I get that. That's how I felt every time a girl rejected me in high school. I'd spend three days wishing it was all a bad dream."

"That's hardly an appropriate comparison, Surtr," Satan scoffed. "Frankly, if you recovered in only three days, it just wasn't that bad."

"Oh, shut up!" the turtle snapped. The moment after a rejection *does* feel like the end of the world. "It may not be that long, but it still feels like being plunged into a pit of darkness! Especially during puberty."

Perhaps one should be proud of the mental fortitude to bounce back fast from rock bottom.

“Good grief,” Rinko said, wincing at Surtr’s excuses. “You’re trying to be sympathetic, but it just makes me pity Eug more. Mm?”

At this point, loud footsteps pattered down the hall, and before anyone could get up, the door slammed open without so much as a knock.

It was Alka. Rinko was given no time to hide.

“Augh!” she yelped. “Alka’s coming!”

Like a foot soldier spotting a general from the Warring States period.

Alka had clearly run all the way here and was gasping for breath. “Hahh... hahh...I knew it! The way these two idiots were talking, I knew someone was behind this—and it was you! Lab Chief Cordelia!”

She came stomping right up to her.

“I have a *lot* of questions for *you*! But first—Satan! Since when are you the one deceiving *me*?! Fess up while you cut your guts open! Seppuku and make it snappy!”

“Fess up to what while I— Excuse me?! Who ever heard of a snappy seppuku?”

But Rinko backed Alka here.

“You heard the lady, Setacchi. Grab a sword.”

“I will do no such thing! Nobody commits hara-kiri like they’re grabbing a beer!”

“You’re Japanese, bro, you know the drill. But, Boss—you do owe her an explanation.”

Satan had no confidence in his ability to explain things while committing ritual suicide. Whether he had the courage to commit seppuku was a question for another hour. All eyes turned toward Rinko.

She gave a breezy smile reminiscent of a plateau soaked in morning dew.

“My bad,” she said, kowtowing so hard that dust rose from the impact.

“Ohhh! That’s been a while,” Alka said, suitably impressed. “The slightest screwup and the lab chief offers up her penitent prostration! A sight to behold!

Wait, haven't I seen this somewhere recently...?"

Seeing her frown, Satan asked, "Can I tell her?"

Head still firmly on the floor, Rinko said, "You betcha!"

"Good grief. Alka, this was news to me, too, but it turns out your Marie is the lab chief's daughter."

"Her what?!" Alka yelped. But then the dots connected. "That explains a lot, actually."

She nodded a few times.

"When I first met Marie, I did think she looked a bit like you. That's actually why I took a total stranger on the lam under my wing. So the speed of her genuflection is hereditary!"

That sounds worrying in its own right. If there's a genetic marker for the kowtow factor, then the public has a right to know.

Figuring the tension had eased enough, Rinko righted herself and beamed at Alka.

"Apology over! Welp, if you're onto me, no use hiding anything. Ask away!"

This was less *resolved* and more *why the hell not*.

"You never did dwell on anything," Alka growled. "But why didn't you come to me—or even Eug?"

"Well, I figured you were onto her by now, and I wanted to remain under President Eva's radar. She was particularly on guard against the two of you. If I'd made contact—and she'd found out I was pulling the strings—she'd have made her move."

"That doesn't make sense, either. I only just worked out President Eva was manipulating Eug as part of some devious scheme, but...what is she planning?"

"I know I said ask anything, but...we're at that part already? No time for tales of my exploits?"

"Are those in high demand?" Surtr asked, puzzled.

They were, actually—Fumar, Katsu, and the king listened avidly for them.

Wanting to know everything and anything about her like old-school idol fans.

Rinko scratched her head. Alka slammed her hand against the wall.

“Tell me *why* you avoided me, why you made the key to the Last Dungeon a holy sword, what President Eva is trying to trick me and Eug into doing, and what you’ve been up to while you were in hiding. Everything!”

Dust fell from the new crack in the ceiling.

