

Toshio Satou
Illustration by
Nao Watanuki

8

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 a Starter Town

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"Sure
takes
me
back!"

"Demon
lords
drink
miso
soup...?"

A mind-bending breakfast
visitor! This demon seems
suspiciously human.



The Ascorbic Sacred

Mountain Rite begins! How will this
risqué-swimsuit-piggyback fight end?!

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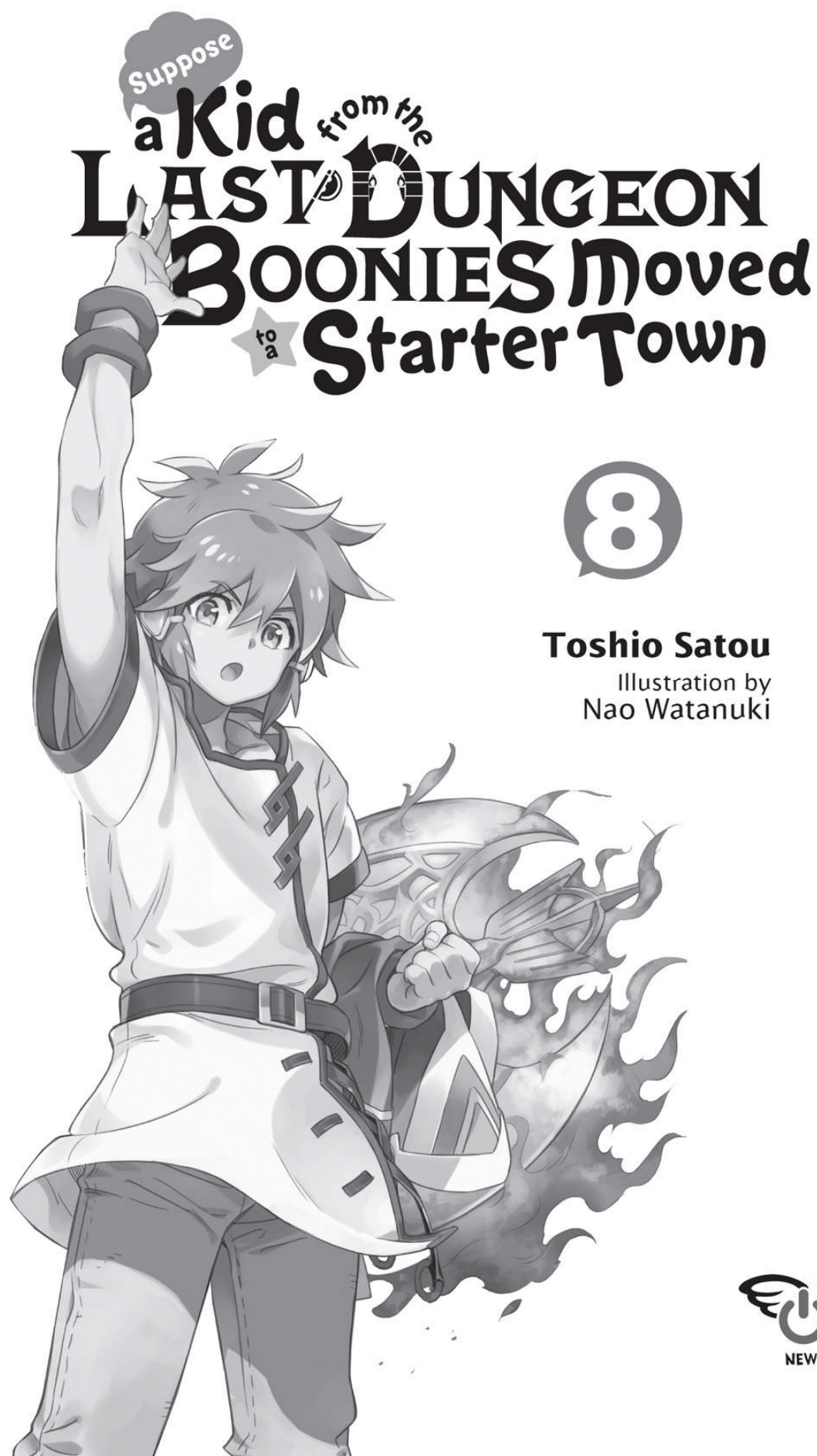
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NEW YORK

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SUPPOSE A KID FROM THE LAST DUNGEON BOONIES MOVED TO A STARTER TOWN 8

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 8

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Character Profiles



Lloyd Belladonna

Boy raised in the town of legend. Even stronger after training with the demon lord!



Marie the Witch

Shopkeeper shrouded in mystery. Actually the princess of Azami.



Alka

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



Selen Hemein

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



Riho Flavin

Former skilled mercenary. Hoping Lloyd will lead her to fortune.



Phyllo Quinone

A martial artist who admires Lloyd. Developing an ultimate move in the holy training grounds!



Anzu Kyounin

A master of the blade. Astounded by Lloyd's power.



Satan

Calls himself the demon lord of the night. Training Lloyd.



Allan Lidocaine

Noble's son and follower of Lloyd. Somehow the ace up the ax wielders' sleeves.



Renge Audoc

Chief of the ax wielders. Convinced Allan is the strongest man alive.



Tiger Nexamic

Powerful chief of the fistfighters. Loves muscles above all.



Lena Eug

Self-proclaimed Dwarf King. Knows the world's secrets.



Eve Profen

Mysterious king of Profen. None have seen the face under the mask.



Priest Chief

Of the Ascorbian Priest Squad. In charge of the Sacred Mountain Rite.



Micona

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



Merthophan

Former colonel of the army in Azami. Currently an agricultural evangelist.



Surtr

Demon lord harboring a burning rage. Gets on well with Allan.

Chapter 1

A Cliché Embodied: Suppose You Woke Up in Another World

On a corner of an island in the south seas...behind white walls, long and tall, surrounding a sprawling swath of land...were buildings—and they, too, were white.

Framed by newly green leaves, they glittered in the sun like something sacred. The surrounding walls and contrast between the green and white gave it an air of secrecy. But before anyone mistook it for an ancient ruin, they'd see the trucks hauling cargo in and out, the wildlife fleeing the watchful eyes of the hidden cameras, and what were almost certainly infrared sensors—all of which would quickly drag them back to reality.

The cluster of buildings housing this state-of-the-art technology was the Cordelia Research Institute.

Nearly an hour's drive from the capital of an emerging world power, the facility was conducting research that was virtually unknown to outsiders, aside from that they'd assembled the best of the best from around the world and were doing something no layman could possibly hope to comprehend.

To pass through those walls, you had to enter a gate laden with security cards and facial-recognition software—like a venture start-up with cash to blow. Beyond the doors was a lounge filled with couches ready for business deals, decorated with potted plants, watercoolers, and aquariums with tropical fish.

This early in the morning, the only sound was the bubbling of these fish tanks.

Just as the morning sun peeped out from between the mountains, and its rays poured through the windows, a man came in the entrance, shiftily scoping his surroundings. He was headed toward the back.

“...No one here yet.”

He was in his midtwenties, on the thin side, and with distinctively messy hair.

It was hard to tell if this was the natural state of his hair, an intentional styling choice gone horribly wrong, or if he was just terrible at using wax... At the very least, his hairdo made you think.

His shirt and slacks were wrinkled, the knot of his tie loose, and a faint boozy odor clung to him—and that was definitely a look of guilt in those slightly droopy eyes. Odds were high he was rolling in after an all-night bender.

Certain he was alone, he let out a sigh of relief.

“Whew...good, now I just have to reach my room without anyone—”

“Hmm, another all-nighter, Seta?”

A voice from behind. Seta flinched.

“Aughhh! D-Director Ishikura?” He spun around, facing a tall, gaunt man in a white lab coat.

Ishikura had hollow cheeks and narrow eyes that made him look like a snake. And those eyes were looking right through Seta.

“Greeting me with a scream of horror? I believe the appropriate response is ‘good morning.’”

“G-good morning, Director Ishikura.”

“Morning. Were you out for a jog? Your appearance would give anyone Japanese other ideas. Do try to avoid these misunderstandings.”

Ishikura was a master of deadpan spite.

Seta managed a polite chuckle. His fingers slipped into his hairstyle, scratching awkwardly.

The director sighed like a father with a constant disappointment for a son. Their interaction made it clear Seta had a habit of being out until morning.

“The meeting isn’t until the afternoon, but...your all-night binges are getting a tad too frequent.”

This was a perfectly reasonable observation, but Seta tried to argue against him.

“Yeah, but my favorite hostess is being lured away by another— You know

what? Never mind! Uh, I really blew the presentation yesterday, huh?"

"Indeed. Your words lacked bite, and your attempts to lighten the mood made absolutely no sense."

Clearly, Ishikura was well aware he'd been nursing those wounds in a cabaret. Seta immediately started spluttering excuses. "So you see...I thought it would be good training! Get better at talking to girls!"

"Are you a complete nitwit?"

"No? I mean, I graduated from the best school in Japan! And the training went well! Everyone laughed at my jokes! I'm sure the next presentation will be much better. I just wish I could be that funny every time..."

"It's her job to make shallow small talk seem exciting and to laugh at a client's tiresome jokes. She's clearly far better at her occupation than you are at yours."

This glare was so intense, Seta visibly flinched.

"The sinister snake stare!"

"I am *not* a snake."

"You seethe like one! But like you said, the meeting's not till this afternoon. I have time! So let me have a little nighttime fun."

People were starting to trickle in, and Seta pressed his hands together in prayer, hoping to put an end to this scolding. But the director simply shook his head. "Nope," he said flatly. "You'll be nodding off all day. If you must go, save it for the weekend. And..."

"And what?"

"If the bigwigs drop in on the meeting, I may not be able to cover for you. It could lead to—"

Ishikura ran his thumb across his throat. Seta gulped.

"D-does the president really stop by that often?"

The director frowned slightly and nodded. "She was delighted by the success of the rainfall experiment. All worked up about bringing down meteors next! She's weirdly into it."

“Seriously? Didn’t seem like the type to be into space stuff.”

“Let’s hope that’s what it is. She might be into something else entirely...”

“Like?”

“Well, this is just my personal take, but...”

Before he said another word, a voice rang out behind him.

“Move your butt, Director.”

They turned around to find a black-haired woman, hands jammed deep in the pockets of her lab coat. She was only five foot three, and her raven-black hair flowed to her waist. She was barely into her twenties and still had a bit of a baby face, but the look in her eyes was all grown-up and seemed to pierce right through them. She acted like the world was a source of perpetual disappointment, and she was waging a silent war against it.

“Ruka Akizuki... Oh, I beg your pardon.” Ishikura stepped aside, clearly daunted. The crowd around were very aware of her presence... She was obviously the star of the show here.

There was another woman following close on her heels.

“Yeah, yeah, move it. You too, Satan. What, you and the director doing a postmortem on yesterday? There’s no salvaging that mess. Nothing you said got through to anyone, so you might as well have been talking into a mirror.”

Also on the small side, the woman had light blue hair and a snarky grin. She looked more like a college student than a researcher, but she clearly had it out for Seta.

“Must you always be so harsh, Eung? Alka, call her off! She’s your friend, isn’t she?”

“.....”

“Alka! Don’t ignore me!”



Akizuki never slowed down, but Ishikura called after her.

“Akizuki, I know you’ve been helping the other group with their biological restoration, but that’s been tabled. We need to get the meteor experiment in shape first. At least have it ready to go on paper.”

“Fine.”

This curt response made the director scratch his cheek.

Eung looked annoyed. “What am I, chopped liver?”

“Eung, your assistance is... Hmm?” He broke off mid-mollification. Akizuki had wheeled round to face him.

“You’re sure?” she snapped.

“About what?”

“Wasn’t biological restoration your top priority?”

“...Other things came up. Regulations tie my hands.”

“Hmph.”

“We still have time. Please do what you can, Ruka Akizuki. And you, too, Lena Eung.”

“Fine.”

Akizuki nodded and strode off toward the laboratory depths.

“Don’t just tack me on at the end, Director! Augh, wait for me, Alka!” Eung ran off, trying to catch up.

When they were gone, Seta sighed. “Oof. Our top performers never disappoint. But back to our earlier topic—Director, your personal take?”

Ishikura shook his head and fixed another snake stare on Seta.

The Ascorbic Domain. In the mountains high above Eug’s underground lab...

The moon shone down upon the boulders. Only short grass and scant scraggly trees grew here. Illuminated as if by the lights of a stage, a man in noble garb was perched on a rock, rubbing his temples, a look of consternation on his haunted visage.

A demon lord—Satan.

He had called himself the demon lord of the night, but now he seemed to have remembered something important—and his mannerisms had grown distinctly human. Almost like a child who's found themselves somewhere unfamiliar.

Next to him was a puzzled-looking boy, clearly of a gentle disposition. Lloyd Belladonna.

He hailed from Kunlun, a village populated by the descendants of heroes. Convinced he was weak, the boy had come to the holy training grounds—the Ascorbic Domain—only to double down on his innate obliviousness. And that had led him to somehow become the student of a demon lord...without realizing his teacher's true nature.

As for Satan, meeting Lloyd had jogged memories of his past.

He learned runes from...Chief Alka?

Alka? Runes?! ...If she's Ruka, and those are her research project...

Satan's mind was having flashbacks to a distant past, before he was called a demon lord—when he was human. When he snapped to his senses, he found himself asking Lloyd *the* question.

“What year is it? AD?”

“AD?” Lloyd asked, looking baffled. Like a student who'd been unexpectedly called by his teacher. “What's that? I can tell you the Azami founding year, but I've never heard anyone give a year in AD before. Sorry.”

Satan slipped his fingers into his hairdo, scratching. “Right...I should have guessed. *Why would* you know that?”

He slapped his knees, moving on. “So what do you think? You like the move I taught you?”

“It's great! I'm getting much better at controlling *Aero*. You're one amazing monster, Satan! Like a real teacher.”

Satan laughed out loud. “Ha-ha, a monster, am I? But with real magic... It's like we're in a game! What the hell happened to the world?”

He put one hand to his chin, probing his memories.

“Hmm...the demon lord of the night...or emperor? I remember being called that. Argh, my memories are so hazy... I feel like something happened to the people I cared about, but...”

He trailed off.

Meanwhile, Lloyd suddenly let out a weird yelp.

“What’s wrong, Lloyd?”

“I—I didn’t tell anyone I was coming here! And the moon’s so low in the sky—it’s almost morning! If I don’t head back, they’ll start to worry about me.”

Lloyd bowed low. “I hate to run! Especially in the middle of training. Can we continue some other time? I’d love to learn more!”

“You’re going back...where?”

“Back to my friends. I know it’s really sudden—sorry. But...they worry about me.”

“Oh. Then...not to impose, but would you mind if I accompany you?”

Lloyd blinked at this suggestion but quickly broke into a smile, nodding. “Oh, yes! Let’s do that. It’ll let me thank you for all you’ve done!”

Lloyd’s smile was infectious, and Satan was soon grinning, too. “So where might these friends be?”

“Um...well. The other side of those mountains...”

“That’s...pretty far. What say I give you a ride?”

“A ride? On your back?! Gosh!” Lloyd was suitably impressed.

Before his very eyes, Satan transformed. His new shape looked rather like a lion—but with jet-black wings.

Lloyd’s eyes shone like stars. “A second form! Wow, you really *are* a monster! All this time, I was secretly wondering if you were actually just a normal human—oops, sorry.”

By anyone else’s standards, having a second form was proof that someone

was a demon lord.

Satan's lion maw curled into a grimace, and he shrugged his wings. "Taking this form should *not* feel this natural...and now I'm wondering what happened to *me*, let alone the world. But I can save that for later! First, let's head to civilization and learn more about this situation."

He knelt down so Lloyd could climb aboard.

"Right, Lloyd! On my back!"

"Yes, sir! Golly, your fur is so soft!"

Lloyd must have been exhausted. No sooner did he lean against the demon lord's mane than he was nodding off.

Satan glanced back at him and shook his head. "Who lets their guard down around a demon lord?" he muttered—impressed instead of shocked. "Rest if you like, Lloyd. I don't mind."

"N-no! I'm awake. I want to review what you taught me as we fly!"

This boy was far too dedicated. Satan sighed. "You're not gonna rest when we get back, are you?"

The image of a girl crossed his mind. A girl so lost in her research she worked until her batteries ran out. "Alka...are you hale and hearty?"

She was so "hale" that her age had regressed and so "hearty" that she'd dropped a meteor on her own head and failed to notice.

Wanting to give Lloyd a rest, Satan cast a mild sleep spell on him. The demon lord's eyes took on an eerie glow... And Lloyd began to snore.

Certain the boy was asleep, Satan nodded. "He pointed me that way. Maybe I'll take the scenic route, give him time to rest."

He flew off, doing a slow circle toward his destination.

Glancing over his shoulder like they were driving home from the amusement park and the kids had fallen asleep in the back seat, Satan took his time reaching the Kyounin clan headquarters.

That morning, in said headquarters... The imposing temple was bathed in

morning light—and the sounds of unbridled panic.

“Aaaaaaaah! Auuughhhh!”

This bloodcurdling scream was coming from Lloyd’s biggest psycho stalker, the Cursed Belt Princess herself—Selen Hemein. Hot on her heels were the female mercenary Riho, the martial artist Phyllo, and Lloyd’s roommate, the witch Marie.

“Calm down, Selen! You’re always crazy, but today you’re extra nuts!”

“...Be still... Be still...”

“Argh, why is this happening?!”

That was a good question...and here is an explanation for it.

Having made Lloyd a dish of poison (a love potion, she said), Selen learned *nothing* from this failure and had risen early to brew a new concoction.

“I can’t believe my love potion was poison...and poisons don’t affect Lloyd, so it was a complete waste of money.”

One would have hoped she’d see the *other* downside, but...Selen likely *would* have happily poisoned him if only that were possible. But it seemed the financial hit had at least encouraged her to try for an *actual* meal this time.

“If love potions won’t work, then I’ll just have to make an aphrodisiac!”

This stalker had spied a new educational opportunity.

If she had been a computer program, her “learning process” would have required a complete recompile from line one, but as it was, Selen had not hesitated to throw in any and all ingredients that she had heard could encourage “vigor.”

“Now then, the vital taste test! I want Sir Lloyd to love it so much he says, ‘Can I have another plate...and a helping of *you*, Selen?’ A development both idealistic and realistically achievable!”

The way she wriggled made it clear “realistic” played no part in this, but Selen took a sip of her vigor-boosting dish. It was essentially a rice porridge, with a mystery viscosity, and the flavor provoked a mild frown.

“It’s lacking something,” she muttered.

Ordinarily, the other girls might have stepped in here... But no one stopped Selen as she grabbed some nearby seasonings and sprinkled them liberally in her dish.

“Ugh! Too salty! Guess I’d better add some sugar.”

Salt and sugar did not actually balance each other out, but facts never stopped Selen. Naturally, this was not going to make the dish taste good. Her frown deepened. She grimaced.

“Ugh. What a full-bodied...aftertaste. Neither the salt nor the sugar are pulling their weight! I’ll have to thin it with water.”

Blaming her ingredients, she adjusted the seasonings over and over, sampling the dish again each time. The result...

“Hisssssssssssssssssssss...” She gained far too much vigor herself, and her engines went into overdrive.

The belt on her hips—Vritra—realized her condition far too late. “M-Mistress! Oh dear! She’s completely out of control!”

“Uhhoooooooooooooooooo!”

A cry of animalistic lust echoed through the morn.

Kyounin clan warriors erupted into the halls, *naginata* in hand, scanning for foes. Selen’s friends heard the commotion, quickly dressed, and came hustling out as well.

“What’s going...? Selen?!”

“What in the...? Yo, m’lady!”

“...Oh no... She’s gone berserk...”

And thus, the morning became a horror show.

Selen was using her belt like a tentacle, grabbing rafters and pillars to hurl herself around at breakneck speeds.

“My apologies, student chums!” Vritra called. “You see, she blah-blah-blah...”

“Blither-blather-blither? You’re kidding?! I knew she was dumb but *this* dumb?!”

Who went berserk taste testing? Riho’s objections were tenfold.

“I should have noticed sooner!” Vritra wailed. “She’s taken control of the belt! You’ll have my formal letter of apology on your desk at a later date!”

“If she’s boosting vitality, then her goal was...” Marie grimaced.

Selen’s cry of love shook the walls. “Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! Sir Llooooooyd!”

“““Thought so!”””

What would happen if Selen the lust monster came anywhere near Lloyd? Just the thought made the other girls instantly band together to prevent that at any cost.

“Stop her if it kills you!”

“.....Mm.”

“Time to get *real* serious!”

The makeshift avengers had faced plenty of unknown organisms before. With a motive in common, they were swiftly in full team-up mode.

“Ahhhhh...ah?”

The tentacle (belt) had Selen whipping through the rafters like some eldritch creature, but with three powerful girls on her heels, her animal instincts sensed danger, and she swiftly changed course.

“...Did we lose her?”

“Nope! She’s going outside so she can break into Lloyd’s room through the window!”

Marie’s prediction proved accurate! Selen ricocheted off a pillar and vaulted out of doors.

In the distance, the Kyounin warrior women were yelling, “She’s through the defensive lines!”

“Damn, she’s trying to bust into the main temple!”

They had to hurry...but as they did, a new voice called out—the hearty voice of that older girl who’s always got your back in a pinch.

“What’s all the commotion?”

“Y-you’re...?”

In full kimono, with a reddish tachi at her hips.

“Heh... Seems like just the role for me.”

Stepping in like she owned the place (because she did) was the current head of the Kyounin clan and ruler of the entire Ascorbic Domain—Anzu Kyounin.

“...Lady Anzu.”

“Sorry I took so long. I had my head buried in research all night...but what are we dealing with? The Audocs? An assassin from the Tiger clan?”

She wasn’t called the Sword God for nothing. When she put her hand on the hilt of her blade and grinned, everyone gulped.

“I may have been a bit undignified of late, but here’s my chance to make up for that.”

Selen and Merthophan had run her ragged in Azami, giving her a lifelong fear of belts and loincloths. Plus, the ruler of the holy training grounds had struggled to provide any training that would actually help Lloyd, leading to a crisis of confidence. So she was extra motivated to prove herself here.

“Er, Lady Anzu, actually...”

“Don’t worry. I won’t lose to anything! Long as it isn’t a wriggling belt, loincloth, or treant.”

“That’s exactly what it is,” Marie almost said, but before she could, Anzu stopped her, eyes turning toward the source of the uproar.

“My blade is nothing to trifle with. Don’t you worry.”

“Yeah, we know, but this time—”

“Doesn’t matter who it is! Problems in the Ascorbic Domain are mine to solve. Prepare yourself, intruder! I fear nothing but wriggly belts, loincloths, and treants!”

“...But it’s the girl with the belt...and she’s gone.”

“Aughhhh! I hate wriggly woorms!”

With perfect comedic timing, Anzu spun right around and came running back. The three girls carried on with their original plan as if none of this had happened.

“Marie, Phyllo, let her do her thing until she reaches Lloyd’s room.”

“...But...his chastity...” Phyllo objected to Riho’s suggestion. An entirely valid point.

“I know! But he’s the only one who can stop her now. Especially with the ruler running thataway.” Riho glanced back down the hall, where the Sword God (LOL) was cowering in a corner.

“Y-you’ve got the wrong ruler!”

“We didn’t see a thing.” Marie had disgraced herself often enough to be very sympathetic.

They heard more yelps of horror from down the hall. Selen must be in the garden by now.

“...And after she does her thing?”

“We’re gonna make Lloyd say, ‘I don’t like you like this, Selen.’ That oughtta shut her down instantly. I’m sure she has a fragment of her human soul remaining, and we’ve gotta bet on that.”

“...If Master said that, it would quiet any soul. And send them to heaven.”

“Right, so we’ve gotta reach his room before they have any fleshy contact, explain the situation, and get him to speak the mantra in question. I dub this Operation: Selen Buster.”

Riho and Phyllo saluted like proper soldiers. Leaving behind the quivering object that had once been Anzu, they all made like the wind to Lloyd’s room.

The entire Kyounin complex was now in a state of panic. Warrior women were bellowing orders; shamans were futilely waving ritual wands—and the three girls sped through them all, taking the shortest route to Lloyd’s room.

They arrived out of breath, hearing Selen's impassioned bellows outside his windows.

They were almost out of time.

"Knooooock, knooooock...!" Selen was pounding on the wall. This was well beyond *knocking*.