“You owe us an explanation!” Alka roared. “I mean, civilization is gone! Countless lives lost! And it’s all been replaced with this fantasy world!”

“Boss,” Surtr said.

“Yeah,” Rinko said, looking sheepish. “I *did* just promise I had answers—and I guess I’d better start with the state of the world. Before Alka gets any angrier.”

She put her hand on Alka’s shoulder.

“Relax and hear me out,” she said. “First, about this world and what happened to all the lab scientists—what’s your current understanding?”

“Mm? Starting with an essay question is a bad habit, Lab Chief.”

Alka folded her arms, thinking about it, then gave her answer.

“Feels weird to explain it out loud, but thanks to Eug’s screwup, the Earth is now a fantasy world. The strange device in the ruins we were studying transformed the world itself, and everyone in or near the lab became immortal—what we now call demon lords. Essentially conceptual beings. Is that wrong?”

“I figured as much,” Rinko said.

She paused—then dropped a bombshell.

“Totally wrong! This isn’t Earth at all!”

“——Huh?!”

Alka gaped at her. Satan and Surtr nodded, understanding that feeling.

“It’s your classic *isekai*! The world we’re from is entirely separate, and we all just got transported over here! If that makes more sense.”

“But...,” Alka said, still reeling. “There are so many similarities, the remains of

the lab itself...”

“Relics of our time do show up floating in the water or buried underground pretty often. And that can be seen as evidence that this world is what’s left of the real one.”

“What other explanation is there?” Alka asked.

“Alka,” Satan said. “Do you know the principles by which magic works here?”

“Chants, conduits, and sigils, right? Expend a set amount of mana, and they’ll all summon magic.”

“All of which boil down to ancient runes—although we called ’em something else back at the lab.”

“You mean...runes... What we were studying was...”

Rinko winced, nodding.

“Yep. Not material control but summoning stuff from another world. We lacked evidence, and if we’d published, we’d have been laughed at, and without President Eva’s backing, we could never have done any research at all. Until we had solid proof, we had to act like we were just studying the new age mystery energy emanating from the ruins.”

“Oh...wow...”

“And half our scientists came from backgrounds where they didn’t ask too many questions.”

Surtr bobbed his head.

“I lost my home to a forest fire. I heard we were studying how to make it rain and didn’t stop to wonder about anything else.”

A surprisingly noble goal.

“Hmm,” Satan said, scratching his cheek. “I didn’t have any noble purpose. Just thought it would be cool if my work could stop global warming and help create a whole new kind of clean energy.”

“And each of your goals manifested within you when you became a demon lord, thus affecting your behaviors, appearances, and abilities. But that aside—

point is, we were studying how to summon another world.”

“So...to put this bluntly, it’s like where a whole class gets transported to a different world in one of those *isekai* light novels,” Surtr said.

“I wish I could argue, but basically,” Satan agreed. “Our research on the ruins transported us to a world of magic, and some of us were gifted with special abilities and turned to the dark side.”

Laughing, Rinko took a few steps forward, now in full lecture mode.



“That *meteor* rune? It summons a rock from a different world and drops it from the sky. While the *rainfall* rune pulls clouds from another world. These successes weren’t enough for us— We began to wonder if we could summon concepts like ‘misfortune’ or ‘health.’ We didn’t tell anyone, but I was after ‘time,’ and President Eva wanted to summon a ‘healthy body’ from a world beyond.”

“Wait, so if this isn’t Earth, but...that other world...”

“Eug didn’t kill *anyone* or destroy civilization. Admittedly, her attempt did wind up moving the whole lab to this world and turning everyone into demon lords.”

“And since we don’t exist in this world...is that why we’re immortal? But...if you’d just *told* Eug that...she’d never have gone wild like this!”

“Because if President Eva learned the truth, it would force her hand. She’d do everything in her power to stop Eug. Using technology she tricked Eug into creating.”

Alka gulped. She had a hunch what that meant.

“The Mastema Fruit... That was President Eva’s doing?”