"Please don't be too late!"

The three girls tumbled into the room just as the window frame snapped.

"Hah-hahh!"

Right before their very eyes, Selen dived into Lloyd's bed. Riho's fist hit the floor in anguish.

"Damn! A second too late! Run for it, Lloyd! It's an emergency!"

No answer came. Selen had her arms around his blankets and was thrashing a lot, but when they squinted...the bed was otherwise empty.

"He's...not here?" Riho said, her legs buckling with relief.

"...Bathroom?" Phyllo suggested.

"Either way, stroke of luck!" Marie breathed a sigh of relief. "Imagining the results if he'd been here gives me *chills*."

Selen was now rolling around the bed like a cat on catnip. "Sir Lloyd's scent! His odor! His fragraaaaance! Huff!"

"Right, let's just keep Selen locked down here while we locate..."

Then a scream echoed from elsewhere on the compound.

One warrior after another bellowed, "Monster!"

"Wh-what? But Selen's right here!"

"...Another one?"

"We'd better check it out!"

Selen was busy rummaging through the chest of drawers like a proper JRPG hero, so they left her to it and raced outside.

They reached the garden and found the warrior women cowering and Anzu staring up at the sky, a grim look on her face.

“Lady Anzu, you’ve recovered.”

“Yeah...this one’s not wriggly.”

Not a word you used while looking that serious, and Marie gave her a brief look of pity.

“You’re stuck like this forever,” she whispered.

“Not worried about that now, witch,” Anzu said. “This one’s *dangerous*.”

“Oh...wait, what *is* that?!”

In the skies above...framed against the sunrise was a winged lion.

The visual alone suggested unfathomable power. Instinctively sensing this was a threat far beyond any mere monster, even Phyllo staggered backward.

“...A demon lord.....!” Forcing her legs to stop shaking, she managed to raise her fists.



Marie was looking equally grim, one hand on her hat to keep the winds from sweeping it away—looking like a mage before the final battle.

“Yeah, that’s definitely a demon lord. Why is it *here*?”

“! It’s coming right at us!”

The demon lord was coming in for a landing in the temple garden.

The impact shook the ground. Everyone’s legs buckled.

As everyone watched with bated breath, the demon lord—Satan—spoke words that came as...quite a surprise.

“We’re here, Lloyd! C’mon, wakey, wakey!”

He was like a taxi driver shaking a sleeping passenger awake. It completely dissipated the tension.

Before anyone’s comprehension could catch up, Lloyd sat up, sleepily rubbing his eyes.

“Oh, good morning, guys... Guess I drifted off.”

“L-Lloyd’s riding a demon lord?!”

He always came with an element of surprise, and the girls had all gotten used to it, but nothing could have prepared them for him saying good morning from the back of a beast.

“Uh...Lloyd,” Anzu managed to say, pointing at the beast—her hand shaking.

Her look was full of questions. *Where’d you go? Who is this? Why were you asleep on his back?*

Lloyd simply registered all of this as her reaction to a stranger showing up uninvited and started doing introductions. “Oh, I should explain, huh? This monster’s name is Satan.”

“S-Satan...?” Riho stammered. “Wait, ‘monster’...? When Lloyd says monster, that means...”

Lloyd nodded. “Yes, apparently he’s a type of monster known as a ‘demon lord.’ Ever heard of them?”

It was rare for any emotions to show on Phyllo's face, but currently there was a bead of sweat running down her brow, and the edge of her mouth was twitching.

"...That clinches it," she said.

"Yeah...I suspected, but..."

Oblivious to the consternation he was provoking, Lloyd smiled blithely. "He helped me out yesterday, so to thank him, I invited him along!"

Only Lloyd would ever introduce a demon lord like a friend you happened to bump into.

"Nope!" Marie yelped. "Send him away!"

She sounded like a mother ordering her kid to put the stray puppy back where he found it. This was not far off, really.

Lloyd pretty much reacted like those kids do. "Sorry. I get why you'd say that."

"Yeah! I mean, it's a de—"

"At this size, he could never fit inside! Satan, can you go back to your original form?"

Twisting the lion's maw into a grin, Satan nodded. "Easily done... I suspect that's not the lady's concern, but this form is certainly aggravating the issue."

Satan returned to human form, muttering to himself.

When Riho saw his nobleman's clothes and spiky hairstyle, she let out a cry of surprise.

"Ahhhhh! You! You're the demon lord who showed up in Kunlun and offered me half the world, and then Chief Alka bopped you on the head with a meteor!"

"Mm... Oh! I remember you."

Riho had her mithril hand raised, braced for combat. "I don't need half the world! I may have freaked out last time, but Lloyd's here, so..."

Satan waved her down. "A painful blunder," he said, bowing like he'd got a bit too drunk the night before...and disgraced himself in front of the exact same people he was now having a business meeting with.

“Uh... Your whole vibe seems different.”

“Yeah, at the time, I was convinced I actually *was* a demon lord, so... I mean, I still technically am one, but... Urgh, it’s like being reminded of all your cringiest moments.”

None of them had ever seen a demon lord wince before. Heedless to this, a far more wince-worthy opponent burst onto the scene.

“Sir Lloyd’s vooooiice!”

Berserker Selen. Having inhaled her fill of Lloyd’s lingering scent, she’d detected the arrival of the man himself and come running. At her age, it was far more appealing to get the scent straight from the source.

“Oh dear! People, please! My mistress has powered up and is craving Lloyd’s odor!”

Selen was in *her* second form. Satan didn’t matter to her—nothing but Lloyd did. She made a beeline right for him.

“G-good morning, Selen,” Lloyd said, completely ignoring her condition like it was just her usual deal. In a way, it was!

“Good morniiiiiiiiing!!!” Selen yelled, like she was pouncing on a feast.

Indeed, her mouth opened wide, and she attempted to take a bite. An unprecedented approach to a morning greeting.

“Hmm, are these side effects of some medication?” Satan asked, correctly diagnosing her perversion. He stuck his hand in his hairdo, scratching...then began chanting a spell.

His eyes lit up with a sinister light. Selen took one look at it...and crumpled, collapsing on the floor.

“...Selen!” Phyllo moved to catch her.

“Zzzz...Sir Lloyd... Mmph...”

“.....She’s asleep.” This made even Phyllo’s eyes widen.

“Yo, what did you do to the lady?” Riho demanded.

“Some sort of hypnosis? I mean...I’m called the demon lord of the night, so...

honestly, I'm a bit freaked out that I can just *do* that, myself."

Everyone took that as a typical demon lord humblebrag, but he meant it more as "...I thought I was a normal human, and this new ability scares me shitless." The man using the spell was the most surprised by it.

The demon lord Satan was clearly powerful...yet not that imposing. The crowd seemed unsure how to handle him.

Utterly oblivious to this, Lloyd bowed his head. "Sorry if I made anyone worry—I gather Selen in particular was up all night!"

Lloyd had somehow interpreted "sampled aphrodisiac stew too much and lost her damn mind" as "up all night sick with worry and was so relieved she fell asleep."

"I'll carry her to bed. Then I'll go help get breakfast ready! Satan, if you don't mind waiting? It won't be long." Lloyd bowed and carried Selen inside...leaving everyone else face-to-face with Satan.

There was a long, awkward silence.

Eventually Anzu whispered (quietly, so Satan couldn't hear), "What the hell is Lloyd thinking? Didn't he say something about training?"

"...He went off to train alone...but that would mean..."

"He trained with a demon lord?!"

"Shh, Marie! He'll hear you!"

Satan definitely had and was awkwardly scratching his head.

The vibe could be equated to that distinctive discomfort that comes when two groups that don't know each other are at a party and their one mutual acquaintance leaves the room.

Tweet-tweet-tweet... The birds were singing.

The sun's rays streamed in, the light catching the steam rising from the breakfast spread.

A peaceful start to the fourth day of the Azami contingent's visit.

In the big hall in the Kyoujin mansion, each tray held a bowl containing a mix

of rice and wheat, an array of *takuan* pickles made from a famous Ascorbic Domain daikon radish, and a soup made from something called *miso*, which was a paste created by fermenting beans.

The hearty main dish was made from salted river fish.

At the table were the Domain's ruler, Anzu, and their honored guests, Marie, Phyllo, Riho...and the demon lord Satan. One of these members was jarringly out of place, giving the entire scene the vibe of a lowbrow comedy sketch.

Satan was sitting on his knees, slurping miso soup. Everyone was watching, clearly biting back words. Everyone thinking the same thing. "Demon lords drink miso soup...?"

This might seem like Act One of a farce, but...he *was* a demon lord. Anzu had her katana resting at her side, ready to draw at a moment's notice.

"So how was Selen?" Riho asked Marie, unable to bear the silence any longer.

"No visible injuries. She's just sleeping. I'm sure she'll wake up soon enough. I'm pretty sure there was no brainwashing component to the spell, so I wouldn't worry too much."

This last comment made Phyllo breathe a sigh of relief. "...That's good."

"Hard to feel any relief," Anzu grumbled, still very grim. "No telling when he'll decide to use that evil eye on us. Don't let your guard down."

There was sweat on her brow. She was at full alert. In that instant...

Clunk. Satan put the bowl of miso soup down on his tray.

Everyone gulped.

"! What?!"

"No... Did the miso soup displease him?!"

"...It's certainly possible."

"Why are we feeding him in the first place? Let's not forget the fundamental question."

But what emerged from the demon lord's lips...was praise.

“That hit the spot! I haven’t had miso soup in years! I think I used to make miso balls at the lab with clams, and it was totally not the same thing... Ah, that takes me back.”

“”””” ”””””

After a very long silence, Phyllo whispered, “.....He’s pleased?”

“Seems like it.”

This demon lord appeared...different from the others. They gave him a long, searching look.

Then Lloyd came in with tea. “Satan, I brought some green tea—*hojicha*. How are you liking Ascorbic food?”

“It’s fantastic! And really takes me back... Wait, did you say *hojicha*?!”

Satan took the cup of tea from Lloyd and savored the aroma, looking thoroughly pleased.

“I may have become a demon lord, but I still need my theanine! Soothes the soul. Thanks, Lloyd. Everyone, drink up! It’s good for you!”

Lloyd talked to the demon lord like a kid would the cool college dude next door. It was hard to stay tense with that going on.

“Keeping my hackles up is starting to feel silly.”

“I agree, Lady Anzu.”

No one had expected the demon lord to voluntarily help serve tea, but they all wound up sipping away. Anzu had finally taken her hand off the hilt of her sword and was scratching one cheek.

Seeing everyone settle down, Lloyd took a seat across from Satan—on his knees.

“Satan, if you don’t mind, would you help me train again after breakfast?”

Er...train? With a demon lord?

As everyone gaped, Anzu asked, “So you really *did* train with a demon lord, Lloyd?”

He looked baffled. “Weren’t you the one who arranged for his instruction?”

“Uh...no, I didn’t. Wouldn’t even know how...”

Which staffing agency provided demon lords? Anzu shook her head, clueless as to what miraculous combination of misunderstandings and coincidence could possibly have led to this.

Lloyd recovered, turning back to Satan.

“Please, there’s a tournament coming up called the Sacred Mountain Rite. This will determine who rules the Domain, but Anzu’s clan have all been poisoned, and we’re the only ones who can fight! I don’t want to bring down the team!”

Meanwhile, Satan was rather flummoxed, having recently realized he was just a former human turned demon lord.

“Well...I thought I was a demon lord when I took you on...but now that I’ve got a fragment of my memories back, uh... I’m just a lowly researcher. This isn’t my field... I don’t have a teaching license! Also, you’re plenty strong, Lloyd?”

Satan hemmed and hawed, but Anzu joined Lloyd on her knees before him.

“Demon lord... Can I call you Satan? Could I ask you to accept his request? He’s more than I can handle, in a good way, if you catch my drift.”

Her methods didn’t really account for a boy this off the charts.

She ruled the holy training grounds and was the kind of woman who would bow her head if it would help a boy who wanted to get stronger. Her characterization might be inconsistent, but the upbeat supportive lady, which was central to her character, was still there.

“Well, I get that, but...I’m none too confident. Back in college, I was surrounded by monsters and always felt inadequate...”

“College? Demon lords go to school?”

“Oh, don’t mind me. I’m just talking to myself.”

Satan clearly had an innate grasp of both Lloyd’s strength and his self-esteem issues.

He scratched his head a moment, thinking. “It won’t be easy, but I can’t just leave him be, huh?” Then he nodded. “Fine, I’ll take him on. I wanna prove I’m harmless anyway.”

The idea of a demon lord calling himself “harmless” made Anzu laugh.

“Harmless, huh? That’s gonna be a tough sell, honestly.”

But she did trust Lloyd—and Satan caught that unvoiced sentiment. He grinned. “If I mess up, come at me with that sword of yours. But I’m not into pain, so...be gentle?”

“You have my gratitude, Satan.”

“Never could turn down a request from a lady. Mm? I feel like that screwed me over a few times...but can’t remember the specifics.”

Meanwhile, Lloyd’s eyes were all sparkles. “Then you’ll help me train?!”

“Yeah, sure.”

Lloyd was so happy he was almost dancing. And that made everyone laugh.

Lost in the laughter was Satan muttering, “...And once that’s done, I’ll have to settle down and figure out what’s going on here. Eung always said if I was in trouble, sit down and make a list of problems. Wonder if they’ll lend me any paper...”

At this point, the sliding doors slammed open.

“Um,” Selen said, looking extremely guilty.

“Oh, feeling better?” Riho asked.

“I’m sorry for everything I’ve done.” Selen bowed low. This one was clearly a bit much, even for her.

Her cursed belt, possessed by Vritra, bobbed its buckle, too. “You have my utmost apologies for my own supervisory shortcomings. I, Vritra, have taken the liberty of reprimanding my mistress even as I explained the events that took place. I ask that we consider this matter resolved.”

With an apology this heartfelt, Anzu was all too willing to accept.

“Nobody got hurt, so don’t worry about it. Any more injuries would mean we

couldn't enter the rite, and that would have been a huge blow! Only real casualty was another thing to add on my list of traumas, ha-ha-ha."

That laugh sounded a bit hollow. Marie gave her a look of concern.

"You've progressed to volunteering jokes about it..."

Anzu just laughed off the pity, too. Selen and Vritra bowed once more.

"Your generosity is most appreciated. You'll have a formal apology in writing later."

The belt's manners and phrasing seemed to be bugging Satan.

"Where have I heard that before...?" he muttered.

Vritra turned toward him, extending the apology. "Satan, was it? Your sensible intervention prevented my mistress from causing any further harm, and you have my utmost gratitude...mm? What?"

"Oh, never mind. Just...something I can't quite remember." He stuck his fingers in his hair, scratching.

This seemed to jog Vritra's memory. "Oh-ho?"

"What is it? ...Vritra, was it?"

"Oh, er... That gesture seemed familiar... Urp!"

Before he could remember, Selen gave the belt a sharp yank.

"Come, Vritra! We've caused a slew of problems and must make apologies and amends! Specifically, I'm going to go help Sir Lloyd."

"W-wait, Mistress! Augh, it's gone! I almost had it, too...!"

Dragged reluctantly away like an eager dog, Vritra vanished after Selen.

Riho scratched a cheek. "And she's back after Lloyd... Nothing changes her. Not sure I'd even want that, at this point..."

She was primarily relieved to see Selen back on her feet.

Marie still seemed concerned. "But...training with a demon lord? Will that end well?"

"...Can't wait," Phyllo grunted.

“You would say that.” Marie laughed.

Satan was still muttering. “This place reminds me of Asia, but not quite... How long *has* it been?”

“When everyone’s done with their food, let’s meet up in the clearing! Looking forward to it, Satan!”

“Uh, yeah. Same here, Lloyd.”

Lloyd’s good cheer banished Satan’s worries, and he finally cracked a smile.

A steamship was peacefully chugging up the gentle stream that ran through the Ascorbic Domain. The hills on either side gave way to fields, and farmers shouldered large baskets as they worked.

In the distance were mist-shrouded peaks. In the waters around the stern, startled fish jumped.

Tourists on deck were enjoying this picturesque view. This seemed to be a regular ferry bringing tourists into the Domain...but three passengers did not exactly look like tourists. They were seated side by side; they knew each other but weren’t close, like classmates stuck together on a bus during a school trip.

One was a young girl in a white robe. She looked bored, swinging her feet. Alka.

She might look like a nine-year-old, but she was well over a hundred and served as chief of Kunlun, a village populated entirely by descendants of heroes. She didn’t actually do her job often, so it might be better to think of her as one of those little monsters that are always causing trouble.

“So slow...! Right, I’m gonna go inscribe the *rev* rune on this here engine. It’ll destroy the ship, but we’ll be there in an hour!”

See? Alka, causing trouble.

Next to her was a silver-haired man in Azami military uniform.

“Don’t do that, Chief,” he said sternly.

His name was Merthophan Dextro. The former Azami colonel was currently a military agricultural adviser and Kunlun village farmer. Quite a bizarre hybrid

role.

His impassive warning got Alka to pull a face. It's not every day you saw duck lips on a centenarian.

"Aww. Faster is better!"

"Not always. Especially with your recent difficulties controlling your power output. If you use a weird rune here and mess it up, what'll happen then?"

"I'll give you that one."

"And the report said an impatient tourist overloaded the engine with coal and sent a different ship into overdrive, sustaining irreparable damage. With international tensions rising, creating a further incident could cause a lasting diplomatic rift. Please restrain yourself."

Despite herself, Alka seemed rather impressed by this monotone lecture.

"You sure talk the talk, Merthophan...but who is this stupid tourist who scrapped the other ship?"

Alka may have met her—a cutie with a big belt. She sprawled back, staring at the sky and thrashing her limbs like a little kid.

"Argh...if only the guardian beast of Kunlun still had his flesh! Vritra! This is all your fault! I could have just flown us right there!"

She let out a sigh so long it deflated her. Then she started trying to cheer herself up.

"Ugh, but...the whole point is to scout a replacement. This Sacred Beast thing. I'm only stuck like this a few more days...and Lloyd's here! I can see him! Why can't I telepooooort?"

If anyone else heard her, they'd want to refer her to a good doctor to run some tests.

Merthophan scolded her again. "Chief, keep the outlandish statements to a minimum. This girl has yet to realize what a monster you are."

"You're calling a cute kid like me a monster?! I'm trying to mind my words, I swear!"

“When you blab about ‘teleporting,’ it hardly counts as trying...”

Both glanced at the girl with them.

She was the head of the second-year cadets, Micona Zol. Her boobs seemed constantly on the verge of exploding out of the seams of her uniform. At a glance, she appeared quite intelligent, but in fact...

“Mm? This ship just rocked pretty hard! Shame Marie isn’t with me so I could pretend to lose my balance and dive directly into her bosom... Hmm? Why are you staring at me?”

““No reason.””

Her love for Marie was obsessive to a degree that made even Kunlun villagers cringe. Perhaps unrelated, but within her body lay the powers of the locust demon lord, Abaddon, and the treant demon lord, the Erlking. In other words, while she did not fully realize it, she was every bit as inhuman as her two companions.

“...Guess we don’t have to worry about ‘common sense’ around her. I fear for the future of the Azami army.”

As a former member of said army, Merthophan was naturally concerned about his successors, but Alka’s response was...

“Ohhh, brilliant idea! If Lloyd were here, that jolt would have us wound up in a heap with our hands all over each other!”

“You get it!” Micona exclaimed. “Pretend your eyes are on the view, too enraptured to keep your balance! The perfect excuse to engineer a lurid mishap!”

“Of course I get it! I didn’t live a hundred plus years for nothing!”

“A hundred! Well, that would do it!”

““Mwa-ha-ha-ha-ha!””

“I’m glad you’ve found each other.”

They were like two classmates who’d never gotten along suddenly finding an excuse to bond. Their common ground was giving Merthophan a headache.

At this juncture, the ship turned into a narrower branch of the river—a fact that made him frown. “Odd,” he said.

“Mm? This isn’t the route! We were supposed to go through a famous bamboo forest!”

The ship captain heard this and bowed apologetically. “Sorry. A bad squall hit that stream the other day... For safety’s sake, we’re taking an alternate route. It really *just* hit that area.”

“By squall you mean localized rainfall? Unusual in these parts.”

“Don’t want our passengers getting drenched... Apologies.”

Merthophan nodded. It never occurred to him that this might be the work of another cadet—Lloyd.

The word *squall* had lit a fire under both the girls.

“A squall... A sudden rainfall... Lloyd, his drenched clothes translucent... We take shelter in an old temple... Yes, I can see it now!”

“Chief, the mere mention of rain should not be enough to make you fantasize about Lloyd.”



“It would be only natural for us to warm each other with body heat! Oh, Marie!”

“Swapping Lloyd for Marie doesn’t make it less weird, Micona Zol!”

His detailed rebuttals were not stopping their delusions. In their minds raged romantic squalls...composed of their cerebral fluids.

“It’s ideal, Micona! I can make it rain whenever, so you be on the lookout for the right temple.”

“On it, Alka! I’ll find the perfect temple for getting wet!”

Micona and Alka were on the same wavelength; the girl didn’t even bat an eye at the rain claim.

“Don’t divvy up tasks...! Look, the captain is staring.”

Indeed, the captain’s look was concerning.

“Remember, we’re abroad. Behave like a village chief and a military cadet ought.”

“Hngg, that’s definitely a look of suspicion...”

Merthophan bowed to the captain and made his companions do the same. “Manners are important! See? He looked relieved and went away.”

“Ex-Colonel Merthophan, the captain seemed to be in quite a hurry.”

Micona stared after the man a moment, but...

“O-oh! There’s an old temple right now! That deserves a spot on the list, Alka!”

Clearly, her lusts were far more important than the suspect actions of passing strangers. The captain’s reaction was promptly forgotten.

“Yes, well spotted! That is a very good old temple! Deserted! Ripe for sheltering in! The perfect start to any fanfic!”

“Did you not hear a single word I said?”

It had only taken seconds for them to start squealing again, and Merthophan was left rubbing his brow.

Meanwhile, the sketchy captain had a notebook out, looking at it and Alka in turn.

The book said, *If you see a young girl in a white robe, report it immediately.*

“Definitely fits the description... Guess I’d better send it up the chain.”

He jotted down a quick report and headed to the engine room.

“Still, a kid her age can’t be a criminal... Why are they looking for her?” He glanced back at Alka again, but she just looked like a regular little girl.

He had no way of knowing who was behind this request—the mastermind behind this entire incident, Lena Eug. She and Alka had a long history...and nobody knew that their conflict would clash up against another piece of ancient history, leading to an unprecedented crisis.

Meanwhile, at the headquarters of Renge’s Audoc clan...

This region had no shortage of lush forests, and the Audoc clan regularly felled oak-like trees, using some to cultivate their main export—shiitake mushrooms—while using the rest as lumber.

As a result, their headquarters was constructed from tree trunks, like a giant log cabin.

The rooms were designed around the warmth of the natural wood, giving it a very different vibe from the Kyounin clan’s imposing temples. Visiting tourists agreed that the Kyounin headquarters were great to gawk at, but if you wanted to spend the night, you should hit up the Audocs.

In one of these rooms, a military cadet named Allan Toin Lidocaine was greeting the dawn.

A soft bed stuffed with feathers. A potpourri of rose petals set by the pillow, filling the room with a lovely fragrance. This was clearly a room for VIPs—it would never be given to ordinary guests. It was the sort of accommodations reserved for diplomats who held the fate of the country in their hands.

Why was he in this room and not with Lloyd and his fellow cadets? Simple! The Audoc clan had “recruited” him.

Why had he gone with them? Because he’d been too seasick to ask questions.

Hilarious, but...well, he was pretty down about it.

He was considered a future star of the Azami army. They'd bestowed the moniker "dragon slayer" on him. Rumor had it he could summon the heroes of yore if the need arose. Naturally, all these stories were wildly exaggerated, but that had resulted in others rolling out the red carpet for him.

Pure chance had resulted in his practice swing appearing to blow away a mountain peak (which was actually caused by Lloyd throwing a wooden practice sword) and histrionically yelling "Let floodwaters sweep the past away!" moments before a squall (that Lloyd made). The upshot of all that was that everyone was convinced all the stories were true, and nothing he said could dissuade them. Leaving him here.

Looking around the luxurious room once more, Allan let out a long sigh. "I'm not worth any of this..."

Starting a day with that statement showed just how poorly he was taking it.

He forced himself up, put on his uniform, and dragged himself out of the room...like an office drone on a Monday.

""""Good morning, Sir Allan!""""

"Mragh!" He found a crowd of Audoc and Tiger clan students waiting outside his door.

They were all in rows like members of some clandestine society, making a show of respect as Allan passed.

The Audoc students bowed deeply, murmuring, "Elegance" and "Tea."

The Tiger students grinned, showing off their builds—and their love of muscle.

"Uh, thanks, let's make it a good one."

Realizing they'd been on standby long before he woke up, Allan guiltily bobbed his head to each in turn, moving as quickly as he could. He wished he was the type who could enjoy being greeted by one row of suits and one row of half-naked warriors, but...

Since all of this is one big lie, I'm just scared of what'll happen when they

figure it out.

It was like clutching a bomb that might go off at any second. This simple morning greeting was shaving hours off his life.

“Good morning, Sir Allan,” chirped a woman in a red dress, her black hair done up in elegant curls. She swept the hem of her skirts up in a beautiful curtsy.

“S-same to you, Renge.”

Renge Audoc.

Though still young, she was the leader of her clan—and had it in for Anzu. She’d recruited Allan, hoping to use the Sacred Mountain Rite to wrest control of the Domain from Anzu and the Kyouin clan.

Now she was turning her glossy smile on Allan.

“No need to look so tense! Make yourself at home. We have breakfast waiting. I personally baked the scones last night—they’re perfect with honey. I hope you like them.”

“Huh...”

Before he could summon the energy for any real answer, a booming voice echoed down the hall. “Mwa-ha-ha! Morning: good! And hamstrings: great! Time for the morning thigh pump!”

The speaker wore a pair of briefs...and a mysterious mask. This was Tiger Nexamic, forty-something chief of the Tiger clan.

He wore an apron on over his usual half-naked look—and a broad grin. He was presenting his thighs as part of his morning routine. Being forcibly flexed at this early in the day lowered Allan’s responsiveness level from listless to speechless.

“Whoa! The invincible dragon slayer has a weakness?! Mornings! How unexpected! Yet, this only makes him *more* relatable! I banish morning blues with my Tiger Armpits!”

Nexamic nailed the Oliva pose.

Renge clearly had no more clue how to respond than Allan. “I do apologize. It’s far too early for anything this unsightly.”

Nexamic paid her no heed, his muscles leading Allan onward to the dining room.

“Come, Sir Allan! I, Tiger Nexamic, have turned my tiger heart toward the art of breakfast! Tiger Paninis and Tiger Potato Salad! Miso soup with daikon as big as my thighs! Think of it as eating a part of me!”

Allan thought that had sounded pretty good until the metaphors kicked in.

“Come, this way, Sir Allan,” Renge urged, taking his hand and escorting him to the table. This hospitality was just rattling him further.

They’re doing all this for me...but only because they think I’m a dragon slayer.

The Sacred Mountain Rite was held every four years and determined the next ruler of the Ascorbic Domain.

These two had teamed up to dethrone Anzu—and Allan’s reputation in Azami had led them to him. The better the treatment he received, the guiltier he felt.

Even for the right to rule, should they be taking my hand, cooking for me...and poisoning the enemy camp?

The hand-holding thing was, well, typical male obliviousness, but Allan was right to be concerned about the Kyounin camp poisonings. He hadn’t known either of them long, but neither of them struck him as the type to do something like that. He had an inkling there was someone else working behind the scenes.

And yesterday, Renge had mentioned “Eug.”

To Allan, that meant Dr. Lena Eug, who’d been working with the Jiou Empire to turn an exhibition match into an attempt at overthrowing the government of Azami.

If Dr. Eug is involved, that would explain a lot.

Allan was pretty sure Eug had her own reasons for going after the throne and had fed Renge and Nexamic a string of lies about Anzu.

“Renge, you said you’d take me to see this Dr. Eug today? At...”

“Her lab.”

“Right, I’d love to check it out!”

Renge made a face, but then she nodded. “She warned us not to involve any more humans...but I’m sure you wouldn’t be a problem.”

“Great! I appreciate it.” He clapped his hands together, finally letting himself smile.

All right! My plan might actually work!

He was hoping that visiting Eug’s lab would allow him to sniff out her plan, grab evidence while she wasn’t looking, and haul it safely back to his friends from Azami.

The ship made me so sick, I stupidly let Renge snatch me away. I can’t exactly go back empty-handed. But if I claim I realized Dr. Eug was involved and infiltrated the enemy camp to learn what she was up to, I’ll be good! They might even respect me for once! And I’d get an excuse to go back. Two birds with one stone! No, I’d save the Ascorbic Domain, so that’s three birds!

Counting those proverbial birds before they hatched, Allan was already picturing Lloyd going, “That’s why you’re my best student!” and Phyllo responding, “I’ll concede that position,” with Riho and Selen going, “You win, Allan,” and “I must begrudgingly admit it,” while looking suitably impressed...

Meanwhile, Renge seemed puzzled.

“But why would you want to visit her lab, Sir Allan?”

“Uh...”

He’d been too busy packing to leave to unpack a plausible motivation.

Just never toured a lab... No, I’m not eight. But they won’t believe the truth...

Unable to think of a good excuse, he froze up, and Renge’s frown deepened.

Sensing the tension, Nexamic jumped in—smoothly striking a pose.

“Mwa-ha-ha! Renge, this is the thing! You know! It takes a genius to know a genius! Once you hear what Dr. Eug can do, it’s only natural to want to know more about her! There is much we do not know ourselves.”

“Well, maybe,” Renge said, still looking sour. Nexamic took the hint, grinning.

“Or is this the other thing? You’re getting jealous? Dr. Eug is a girl, after all! Even if she sometimes seems more like an old woman.”

This clearly hit the nail so hard, Renge let the country back into her voice.

“Like hell I— Ahem. I beg your pardon, Sir Allan.”

“Uh, not at all.”

They seem to have reached a conclusion that worked to his advantage, but then he wondered what would happen once they realized he was no genius and got depressed again.

“The backlash is gonna hurt...”

“Buck up! And turn your eyes in the direction my pecs are pointing! Onward!”

Allan let the Tiger pecs be his guide and entered the dining hall.

Yeah, I’ve gotta make up for all that by figuring out Dr. Eug’s plan and getting my hands on proof! There’s clearly all kinds of weird stuff going on here! Mountains collapsing, sudden rainstorms—I bet those were both some of her destructive experiments, and they just happened to go off with the worst possible timing!

Both had been Lloyd’s fault, and if he thought about it for a minute, you’d think he’d have worked that out. Sadly, he was hardly thinking straight.

His mind made up, Allan filled his belly with Nexamic’s nutritious breakfast and Renge’s special scones, and then they all headed toward the lab.

Dr. Eug’s lab was in a little cave somewhere in the Audoc territory.

The entrance looked just like any ordinary cave, but farther in were nice floors, some couches, an electric kettle and fridge, air-conditioning, and computing devices. A very comfortable living space, quite a few steps above the local standard. Like another world entirely.

In the center of that room was someone very weird—wearing a fluffy bunny costume, while wiping herself with a bath towel.

There was water dripping off the costume and steam rising from it—she’d

clearly just emerged from the bath. A bath she'd taken in the costume.

"Whew, that hit the spot! Nothing like the feeling of the water seeping through the sides of your costume!"

She plugged a hair dryer into a socket set in the rock wall and began drying her body with it. The practiced ease with which she went about this only highlighted how weird it was.

Her actions as bizarre as her outfit, this costumed lady was named Eve Profen.

She ruled the Profen Kingdom—a world power every bit the equal of the Jiou Empire. This highly mysterious individual was never seen without her costume. Eve insisted that her family had worn costumes for generations so that everyone would think they could talk to animals, but no one knew the truth.

Eve and Eug went way back—and their shared history explained why she was in the lab, acting like she owned the place and easily using all this technology. She was the kind of friend who knows you so well, she knows right where you've hidden the spare key.

"Dryers using typhoon technology are just so much more effective! These negative ions seal the deal! All hail the NAIs! They'll save the world!"

As she hailed the ionic power, she dried behind her ears, under her arms, around the crotch, and then stuck the dryer into the costume's mouth—drying the person inside.

"Aaaaaaah! Feeeeeel the heaaaaaaling!"

From the side, she looked like a bunny with a gun in its mouth, which...could give people the wrong idea.

At this point, the cave's owner, Eug, came bursting in, grief-stricken. No sign of her usual canine-flashing grin. Even her trademark helmet was at a goofy-looking angle. Clearly, something had gone terribly wrong.

"Augh! That idiot! This sucks so hard!"

She might look like a fourteen-year-old, but like Alka, she was immortal. No signs of her advanced age, however, were present when she started panicking.

Breathing heavily, she spotted Eve enjoying her dryer.

“E-Eve! Help!”

“Sorry, Eug, I borrowed your bath... What’s all the fuss? I’m drying the insides. Hold on a moment.”

“There’s no time for insides! Alka’s on her way here!”

“.....” Eve froze. Dryer still blowing.

The roar of the dryer was the only sound. The longer it went, the sillier it sounded.

Finally, Eve started moving again, slowly, calmly putting the dryer away.

“Uh, what?” she said, clearly forgetting to maintain character.

“I dunnoooo!” Eug wailed, frustrated beyond enunciation.

“Um, I thought she was preoccupied out at sea?”

“Shouma swore she was! Dammit, she probably half-assed it ‘cause Lloyd wasn’t involved, and then...heard he was here and came running. Lloyd, Lloyd, Lloyd! I’m so sick of that boy!”

“Alka really dotes on him, huh? And he’s at the center of everything, whether we like it or not.”

“Well, I told Lloyd it was training and sent him to fight Satan, and based on how that was going, there’s no way he doesn’t end up hospitalized. The problem is Alka!”

Not only was Lloyd not hospitalized but the boy and Satan were getting along great, and the kid was learning a lot. Eug had a habit of being overoptimistic about things, and it often came back to haunt her.

Eve put her hands on the sides of her head, overacting *distress*. “We’ll have to do something about her, or all our plans will collapse!”

“Yes! The Sacred Mountain Rite! We’ve gotta win that thing, lure out the Sacred Beast, and get our hands on it, or all our plans go kaput.” Eug was clutching her own head, rapping her knuckles on that helmet.

“This Sacred Beast has been worshipped here for eons... If it’s a demon lord, it’ll be a valuable asset. If we can’t get our hands on it...or worse, if it turns to

Alka's side..."

"That could lead to an even worse scenario. If that demon lord is the lab chief..."

Eve pushed her cheeks in like Munch's *The Scream*. She really didn't seem *that* concerned. "Without her, we can't solve the riddle of the Last Key—the Holy Sword. And without that, unleashing the Last Dungeon will take even longer! Oh no."

"If there's any chance it's the lab chief, we've gotta capture her. But Alka..."

Eug trailed off in a wail, clearly entering a downward spiral.

"Wait a gosh-darn minute!" Eve yelled. "Don't you start falling apart on me yet!"

She loomed over Eug, offering words of encouragement. A girl in a bunny costume, solving depression—like a children's TV show.

"No time for buts, Eugy! Subdue them protests! With force! You dig?"

"If you'd said that when you were president, it would have been a disaster."

"True! That's why we had hired you at our best lab!" Eve folded her arms, talking about her time as President Eva. "We were an emerging power, so there weren't a lot of protests in-country. Lots from our neighbors, mind. The key to protests is to nip them in the bud! Whoops, there I go, reminiscing again. Let's focus on the issue at hand."

"Yeah, wailing isn't getting us anywhere. Gotta figure out the facts, find a solution. Best shortcut when you're stuck is to list up what you gotta do and all the problems you've got." Eug wheeled out a whiteboard and jotted down their goals and tasks at hand. "We want to develop the world, and to do that, we've gotta release all the world's enemies—the demon lords—from the Last Dungeon."

"Their threat will strike fear in the hearts of man. And that's where we supply everyone with modern weapons." Eve demonstrated, but with her costume, it looked more like she was handing out flyers. Realizing this, she even said, "Thank you, come again!"

They'd known each other long enough that Eug just ignored this. "They'd normally refuse a deal that sketchy, but drowning men clutch at unknown technology."

Eve nodded, one elbow on the table. "I mean, we can manage that much by rounding up wild demon lords, but we're gonna need to get in the Last Dungeon anyway, so that place has gotta come open."

Eug started scribbling on the whiteboard in English. "Once new tech becomes familiar tech, the rest is easy. They go from fearing demon lords to fearing one another. Scary weapons fuel research, and we know they'll invent things we never would have in our time. After all..."

"We didn't have *magic* back then."

Eug nodded gravely. The light of revenge in her eyes.

"If people across the world combine magic with the technology of our day... explosive economic growth and rapid development are sure to follow."

"And once science has reached the highest levels, we'll finally have control over the device in the Last Dungeon—our ultimate goal." Eve hmped twice and thrashed wildly, posing like a hawk that's sighted prey. "We failed last time! But we'll have better technology! Hybrid magitech! And this time, we can control it!"

"If only we'd had magic as strong as Alka's. Nope, back on topic. Also, Eve, your head's about to come off there."

The pose had proven precarious, and her head was tipping. "Thanks," Eve said, putting it back. "The key to opening the Last Dungeon is the Holy Sword. But unfortunately, that wound up on Alka's side."

"For some reason, we can't touch the thing. Neither can Alka, Shouma, or Sou. I've got no clue how anyone ever pulled the thing out, but that's not the problem!"

"We had all sorts of schemes in the works. Brainwashing the Rokujou Sorcery Academy headmaster into doing experiments with a mithril arm—Sou did good work there!" Eve gazed fondly into the distance, remembering the good times.

Eug went on. “Then we killed Vritra, the guardian beast of Kunlun, hoping that without him around to shoulder the burden of Alka’s power, she’d be weakened and give us a chance to steal the sword...”

“But that failed! The cursed belt made from his hide was right there, and his mind remained in this world.”

“Alka was technically weakened, but she’s still a totally viable threat. So I tricked her and stuck Vritra in a Mastema Fruit, rendering her powerless.”

“And at the exhibition match, you’d taken over the Jiou Empire and launched a surprise attack on the Azami Kingdom, trying to steal the sword...and failed again.”

“Damn you, Lloyd!” Tears welled up in Eug’s eyes, remembering how he’d chased her around.

“This forced us to change up our approach. Waiting for our chance to steal the sword, we began rounding up wild demon lords, trying to turn the Jiou Empire into a viable threat that could terrify the rest of the world. Once the moment arrives, we’ve got futuristic weaponry ready to go!”

Eve did the tissue pose again, but Eug was shaking her head.

“About those weapons... Lloyd actually destroyed them...”

This was news bad enough even Eve couldn’t joke about it.

“What?” she growled. Some legit regal power behind that.

Eug didn’t even flinch. She explained what had happened.

“He was just...training and accidentally threw a wooden sword so hard it snapped a mountain peak. And our tanks and stuff were all in a cave on that mountain... He doesn’t even know! He’s not on to us. But I will need time to make them all again.”

“W-well, if he’s not on to us, then we’re good. Whew, you spooked me there!”

She went back to handing out flyers. This lady turned it on and off real quick.

“So while we manufacture those weapons, we keep gathering wild demon

lords, analyzing and mass-producing them. For the days to come.”

“Alka may be weakened, but she’s still a threat, and it’ll take numbers to go against her.”

“...That’s not the only reason we’re gathering demon lords,” Eug said, giving Eve a grim look.

Eve nodded slowly. She was well aware. “One of those demon lords was once the lab chief. We’ve gotta get her in a Mastema Fruit and turn her to our side.”

“We can’t touch the Holy Sword, let alone explain how it works. Or how to unlock the Last Dungeon... If she can tell us that...”

“You could use your dwarf powers, replicate the sword, and get that dungeon open.”

Eug sat down on a couch, staring into the distance. Thinking about the lab chief, maybe.

“She’s the one who put the lock on the device and made it so immortals like Alka and us—and our apostles—can’t touch the Holy Sword. I don’t know why she’d do that or how...which is very frustrating.”

“We were all fired up about getting that dungeon open, whoo-hoo! ...And that was when we heard the Sacred Mountain Sacred Beast was kinda demon lord-esque and possibly the actual lab chief.”

Eve did her own version of Eug’s distant gaze. But with that costume on, it just looked silly.

“The door in the Sacred Mountain shrine worked like the Holy Sword,” Eug said. “We can’t even touch it! Which makes me suspect the Sacred Beast is the lab chief.”

Eve grumpily scratched her head. Inside the costume. “We can’t force the door open... It’s so weird! Can’t touch or grab it, but it’s still a physical barrier... Even with the costume on, it blocked me. How’s that work?!”

“We can’t say for sure this beast is the lab chief. It’s entirely possible her home just happened to be here and, over time, wound up treated like a shrine.”

“But that’ll still give us vital clues!”

“Yeah, which is why I’m tricking the locals into helping me meet this beast. Only way to get those shrine doors open is to follow proper protocols.”

“Good thing you found a couple of gullible idiots. Go with them to the shrine and capture the thing!”

Eve made a pouncing motion, but Eug was staring grimly at the floor.

“Even if I can’t capture her, I’ll at least plead my case. I’m sure the lab chief will see where I’m coming from! That’s the sort of person she was.”

Eve whistled. “That’s the spirit! ’Course, the problem is Alka. Got a plan there?”

“Argh, she just *never* does what you think she will!”

There was several hundred years of history between them. Eug scowled at her whiteboard, then slapped it so hard it started spinning. It caught her chin on the upswing. Kids, don’t hit random objects without considering the consequences.

At any rate, Eve and Eug had laid out the facts, and this had only brought them back to the truth—they had to do *something* about Alka.

“She might screw up this Sacred Mountain Rite, preventing us from meeting the Sacred Beast. It might run off somewhere. Worse, join Alka’s side.”

“Our best shot is to somehow capture the beast before Alka gets here...right!” Eve slapped her palms together. A crack echoed through the cave, and she leaped to her feet—and started dancing.

“Eve?”

“A dance of determination!”

She turned her back on Eug, her voice dropping to a badass growl.

“I’m gonna go slow Alka down.”

“I-in person?”

“It’ll be fiiine,” Eve dismissed, waving her hand like a friendly neighborhood biddy. “Don’t worry about meee. I mean, Alka’s got no clue we’re working together behind the scenes! And that gives me an advantage! I’m a poke her like

this!”

She struck a fencing pose.

Eug still looked dubious, so Eve ran to the whiteboard, drew pictures of herself, Alka, and Eug, and arrows between them—a relationship flowchart.

“The only choke point here is Alka finding out I’m alive at all.”

“Yeah, if she learned the king of Profen is President Eva, that’ll make a lot of our plans—especially capturing wild demon lords—a lot harder.”

“I’m well aware of the risks! But it’ll take a surprise to slow her down. I’m sure we can kill at least a full day on catching up. I mean, it’s been centuries!”

“Centuries since the world wound up like this. Hundreds of years of destruction and rebirth... Yeah, catching up would take more than a day or two.”

“Meanwhile, Eugy—you’ve gotta do everything in your power to win this rite.”

“I know! Alka oughtta be in the Audoc territory right now.”

“I don’t know my way around—can you show me the way? It’s not easy terrain for someone in a costume, is it?”

Was *any* terrain? Would nothing make her take that costume off? With those questions drifting in her mind, Eug led the way.

A while later...

Allan, Renge, and Nexamic all arrived at Eug’s lab—too late to find her there.

“This is the lab, Sir Allan! And these are the proudest muscles in my body—my hamstrings!” Nexamic pumped his thighs up, pointing at the cave hidden at the back of a forest.

At a glance, it looked like any other cave.

“Hmm,” Allan grunted, folding his arms. “So this is her lair... If that doctor’s here, then there’s gotta be *something* that’ll clue me into her schemes.”

Hearing him mutter, Renge leaned close. “Something amiss, Sir Allan?”

“Oh, nah, never mind. Is Dr. Eug here?”

“Afraid not,” Nexamic said, pecs quivering. “She left in a rush mere moments ago! One of our young’uns said she was muttering something about a girl in a white robe.”

“Oh, perfect.”

“Perfect?” Renge blinked.

“Uh...for...tea! Perfect teatime! Mind making me a cup?”

“Yes! I’d be delighted to! Anytime! Just say the word!”

Allan wiped his brow, convinced he’d made a narrow escape—and never once realizing he’d totally set himself up for something. It left Renge’s face bright red!

Oblivious to that, Allan seized the opportunity and hunkered his massive bulk down to squeeze through the cave entrance.

Renge stayed close behind, fanning her burning cheeks. At the rear, they could hear Nexamic bellowing, “Tiger ☆ Crawl!”

In due time, they came out into the open cavern within.

“Floorboards and couches...and what the heck are those gizmos? This is definitely her handiwork...”

Footsteps echoing on the boards, Allan gawked at the comfortable work space, now even more convinced it was the same Dr. Eug.

“Satisfied, Sir Allan?”

“Yes, thanks a lot, Renge!”

“Oh, it was nothing...” She blushed again.

“We must apologize, Sir Allan.” Nexamic looked genuinely sorry. “We’d like to accompany you further...”

“Oh, yes! There’s somewhere we have to be.”

“Oh yeah?”

Nexamic struck a pose, biceps bulging apologetically. Flexing wasn’t usually

the best way to express remorse, but everyone was past caring.

“We have reports of a large monster flying overhead this morning,” Renge explained. “Nexamic and I can’t rest easy until the safety of all is secured!”

Allan was suitably impressed with their diligence.

“Wow...being a clan leader sounds like hard work.”

“One’s muscles and attitude must always reflect it! That is the responsibility I bear!”

“I must ensure my people can sip tea elegantly at all times. Adieu!”

With a curtsy, Renge reluctantly left, Nexamic close behind.

Once he was sure they were gone, Allan hunkered down, searching the place. Total sneak-thief mode. If a cop spotted him, they’d have had probable cause. Trying to copy stealthy footwork he’d seen before, he crept across the floor, eyes sweeping the table and shelves.

“I need something that just screams ‘This is Dr. Eug’s nefarious scheme!’ Like...documents or...”

His eyes lit on the scribble-covered whiteboard.

“What’s this flat white thing?”

Technology levels had not led to the invention of this office staple. Allan gave it a curious inspection.

“I dunno if it proves anything, and it’s too big... I need something smaller. And I can’t make head nor tail of this writing... What language is that?”

Eug had written everything in English, and Allan had never seen the like.

“Anything in the common tongue? Hmm. This drawing...the one with a helmet and snaggleteeth is Dr. Eug, the pigtailed one is Chief Alka...and a bunny? Dr. Eug and the bunny are working together, and the bunny’s gonna try and get the drop on Alka? I don’t get it.”

He gave up on decoding the whiteboard and headed to the next floor. He knew full well no one was here but couldn’t stop himself sneaking around. He would never make a good villain.

The next floor was less a lab than a factory. What had been an office and work space was now full-on manufacturing. There were piles of tool-like gizmos that did god-knows-what, cords stretching off to god-knows-where... It definitely said a lot about the person who designed it.

“These tools...I dunno if they’d be much good as evidence. I need something that’ll convince Renge and Nexamic they’ve been bamboozled! If I bring back something half-assed, that mercenary’ll just mock me to my face.”

He sighed, then tried to motivate himself.

“Nope, I’m not the kinda guy who stays down! I turn my failures into even bigger success! Be a man, Allan! Thwart these evil schemes!”

“Yo! That’s a pretty cool monologue, bro!”

“! Who was that?!”

He was alone in the room—so where was this voice coming from?

Allan quickly recovered and drew his ax, ready for battle. He scanned his surroundings.

Nobody there.

Fear made a bead of sweat roll down his cheek.

“Wh-who was that? Where are you?” he yelled, unable to bear the stress.

The jovial voice responded, “Yo! Right over here!”

“Where’s here...hmm?” Allan’s eyes locked on something—an egg-like Mastema Fruit, connected to several cables...glowing with a pale light. “An egg? Or a fruit? The hell are you?”

“Wow. This thief is swearing at me!”

“I’m not a thief! I mean, maybe that’s not convincing at the moment, but... seriously, what are you?”

The Mastema Fruit chuckled happily. “I’m Surtr! The demon lord.”

Allan had never seen a fruit that thought it was a demon lord before and nearly dropped his ax.



“A d-demon lord? Seriously?! What’s a demon lord doing here?”

“Some weird rabbit caught me, and here I am. And you? I gave my name.”

“Allan. Eldest son of the Lidocaines,” Allan replied cautiously.