“That’s the thing I was trapped in! If your mind’s in a weakened state, there’s no getting away. I guarantee it.”

Surtr spoke from experience.

“While I was celebrating getting infinite time, she was busy getting her head around the situation and laying plans.”

“Then...what is her goal?”

“Simple. Very simple.”

Rinko crossed her arms and made a face.

“Leave everyone who knows about runes here and go back to the real world alone—only immortal.”

“Sh-she can do that?”

“I didn’t think she could. But apparently she can. She’s not like us. She’s an

irregular— After all, she was *dead* at the time of the accident.”

Alka remembered finding President Eva’s body. The gunshot wound.

“I confirmed her death myself. Her heart wasn’t beating.”

“This may not be the most scientific statement, but she’s basically a ghost. And—”

Meanwhile, in the Azami castle audience chamber, a line of Jiou border guards was standing before the king, explaining what had happened.

The war itself may have fizzled out, but as soldiers of the aggressors, appearing before the enemy king...that certainly left the officer stroking his whiskers anxiously.

The king was conscious of this as well and maintained his most serious expression.

When they were done, he asked, “Hmm, what do you make of it, Chrome?”

“It matches reports from the scene. I believe they are telling the truth.”

They had been hearing about Eug’s transformation into a demon lord, warning signs of her true nature, and how the situation resolved itself on the Jiou side.

They’d hidden nothing, and he was grateful for it.

“Thank you all. I realize these things should go through your country’s diplomats, but...they have their hands full. It seemed easier to ask those directly involved.”

“Y-yes, Your Majesty.”

With the interrogation over, the king visibly relaxed.

“I have one other question,” he said.

“W-we’ll answer anything we can!”

The officer’s voice cracked a bit. He’d thought they were in the clear. The king waited a moment for him to recollect himself.

“Why did you choose to step in and save Lloyd?” he asked. “He may not have

meant to trick you, but...essentially he *was* a spy.”

This question was answered not just by the officer—but by every guard present.

“““Lloyd’s an angel!”””

And the king’s reaction...

“Makes sense!!!”

An instant nod. Next to him, Chrome was clutching his head like a put-upon protagonist.

Now that everyone’s favorite was out in the open, the king and the border guards let their hair down and spoke freely. Lloyd’s angelic factor erased all borders off the map. There was no trace of the king’s serious expression or the previous tension.

Once they had finished gushing over the boy, the king was smiling like he’d found lifelong friends.

“Mm! You are all trustworthy. Until Jiou itself settles down, I hope you’ll help bridge relations between our two countries.”

“Er, um...s-sure!”

They’d been prepared to be driven from their homes, so getting earmarked for a vital role was certainly intimidating.

Getting ahead of ourselves, but in the years to come, they would be instrumental in making improvements to the inward-gazing mentality of Jiou’s Central capital and freeing the vassal states from oppression. Telling everyone they were guided by an angel.

Speaking of said angel, Lloyd himself happened to pass by the audience chamber. His usual crew followed him; they were there to check in on Marie, after her earlier fainting spell.

“Marie’s resting in a room up ahead,” Lloyd said.

“A mere swoon, and Lloyd’s coming to see her. How *blessed*.” Selen seemed highly displeased.

“Heh-heh, then go get yourself injured. Break a bone or two!” Riho suggested.

“.....I can help. I’ve been practicing how to finely control my power,” Phyllo growled.

“Ugh, Riho!” Allan wailed. “Don’t put funny ideas in their heads. They might just go through with it! Phyllo, stop that, we’re in the castle.”

The cadets were always a merry crew.

Passing by the audience chamber, Lloyd happened to glance inside and saw a row of familiar faces, and he headed in, smiling.

“Gosh! The guards from the Azami border station! It’s been a while.”

“Oh, Lloyd...you really did think that was Azami.”

“Huh? Wasn’t it?”

He just looked baffled, and everyone tried not to laugh.

Allan and Riho were whispering.

“So the rumors were true! Lloyd’s amazing.”