“Allan, huh? Cool,” Surtr said, like he was meeting a new classmate. “A minute ago, you were talking about getting mocked and overcoming failures, yeah?”

“D-don’t remind me.”

“I wasn’t trying to eavesdrop, man! ’Preciate your hardship, is all.”

This demon lord had a voice like an arm around your shoulders. Conscious of the spell these words were casting, Allan considered his reply carefully. “A being like you...faces hardship?”

“Damn straight, man! All of us have times when we’re totally outclassed, when we get frustrated even though we know it won’t help, and there ain’t a thing you can do but stuff your face with jelly beans.”

“Jelly beans...?” Allan had never heard that word before, but Surtr kept talking, his words a breeze that blew that question aside.

“I know just how you feel! This is destiny! Fate brought us together. Can you sense it? This is a kairotic moment in your life!”

“A what?”

“A turning point! C’mon, bro, repeat after me! Kairotic! Moment!”

“K-kairotic moment...”

“Aw yeah! Got it in one! ’Grats, man! So now we’re both on this destiny train... Allan, what say we team up?”

“Team up? With a demon lord?”

This was an alarming prospect. Allan frowned, not ready to jump on that.

“I don’t mean like, *permanently*. More like a tag team!”

“Nah...,” Allan began.

But Surtr just kept raining words down on him, overwhelming him—a tried-

and-true grifter technique to rob people of their judgment.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah! I’m a demon lord, no doubt! The opportunity of a lifetime.”

“Certainly, a first for me...”

He was going to add, “Obviously,” but before he could, the demon lord sealed in that Mastema Fruit came at him again, like a pushy souvenir salesman in a tourist trap.

“I ain’t asking for your soul or nothing! It’s just, look, I’m kinda stuck here? And I thought you might lend me your body! Promise I’ll hand you back your life on a platter!”

“M-my body...?”

Allan clasped his hands to his chest. This was rather creepy, but Surtr kept negotiating, his voice radiating sincerity.

“Nothing to be scared of! It’s just a quick loan. I was roaming around outside with a purpose before I got caught, you see.”

“Still...”

“Naturally, this a mutually beneficial arrangement! A fair trade! You lend me your body, and I pay you back in spades! With demon lord powers beyond what any human could hope to achieve.”

“You’d...give me power?”

Surtr took this as a sign Allan was hooked. He launched into a pitch on the “benefits” that being possessed would incur.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never wanted it. The power to split the earth, to control flame at will. To shatter rocks with your bare hands! With that, you can show up anyone who mocked you! Just imagine their faces!”

“.....”

“Well? You can change the world as you see fit, man! The whole world!”

“Never,” Allan growled, his voice as grim as Surtr’s was gleeful.

“Seriously? This is...demon lord levels of power. You could have entire

countries dancing on the palm of your hand!”

As if listing reasons would help resist the temptation, Allan started to do just that.

“I’ve got a master—”

Surtr chuckled like he knew where that was going and jumped on Allan’s words.

“And you wanna stick to their teachings? But is this master gonna do more for you than the demon lord’s power would? Flames that can scorch everything? Boulder-pulverizing strength?”

He was clearly sure he was offering the better end of the bargain, but Allan... winced slightly, laying a dose of reality on the demon lord.

“Yeah, he can do all that. Easily shatter boulders. Cross the continent in six days. Banish a demon lord’s curse like he’s just washing someone’s face.”

“.....Huh?”

For the first time, Surtr’s confidence wavered.

Piling on, Allan kept talking about his master—Lloyd—and the feats he’d witnessed with his own eyes rolled off his tongue, like he’d been waiting for the chance to boast about it.

“He can take out treants like they’re weeds, cross mountains just to shop... I’ve heard he can even fly! When he crossed the continent, he did so by casting *Aero* on repeat.”

“Yo, wait, wait, hang on—”

“I’ve got someone like that around, so this deal you offer? Ain’t too tempting. Shattering boulders bare-handed won’t impress anyone. My master ain’t the only one who can do *that*.”

Surtr was reduced to hollow laughter. “Ha-ha-ha, real funny. Lying your head off to try and resist the temptation, huh? That’s a good one. No way that’s real...right?”

“.....Sorry, man.”

Allan let that one linger. He could almost see the demon lord clutching its head.

“...Right, fine. You’ve convinced me. You ain’t lying.”

“Nope.”

Negotiations failed. That glow around the Mastema Fruit pulsed faintly.

“Really? Man, what a world. I know, what I offer ain’t all that. Who is your master? Sure he ain’t a demon lord, too?”

“I dunno.”

“You don’t even rule that out?!”

Allan didn’t hesitate.

“But even if Lloyd is a demon lord, I know he’s a good one.”

The Mastema Fruit was reflected in Allan’s eyes. They didn’t waver.

“A good...demon lord.” Surtr ran that phrase over on his tongue, then let out a sigh of resignation. “Yeahhhh, all right, then. If another one’s got a prior claim on ya...negotiations gonna break down.”

“Sorry, demon lord.”

“Don’t be!” Surtr wailed. Then like the flood gates opening, the truth came out. “Argh, my plan to feed you a bunch of lies and steal your body, down the drain!”

“Yooooo!” Allan didn’t see any other way to respond to *that*.

Forgetting he was sneaking into Eug’s lab, his yowl echoed through the caverns.

Surtr seemed to get a kick out of this and cackled loudly. “Mwa-ha-ha! Don’t worry, I’m done trying. In hindsight, why would I want an ugly mug like yours? Ain’t gonna pick up any girls in your body! That’d be like starting the game on Insanity as the difficulty level.”

“So I’m insanely ugly, am I? I’ll have you know I’m considered quite dashing!”

“Yeah, from *some* angles.”

Allan was less than pleased with this assessment, but...probably because he knew it was true. The angrier he got, the friendlier Surtr's voice became. No longer trying to trick him, the demon lord was just voicing his honest thoughts.

"Sorry I tried to pull a fast one on ya. But I ain't kidding about wanting to get outta here. Don't suppose I could convince you to take me with you?"

"I already rejected that idea! That goes double now I *know* you're gonna take control!"

"I am not!" Surtr said. "I don't need your body! I can possess whatever. That ax, for instance."

Allan frowned, holding out his ax. "This ax?"

"Yeah! I just wanna get outta this weird egg, mangosteen, Mastema Fruit, whatever it is. Help a bro out, Allan!"

"...You're not planning anything evil, are you?"

"Look, if I'm possessing some random inanimate object, I'm not gonna be able to use more than twenty percent of my power. Scout's honor. With people, it's like they're a part of me, so I can manage half."

"So this would be like Selen's belt...?"

Allan knew of a possessed object already—her belt was possessed by a monster that talked like a savvy boss.

"I dunno about that, but please. If you leave me, the helmet girl's gonna suck all my power and erase my mind. I tried to resist, but she already drained a lot."

"Helmet girl? Dr. Eug?"

"Yeah, I think that's her name. It rings a bell anyway."

Allan folded his arms, thinking. "A demon lord, and one we can at least communicate with... That would be pretty solid evidence."

If he took Surtr out of here and got him to give testimony, that would at least prove that Dr. Eug had plans to use demon lords for *something*. And that might help clear up this whole mess. The pieces were falling in place.

"And if you're tricking me, Lloyd'll sort it out. All right, Surtr! Promise not to

be bad, and I'll take you outta here."

"Oh! Thanks, Allan! Just bring that ax over to me."

"Like this?"

The glow began pouring onto his ax.

"Okay! Just stay like that for maybe half an hour."

"That's a long time!"

"Yeah, well, like I said...it's a random inanimate object. While we're at it—tell me more about yourself! Tell me all your tales of woe!"

"Like I don't have any other kind? Okay, I admit I do have a lot. Well, most recently..."

Over the next thirty minutes, they went from his misfortunes to his life history to Lloyd and how he came to be known as the dragon slayer. By that time, they were firm friends.

"...Wow, that's nuts! You didn't do anything, but the king and all the top brass were hauling you out to dinner? That's not a tale of woe! You're the luckiest dog in town!"

"I sit there scared they'll find out it's all a lie, and I can't taste a thing."

"Oh...I get that, yeah. Hardly has any flavor! That would be rough."

"I've got this thick slab of steak, and it tastes like nothing...almost funny. But what about you, Surtr? What kind stuff does a demon lord do? What *is* a demon lord?"

"I don't really know," Surtr said. It sounded like he was shrugging.

"Yeah? But you are one."

"I get your drift, and all, but...my memories are kinda spotty? Like, first thing I knew I was a demon lord and wandering around...and all I really remember..."

"Is?"

"...Looking for the one I love. I think."

"Oh. Any clues?"

“Not sure, but there’s this one phrase in the corner of my mind...Dom Pérignon.”

“What’s that?”

“I feel like the one I love had a sick brother, or... And she needed that, so it must have been medicine.”

Surtr’s tone was getting steadily gloomier. Allan was feeling very sorry for him. Even getting tears in his eyes.

“So that’s why you wanted out so bad? Okay! Meeting you is a sign from above! I’ll help you find your beloved!”

“You will? Thanks, Allan. You’re a better guy than your mean mug suggests!”

“Leave my mug out of it!”

“My bad. Oh, you can let go of the ax now.”

Seeing the glow around his ax, Allan let out a cry of delight. “Great! All the proof I need. Now we just gotta get back to Lloyd and the rest of the contingent! And solve everything!”

“All I have to do is tell ’em about this Eug girl and her plans, right? Leave it to me, Allan, my buddy!”

And so, a new odd duo was born...and they would create no end of chaos—as Allan would soon learn...

Chapter 2

A Clash Rekindled: Suppose Two Rivals for a Girl's Hand Wound Up at the Same Reunion

"So? What is it?"

In the lobby of the laboratory...

The sun was higher in the sky, and there were more people entering and exiting the facility. Seta had hit up the cooler for some water and brought that back to Ishikura.

"What is what?" Ishikura's eyes gleamed.

Seta certainly found that daunting, but he made like a gossip reporter chasing a slip of the tongue. "Don't give me that. You started to say something earlier! Your personal take on the meteor thing."

"Shouldn't you be taking a nap? Getting yourself in shape for the meeting this afternoon?"

"How can I sleep now? It's like reading a novel in bed, but I can't find a good stopping point. Don't leave me tossing and turning, Director!"

"You could spare yourself this grief by staying home! No more cabarets!"

Seta shook his head, like cabaret was a mission from god.

"Anything but that, Director! I can't turn my back on them now! Tony's after the same girl I am! He came in the other day going, 'I got us the Dom Pérignon, baby!' How am I supposed to sit at home after hearing that?"

"....."

"Rumor has it she *might* bake you cookies! I mean, I'm sure that's just to butter us up, but...!"

"....."

Ishikura's stony silence was clearly making him uncomfortable, and Seta was starting to foam at the mouth.

"Don't give me that look! She's got a sick brother! She didn't want Tony's Dom Pérignon; she had no choice but to accept it for her brother's sake! I'm sure! Mostly! It broke her heart! I mean, she said she loves *me*, so...!"

"....."

"I—I see the pity in your eyes! For her, I assume? That poor girl working herself to the bone for her sick brother!"

"...No, it's *you* I pity."

Few things more pathetic than a man duped—hook, line, and sinker—for the first scam that came to mind when you thought about nighttime entertainment.

"But enough about me! What were you about to say?"

"For Pete's sake," Ishikura muttered—like a parent being pestered to read a picture book out loud. "Once again, this is a personal concern. Don't spread it around."

"My lips are sealed! Don't worry." Seta threw out a thumbs-up, which earned him an exasperated sigh.

"It's just a feeling," Ishikura began. "I worry the meteor thing isn't about rare metals but the very act of summoning meteors."

"Uh...for what?" Seta slumped like the wind had left his sails. He'd clearly been braced for something far juicier.

"Is it that hard to grasp?" Ishikura grumbled. "Certainly, if these meteors increase our supply of rare metals, that alone would be a valuable resource. It would help transform this small developing country into an energy superpower."

"Right—and help prevent global warming."

Ishikura hesitated to say the next part. "However, if we don't get any rare metals and find out they're just rocks...well, that can still lead to profit."

"How? They're rocks."

The director kept an eye on their surroundings, picking his words carefully. He leaned across the table like he was sharing a secret. “Think about it. We can make rocks fall from the sky without warning. With more research, we’ll probably be able to pinpoint the location, time, and size.”

Seta gulped, finally catching Ishikura’s drift.

“Oh,” he said. “If you put it that way, it’s a weapon the rival of any intercontinental ballistic missile.”

Ishikura nodded quietly. “A weapon only our country is capable of producing. Cost performance and environmental impact are both green. And it’s a *meteor*. We could argue it was just a natural disaster.”

Seta was starting to feel like he’d been sucked into a vast conspiracy. He nervously loosened his tie.

“And if other countries suspect something and try to pass judgment...the other research projects can take care of *that*,” Ishikura continued.

“Biological restoration and probability manipulation...both certainly effective in war.”

“And if they bring down economic sanctions, the rainfall experiments will secure our water supply, and we’re even researching crops that can be harvested on a monthly basis.”

“If we can harvest wheat and soy once a month, we can survive even isolated from the rest of the world. Research meant to end world hunger can also...”

“Be countermeasures if the world turns against us.”

Seta leaned back against the couch, laughing. “Ha-ha-ha, some wild theories, for sure. But do we really think the president is thinking that far ahead?”

“Well, I admit I’m being a bit paranoid... Don’t rat me out, okay? Neither of us will be let off with an apology in writing.”

“I won’t; I promise... Geez, you gave me a fright! Now I’ll never sleep.”

“Do try... Let’s hope it’s just my nerves talking,” he muttered.

The foot traffic in the lobby was steadily rising. His whisper was drowned out

by the din.

The Ascorbic Domain—a river in the Kyouin clan’s territory.

Clear water flowing down from the Sacred Mountains glittered in the sunlight.

The cadets from Azami were standing on the bank, swinging wooden practice swords.

The third day of their training. Lloyd had let one of those swords go flying and destroyed a landmark mountain; Phyllo had accidentally mowed down a beautiful bamboo thicket; a half-naked forty-something named Tiger had assaulted them; and one of the girls had lost her damn mind and nearly destroyed the entire temple complex. But they’d overcome it all, and the looks on their faces were newly robust—arguably.

With them around, the Kyouin clan would dominate in the Sacred Mountain Rite, securing Anzu’s position as Domain leader for another four years. Good job, Anzu!

“Gotta look at it that way, or I’ll be too sad to continue...”

Yeah, it was mostly wishful thinking. Anzu had seen tourist attractions, her own base, and her own mind pushed to the brink of collapse.

Her own students had been poisoned, and she’d brought in Lloyd and the other cadets to help win—but they’d proven to be uncontrollable loose cannons, reducing her to a hapless mess. If she lost the throne as well, then it would all be for nothing.

“Gotta protect that at all costs. Gotta protect the secrets of that shrine. Which means I gotta focus on this training. Right. Good! Your swings are all improving!”

Praise was important. Anzu kept a close eye on their progress, shouting encouragement.

After a while, Riho paused, raising a hand. “Um, Lady Anzu...?” she said.

“What’s up, Riho? Tired already?”

“That’s not it, no. It’s just...” She searched for the right word.

“Don’t, Riho. You can’t neglect your fundamentals. The key to training is to put your feet on the ground and enjoy the grind.”

“Oh, I know that. But, uh, when you say ground...?”

Riho made a face, then glanced at the skies above.

“Come, now! You’ve got that wind wrapped around yourself, but if you can’t control it at this altitude, it means nothing!”

“Yes, Satan! Hahhhh!”

Bam, bam, bam! Pow! Thwack! (And other midair battle noises.)

“Aerial combat comes from all directions! Blows from any course! There is no up and down! You know what that means, Lloyd? You’ve gotta be conscious of your core!”

Shwsh! Snap! Shpp! Bash! (Sounds of Lloyd receiving blows from all directions.)

“Take advantage of the open air, vary your speed, and attack! Can you keep up with me?”

“I’ll try! Hahhhh!”

Vroooooom! (Noises as Satan and Lloyd fly around like dogfighting airplanes.)

Tearing her eyes from the view above, Riho tried to talk to Anzu again. “With them flying around, it’s really hard to focus on training.”

“Hmm? I don’t know what you’re talking about, Riho. I can’t see a thing!”

Ka-piiiiiiiiing!

“That noise sounded nuts! Like someone unleashing a beam attack.”

“I didn’t hear a thing.”

Satan and Lloyd had their feet way off the ground, and their aerial combat was so spectacular, Riho couldn’t stop staring. Selen, Phyllo, and Marie were all looking up, too...like they were at a fireworks display.

Meanwhile, Anzu was firmly refusing to raise her eyes above the horizon line. Preserving her mental equanimity by steadfastly refusing to allow this insane

training to cross her eyeballs.

Her smile was definitely on the frozen side.

Riho tried again. “Um, Lady An—”

“I see nothing, and I hear nothing. Nobody is training with a demon lord in the skies above. Everything above us is a work of fiction!”

The words were starting to tumble out with a hint of panic. Her mind would not last long at this rate.

“I get it, but maybe it’s time you start to process the truth. Mm?”

Someone had jumped into the thick of the battle above.

Shnk! A shock wave rocketed toward Satan.

“Whoa!”

It just barely missed his nose. He glanced at the source.

“...So close,” Phyllo hissed, hands raised...and glowing. Phyllo’s new ultimate attack—shock waves generated from her karate chops.

“Phyllo?!”

“...It’s not fair only Master gets to train.”

Phyllo was sulking. Events the day before had banished her concerns, and her movements were sharper than ever before. She was hungry to see how well she could do against a demon lord. Imagine you’d just bought a new move in a game and couldn’t wait to try it out.

Seeing her unable to stand idly by, Satan beckoned. “Two against one? You’re on! Man, I never thought I’d be spewing cheesy lines like a manga character...”

Satan’s character kept slipping; now he was like an older teen playing with the neighborhood children.

““Thanks!”” Lloyd and Phyllo shouted.

Satan touched down on earth, raised his hands, and waggled his wrists. “Come at me.”

Seta was very into this, it seemed.



Both his opponents lunged forward. *Pow! Thwack! Bam, bam, bam!*

“They’re *both* ridiculous. Practicing with a demon lord...”

“Sheesh, will no one restore sanity to the world?”

Marie and Riho exchanged grins. This was the ultimate fight, the climax of a battle manga—and it was right here in front of them. Anzu, meanwhile, had her hands over her ears and her eyes closed. “La-la-la! I can’t hear you!” The holy training ground’s secret menu item, “Practice Session with a Demon Lord,” had proved too much for the Domain’s leader to handle.

Lloyd and Phyllo were working together perfectly, battering Satan with an awesome combo.

“Here I go!”

“.....Mm!”

The unrelenting flurry came at him from back, front, left, and right.

“Ohhh! This is pretty rough...!”

When Satan tried to leap backward, Phyllo’s shock waves gave chase.

“Uh!”

This earned her an actual grunt.

“Keep the pressure on!”

While Satan was blocking the shock waves, Lloyd rocketed forward, wreathed in *Aero*, closing the gap. Fantastic teamwork.

Satan was on his heels. Even a demon lord must be suffering—nope, he was grinning, watching his students like an uncle seeing how much his niece and nephew had grown.

“Great work! So good—I’m gonna show you one of my moves!” With that, Satan dropped into his shadow.

Phyllo’s eyes went wide, and she quickly scanned her surroundings.

“Phyllo, at your feet!” Lloyd yelled.

“.....! Below me?!” Phyllo saw a hand reaching out from the shadows under

her.

“Hah!” She swung a fist down toward it, but...

“That’s a feint.” Satan snatched his hand back and popped out of the shadows behind Lloyd. “You thought I wasn’t after you, Lloyd?”

“Oh n— Aughh!”

Satan grabbed Lloyd by the scruff of his neck and chucked him at Phyllo. A high throw.

“Master! Nn?!”

When her eyes turned up to follow Lloyd...Satan attacked from the shadows at her feet.

“You’re both vulnerable to grappling, I see!”

“.....No!”

As Phyllo toppled off balance, Lloyd plummeted toward her...

““Gah!””

And they both went down together.

Satan clapped his hands like a teacher calling for attention. “Right, time for a quick break. Lloyd, you’re getting the hang of using that wind. Your new move is officially called...Wind Cloak.”

“Wind...what?” Lloyd blinked. Clearly, he hadn’t heard the name before.

“Yes, the perfect name for a move that channels wind magic to take flight! Really has that light-novel feel!”

“There are ‘light’ novels?”

“Just assume it means ‘really cool.’ Ha-ha-ha. If you master Wind Cloak, then the ultimate move we were practicing yesterday won’t be too far off!”

“The ultimate... Okay! I’ll try real hard!”

Phyllo was still stuck under him. “...Demon lords *are* strong.”

“Waugh, sorry, Phyllo! I’ll get off you!”

“.....Mm.” Her face was a bit red.

“I didn’t expect the shock waves from your hands!” Satan praised. “But I do think that move itself is still controlling you.”

“.....Right.”

“I assume you just learned it? Best thing to do is bring it into battle after battle, making it yours.”

“.....Right.” She bowed her head.

Riho turned to Anzu with a smirk. “Yo, Anzu. This demon lord’s stealing your role! Who’s the leader of the holy training grounds now?”

“I can’t hear you!”

She was too busy escaping reality to notice Satan approaching.

“What is she doing?” he asked.

“...Best to leave her alone. Can you blame her?”

“Fair. I’ve never been good at cheering up sad women... I’m more the type to be saddened by them. Men are easier! I know a place that can cheer any man up!”

“Wh-where? Sounds like magic!” Lloyd said, eyes glittering.

Satan leered like a bad influence. “Well, Lloyd, it’s called a caba—”

“Caba?”

“.....Hngg. Sorry, the rest is all hazy. It’s like... My instincts are preventing me from remembering.”

Satan still wasn’t entirely himself. Once again, he stuck his fingers in his hairdo, scratching the back of his head.

Someone else was watching Satan from a distance.

“Is that...? I feel like I’ve seen that demon lord before...”

It was Vritra. Currently possessing the cursed belt, he was moving the buckle like a snake’s head, following Satan’s every movement.

“Hmm, he seems so familiar... The demon lord of the night? Where have I

heard that be— Gah!”

As he was mid-thought, Selen gave him a yank. “Vritra! No slacking! We’ve gotta make up for our failures this morning! Everyone’s working hard, and we must be there for them!”

Guilt over her morning rampage meant Selen was, for once, dedicating herself to supporting the others. She was prepping wet towels and drinks like a sports team manager...and dragging Vritra along in her wake, fuming at him.

“I’m not slacking!” he wailed. “Also, this was originally your—”

“No excuses! I’m going to apologetically dedicate myself to this task until Lloyd notices!”

It seemed her guilt and regret came hand in hand with ulterior motives. Selen was still...Selen.

“Mwah! I’m trying to remember, but just...can’t! What *is* this?”

Still bothered by his faint memories, Vritra buckled down to do Selen’s bidding.

While Selen and her belt were doing their bit, Marie had seized her chance to lavish Lloyd in compliments.

“You’re really something, Lloyd! Most people can’t fight like that! You’re really impressing me!”

“Yeah,” Riho chimed in. “That was some high-level fighting!”

The reason they’d come here in the first place was to get Lloyd some confidence and help him realize his own strength. They were so invested in that outcome that they were being more than a little phony.

“Y-yeah?” Lloyd said, rattled by this.

Riho crossed her fingers that this would help him see the light. “Yeah, normal people can’t fly, Lloyd. I can’t even believe I’m saying that!”

Being raised in Kunlun had given him inflated expectations and self-esteem issues, which made him eternally humble.

“I can only do it a short time, and the chief can fly for days, so I’m barely

getting started.”

“Oh, Chief Alka...right.”

“.....That kid grandma really oughtta rein it in a little.”

Lloyd’s standards were based on the most superhuman of all superhumans, and that made it hard to argue with. When you had to start by convincing someone that flight wasn’t a normal human activity, it was hard to stay motivated.

They may not have managed to make him realize his own strength, but he did seem significantly more confident.

“But I’m feeling more sure of myself!” he stated. “Wind Cloak isn’t my only new move! Watch this!”

With a grin, he demonstrated his new technique like a gentle breeze. A very small *Aero*.

“Um...what was that?”

“*Aero!* I can control it now!”

That’s it? they thought, but he seemed very satisfied.

“I’ve been wanting to do this awhile! Seemed like a great way to dry my hair faster! Or sweep up the leaves in the fall! A little gust of wind to gather them all in the corner would make the job so much easier! This alone makes it worth the trip the Ascorbic Domain!”

His childish glee put a smile on both girls’ faces.

“Heh-heh.”

“Well, that is very Lloyd.”

He would forever place housework first, and that sure did warm their hearts.

“It’s a little thing, but if I keep making steps like this, someday I’ll be the kind of soldier who can protect everyone!”

A little *Aero* was a big step for Lloyd.

His new teacher, Satan, seemed thoroughly pleased. “Hard to believe he

doesn't know his own strength, but glad to see he's got a little confidence now. What the heck is Alka teaching him? She never was exactly the mentor type, but..."

Satan shook his head, thinking of his absent colleague.

"....." Marie was staring fixedly at him.

This demon lord was *very* human—nothing like the others she'd encountered. The doubt in her mind was strong enough she had to ask: "So...are you really a demon lord?"

"Um, I guess so?" Satan replied. That seemed significant.

Marie's fingers clenched on the ends of her sleeves. She picked her next words carefully.

"I've met a number of demon lords...but you seem far more human than them. Like...you *are* a human."

"I met you back in Kunlun," Riho said. "And you were super demon lord-esque then. What happened?"

He laughed at the word *demon lord-esque* but didn't seem sure how to respond...like a dad whose kid has just asked him an awkward question.

"I guess something did happen. I dunno if you'll believe it, though. Sure you want to know?"

"If you don't mind sharing."

"You see, I was once—" But before he could say another word...

"Mwa-ha-ha! I'll be back! Glutes and hamstrings!"

A very sweaty voice echoed from above. All eyes turned toward the cliff.

"Gah, him again?" Riho scowled.

Oblivious to the extremely unwelcoming vibe, Tiger Nexamic kept posing. "Before their very eyes, they beheld a physical specimen no less magnificent than the great cat itself! It was none other than the leader of the Tiger clan, famed for his throbbing hamstrings—Tiger Nexamic (age forty-three)!"

"Why is he narrating?"

“Gazing rapturously at the sight of this glorious body, they desired it for themselves...!”

“No rapturing here!”

“Aw,” Nexamic said, then jumped down off the cliff. “No audience participation? You could at least hear me out. I had a whole Tiger Heart Haiku planned!”

“You could bribe me in gold, and I still wouldn’t listen to them.”

Coming from Riho, that was a lot. He *really* grinded her gears.

“Anyway, what’s up, everyone? It’s me! Tiger Nexamic!”

The other day, he’d shown up to challenge the contingent from Azami—with an eye on securing his victory in the Sacred Mountain Rite. None of them had expected him to show up again this quick.

“.....Back for more? Already?”

Phyllo was ready to fight—she’d been the one who drove him off last time.

“Now, now.” He gestured to placate her. “Tiger Stop! I would love another go sometime, but not today! Also because these are my favorite short tights, and I don’t want you slicing them up with your sharp sharp chops.”

“.....You have favorites...”

“And Renge was furious with me over the exposure and spillage. It was an unfortunate accident, but she bore eye witness to the open house, and the imagery was burned into her brain. I doubt she slept a wink!”

All of this was definitely in the too-much-information category, and the speech ended with a red-faced Renge attacking him from behind. “Shuuuuudduuup! Don’t remind me!”

“Oh, there you are, Renge! You’re letting the accent slip again.”

“...My, how inelegant of me. I must recover with some tea.”

Renge began unpacking her tea set from the box on her back. Satan seemed to find this fascinating.

“Oh? Is that real tea? This world has black tea! I used to always prefer that

over coffee. Really takes me back.”

Renge noticed him staring and frowned. “Who is this spiky-haired gentleman? A new ringer from the Kyounin clan? Ogling someone is far from elegant.”

It never occurred to her that he simply hadn’t seen tea in hundreds of years.

Anzu finally stopped wailing “I can’t hear anything” long enough to notice their arrival. She came over.

“Why are you here, Renge? The Kyounin clan is busy doing last-minute training for the Sacred Mountain Rite tomorrow!”

“Yet, you appeared to be hunched over with your hands over your ears. I assume those wails were because you know you can’t win?”

“That wouldn’t make me wail. I was...engaged in philosophical thought about the nature of man and the divide between species.”

It did not seem like the interlopers had witnessed the aerial combat. If they had, they wouldn’t be casually narrating or having tea.

“So? How many times are you planning on barging in?” Anzu growled.

Renge didn’t bat an eye and just poured herself some tea. “I would vastly prefer to spend no time in the company of a traitor without an elegant bone in her body. But a certain someone insisted on making a declaration of war, and so we led him here.”

“A certain someone? Who might that be?”

“Mwa-ha-ha! He’s got a lot to lay on you! Make ’em weep, boy!” Nexamic waved his arms like the host of a variety show, calling out...

“H-hi, Lloyd and everyone else... Sorry I just disappeared.”

Allan poked his head out from behind a rock, looking highly guilty.

Riho’s bad mood got visibly worse. “Oh, the idiot who’ll run off with literally any woman.”

“Don’t put it like that! That was an accident! A misunderstanding! Hngg...”

He’d been so seasick that he hadn’t realized he was going to the enemy camp, and he was more ashamed of that than anyone.

“Yes! He wasn’t lured by Renge’s wiles! But by the harmony of muscle upon muscle! That’s your point, right?”

“Our eyes met, and it felt explosive! This is no misunderstanding but destiny! That’s your point, right?”

Nexamic and Renge were both *very* good at interpreting things to suit their purposes.

“Uh, can we move on to the topic at hand? Are you back now, Allan?” Lloyd seemed worried.

Allan looked emotional. Only Lloyd was genuinely concerned for his well-being.

“L-Lloyd, truth is...”

“Mwa-ha-ha! Allan accompanied us because he has words for you! Listen to them!”

“Let me *say* them!”

“Come, Sir Allan! Declaring war? Demanding surrender? Choose whichever you like—just make it elegant!”

“Not much of a choice! No, no, no, what I want to say is—”

Eug was behind all of this.

He didn’t know her whole plan, but it clearly involved demon lords. To prove it, he’d allowed Surtr to possess his ax, and he’d quite like to come back to them. He had so much he wanted to say, his head was spinning like a new employee delivering his first report to an uncompromising boss.

Spotting this, Lloyd kept his question gentle. He had the makings of a very good manager.

“What’s going on, Allan? You don’t really want to fight us, do you?”

“N-no, not at all! Truth is...”

Before he could mention Dr. Eug’s involvement...

Rooooooooarrr!

“Aughhhh?!?!?!?!?”

""""""""Huh?!"""""""""

The ax at Allan's hip—the one possessed by Surtr—had suddenly let out a growl, and a column of flames had rocketed toward Satan, leaving a groove in the earth and a fire burning before his friends' eyes. A blast of heat hit their faces, evaporating all the sweat.

“F-firrreeeee?! Huh? Why?!” Allan himself received the shock of his life. He glared down at the demon lord. “Why’d you start a fire, Surtr? That’s not what we agreed to! You said you’d help explain the situation!”

But the demon lord wasn't listening. He was *very* worked up.

“That spiky hairdo! You must *pay*! My mortal enemy... Prepare to *die*!”

His voice was a guttural snarl. All that fury aimed squarely at Satan.

“You set him on fire for having spiky hair?! That’s not exactly an uncommon look!”

Nexamic and Renge were momentarily taken aback by this rain of fire, which was clearly not a human-level attack. Definitely demon lord level. But it didn't take long before...

“Mwa-ha-ha! Sir Allan does it again! You had a skill like the legendary demon lords up your sleeve?”

“Only one word for it: magnificent! Elegance demands you strike the first blow.”

...the two chiefs accepted it wholeheartedly. They really raised interpreting events in their favor to an art form.

“See? Now everyone’s getting weird ideas!”

Meanwhile, the Azami crew were taken aback by the sudden attack...and confused by the sheer strength behind it.

“What the hell? You turning on us?”

“Should we sue him? Take him for every penny he’s got?”

“Allan? Did we push you to the brink? I thought you’d accepted your role in

the party!”

“.....Why is a muscle-brain casting magic? Makes *no* sense.”

Being them, they mostly reacted with scorn.

“Wh-what’s going on, Allan?” Lloyd asked, rattled.

“.....Step back, Lloyd,” Satan warned. He’d easily dodged the attack and stepped forward, raising a hand—and the flames were instantly quelled.

His face was grim. His eyes cold. The air seemed to crackle.

“Wh-what’s happening, Satan?”

“I thought I sensed hostility from him—no, from his ax. It’s possessed by a demon lord.”

““““It is?!”””” They all gasped.

“Yes.” Satan nodded gravely. “I heard a faint voice—and even the way it spoke annoyed me. Assume this is the worst kind of demon lord, one that means nothing but harm to all mankind.”

This opinion was likely a *bit* biased, but Vritra was on the same page.

“I’m unsure of its intent, but I can vouch for it being a demon lord. And I’m sure I’ve heard that voice before. Wasn’t he from Amer—?”

Selen interrupted. “Vritra, we’re having an important conversation here. Be quiet.”

“Oh, right, sorry...hngg! I’d almost remembered, too...”

Satan watched them, frowning. “That belt reminds me of someone, but... Nah, it can’t be. He wasn’t that easily cowed. Not worth dwelling on now—this new demon lord definitely has history with me. Damn, I wish I could remember what!”

He was probably better off not knowing all this bad blood was over a cabaret girl, really.

Anyhoo, the fact that Allan had shown up with a demon lord–possessed ax was giving the contingent all sorts of weird ideas. Anzu and Marie were giving him funny looks, whispering to each other.

“I traded blows with him the other day, but that ax didn’t have any kind of ominous vibe to it then... You think it’s genuinely possessed?”

“It’s very possible, Lady Anzu. And if he’s carrying something like that—and attacking without warning...”

“I heard a second voice from his direction,” Selen offered, joining them. “They did not seem to get along as famously as Vritra and I do, but...”

Vritra let out a squeak of protest, but...a very soft one. “That is hardly an apt expression, Mistress. I would like a full explanation of this theory in writing at a later date.”

Riho ignored this line completely. “Right, right... So we can assume it isn’t just the ax—Allan himself is under the demon lord’s influence.”

“H-he is?!” Lloyd gasped.

“I could only hear fragments.” Riho began sorting through what she’d heard. “He said, ‘That’s not what we agreed!’ Which means that dummy probably made a deal and got tricked into giving up control. If he’s still able to argue with it, the demon lord hasn’t completely taken over yet.”

Allan was hardly pleased by the assumption that he’d let this happen.

“You really oughtta have more faith in me!” he wailed.

“See? Sometimes it sounds just like Allan. I’m sure he’s *trying* to fight back.”

His protests dismissed out of hand, Allan shut up. Clearly, he’d reached the form of nirvana that knows when it’s pointless to argue.

Phyllo shot Allan a heavy-lidded glare and took Riho’s side. “.....That explains why he only showed up now. I thought it was odd those two would have such faith in Allan’s strength... They’re not *blind*.”

“They’ve mistaken the demon lord’s power for the skills of the fictitious dragon slayer. And they’ve been told Anzu is betraying her country... Everything’s conspired against them.”

Selen gave Renge and Nexamic a look of withering pity...and Allan the look you reserve for sidewalk puke. So *that* didn’t change.

Desperate to convince *someone* he wasn't a demon lord, Allan called out to the one person he didn't know.

"This is a disaster. Spiky-haired dude! I'm not a demon lord!"

"Hmm, that would suggest your Allan is still conscious."

"I'm doomed, aren't I?" Nothing he said would break through the wall of misunderstanding.

Given her history, Marie felt particularly sorry for him. "My father was once possessed by a demon lord. I know your pain, Allan!"

"Wh-what's that, Marie? Wait, are you actually Prin—"

Marie cut Anzu off, nodding gravely. "For a while after the initial possession, he retained a will of his own. And that allowed him to save me—he helped me escape. And now the same thing's happening to Allan."

She shook her head, looking very sad.

Allan shook his head, looking even sadder. Clearly, no one was going to listen to him.

Satan was studying him closely—with a side helping of loathing directed at the ax Surtr lurked within. "That vile tongue of yours deceived this poor man? How craven."

"If it's possessing a weapon...what can we do about it, Satan?" Marie asked.

Satan didn't hesitate. "It's harsh, but roughing him up is one option. If we can get the ax out of the owner's hands, then it's likely—"

Faced with a beating, Allan began acting *very* jittery...like the culprit brought in for questioning. "Rough me up?! Come on, hear me out first! I'm—"

"You spiky-haired jerk! I'm gonna turn you all to ashes, baby!"

"Surtr?! Stop shouting over me! It makes it sound like I *want* that!"

But Surtr was beyond reason, and Allan didn't know *what* to do.

Allan's shrieks went in one side of the ax and out the other. Surtr's voice rambled like a broken radio echoing lost memories.

“She was mine! You know how many times I bought Dom Pérignon for her?! I won’t let you have her!”

“Seriously, Surtr, get a grip.”

“Nooooo! You’re not taking her from meeee! Spikyyyy! Don’t you tempt heeeer! We’d held haaaands! She’d made me cookieees! We’d promised we’d get marriiiiied!”

Obsession with girls can really do that to a man—er, demon lord.

Surtr was spitting fragments of memories like a machine gun, and Satan took it all in stride.

“Hmph, cookies? She brought me back souvenirs from a trip! Proof she was thinking of me on vacation! Argh, why can’t I remember more?”

Yep, he was *just* as bad, really. Driven into acts of abandon by things he didn’t even fully recall.

Riho and Phyllo were whispering to each other.

“What kinda history do these demon lords share?”

“...My understanding is lessening by the moment.”

Meanwhile, Renge had gone bright red. “Wh-whaaat?” she stuttered—clearly taking Surtr’s words as Allan’s. Her brain started shaking them around, desperately searching for meaning. “You clearly love this girl... Allan loves her... That spiky-haired man does look like a home-wrecker. But that means...!”

Having leaped to the conclusion that Allan *must* be in love with her, she went back over his words.

“We...did hold hands! But cookies... Does he mean scones? But what was that about a promise? Wait, marriage?! When did we do that?!”

Never.

...But human brains are designed to interpret two out of three like it was fact, especially when you *like* the implication.

“Come to think of it, we did get rather drunk...and...lord howdy! Did I really —? I ain’t got no recollection!”

“Mwa-ha? Renge, that’s the worst accent slip yet!”

“G-gosh and golly! That does make a few things less durned confounding. He rolled outta bed all sheepish and ashamed!”

She clearly hadn’t heard a word Nexamic said. Her stream of consciousness had left her positively *wriggling*. As her delusions accelerated, Allan found himself unable to control Surtr’s anger any longer.

“Arghhhhhh! Just the sight of his hair makes me wanna set it on fiiiiiire! It’s too spikyyyyyyy!”

“Snap out of it, Surtr!” Allan yelled.

“He’s hopping mad ’cause some scallywag tried to take a pass at me—such bliss!”

“Renge, I’m getting genuinely frightened here. Can’t you see my hamstrings quivering?”

They’d swapped which of them was dumber, and Nexamic was perturbed.

Meanwhile, the crew from Azami were so sold on their possession theory that they’d started expanding it.

“It...does seem like his mind is still left. He’s arguing with the demon lord.”

“So that demon lord’s the one trying to turn us on each other, wrest control of the Domain...and that’s why it fed them a lie about me betraying everyone.”

“Just like the plot to overthrow Azami.”

“B-but...if Allan—,” Lloyd wailed. In his mind, Allan was so strong, that if this happened to him—then Lloyd didn’t stand a chance.

“Mwa-ha-ha!” Nexamic grinned, pecs wobbling. “Lloyd, I hate to drop this on you just as you’ve got a little confidence! But victory in the rite will be ours! You’ve seen Sir Allan’s power for yourself! It was a shock to all of us! If you choose to surrender, we’ll be glad to accept.”

“Sorry, Lloyd. But hol’ on to your britches, Anzu!” Renge exclaimed. “My Sir Allan’s gonna *uproot* your treasonous schemes!”

“Um, Renge, please...”

“Aheemmmmm! My, excuse me. What was I even saying? How mortifying.” Renge covered her lips, blushing.

Riho sensed rom-com shenanigans and frowned. “She’s got the hots for Allan? That’s gotta be the demon lord’s power. *No way* he’d ever do that on his own.”

“*That* you have faith in? I mean, you’re not wrong...”

Ignoring Allan’s self-own, Anzu gave him a look of pity. “One more goal for the rite... We’ll have to save him.”

“When he pops up, we slap him down and free him from the demon lord. Thanks for piling on the trouble, Allan.”

“As a member of the local lords, I don’t approve of you dragging our reputations down.”

“.....Could be a good challenge.”

“I’ll do whatever I can to help!”

They were all fired up to save him from the demon lord’s influence, at least.

“I’m glad you want to help, but I feel like I won’t come out of it with my limbs intact...”

Meanwhile, the demon lords were really getting into it.

“.....Tch, he always could talk the arm off a donkey. That’s how he Dom Pérignoned her... Argh, it’s so hazy! I can’t remember what that even is...”

“Yo! Spiky! I’m gonna reduce you to a heap of cinders! That girl’s got one destiny, and it’s with me! She’s... What was her name?”

It was really heating up. Demon lord versus demon lord: grudge match! ...It sounded good, but the grudge was over some dumb shit about a cabaret girl who’d been stringing them both along, and if anyone around discovered the truth, they’d be annoyed beyond imagination.

As their argument peaked, Nexamic clapped loudly. “Let’s call that a day, shall we? Don’t want to show all our tricks off! Let’s settle this tomorrow!”

“True! Come, Allan—we must go!”

“Er, wait! No, stop... Why did it turn out like this?!”

And so the Audoc and Tiger clan leaders dragged Allan away without allowing him to provide any correct information.

Not too long after, in a rocky valley in the Audoc terrain...

Having convinced everyone that not only was he possessed, but he was at war with them—and thus could never go home—Allan had announced he was going to go train by himself and fled up here.

It was an area dotted by the short, scraggly trees common at high elevations.

Certain there was no one else around, he stuck the possessed ax between two rocks and began yelling at it. It was an odd sight, but he clearly meant business...which made it even sillier looking.

“What the hell, man? Why’d you start attacking? Now everyone’s convinced I’m a boob who got duped into letting a demon lord possess me! Give me my life back!”

His complaints did not lack for scale, but when all hope was lost, people tended to talk like this.

Surtr, meanwhile, had got his wits back and clearly had some regrets. “My bad. I mean that! I wasn’t trying to trick you or nothing. Just...when I saw that spiky head, I got so pissed off...”

“I’m not talking about your personal problems! Keep it together! You’re a demon lord! I shouldn’t be stuck feeling like an owner trying to restrain a grumpy dog.”

Surtr took that comparison in stride and tried to explain himself. “It’s like...he looks just like this dude I used to know. We were both after the same girl... I’m pretty sure that *was* him.”

“The one you told me about? With the sick brother? You said you were so in love with her that you sprung for a ‘Dom Pérignon’ to help that brother out.”

Put like that, it seemed normal enough. But Surtr was just a sucker falling for a cabaret girl’s bullshit.

“Yeah, I bet we fought each other over that Dom Pérignon. I got her one, and

then he rolls in to show me up, orders the rosé...”

“I thought ‘Dom Pérignon’ was medicine. Medicines come in rosé?”

“Yeah, probably some sort of panacea. And the rosé was...a better one.”

Dom Pérignon rosé definitely cost more, but all buying one would get you was a night’s undivided attention.

“Then I guess I get wanting to attack,” Allan muttered, still not satisfied. “But can’t you control the impulse? I was thinking of swallowing my shame and trying again, but...”

Surtr’s response was so resigned that Allan could almost see his head shake.

“Can’t promise that. I dunno if this is a demon lord thing or what, but there’s no telling what’ll set me off...and plenty of things do. Heh-heh.”

“‘Heh-heh,’ my ass! I oughtta leave you here!”

Allan wasn’t into carrying around a bomb if he didn’t even know where the trigger was. He didn’t sound like he was joking.

“Sorry, bro! Don’t mean to be a burden, ole buddy, old pal! Don’t abandon me in my hour of need! I get enough of that with girls! If guys start abandoning me, it just wouldn’t be fair!”

“Oh, now you’re all...”

“I’m one of the better ones! There is this demon lord called the Erlking; he doesn’t have a thought in him except splitting pieces of himself off to grow more treants. And there’s this locust guy, Abaddon? He’s so hungry he’s always trying to conquer places. At least, that’s what the girl in the helmet and white coat said.”

“Dr. Eug?”

“Yeah...and the reason I’m only *this* crazy is because I managed to remember a few fragments of my past.”

So the spiky-haired guy remembered everything? Allan almost voiced that thought but figured it might set Surtr off again, so he stopped himself.

“So you admit you’re pretty crazy? But if you know Dr. Eug, then I really *can’t*

just drop you.”

“Best plan is for you to get strong enough to restrain me when I snap.”

“That ain’t happening...” Allan slumped to the ground, defeated.

“We have a lot in common,” Surtr muttered, too quietly for Allan to hear. “I thought you might be able to, but...I guess it ain’t that easy.”

“What was that?”

“Oh, just talking to myself.”

“Argh, what am I supposed to do? They think I’m possessed! They’re gonna throw everything they’ve got at me! But if I don’t enter this tournament, there’s no telling what Nexamic and Renge will do...and I still don’t know why Dr. Eug captured you!”

Surtr was now fully back to his initial friendly confidant vibe.

“You’ve got no choice but to fight, huh? If you win, make ’em listen! If you lose, just go, ‘Thanks for freeing me!’”

“You make it sound easy, but if I have to fight Lloyd? He might well kill me.” Allan sounded relieved that Surtr had his groove back.

“That boy, right? Your master? The soft-looking kid with the chestnut hair hiding behind the spiky-haired demon lord?”

“You noticed him?”

“I’m a demon lord. Could sense the power. He was off the charts for a human. At full power, I could take him, but not in this form.”

“Are you really planning to fight? I was hoping to find a diplomatic solution...”

“I’m trying to help! You’ve gotta surpass your master. That spiky head is working with your boy! I know it! You’ve gotta crush him!”

“I don’t need *that* kinda help! I crave peace!”

“Cool! I can do that. Grow some balls, Allan! This is a proxy war! You’ve gotta beat him to a pulp and prove you ain’t been taken over by no demon lord! That’s the only waaaaay!”

“Nothing involving a beatdown counts as peace! You’re back in crazy mode! Surtr!”

Allan was regretting ever talking to this thing and was forced to spend the rest of the daylight hours pounding the concept of a peaceful solution into the demon lord’s head.

While Allan was struggling to make sense of his predicament...

“Well, this is a predicament.”

Alka’s group had been thrown in a prison operated by the Audocs. Their ship had pulled over to refuel, and they’d been asked to disembark and then been guided to a dimly lit interior...and into a cell.

So basically, they just followed a guide right into prison.

Without knowing why they’d been locked up or even realizing that they were, they kicked back awhile...until realization dawned.

“How did this happen?” Merthophan wailed, clutching the bars.

“Calm yourself, Merthophan. They probably just ran out of reception rooms to hold the passengers! And used the jail for overflow.”

“Even if that unlikely scenario were true, they wouldn’t have locked the door.”

No iron bars could possibly contain Alka, so she was definitely not treating this situation with the same gravity.

Micona sighed, unable to imagine a reason for their confinement. “It’s not like Ex-Colonel Merthophan dropped his clothes to reveal his loincloth form...”

“I have no idea how that would lead to imprisonment. Certainly, it exposes a great deal of skin, but it is impossible for Traditional ☆ Farming ☆ Attire to be a crime!”

It was now his default fashion statement, and those beautiful eyes radiated such innocence that both Alka and Micona chose not to argue.

“Hard to imagine this is Jiou’s doing. They’d know these iron bars are like Styrofoam to me.”

“What kind of foam?”

“Oh, whoops. Micona, that doesn’t exist in this era. Just...imagine something really flimsy,” Alka said, sticking out her tongue.

“Okaaay...but certainly, they’re aware my treant powers could easily bend these bars. That does make Jiou’s involvement unlikely. I mean, it’s *this* easy.”

Micona actually *did* extend a treant root and bend one of the bars.

“Hey, put that back!” Merthophan scolded. “These really are flimsy, though. I can easily extend my loincloth through the gaps! They’re of no use as a containment facility.”

“.....I’m getting quite concerned about this trajectory you’re on...”