“I dunno if that’s the word I’d use for someone who can’t even tell countries apart...”

Phyllo and Selen simply looked smug.

“...The human heart is like putty in my master’s hand.”

“His hands are clutched round my heart!”

Lloyd was baffled by all these funny looks and compliments. As usual, he remained oblivious to everything he’d done.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“Mm? We’re all just singing your praises!”

Watching Lloyd chat with his friends, the Jiou guards nodded. “What you see is what you get!” they said, smiling. Resembling uncles seeing their nephews grow up.

The king was acting more like the young cadet was his own son.

“Lloyd! You stopped the war with Jiou! Thank you so much.”

“Er, okay. Thank you? But what war? Wasn’t that an exercise?”

“Mm? Officially, yes! Just an exercise.”

The king had clearly given up on trying to explain. Like a parent refusing to answer a child wondering if Santa really exists.

So Lloyd remained blissfully unaware that his actions had genuinely averted a world war.

Since the king seemed friendly, the mustachioed officer asked, “Um, so...who is that boy? He’s so strong!”

The king considered this carefully, then smiled.

“If you ask me, he’s our next king.”

A very loaded statement! Of course, the king laughed it off as a joke. But what if he wasn’t joking? That would be like a low-ranking employee getting fast-tracked as the next CEO.

But that employee was as talented as he was beloved, with a smile that melted the hearts of all, and the suggestion only made everyone think it would probably work out just fine.

Except for Lloyd, of course, who never even realized it was happening.

Afterword

Rebound—

In sports, when a shot is missed and bounces away—or perhaps it gets caught.

Or when weight comes back after a diet ends.

I, Satou, lost ten kilograms, but they're almost all back. You can call me the Hanamichi Sakuragi of the dieting world. Or maybe the Bill Russell. Instead of the legendary sixth man, it's the legendary sixty-kilogram range. They call 'em miracles because they don't happen every day. Ha-ha-ha.

Weight gain during stressful times is your body telling you to live. I certainly feel that!

Figuring it was high time I got married, I've been spending my weekends at matchmaking events.

And when the matchmaking ad explained how it worked, I realized something —

“Trying to get married is *just* like aiming for a new writer's prize!”

The marriage interview is the first selection round, then the initial dating period is the second.

The embers of my time aiming for the GA Bunko prize were kindled anew.

I have fond memories of that prize. I won on my fourth submission with my third work, and the series got an anime!

As for my progress on the marriage front...

Nine out of ten turned me down in the first stage, and the tenth person rejected me after a brief dating period.

I believe I have proved it is easier to become a published author than a

married man.

I can't help but feel as if the fire inside me has burned out and crumbled, with the ashes then scattered sadly across the sky.

If you're aiming for that novel prize and feel like you'll never get over that hurdle, try going to a marriage interview. Even if it doesn't work out, you'll get a lot of material to use for your work. Toss out your pride and writer's voice and *revise*. A lot of things you think are important may not be. And you'll find yourself taking pleasure in writing something new.

So I may never get married, but I am grateful for those around me, so let's get down to that.

To my editor, Maizo—this is far too late, but congratulations on the birth of your child. I probably cause you just as many headaches, but I do try and sleep through the night.

Watanuki, I can scarcely believe the beautiful illustrations you produce from my haphazard descriptions. I certainly did not expect Ub*r Eats Lloyd.

Fusemachi, the raw power of your manga adaption brings out the best in my work. I'm an avid reader myself!

Souchu, your gentle touch brings out the joy in Lloyd's daily routine, and I'm grateful for it. I look forward to every issue of Monthly Gangan.

To everyone in editing and the anime production, the media, rights, sales—I can't thank you enough. I'm learning as I go, but I promise I'll keep doing the best I can.

Finally, to whoever is reading this book, I am able to continue writing thanks to the kind words of my readers. I'll do whatever I can to keep entertaining you, so I hope you'll follow me.

This isn't a contest, but I'm not about to lose! Except for the marriage thing.

TOSHIO SATOU

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