If Alka, the embodiment of outlandish, was getting worried...

A cheery voice cut in, expressing that exact thought. “Golly! If Alka starts worrying about you, you’re doomed!”

“Who the—?!” Merthophan shouted, reflexively stripping to his loincloth. (He was definitely “doomed.”) Eve—in her usual costume—had poked her head out in front of their cage, waving adorably...like a theme-park mascot had come to play. This made Micona’s frown deepen.

“A bunny costume? Are you kidding me? Let us out of here!”

“I assure you—I’m not kidding at *all*.”

This silly response left Micona ready to throw down, but Alka raised a hand to stop her.

“Alka, why—?”

“That voice...is it really you?”

Eve spun twice and struck a pose. No wavering, like an experienced dancer.

“It is! Been far too long, Ruka Akizuki. Wait, you’re going by Alka now?”

“President...Eva?”

Eve wagged a finger. “Non, non! It’s Eve now. Eve of the Profen Kingdom.”

Merthophan recognized that name and saluted. “Eve...and that costume!

You're King Eve Profen?!"

"Yep! Chaaaarmed."

Merthophan followed the salute with a low bow. "I apologize for my subordinate's rudeness."

"Hmm, I feel like the loincloth is *far* ruder."

"Oh, sorry, I'll adjust the wedgie," Merthophan apologized, as if she'd pointed out his tie was loose.

"Wow, it's no use talking to you," Eve said, wriggling with apparent delight.

She took a key out of the pouch on her shoulder and moved to open the door.

"Sorry you had to get all cooped up! I was so desperate to see you, Alka, that I put out a directive saying, 'If you see this kid, lemme know!' and I guess they thought that was like a wanted poster. My bad!"

Alka finally recovered from her stupor—but when she spoke, her voice slipped out of her usual goofy grandma act. "You wanted to see me? And... you're still alive?"

Eve seemed to be fumbling with the door, the costume clearly getting in the way. "Argh," she muttered and stuck a hand out of the mouth to complete the job. A very uncanny spectacle.

"Yep, I'm alive! The very person who made the world like this. A criminal without a wanted poster— Oh, it's open! You're free!"

The more whimsical Eve got, the more serious Alka became.

"That was Eug! You didn't—"

"It was me, Akizuki. Don't you forget that. That crime is one I'll carry—back to my burrow!"

The speed of her tone shifts could give you whiplash, her behavior so inexplicable it looped back around to terrifying.

"Chief, you know the king of Profen?"

"And since when do you talk like that, Alka?"

A change had swept over Alka, and it was worrying her companions. They'd never seen her this grim.

"You kids go on ahead!" Alka urged, forcing herself back into character. "I'm gonna hang back and chat with this lady."

"I don't mind doing that," Micona said. "But what's the history between you two?"

"That's top secret," Eve whispered. "Like your bust size, big boobs."

"Wha—?!"

Micona had no clue how to deal with a dig that direct, and Eve followed it up with a reach and (attempted) grab.

"Tch! They're E-cups or better! E! E!"

And with that display of naked hostility, she turned back to Alka.

"We've got a lot to catch up on, human demon lord. Let's talk over tea."

"Human demon lord?" Merthophan asked.

"Forget she said that," Alka snapped. She took a step after Eve, then turned back. "This could take a while. Watch after Lloyd for me, Merthophan. Same to you, Micona."

And then she followed Eve away, looking less like a kid grandma than a business woman on her way to a sales meeting.

Chapter 3

An Apocalyptic Election: Suppose the World's Leader Was Decided via Fisticuffs

The Sacred Mountain Rite, a tournament held every four years to decide which clan would rule the Ascorbic Domain. The leader of the victorious clan would run the Domain for the next four years. As elections went, it was both retrograde and enthralling.

The rite itself lasted for months. An impartial lottery divvied the clans into groups, resulting in eight clans advancing to the final tournament. Basically, the same as the World Cup.

The finals took place on the ritual stage in the foothills of the Sacred Mountain, Keihi, attended by crowds local and foreign, nobility, merchants, and ordinary people alike.

And the format of each individual battle...was determined by drawing straws.

That may raise a few eyebrows, but this was part of the fun. Battles weren't just one-on-one—you might get three-on-three or battles requiring specific weapons or even more outlandish elements like a three-legged race. The sheer variety and potential for upsets kept the action thrilling.

"All is as the Sacred Beast desires," they claimed. The rite had a heavy religious angle, with the battles being offered up to the Sacred Mountain's god.

Today marked the day of the final battle.

The stage was blessed with clear skies, and a massive crowd gathered at the sanctuary, which was built nearly an hour's walk from the base. Of traditional wooden construction, it was decorated with torii-style gates, geometrically arranged rock states, pale pink wards made from the "Sacred Beast's favorite food," Mastema Fruits. All accompanied by the soothing scent of incense... Each and every one of these things clearly so religiously significant that touching

them seemed liable to bring misfortune. Even those of little faith would likely keep their hands to themselves.

At the heart of this solemn sanctuary, blanketed by clean mountain air, was the venue itself, set at the base of a circular indentation. They'd hauled earth from the mountain's base, hardening it into a stage, and scattered gravel all around.

It had all the austere beauty of a Zen garden.

The crowd was less touristy than international dignitaries, monks, and clan members here to support their sides—so they were pretty serious in their own right.

It seemed less like a martial arts competition than a purification or harvest ritual. Lloyd's back instinctively stiffened as he arrived.

"Nothing like the Student Sorcery Tournament," Riho noted, visibly uncomfortable. "So many VIPs in the crowd... We're totally out of our element, huh?"

"It's like I've accidentally wandered into a stranger's wedding."

"Right you are, Lloyd!" Marie said. "Those looks suggest they don't think we belong here."

Since they weren't even from the Ascorbic Domain, they technically *didn't* belong here.

"Don't worry about it. This wouldn't have happened if they hadn't used that poison. And we can always formally make you part of the Kyounin clan once this is over, heh-heh-heh!"

Phyllo pointedly ignored Anzu's "joke."

"...It isn't just hostility. Some...are curious."

"They're definitely wondering what we can do," Lloyd observed, picking up on the same thing. "Everyone from the Domain is so eager to better themselves!"

"Not just that," Anzu corrected. "Merchants looking for bodyguards, guild scouts—there's lots of people taking stock of you here."

“Yikes, scouts? This is like a high-pressure job interview. Stressful!” Riho exclaimed, not sounding at all stressed.

“We’re here as ringers for the downed Kyounin students.” Selen nodded. “Naturally, they want to know how good we are. Sadly, I’ve already secured a lifelong position at Sir Lloyd’s side, so scouting me will do them no good at all.”

The usual delusional tinge was met with the usual frosty stares from the rest of the girls—just take that as a given.

“Mistress, perhaps best not to be too optimistic. Your rivals have been making great strides— AUGH! Please, don’t tie me in a bow!”

Selen had grown worryingly good at quelling Vritra’s objections.

Meanwhile, Lloyd was more worried about living up to the audience’s expectations.

“It’s not just Anzu and the Kyounin clan. If we fail, they’ll think less of the entire Azami Kingdom. We’ve gotta avoid that...!”

“Don’t let yourself think such things, Lloyd,” Satan interrupted. “You’ve made great strides in a very short time span. You’ve got Satan’s seal of approval! Don’t you agree, Anzu?”

Anzu caught his glance and nodded. “Yeah, and the contents of the battle is down to the luck of the draw. Don’t worry; you’ll only have to fight if the format agrees with you. Pretty sure you could win no matter the format, but...”

“Ah-ha-ha, you’re both far too kind.”

Lloyd’s low self-esteem was enough to break down barriers between demon lords and humans; Satan and Anzu were now exchanging rueful glances like old friends.

Phyllo was running through the tournament guide. “.....We draw for each match, and it’s best of five...so three wins to victory?”

“Right,” Anzu replied. “See that big ole wooden box? We pick reps based on what’s written there and send ’em out to battle.”

“.....And everyone’s okay with that? Doesn’t this decide who rules?”

“Okay with it? I mean, it’s holy. A festival to honor the Sacred Beast, held once every four years—and somewhere along the line, it wound up also deciding who’s in charge. Drawing straws may sound crazy, but pretty much everything’s a fight of some kind, so...should be fun!”

“.....Hmph!” Phyllo snorted, clearly ready to try her new moves out in real combat.

“Fights, huh?” Lloyd voiced. “If they had cooking or cleaning, I’d definitely be in for those!”

This earned him a round of extremely pleasant smiles...and that mood was shattered by a Kyounin warrior, who came running over.

“Hahh...hahh...! Lady Anzu...!”

“What? You seem upset.”

The warrior was badly out of breath, and Anzu had to pat her on the back until she calmed down.

“W-weird intruders...at the Kyounin camp!”

“How weird?”

The warrior shuddered, clearly not wanting to remember it. “A half-naked man...”

That was all Anzu needed to hear. She was already shaking her head, looking exhausted. “Geez, another assassin sent by Nexamic? Desperate to win no matter the cost, huh.”

“But if it was Nexamic, he’d have introduced himself as part of the Tiger clan.”

“It’s trouble no matter what, Marie. But if he gets too bad, I’ll just have to cut him down.”

Anzu headed off with an indomitable grin. The crew from Azami followed.

In the hall outside the sanctuary, they found an odd assembly. Women letting out little shrieks. Security priests fuming. And two people everyone in Lloyd’s group recognized—Merthophan and Micona.

The former was, naturally, in a loincloth.

“You there! What’s the meaning of this? Put your clothes on!”

“I’m wearing clothes! Any farmer knows that! This is Traditional ☆ Farming ☆ Attire!”

“So you don’t need to be dressed like that *now*.”

The priest had an excellent point.

“I do!” Merthophan insisted. “I’m looking for someone. Ma’am, have you seen this boy?”

Merthophan swiped the front flap of his loincloth, and an image of Lloyd appeared on it. “We’re looking for him...”

The little shriek became a big one. A natural reaction to a man with an image of a cute young boy on his loincloth flap.

Micona stood by, making no effort to stop her former superior, simply letting her own desires take the throttle. “Let us in right now! I can smell Marie’s tantalizing odor from inside!”

Any scent emanating from Marie was entirely because she’d eaten yakisoba from a festival stall.

“Odor? I smell nothing but incense. Augh! Don’t do that! Stopppp!”

“Let me in, or this treant will rip you asunder!”

Her desires opened that throttle a bit too far, and tree roots gushed out, binding the priest. The screams grew even longer. It was now a hellscape.

“““”””

Coming across an acquaintance making a spectacle of themselves was always awkward.

Anzu was still traumatized from being chased all over Azami by the loincloth and treant combo.

“Aughhhhh!”

And that was now revived. After a quick screech, she wound up rolled tight like a pill bug, biting her thumb.

“Mm? Oh!” Merthophan heard her scream and let out a friendly shout an octave higher, like a housewife who’s just spotted a gossip buddy down the way.

“Lady Anzu! If you aren’t a sight for sore eyes!”

“Oh, Lady An— And Marieeee!”

The crowd parted voluntarily, like the sea before Moses, not wanting anything to do with her biological transmogrification. A touching reunion.

“Oh, and Lloyd!” Merthophan added. “Glad we finally caught up. When we got to the headquarters of the Kyounin clan, you were already gone! I never imagined you’d be halfway up the Sacred Mountain! It’s rather chilly up here.”

“Then put some clothes on, Ex-Colonel Merthophan. You’re *abroad*.”

“Prin— Ahem, Marie. Pardon me. Certainly, I should have taken the local climate into consideration. As the agricultural adviser, consider me shamed.”

“That’s not the shameful thing, Merthophan,” Riho reminded.

No matter what country he was in, the loincloth was a public nuisance. Do try to avoid stripping to your skivvies on vacation, dear reader.

Selen had never seen these two together. “What’s going on here?” she asked, frowning. “Why are you here? Are you in cahoots?”

Miconna managed to stop herself, panting, inches from Marie long enough to answer. “Good question, Selen Hemein! Obviously, I am here to see Marie.”

A simple answer that silenced all. The second time today!

“Miconna, were you so desperate for my medicine you came all this way?” Marie asked. As ever, she was the only one here unaware of what drove Miconna’s aggression. It would have a severe toll on their relationship if she worked it out, so perhaps best to let that sleeping dog lie.

Meanwhile, loincloth Merthophan looked rather confused.

“Truth is, Miconna Zol and Chief Alka insisted they had to come here. I leave the reason to your imaginations, but...I wasn’t sure what else to do.”

“...I know what you should do. Put your clothes on.” Phyllo glared pointedly at

him until he reluctantly began to get dressed. Starting with the top. You'd think you'd want that crotch covered first, but nope.

Marie, meanwhile, had peeled herself away from Micona at the mention of Alka.

"Gah, the kid grandma?! Master Alka's here? Where?! Where?!"

"Alka went off with a bunny costume, looking grim."

"She... A bunny costume? I'm lost. What could she be up to? She's turned me into frogs and bugs but...a bunny? I mean, that would be cute, but...I'd rather not..."

Given Alka's usual bullshit, Marie just assumed this was a portent.

Micona was panting over that, too, but she and the loincloth man had been causing a scene outside the Kyounin camp, so...

"What's all this?" A group of important-looking Ascorbians were approaching.

"Are you...the Ascorbic police? The Priest Squad?" Marie asked.

They wore white vestments and carried spears, brandishing them like...all cops do around criminals. At the center of them was an elder priest, glaring fiercely at the crowd over his mustache.

At the end of this circuit, he found Anzu curled up with her thumb in her mouth and sneered, "You know these ruffians, Lady Anzu? And you call yourself a ruler in the holy grounds protected by the Sacred Beast?"

His spite was enough to snap her back into character. "Priest Chief," she managed to say, summoning her old gravitas once more. "Thank you for overseeing the battles today."

His hairy lip curled with disdain, and he snorted once. "Need I remind you again the Kyounin clan does not rule alone?"

Getting a big *asshole* vibe off him, Selen leaned over, whispering in Marie's ear.

"What's a Priest Squad? Who gets to talk like that to Lady Anzu?"

"They're a division of the clergy in the Ascorbic Domain. Tasked with handling

trouble. Essentially the Ascorbic police force. It's their job to keep events like this running smoothly, so sometimes they'll have more power than the actual ruler. Since they oversee the Sacred Mountain itself and the tournament associated with it and help with internal administration, they're convinced the Domain is helpless without them."

So they were a police force that doubled as a bureaucracy.

"You're so well informed, Marie." Micona was well into brown-nosing mode.

The Priest Chief and Anzu were still going at it.

"You seem nervous. First time defending your title got you frazzled?"

"Hardly! There's just...been a lot going on."

"That's what frazzled usually means."

Anzu couldn't argue with that.

"Everyone's frazzled their first time!" he exclaimed, seizing his chance. "Don't disgrace our predecessors! Make sure this is done right. Be on the lookout for accidents, incidents, and anything unnecessary or irregular."

"Sure, sure," she said, letting it wash over her. Clearly, she'd dealt with him before.

"There are visiting dignitaries from across the continent, and we must stay on schedule and complete this rite without a single mishap! I trust we have your cooperation."

"Yeah, yeah."

"Having your team composed primarily of outsiders is ordinarily not something we'd allow, but there are too many visitors looking forward to the tournament to end in a called loss. Be grateful!"

"Oh, I am. Thank you, thank you."

"If there's a disaster on my watch, it'll be recounted for generations of my family to come, and that would never do..."

".....His real motivation," Phyllo muttered.

Before the Priest Chief could complain any further, Renge and Nexamic burst

in.

“Mwa-ha-ha! More trouble, Anzu? If you need to relax, just ply my hamstrings!”

“You haven’t had enough tea. All that energy spent gathering this riffraff and now you’re breaking apart on the ascent. How inelegant...”

Anzu fired back. “Big talk from an alliance of convenience that can’t even stand each other.”

Renge pointed her teacup at Anzu. “That issue is long since resolved. Allow me to inform you there is no longer any chance of you succeeding. Right, Sir Allan?”

At his name, Allan emerged, looking just as guilty as the day before. “Uh, yeah...not really... I just want to say—”

This was his chance. His last opportunity to escape being beaten in front of a crowd, mistaken for a fool who got himself possessed by a demon lord. He tried desperately to communicate.

“If you can’t speak your mind, say it with muscle! If any of you *have* any! This is Allan’s declaration of war!”

“No, no, I’m trying to say—”

Before he could actually say anything, Merthophan roared, “What’s this, Allan? Why are you on *their* side?!”

“Gah, Ex-Colonel Merthophan? And Micona, too?!”

“What am I, an add-on? You clearly wish me to rake you over the coals.”

Lloyd hastily tried to fill them in. “Don’t blame Allan! You see, he...”

He told them both how Allan came to be possessed by a demon lord. This involved quite a bit of speculation on his part and was mostly wrong.

Their looks of contempt soon turned to pity.

“I’ve...never seen either of you look so sweetly at me...”

That alone was pitiable.

“I see, Allan,” Merthophan sympathized. “You’ve suffered the same fate I did at the hands of Abaddon.”

“I thought it was odd that you noticed me second, given all my successes as head of the second year. But your mind is not yours—like mine when the treants had taken control.”

“Don’t be so easily convinced!” Allan roared.

They’d both suffered at the hands of that vile power...and easily accepted Allan’s betrayal as a side effect.

“We must allow Lloyd and Allan to battle. He’s the only one who can lift the demon lord’s curse!”

“I hate that you’ve forced me to agree to that, but...Lloyd Belladonna! You’re the only one who can save Allan Toin Lidocaine,” Miconna agreed.

Buying into the misunderstanding was one thing, but now they were busy delivering the final blow. The last thing Allan had wanted was to fight Lloyd... Sometimes the best intentions lead to the worst results.

Miconna’s and Merthophan’s plights at the hands of those other demon lords were very convincing; everyone listening was now certain Lloyd was the boy for the job.

“If it was anyone but Lloyd...I could have lost the match and gone, ‘The curse is lifted!’ But with him, I dunno if I can lose with my limbs attached...”

Allan’s hopes were evaporating like mist in sunlight.

“You were a fool, Allan!” he wailed to himself. “Ex-Colonel Merthophan and Miconna would *never* do anything the way I want them to. Of course they’d try to be *nice* for the first time ever! I should have known. I was born doomed!”

Having given up to a fatalistic level, he was reduced to muttering “No use!” under his breath.

Oblivious to this, the ax at his hip was gradually accumulating heat. “Spiky-haired Satan! This is a proxy war, baby!”

“Ugh, you’re so annoying! But I accept the challenge! Lloyd will send you packing and free Allan from your control.”

“No one was offering a challenge! And you’re snapping even faster than before, Surtr!” Riho said.

“Seems his mind is still in there,” Selen commented.

“...He always was tough. Hang in there...Master will free you!”

The tension was growing. They seemed ready to fight right then and there—but then the Priest Chief stepped in.

“Not here! Not here. No fighting outside the ring! Not on my watch! Do it after I retire!”

“.....You really aren’t trying to hide anything, huh?”

“Priest Chief, do not be concerned!” Nexamic accosted the older man, pecs rippling. “This is merely a demonstration! Part of the pre-match performance! Just a little heart-on-heart action!”

Despite the dubious phrasing, the Priest Chief immediately backed down. “Fine, then,” he said. Clearly only caring about whether things harmed *his* reputation.

“In other words, you can add that tanned lad and the girl with massive pecs to your team, but it will not shake us from inevitable victory! No matter how many string beans you have, the Tiger Hamstrings will prevail!”

“Indeed. Adding further inelegant clods poses no threat to us at all.”

Merthophan stepped forward in the face of their jeers. “String beans? Are you mocking string beans?!”

Wrong thing to get mad about, but...his mind had long since gone to the farm, so perhaps this should be expected.

“Inelegant? I don’t care what you call me, but you’re including Marie in that? Do you not have eyes?!” Micona was also predisposed to getting mad about indirect insults if they affected the only one she cared about.

“Mwa-ha-ha! If you wish to contest the point, then let muscle speak to muscle in the tournament to come! Lloyd, we’ll be giving you everything we’ve got, so make sure you bring your best!”

“Even if I defeat you, don’t grow despondent. True elegance demands you always keep your head raised!”

Both were assuming Lloyd was weak and projecting their past selves onto him—and as a result, being rather supportive.

“Uh, okay. Thank you! But I’m not going to lose. I have to win and get Allan back!”

“A touch of confidence, I see! If only you had muscles, you’d be an ideal man.”

Except Lloyd didn’t just gain confidence; he’d mastered the ability to fly.

“Yes, if you only had elegance... Still, I’m afraid we’re not giving up on Sir Allan. Even once the rite is over.”

A bit of her own desires were mixed in there.

“Wh-what do you mean?” Lloyd blinked at her.

“You know,” Renge whispered. “There’s the ceremony and...don’t make me say it out loud, Lloyd.”

She was clearly getting ahead of herself...and clearly going to be a problem long-term.

“That lady reminds me of me,” Selen growled.

“I was just thinking the same thing.”

“.....Mm.”

Riho and Phyllo smelled the same kinda trouble on both girls. But with all the misunderstandings in the air, it was more suspicion than confirmation.

Oblivious to their stares, Renge and Nexamic offered Lloyd more words of encouragement—unaware that this had already led to him encountering Satan and improving his skills beyond their wildest imaginings.

“They’re better teachers than Anzu is...”

“Er, that’s harsh! But what did Lloyd do to get them both so...attentive?”

Just a long string of misconceptions that had them projecting their past selves

onto him. With all the talk of getting him back, Allan was now officially in the “captured damsel” role—which was making him weep.

“L-Lloyd!”

“Even if I have to fight Allan—!”

“L-Llooooooyd!” Allan had gone from touched to terrified in the blink of an eye.

“Mwa-ha-ha! I guess it’s time’s up (and pump up)! We bid you farewell! Come, Sir Allan!”

“The tyranny of the Kyounin clan ends today! Adieu. Let us make our departure, Sir Allan—put your arm in mine.”

“Mwa-ha-ha! A bicep lock! How festive!”

“D-don’t pull—augh, I’m gonna have to fight after all...!”

Renge and Nexamic on each arm, Allan was dragged away, his anguished cries echoing in his wake.

Merthophan and Micona watched with looks of pity.

“Whew, trouble at every turn!” the Priest Chief observed. “Do try not to make things worse.”

He turned to go, but Anzu grabbed his arm. “Hang on a second, Chief. We’ve got two new entrants.”

Like ordering another beer, she added Merthophan and Micona to their roster. The Priest Chief made a face but nodded and made his exit.

An hour after the public loincloth incident, the new entrants were processed and ready to go, and everyone was seated with their camp, waiting for the tournament to begin.

Simple chairs of stretched cloth and wood were placed before the banners of their camp, like Warring States-era warlords before a battle or fighters before an Edo-era duel.

There was a whole string of rituals and prayers that were never used with ordinary competitions, which really added to the ceremonial feel. Anzu,

Nexamic, and Renge were all on their best behavior, looking as dignified as possible.

The Azami contingent were caught up in the mood, looking tense...

“Ugh, so stiff! Like Merthophan at orientation. I remember how he said to make our hearts, bodies, and hearts strong. Doubling down on the hearts! Who remembers that?”

“I was consumed with loathing for Jiou... Please don’t remind me.”

“I was consumed with love for Lloyd and not listening.”

“.....Three hundred twenty-one... Three hundred twenty-two...”

“I know you’re bored, Phyllo Quinone. But that’s no reason to start doing push-ups. Boring as it is, there is value in boredom.”

“Micona, you seem more bored than anyone.”

“You dare voice an opinion about me, Lloyd Belladonna? Do you wish to rekindle our battle right here and now?”

...Of course they weren’t on good behavior. They were all as oblivious as they were eccentric.

“You could call it confidence, I guess,” Anzu muttered. Marie apologized on behalf of all of them.

“.....Micona...they’re about to explain the rules.”

The prayers were finally over, and the Priest Chief had taken the stage. The solemn vibe faded, and the crowd started getting worked up. Using a megaphone fitted with a voice-amplifying magic stone, he bowed to the audience and began to announce the first match.

“And now the moment you’ve all been waiting for! The war rites we offer up to the Sacred Beast!”

“War rites?” Merthophan muttered. “That’s certainly a grand phrase. All part of the religious aspect?”

“Both clans have brought their might to bear! Whichever wins three of five matches has earned the right to an audience with the Sacred Beast and will

serve as the exalted ruler of the Ascorbic Domain for the next four years! I'm sure you're all curious to know the format of the matches: That will be determined by the contents of this very box!"

The Priest Chief held the ancient wooden box aloft, showing it to the crowds. There was something written on it with a calligraphy pen, but it was far too old to be legible.

"He's trying to make it sound impressive, but we're just drawing lots," Riho grumbled. "Wouldn't it be faster to just...draw straws to decide who's in charge?"

"Please, no," Anzu groaned. "What if we got stuck with the muscle-bound freak show or the woman who can't shut up about elegance?"

"Oof. Heh, forget I said anything."

While the Kyounin camp chattered among themselves, the members of their rival camp were all fired up.

"I'll show them the power of my muscles! The time is here! That is all."

"Heh-heh-heh. I shall be the most elegant ruler and surpass you, Anzu."

Anzu's grin broadened, and her grip on her hilt tightened. "Big talk for poison-dealing cowards. I'll show you! Whether it's dueling blades or a good old-fashioned slugfest!"

Radiating intensity, both camps stared at the Priest Chief as he rummaged around in the box.

"I will now perform the draw with the solemn dignity it deserves. The first battle is..."

He looked down at the wooden card he'd drawn and read it aloud.

"Wowzers! Swimsuit piggyback battle! Will anything pop out the seams?!"

The cheering crowd was instantly silenced...like someone had thrown a bucket of water on them.

"Ahem, so..." The Priest Chief looked up, biting his lip as if he knew he'd really slipped up...like your uncle trying to do a magic trick at a wedding reception and

nobody applauding.

“Uh, Lady Anzu...you said this was a holy thing? And all the matches would be...fights?”

“.....This swimsuit thing ain’t right.”

“That seems positively lewd. As a lady, I object!”

“M’lady Selen... This is where you draw the line...?”

The girls from Azami all expressed their disapproval. (Well, Riho mostly had a bone to pick with Selen.) Anzu herself appeared rather baffled.

“So, uh, they’re usually...normal ideas.”

She was just as uncomfortable with this as they were... Nobody wanted to pop out of a swimsuit.

Nexamic, however, was laughing wildly. “Mwa-ha-ha! Lacking confidence in your figure, Anzu?”

“What are you waiting for? Put your swimsuit on! I’m sure you’ve brought one?” Renge asked.

Anzu saw the entire Tiger contingent holding swimsuits aloft and swore under her breath. “Tch, they saw this coming... Must have tampered with the draw. Bet they knew they’d never win with a normal format. Well planned.”

“What do we do? Raise an objection with the Priest Chief?”

Marie’s suggestion sounded practical, but...

“““Religion is awesooome!!!”””

There were swimsuits on everybody’s minds, and the crowd was going wild. Made it hard to say no.

The uptight elder in charge had clearly opted to insist nothing he’d done was wrong. He was moving right along to the next step.

“It seems the Sacred Beast desires a swimsuit face-off! Ready yourselves for the fiercest of competitions!”

“““We love you, Sacred Beast!!!!”””

Seeing the crowd come together under a single cause, Satan laughed aloud. “Men never change, no matter the world. Can’t say I’m any different.”

Their opponents were busy getting ready...but all their entrants were Tiger clan macho men. All prone to wearing nothing but skivvies anyway...and all looking ready to pop out...

“Mwa-ha-ha! The Tiger clan is used to showing skin! You’ll be desperate to keep your suits on, but we’re happy to pop out at any time! We’ve as good as won! Sir Allan need not enter—this one’s so easy, neither myself nor Renge will join in! All it takes is one twist of the crotch!”

Any time the word *crotch* got mentioned, it was basically a harassment charge, but Tiger Nexamic was always so boisterous that it didn’t sound that bad.

The crowd was going wild for his hip wriggling.

Renge took a languid sip of tea. “With elegant aplomb, I shall be sipping tea while you display your swimsuit, Anzu.”

Anzu shot her a fierce glare, then turned her attention to picking a team.

“Damn, we’ll need at least three. Two form the mount and one gets carried.”

“I’m out!” Riho said. “No way I’m putting a swimsuit on before *this* crowd.”

Fortunately, someone else was rather into it. “For shame! As a soldier for Azami and your upperclassman, I shake my head at you, Riho Flavin.”

“Really, Micono?”

Who else? She was making her rack sway pointedly as she launched into a lecture on moral support.

“We help those in need, even if they’re from foreign nations! That’s the point!”

This logic was so fishy that Riho began to suspect ulterior motives.

“She only ever acts up for one reason. Which means...”

“Isn’t that right, Marie? Let’s change into our swimsuits!”

“Huh? Me?!”

“See? She just wants to get Marie in one.”

Basically, everything Micona did was “Marie-a-holic.” This wasn’t really moral support or even moral at all, and the first-years were all giving her scathing looks.

Marie had no clue why Micona was so hell-bent on getting her in a swimsuit, so she cheerfully encouraged the other girls to join in.

“Um, if it was just me, it would be pretty mortifying, but if we all go together... And having more mounts is an advantage.”

“You’re roping us in?!”

“.....Ew.”

“Ha? You’re kidding!”

Micona wasn’t letting them off the hook, either. “Marie’s willing to go, so you’re obligated to join her! C’mon! Hurry! Oh, Lloyd Belladonna and Ex-Colonel Merthophan, you can stay here. Any chance contact with Marie’s bare flesh would force me to roast you till the char goes all the way through.”

“Reduced to cinders? Keep those fires down, Micona,” Riho growled. Her role as resident roaster didn’t give her much downtime.

As Micona’s lust reached the boiling point, Merthophan smiled. “Yes, Micona Zol! Saving foreigners is all part of the spirit of the Azami army! I shall observe you in action. Right, Lloyd?”

“Yes! I’ll sear Micona’s heroics into my eyeballs!”

They seemed to be in a competition for most tactless.

“Hmm, searing swimsuits into eyeballs?” Satan muttered. “If I said that, Director Ishikura would be all, ‘Turn in an essay repenting your harassment tomorrow!’”

Hearing that, Vritra uncurled the cursed belt in Satan’s direction. “Um, young Satan. Did you just say Ishi-something?”

“Uh-huh...why do ask, Vritra?”

“Could I trouble you to repeat it? Gah! This again, Mistress?”

Selen was yanking Vritra back like an AD reeling in a camera cable, suddenly in full hustle mode. What was up with her?

“Vritra! No time for pointless chatter! We’ve gotta jump in!”

“M-Mistress, I thought you were against the idea?”

“That was before Sir Lloyd promised to burn me into his retinas! Now I have to put on an aneurysm-inducing swimsuit and ensure he never sleeps at night! This way, Vritra! And, Riho, we need you to help carry.”

“W-wait, Selen! This isn’t exactly a beach; I don’t—”

Belt buckle trailing in her wake, nostrils flaring, Selen never even heard Riho’s weak protests. Poor thing—the harder she tried to argue, the more the crowd roared.

“No arguments! Piggyback fight! Come, Marie! I’ll hook you up with the perfect suit.”

“Miconaaaa! Why are all the options string bikinis?!”

Phyllo was gravely inspecting the rack of suits. “...If the suit will make Master’s nose bleed, it’s a viable option.”

“Why swimsuits? What is that even for?! Neither heart nor body are ready for this!”

Seeing Riho alone still dragging her heels, Anzu offered encouragement—no, her grin was just malicious. She’s got a cunning plan, here.

She raised her voice—loud enough that Renge could hear.

“Don’t worry, Riho! You’re still a teenager! You’ve got lovely skin and tight abs!”

“Yeah, I’m hella scrawny! Not exactly flauntable! Why are you yelling?!”

Oblivious to Anzu’s scheme, Lloyd chimed in. “Riho has lovely skin! You can tell she takes care of it. And she’s in great shape!”

The unexpected compliment left her turning red.

Anzu wasn’t letting up, either. “Right you are, Lloyd! No reason to be ashamed of a slender figure! Only feel shame if you’ve been doing no training,

spending all your time gulping down tea, and putting on water weight!”

She repressed a snicker, glancing in Renge’s direction. She was building Riho up to put Renge down.

“Wh-wh-why, I never! I ain’t— I’ll have you know I have complete confidence in my figure.”



“Clearly not. Otherwise, you’d be joining in. But you know I train daily and you don’t. If you go exposing that tea belly, the love of the millennium would freeze right over.”

Renge was so furious she smashed her teacup on the ground, roaring, “You’re on, Anzu! This feud’s gettin’ finalized on piggybacks!”

Nexamic was right next to her doing squats and sweating, but Renge’s rage was so great he stopped and looked up, his sweat quickly becoming...a cold sweat.

“Renge! You’re breaking character!”

“Shut yer can hole, Nexamic! I’ll break anyone who says a funny word! Ya think mah belly’s a water balloon, too, do ya? Get me a swimsuit! This is war!”

“Renge, Renge! Sir Allan’s watching! Mind his gaze!”

Nexamic pointed, and indeed, Allan’s eyes looked ready to pop out of his head.

“.....E-elegant! If you’ll pardon me.” Desperate to cover her slip, Renge chugged tea right from the pot, restoring elegance. How exactly is elegance administered orally anyway? Is it some sort of mineral?

Then she muttered, “This is that darned Anzu’s fault! I’ll get her for this!” She wiped her mouth and scowled at her opponent’s camp.

Having seen the whole thing, Allan settled for saying, “Uh, g-good luck?”

“.....Women are terrifying,” Surtr hissed.

But the upshot of it all was that Renge was forced to don a suit herself and join the piggyback battle.

Anzu and the Azami girls had changed into suits of every style and color, and the people in the crowd were gasping aloud. Meanwhile, the Tiger clan had formed muscly piggyback trios of speedo-clad deep-tanned macho men.

This was definitely getting gasps from *other* sections of the audience. They had their fans, too.

“I know this was *our* trick, but our mounts lack elegance. No charm.”

Riding one of these mounts was Renge herself, looking uncomfortable in a crimson sarong-style swimsuit. Riding a mount opposite, Anzu roared, “So you admit it was a trick? Admitting to foul play?”

“Wha—? Lady Anzu! Steady! It’s a three-girl mount, but we aren’t that stable!” Selen shouted.

The Kyounin clan had opted to go with two mounts, at the cost of safety. Phyllo and Micona were carrying Marie, and Riho and Selen were carrying Anzu.

Riho was super red-faced and not looking up. “I am *not* cool with this. Can we please get it over with...?”

“...Stay frosty.”

The ref—the Priest Chief—heard the allegations...

“No misconduct has occurred! Nothing would get missed on my watch! There’s no way they could manipulate the selection!”

...He was hell-bent on covering it up. He was the type to get caught red-handed during an internal review later on.

“Have you no eyes, Chief? They’ve prepped tons of suits! Wedding dresses! Cook’s aprons! It’s obvious that they’re up to no good!”

The Priest Chief spit on this charge. “Silence, Anzu Kyounin! This is the Sacred Mountain Rite! Your charges are sacrilege!”

“You’ve got us in swimsuits! If you cared about sacrilege, we’d have clothes on!”

Nexamic guffawed. “Nothing but women! And unstable three-lady mounts, guarding against wardrobe malfunctions! We’ve won already!”

“Micona, argue with him!” Selen urged, clearly blaming this on her.

“Marie’s behind is right in front of me! Clad only in a swimsuit! Hahhhhhh!”

Micona’s mind was clearly elsewhere. This close-up was all she’d ever wanted.

“.....Does that count as a trance?” Phyllo asked.

She was more worked up than a cat on catnip. Beyond salvation.

“Uh, Micona? We can win this, right? *Right?*” Marie tightened her headband. When she glanced down at Micona, she found her looking resolute—except for the nosebleed.

“Naturally!” Micona responded.

“...Not the least bit convincing,” Renge chuckled, winding Anzu up. “You may be strong, but if your teams can’t work together—well, just hope the inevitable spillage is an elegant one.”

“Whoever heard of an elegant spillage?! Why don’t you demonstrate?”

Glaring at each other, they both drew their weapons.

“Wait, weapons? In swimsuits?! Isn’t that dangerous?!” Lloyd gasped.

“The goal of a piggyback battle is to capture the opponent’s headband,” Satan mused. “Ordinarily, that wouldn’t require weapons—but this is a spectacle first. Standard fantasy-world stuff. It might be their guts that wind up spilling out!”

As the leaders glared, the Priest Chief yelled, “Time for the first battle! Swimsuit piggyback fight—begin!”

Drums pounded.

The Kyounin clan and Audoc and Tiger clan teams braced for a clash...and stayed braced, waiting for the other to move. In the Kyounin clan’s case, this was largely because three-person mounts weren’t nimble, and one of them was too busy sniffing to do anything. Sad but true.

“Should I take this as confidence? Like a Yokozuna sumo wrestler letting his weight win for him?”

“Leaders should always maintain their aplomb, Anzu. I can win as soon as I take action, but the crowd would be so disappointed! It’s definitely not nerves.”

“Then drop that sarong. Let’s see how sumo you are under there.”

“Drop dead in a ditch! Ugh, *hack, hack!*”

She definitely had that sarong *very* tight. Corset tight. It made it rather hard to breathe from the diaphragm.

“I think we can win this without moving,” Riho said. “Just wait till she passes

out.”

“Careful, Riho,” Anzu warned. “Her secret art, Dragonfly? It’s pretty good.”

Knowing what was coming, Anzu had her blade drawn and ready.

When Renge’s coughing fit died down, she recovered...and tossed her hatchets—not aiming anywhere near her opponents.

“What, did she totally flub it?”

“Nope! They’re coming!” Anzu roared, raising her katana.

As she did, the hatchets came whizzing back.

“...Like tomahawks? She can control them at will?!”

Even the usually impassive Phyllo was shocked by that one.

“Cough! Heh-heh-heh! Such elegant surprise! The Audoc clan’s secret art, Dragonfly! It’s ax manipulation! Hah...hah...”

She was really struggling with her tight sarong there, but the throwing axes were keeping Anzu plenty busy. Between her swift katana strikes and Selen’s cursed belt, they were holding out for now, but each flying ax hit hard, and their unstable piggyback mount nearly toppled over several times.

“That’s Renge’s secret art. Making her weapons levitate and obey her commands—basically a circus trick.”

“But real hard to handle during a piggyback fight!” Riho yelled. “Why’d you wind her up and get her in this?!”

This was a sound argument.

“She pissed me off! I’m not being the only one on display here!”

...Anzu’s answer was, sadly, all about her baser instincts.

“Well, at least you’re honest!” Marie dodged an ax, naturally sympathetic to these pathetic priorities. “But the situation is dire! Axes flying everyone, macho men charging in!”

“.....Any plans? This was *your* idea, Micono.”

Micono tore her eyes off Marie’s writhing rear end, glanced at the macho-

men mounts, and grinned through her nosebleed.

“I do! Now that I’ve feasted my eyes, time I earn that keep. With a little instant death.”

Renge, meanwhile, saw that her axes had stopped both Kyounin units in their tracks and was certain victory was hers. She pointed right at Anzu.

“Time for the elegant finale! Tiger clan! Charge!”

At this, the macho mounts struck poses and hurtled forward.

“Excellent! My beloved Tiger clan gentlemen! Pound them down and snatch their headbands!”

But the macho wave soon had the rug pulled out from under them.

“Mm? What’s wrong?” Nexamic roared. “Move those muscles! Flex! Onward, hamstring brigade!”

But the brigade in question were looking confused.

“Tiger Nexamic! W-we can’t move...!”

“What? Torn muscles? Torn glutes?! No! That’s—”

There were roots around the macho men’s feet, snaring their ankles. They’d appeared from nowhere, growing instantly. It was part of the treant powers Micona harbored. Growing roots beneath her swimsuit, she cackled like...like a demon lord.

“Ahhhhh-ha-ha-ha! The poweeer! I can do anythiiiiing! I might even pull off a back hip circle!”

“Has...that been eluding you?”

“...Tits get in the way of bar exercises... Don’t make her spell it out.”

“Argh, like *I’d* know! Dammit.” Riho sounded thoroughly defeated.

But Micona just kept cackling, tree roots running wild. “C’mon, c’mon, c’mon! I’ll snag it all! Headbands or drawers, they’re all miiine!”

From there on out was like a scene from hell. Tanned macho men shrieking, headbands and bikini briefs getting torn asunder, dozens subjected to tentacle

torture...

It was the sort of visuals that would get a saucy TV program pulled off the air. And it had a chilling effect on the crowd.

“Augh, no! Leave the sarong alone! No, that doesn’t mean you can take the *rest!*”

The enemy commander hoisted up by her roots, Micona turned to the Priest Chief, triumphant.

“Must we continue this contest?” she asked.

“It’s already way over the line!” he roared. “It’s over! Please, no more! Stopppp!”

The Priest Chief simply could not handle mass-produced tanned macho men with torn briefs, so he hastily declared victory.

“Th-the Kyounin clan wins! Fetch some crotch covers! Pronto! You’re defiling the holy rite!”

Micona looked as smug as anyone with a bleeding nose ever had. “Heh-heh! This victory belongs to me and Marie.”

“I—I didn’t do anything?”

The drums pounded again. The Kyounin clan had won without incident. No, given all the enemy spillage, they had won with *plenty* of incident.

“Waughhhhh...” Renge had been dangling upside down from a root, but the moment victory was announced, she was flung aside, landing face-first. Her students pulled her back to their camp.

Like someone rescued after being stranded up a mountain, the trauma of treant tentacle humiliation would stay with her awhile. She was still shaking, tears flowing. “Th-that was horrific... Roots rippling everywhere, tanned macho men spilling all over the place...”

Allan could hardly bear seeing her like this. “I’m ashamed to attend the same school as her. That’s not all I’m ashamed of...”

This entire conflict might only be happening because he couldn’t manage to

warn them about Eug's plot. With that thought in mind, he quietly held out his jacket.

"S-Sir Allan...!"

"Uh, you don't wanna catch cold or anything. Good job lasting that long against the monster—Micona. D-don't let it get you down."

"I won't!"

That was easy. But Allan was too dense to get why she'd perked up like she'd just chugged an energy drink.

".....Allan's demonstrating smooth moves. He's *definitely* possessed."

Allan hadn't actually heard this, but a chill ran down his spine anyway.

"Feels like a suspicion just got 'confirmed.'"

Renge was staring up at him, passion in her eyes. "Such a kind soul... I...I'm sure I *did* agree to marry him..."

Allan was digging himself deeper in more ways than one. Would he ever clear the air...?

With the horrific opening match concluded, and all the spillage being of the *wrong* kind, the crowd's enthusiasm was rather dampened. The crazy skills Micona had used to easily secure that victory were sending ripples through the Audoc and Tiger camp.

"Mwa-ha-ha!"

"Eh-heh-heh."

Or not! Nexamic and Renge were both chortling away, unperturbed.

Renge in particular was fingering the jacket Allan had given her, her smile so gleeful it was hard to believe she'd just been thoroughly trounced.

Anzu had hastily changed back into her usual garb, giving the other camp a look of deep suspicion.

"What's your problem? How are you laughing? You lost! Show some remorse!"

“Mwa-ha-ha! Your ringers are certainly intimidating! However, are you sure it was the right choice throwing that many people into the first round?”

“Huh?”

“An elegant soul would have read the regulations first, Anzu. Especially the last line. The handwritten one. Ha-choo! Argh, darn it.”

“Not an elegant sneeze, there. But what do you mean, regulations? They’re the same every year!” Anzu quickly scanned the tournament rules...and the handwritten addition made her yelp. “Wh-what the—? You can’t just add that!”

“What’s wrong, Lady Anzu?”

Everyone leaned in, peering at the list in her hand.

“Every contestant can only participate in one match?!”

That’s what the handwritten addition said. “Each participant may only enter one battle from each set of five.”

“Y-you mean if the next battle is a three-legged race, I can’t be on Sir Lloyd’s team?!”

“Mistress, that’s not the biggest issue! Gah...no, not a reef knot!”

As Selen tied Vritra up, Satan scratched his head, nodding.

“Smart,” he commended. “We win in quality, so they’re pushing quantity. A trick like this is...an almost admirable level of obsession.”

Satan might be impressed, but Anzu was screaming. Futilely.

“F-first I’ve heard of it! There’s...there’s never been a rule like that before!”

Clearly anticipating that response, Nexamic kissed his biceps. “The whole point of the rite is to show the range of our talent to the Sacred Beast! We adjusted the rules right before printing.”

“The new ruling clan should have a broad depth of talent, yes? That’s only elegant.”

A contract designed to deceive—they should take this scam to the consumer affairs department.

“Priest Chief!” Anzu roared. “This is on your watch! Check the list before you print it!”

He’d steadfastly dismissed all previous claims, but this time, he was going, “What, really?” and scanning the list. “Uh-oh,” he muttered.

The Priest Chief finally opened his mouth. “Any would-be ruler should read the rules carefully! So sayeth the Sacred Beast!”

He was once again steering that rudder right back toward denial.

“Liar! You only just saw it yourself! I heard you say ‘Uh-oh’!”

“I said nothing of the sort! I would never assume they were the same as last time and overlook their trick! No failures like that would happen on my watch! It’s your fault for not noticing yourself! We’re even!”

“...That’s an admission.”

He was like an underpaid manager not reporting shoplifting because dealing with the paperwork was too much trouble.

“W-well, I probably *should* have read the rules. Dammit...”

That fact wasn’t going anywhere.

And six of their eight entrants had been wasted on the first match. They’d have to win the next two matches with only two members.

Riho had been mad enough about the swimsuit thing already, and now she exploded. “Micono! This is your fault! You’ve embarrassed us in more ways than one!”

“But it was hot, so who cares?”

“How was that *hot*?! Who wants to see a tanned-macho-man tentacle show?!”

Her fellow cadets were all advancing on her now. Not only had they been subjected to gross perversions but they were now in danger of losing the whole thing. They didn’t have much riding on the outcome here but had plenty to gripe about.

This shocking twist had left Anzu dumbfounded.

“Wait, then...Lloyd and Ex-Colonel Merthophan have to win the next two battles on their own? If either of them loses...then the other side wins by default?!”

There was suddenly a lot of pressure on Lloyd, and he looked ready to crumble under it.

“No! I-I’m not ready for this...!”

Merthophan appeared astonished by the cunning plan. “No farmer would come up with that! They’ve really thought this through.”

Yeah, this had nothing to do with farming, so...

Nexamic did his patented hamstring flex, ready to coast to victory. “Mwa-ha-ha! Say what you like! We won’t let you have your way with the Ascorbic Domain!”

“As we will elegantly demonstrate in the next battle.” Renge gestured to the Priest Chief, who blithely began rummaging for the next card.

Meanwhile, Alka was following Eve through the mountains in the Audoc territory. She had dropped her old-lady act and was talking like a young woman.

“Never occurred to me King Profen was President Eva. Why the costume?”

“I made it so the Profen kings all wear this thing!” Eve said, hopping up the trail. “Each new king was still me, and nobody realized it was always the same person inside.”

“Why would they?” Alka asked, seemingly impressed by this wild idea. “Nobody believes us if we admit we’re immortal...so is the Profen Kingdom...?”

“Yeah, I founded it! The idea was just to give myself a foothold to figure this world out. I was well versed in intelligence work, after all. I sure was dumbfounded at first— Oh, here we are.”

Eve had led them to a...very old Audoc temple. Exactly the kind of place they’d been talking about on the ship.

“It’s old, but there’s plenty of monks inside—what?”

“.....Things might have gone very wrong. Never mind!”

If she'd dragged the boy she doted on to a monk-filled temple and tried anything, she'd have ended up embarrassing herself more than usual.

Eve, however, read her flash of panic as something else entirely.

"Don't worry, I'm not a ghost. The monks can't exorcise me!"

"...You sure about that? I'm still finding this hard to believe."

Alka was sure sweating like she was talking to a ghost.

"You thought I was dead, right?" Eve said merrily. "But nope! This way!"

Beckoning like an amusement park worker, she squeaked off down the hall to a temple room. It had tatami floors and offered a view of the whole Audoc territory. Trees stretched out below, and the forest scents wafted up through the open window.

".....Actual tatami," Alka gasped. Woven floors, like a traditional Japanese inn—just like she remembered it.

"It's like you're at a hot springs back home. And a good one! An expensive room! Impressed?" Eve asked.

Alka settled wordlessly down on a chair by the window, blissfully making the back of the seat creak.

"Is that a yes?"

"Yeah. Just how I remember it."

Eve sat down across from her, propped her elbow on the table and her chin on her hand, and gazed out at the view.

"It reminds me of a diplomatic trip I took. Never thought I'd see the like in this fantasy world."

Not long after, a monk brought some tea and treats. He didn't bat an eye at Eve's costume. Alka raised an eyebrow at that.

"You come here often? He seemed used to you."

"I'm so adorable that I have him wrapped around my little finger! ...Just kidding. As king of Profen, I've been here pretty often, meeting up with the ruler of the Domain, Anzu. Our little girls-in-charge club." She patted her

costume's cheeks.

Alka remembered how ruthless she'd been as president and winced. "All part of your intelligence work?"

"Not always, Alka! But let's be honest, all girls' clubs are basically espionage. Trading intel on who's after which guy, who's available, and how to nab yourself a rich benefactor."

"You never did mince words."

Eve cackled, her voice muffled by the mascot head. "I've been gathering intel here from Anzy's predecessor and the predecessor before that. Not only the Ascorbic Domain, either. Local lords, and kingdoms like Rokujou or Azami—since long before either was founded."

"Before Azami even existed? I suppose I'm not surprised you sprang into action instantly, even after what happened."

"I'm just a bundle of energy! So naturally I know the former researchers have all become demon lords. And you were a wild demon lord yourself." She accompanied that with a dramatic point.

"President Eva has the world's info at her fingertips!" Alka said, shaking her head. "I bet you also know exactly what Eug's up to, then?"

"Na-tur-al-ly! And practically," Eve trilled. "She's still gung ho about her plan to force science-magic hybrid research. And I know—I mean, I can *imagine* you turned that down."

Eve kept her tone jokey, trying to hide her connection to—and support of—Eug's efforts.

"Yeah. So can you tell me what exactly happened on the day in question?"

"Which day is that?"

Alka leaned across the table...like a veteran salesperson done with small talk and ready to get down to business. "That's why you brought me here, isn't it?" she said. "When I got there, you were bleeding out. No longer breathing. What happened afterward?"

"....."

“You ignored requests to take it one step at a time...and changed the world to this. What rune did you apply to the world?”

“.....”

“.....”

““ ””

A strange silence settled over the room.

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

““ ””

Eve was at a total loss. *I can't tell her! My condition was terminal, and I didn't have long to live, and controlling the device was the only shot I had, so I pushed everyone to work harder, hoping to make myself immortal. This ridiculous mess is all my fault!*

She was behind *everything*. For the most cliché reason.

“Um, is that *not* why you were looking for me?” Alka asked, appearing puzzled.

Eve was sweating hard in that suit.

Eventually, she croaked, “No comment!”

“What?! No comment?! You said we had lots to catch up on?! I guess not!”

Eve had only brought Alka here to keep her from meddling with the Sacred Mountain Rite and ruining their plans, so honestly, she didn't have anything to talk about—and quite a lot she *didn't* want to talk about...which left her feeling pretty dumb.

“Uh...your tea's getting cold!” she blathered, gamely trying to deflect.

It was no use.

“You're offering me tea now? I've got more questions for you!”

“It's really good!” Eve insisted, jerking a cup in through the mouth and gulping noisily.

“Argh, if I can’t ask the real question...what is this? I’m trying to have a serious conversation and you’re knocking back tea like ale?! Why did you even bring me here?”

Eve scrambled for a reason. “Um, um...Eugy’s schemes! We’ve gotta plan against ‘em!”

That was actually a pretty good excuse. Eve pumped a fist mentally. Sometimes when you were up against the wall, inspiration really did come along to save you.

“Then start with that! Obviously, Eug’s too self-centered to let it end just because we trounced her. I know I’ve gotta do something, but I’ve been running around putting out the fires...”

Alka paused for a moment, then sighed.

“Can’t you say something to her, President? It’s still too dangerous! The world’s maintaining its shape for now, but there’s no telling what’ll happen if —”

Since Eve was conspiring with Eug, she wound up just going, “Mm,” noncommittally.

That earned her a suspicious look.

“Fact is,” Alka continued. “Mankind wasn’t ready for that system. If she’s placing the world in danger just to get back at me, I’ve got to stop her.”

“But if it goes well, wouldn’t that be a good thing? We might get it all back!”

“Like the world as it used to be?”

“Yep. And...Roy Akizuki.”

Alka’s eyes went wide. “He—”

Eve pressed the advantage. “That’s *why* I had you all researching this stuff back home. Part of me thinks we oughtta be working *with* Eugy. Not that I am, of course.”

She really emphasized that last bit, trying to avert suspicion.

It was pretty transparent, but Alka was too rattled to notice.

“Well? Sure you don’t wanna lend Eugy a hand?” Eve asked, getting more than a bit pushy.

If Alka switched sides, they were set, and she was getting excited about the very idea.

Alka took a sip of tea, trying to settle down. A look of regret passed over her.

“I...tried it once. You know, just to see. I used some runes and...made one.”

“One what?”

“A person.”

“What?” Eve froze.

“The demon lords were running wild, so I made a hero to bring peace to the world.”

This was news to Eve, and she was all ears. Not the bunny ears—the person inside.

“I knew it was theoretically possible, but you...actually did it? Wow.”

Alka shook her head. Not out of modesty.

Then she explained how it turned out. “I did my groundwork. I had Eug and the dwarven craftsmen make dungeons and ruins and inscribe significant-looking writing on the stones and walls.”

“I can imagine what that said. Motivational stuff for a hero?”

“Yes. Fairy tales and legends. Tales of how a hero saved the world, spread to all corners of it. Someone even wrote a novel! I made the world aware of the concept of heroes.”

“Totally not my field, but this is that universal subconscious thing? Japan had that concept of *kotodama*. They gave Edo places powerful names, making people think they were protected land—famous stuff!”

“And these writings made me the priestess of salvation and Vritra a channel for the Last Dungeon—redirecting the mana generated by that device into infinite power.”

“By convincing the world a thing was true—you crafted a world-sized rune.”

“And it went well! Except that if Vritra dies, I end up extremely feeble. In hindsight, probably Eug’s contingency plan.”

“Crafting your own myths and legends... Amazed you actually did it.” Eve sighed.

“The hero exists! The priestess is all-powerful! That’s all it took to produce him—the hero, Sou.”

Eve finally connected the dots. “Oh, *him*...?” she muttered. “I’ve heard the stories. From way back when. The exploits of Sou, the great hero. Before I even got Profen going. All your doing?”

“And the runes brought Sou to life, and like the writings said, he did it all, just as the world wanted. He sealed away all the wild demon lords.”

“Yay! Bravo... But it didn’t quite work out, huh?”

“No. When his role was done, he should have faded out. But that didn’t happen. The legends lingered in people’s minds, leaving him wandering the world aimlessly, no one able to tell how old he really was. Now he’s working with a Kunlun villager name Shouma. I’m told they’ve taken over the Jiou Empire.”

“Ah-ha. Right.” Eve already knew this, so she was just nodding.

Alka thought that seemed fishy but kept talking, like she was giving confession.

“I’m the one who created him and the reason he’s suffering. After seeing what happens to someone like him—well, even if we could make something *like* Roy, to me, he would be something else entirely.”

“.....”

“And because of Sou, people are suffering. I’ve got to stop him, no matter what it costs me. I’ve gotta make it so nothing like him is ever created again. And...”

“That’s real cool! But what?”

Alka scratched a cheek, looking sheepish. “I dunno if it’s coincidence or what, but I found this boy who looked just like Roy...”

“You...found him? I guess it’s statistically possible.”

“I know I’ve been acting all high and noble, but until I found this boy, I...I admit I regularly got the impulse to rune Roy back into being. Ha-ha-ha.”

“It’s no laughing matter! You might have created a second monster like Sou! ‘Whatever the cost to you’—and I called you cool! Give that back.” Eve held out a hand like she was demanding a payout.

“Sorry,” Alka said, bobbing her head. “Anyway, thanks to him, there’s no more risk of me blowing it. He’s my angel! I don’t just want him in my eyes, I want him in every hole, and it wouldn’t even hurt!”

She was hurtling off the beaten path so far, it scared Eve.

“Uh, Alka? I see time hasn’t fixed this side of you...”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. But as long as I’ve got Lloyd, there’s no reason I’d ever help Eug. And I’ll be risking my life to stop anything that’s a threat to him or his world.”

“Ohhh. Okay, okay.” Eve nodded like she got it. With the costume on, it was hard to tell if she meant it. “Sorry if I stirred up bad memories.”

Alka shook her head. “Nah, it was worth the time. Reminded me of my love for Lloyd, what I need to do, and his love for me. I’d better be going.”

That last one hadn’t really come up, but...Alka couldn’t see Eve raise her eyebrow.

Alka bowed, and Eve made no move to stop her.

“Sorry, this was all so sudden! I know we skipped past some stuff you wanted to talk about. We’ll have to catch up again some other time! I’ll arrange a ship for you.”

“Thank you. I’ll soak in the views, think about Eug, Sou, Shouma, and my future with Lloyd.”

“Oh, um...see ya.” Eve waved after her as she left. “Now I just gotta get her a really slow ship and buy some more time... Geez, she didn’t make it easy for me.”

Alka was headed down the mountain now—so eager to see Lloyd she looked like a girl headed off to a playdate.

“Both Alka and Eug are too hung up on the part they played in changing the world.”

Eve had thoughts of her own on that. She scratched the side of the costume’s head.

“The world changed, huh? ...What would they say if they knew the truth?”

The costume quivered. She was laughing inside.

Her whole body shook, like a wind-up toy with a dislodged gear.

By then, the second battle was about to start.

Long story short, our heroes may have won the first battle, but the Audoc and Tiger clans’ conspiracy had altered the rules so Lloyd and Merthophan each had to fight solo and win—or the Kyounin clan would lose by default.

“Crap, first I get swimsuited, now we’re up against the wall! If I lose control of the Domain now, I’ll never be able to face my ancestors!”

“Mwa-ha-ha! You’re gonna have to find a way, Anzu! As for the two of you, you’ll be up against Sir Allan and myself, and the Audoc clan students are pulsing like my own muscles!”

As Nexamic ranted, the Priest Chief pulled a wooden card from the box.

“Please be a normal battle...”

“Yes, I, for one, have no need to see Ex-Colonel Merthophan in a swimsuit. Sir Lloyd, though—,” Selen rambled.

All eyes turned toward the stage.

“The next battle... ‘Daikon Drubbing Duel’!”

That wasn’t exactly a phrase you heard every day.

Two wacky formats in a row was starting to get on Marie’s nerves.

“Hey! First swimsuits, now radishes?! Even if they’ve sneaked in cards designed for them to win, you’d think they’d at least be serious!”

“What are you talking about, witch lady?”

“I have no idea what you could possibly mean.”

The Priest Chief and Selen both just looked offended.

“Uh, Marie, sorry,” Anzu said. She really seemed to mean that. “Daikon duels are actually a long-standing Ascorbic tradition.”

Marie gaped at her like something you’ve always assumed was a minor sport turned out to have a worldwide following.

Merthophan was well versed in farm-adjacent topics and launched into an explanation.

“Daikon dueling was originally a harvest ritual, done in the buff, offering up the drubbing to the gods. When the rice harvest was poor, we got through it by padding our rice with daikon, so the rite was intended to venerate the holy vegetable,” he explained.

“...By hitting each other with them?”

“Phyllo, even if you try to pretend they’re like little boys who are mean to their crushes, it makes *no* sense.”

While the Azami contingent were flummoxed, the crowd seemed to be waiting for this exact moment. Like, it wasn’t a real Ascorbic rite until the daikon came out.

And adding flames to that fire, pulling in the lion’s share of gazes—

“Mwa-ha-ha! My chance to flex!”

Tiger Nexamic had already taken the stage. Daikon in each hand, a basket of daikon on his back—ready for the drubbing.

“He’s *really* into this...”

“Yeah, the Tiger clan have won the Domain’s Daikon Drubbing Duel Derby ten years running,” Anzu explained. “No one here is defter with a daikon than him. That mask is actually the champion’s symbol.”

“He’s the head of the Tiger clan, right? Perhaps he should change their name to the Daikon clan.” Selen might have no interest, but Nexamic was only getting

more fired up.

“Mwa-ha-ha! My body boasts the greatest endurance in all the Domain! No matter how many daikons batter it, I am unharmed! You don’t have a one-in-a-million shot at victory!”

They didn’t even have the motivation... Well, except for one man.

“A battle with produce?! I’m the only candidate for this! I trust there are no arguments?”

Merthophan. He took a basket of daikons and strode confidently toward the stage.

“No arguments? Obviously not. Like, knock yourself out, dude.”

“I understand, Riho Flavin! You wish to watch from the sidelines, preparing yourself for the inevitable agricultural dominance.”

“I have no clue how you arrived at that conclusion.”

Nexamic saw Merthophan joining him, and his teeth gleamed.

“Ah-ha! You’ll be my opponent, Merthophan Dextro? You underestimate the rigors of the daikon duel! The depth of the radish! Don’t worry—I’ll drub them into you!”

“Hmph—no need.”

“No need? How naive—wait, what?”

Merthophan had put one hand on his uniform lapels...and torn his clothes right off.

Honed muscles gleamed, his skin tanned by hours in the sun, the front flap of his loincloth fluttering in the breeze like a flag—his build was every bit the match for Nexamic’s own. It drew gasps from segments of the crowd.

“What *is* that beautiful garment?!”

“Traditional! Farming! Attire!”

He took a hand cloth out of...somewhere, tied it around his head, and was ready. Ready for what, nobody was sure.

“You were hiding some cute little muscles there...for shame! Why hide muscles that beautiful? The mind boggles!”

“Muscles are neither for show nor shame. My tanned skin and build are but the byproducts of my work in the fields! My victory in this battle will prove what it is you lack!”

“Mwa-ha-ha! I lack for nothing! Drown in a daikon deluge!”

Merthophan shouldered his own basket and hefted a daikon—looking like he was born with one in hand.

The crowd was starting to realize this dude was something else. Well, they got that impression when they saw the loincloth, but...

“Is this really his first daikon duel? That’s the aura of a seasoned warrior—you can feel the daikon power!”

Anzu had an eye for these things and was already appraising Merthophan’s vegetable aptitude.

“...I know nothing about daikon auras and never want to,” Phyllo muttered, speaking for everyone.

Moments later, drums thundered, marking the beginning of the fight. Skinny buff versus mega macho! The Sacred Mountain Rite’s second battle!

Both circled the stage warily, daikon at the ready.

“I dunno about traditional farming whatever, but you’ll regret stepping into the tiger’s den! Roaaarr!!!!”

A powerful swing! Nexamic was the first to act!

One step into a bound, glutes flaunted at a merciless angle, daikon swinging downward!

“Tiger! Dangerous! The moment your eyes lock on magnificent glute-and-hamstring merger zone, the daikon pounds home! Impossible to dodge! Ascend to the next life with rapture on your face! Merthophan! Dextrooo!”

“Too long a speech. Ex-Colonel Merthophan could easily duck away,” Miconaspat.

But he did the exact opposite—taking the daikon head-on!

“Gah!”

The daikon shattered!

“Not so easily, then?” Riho asked, unimpressed.

“I...why? Ex-Colonel, what are you doing? You’re undermining my upperclassman authority!”

Micona’s display earlier had undermined that so hard, she’d never crawl her way up from the resulting pit.

Seeing his opponent fail to dodge, Nexamic pressed his advantage, slamming home daikon after daikon. “Mwa-ha-ha! So much for your bravado! Are those muscles purely decorative?! Mwa-ha-ha! Mwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Daikon! Daikon! Daikon! Butt flex! Daikon on the about swing! Hamstring flaunt! Daikon— Certain of victory, Nexamic was burning through daikons, drubbing the crap out of Merthophan.

“M-Micona’s right, the ex-colonel *could* be avoiding all of these,” Lloyd observed, his keen eye spotting the crux of the matter.

“Right you are, Lloyd Belladonna! My instincts do not lie! I hate that *you’re* the one who agrees with me, but today I offer praise instead!”

“...Get over yourself,” Riho muttered.

Lloyd was watching the fight grimly, like a seasoned battle commentator—explaining just why Merthophan was choosing to take a beating. “The ex-colonel is tracking each daikon swing with his eyes, intentionally soaking the blows because...he’s a farmer!”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Look at all the daikons Nexamic shattered!”

At this, Nexamic used up his last daikon and spun round to point at Lloyd.

“Why the shocked yelp, Lloyd?! Did you spot muscles more attractive than my ham— Hngg?!”

Lloyd was pointing at the piles of broken daikons. But what should have been

shattered, pulped shards—were all in bite-size pieces, piled neatly in Merthophan's basket.

This was so clearly nonsensical even Nexamic stopped flexing.

"You absorbed the blows and basketed them... Wh-why?! What purpose does that serve?"

"Isn't it obvious? A farmer who wastes the product of his fields is insulting the land!"

Merthophan undercut this grand declaration by adjusting his wedgie.

Nexamic reeled backward, stunned. "Wh-what?! You—you soaked my barrage so the staff could enjoy the delicious veggies later?! And you prepped them to an edible size?!"

The entire staff went, "Wait, we have to eat them?"

"Exactly! A farmer's love at work! I carefully took the blows so they would shatter in bite-size chunks!"

"I-incredible! You mean—I forgot the debt we owe the daikon?!"

"No—that is not all you lack."

"Hngg?"

"Your build and tan are both cultivated purely for aesthetics—you've lost the true essence of beauty!" Merthophan pointed dramatically, launching into a lecture on the man's own subject!

No Ascorbian cared more about machoness than Nexamic! Having a strange young man insult his build led to a panicked series of Most Muscular Poses, his pecs throbbing with unchecked rage!

"How dare you!"

Undaunted, Merthophan gestured proudly at the bare skin around his loincloth. "True beauty is functional! Muscles built by swinging a hoe in the fields! Tan achieved by hard work in the sun! And a loincloth, symbolic of my love for the farm! These three are one! And I cannot lose."

Ignoring the radical loincloth-love theory, his argument for naturally

cultivated builds was a common one—but Nexamic tried to dismiss it with a snort. “Hmph! What nonsense...hngg?!”

But Nexamic had seen...the “farming love” in Merthophan’s muscles—and deep within it, the build he’d always wanted.

“Very...cute..... Ack!”

“You saw it? The agricultural affection in my flesh? The functional beauty?!”

Nexamic tore his eyes away, desperately trying to shake off the compulsion. “I—I can’t accept this! If I do...then all the time I’ve spent in the gym will be for nothing!”

Merthophan raised his daikon with a sigh, focusing his spirit.

“I inhabit this daikon with my passion for the fields. My farmer’s mind will not shatter, will not bend—and thus, this daikon is invulnerable!”

He was forcibly assigning properties to food—ones that were definitely not very kind to teeth.

How this all worked was beyond comprehension, but the daikon began to glow!

“How...? The daikon is glowing—with such a powerful light!”

Nexamic was momentarily bewitched by it, but he soon shook it off, taking a defensive stance.

“I can’t lose here! My body’s super hard! The secret art Rock Hawk makes my body like solid steel!”

He couldn’t move with it active, but as defensive moves went, it was without equal. The crowd went wild. Seemed like he’d used it a lot in previous daikon duels.

“Heh...,” laughed the loincloth man.

“What’s so funny? A-aughhh!”

Merthophan put both hands on the glowing daikon—and began to *spin*. It was a sight so sublime, Nexamic forgot that he was in the middle of a match.

“Mwa-ha...so *this* is functional beauty?”

“In my right hand, the pain of breaking new ground—in my left, the joy of harvest!”

The loincloth man’s spin lifted him aloft...and still spinning, he shot toward his immobilized foe.

“Let the farm winds awaken! Ultimate! Agriculture! Typhoon!”

“M-mwa-ha—mwa-hahhhh!”

Every inch of him clobbered with daikon blows, Nexamic shot into the air and came crashing down, face-first.

“H-how?! No daikon is that hard! To surpass my secret art, Rock Hawk? Impossible!”

“That’s just how hard farm labor is!”

This was probably irrelevant.

Flat out on the ground, shedding manly tears, Nexamic deplored the foolishness of his own losing muscles.

“Functional beauty!” he wailed. “Have I...have I wasted my muscles all these years?!”

“You still have a future! Put in the work—and make it so your muscles are not in vain!”

“M-Merthophan—may I call you brother?”

The loincloth and speedo men clutched together. The crowd applauded the magnificent match.

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“Allan! Allan! Allan! Allan...” The whole alliance camp was cheering.

In the middle of the crowd was Allan, looking ready to puke. He alone appeared pretty dang concerned.

“Er, uh...no, no, no.”

When he tried to wave his hands, Renge clasped them to her. “All you have to do is win, Sir Allan! Elegantly!”

“Yeah, but...”

How had it come to this?

The camp was acting like he’d already won. No way he could refuse. He hung his head.

“Sir Allan’s limbering up his shoulders!”

“The key to victory is to release all the tension in your muscles!”

“He’s so relaxed, he almost looks totally depressed! Amazing, Sir Allan!”

They were certainly spinning that hard.

“All ’cause I lost control,” Surtr whispered. “My bad, Allan.”

“No, if I was strong enough to stop you—or if I’d done what I had to from the start, it would never have got this bad.”

He’d let Surtr attack and just kept letting the chaos yank him around. He could only blame himself.

“I’ll do my best to keep control, bro! But if I do lose it...”

“Mm? What?”

“Nah, I just gotta try harder.”

Surtr seemed to have thought better of it. Allan let it pass.

“Please,” he begged. “I’m up against Lloyd, so I need to lose convincingly, go ‘I’m free of the demon lord!’ and return back to my friends.”

“Roger that. I’ll do what I can, baby. Long as ole spiky hair doesn’t cross my line of vision... Come on, Tony Glanzmann. Wait, who the hell is Tony?”

“Don’t ask me! I don’t know any Tonys.”

Mystery names and promises as vague as any politicians weren’t exactly reassuring, but Allan refocused his thoughts on the next battle’s format.

Please...gimme a game of some sort! Anything with no injuries! A card game!

A really pathetic prayer.

Renge and Nexamic were just beaming at him.

“Behold, Renge! He doesn’t want to harm that poor Lloyd kid, so he’s asking the gods for a nonviolent event!”

“Praying for the safety of his foe—how elegant!”

And please give me a way to sort out their misunderstandings and resolve the problems in the Domain and find someone I can love and marry.

Maybe putting a bit too much in god’s hands there. He should try to keep it to one request at a time.

Allan was now waving his arms around like he was driving out evil spirits—and the Priest Chief reached into the box.

The format...was Allan’s worst nightmare.

“Ah-ha! The next round—is a one-on-one no-holds-barred fight!”

“Take a hiiiiiiiiiiiiint!”

Allan’s shriek was drowned out by the roar of the crowd. No more wacky events—a real brawl! That’s what they’d come to see! This was the second loudest the crowd had cheered. The swimsuits had edged it out, but let’s just pretend that wasn’t true.

“N-no holds barred? Against...”

Lloyd, of course. The entry limit meant he was the only option.

The boy looked as horrified as Allan. *A weakling like me, fighting Allan—who’s possessed by a demon lord? With the fate of the Ascorbic Domain on the line?!* That was far too much.

“I have to fight Allan? I’m not strong enough!”

Satan put a hand on his shoulders. “Don’t worry, Lloyd. You’re much stronger now. And because the two of you are close, fighting you might help him escape the demon lord’s control. Start by smashing that ax. Perfect chance to try out your new moves.”

His tone got gradually more menacing, and he was glaring over at Surtr. He might not remember it, but shades of their cabaret girl tussle had lingered with him.

“...Okay! I’ll use the move you taught me to wake Allan up, Satan! I know his mind is still in there somewhere, and a man as kind as he is will find a way to pull his punches! And give me an opening!”

He started limbering up. Marie stepped in like a proper coach, whispering advice.

“Listen, Lloyd, first pound him till he can’t move. Breaking his legs will help. Then grab the ax and use your rune to wipe it clean.”

“H-his legs...and why would I clean his ax?”

Lloyd was still unaware that his household wisdom was actually the *disenchant* rune.

“Um, so...trust me; I’m Azami’s savior!”

Marie was forced to pull out that old title. It might have been generated by Lloyd’s confusion, but it proved convincing.

“Oh, right! You would know! All right. Allan’s possessed by a demon lord! I’ve got to give it all I’ve got. I’ll go break his legs!”

Horrifying words coming from that cute face of his.

“You sure about that, Marie?” Riho whispered, a bead of sweat running down her brow. “He might kill Allan *and* the demon lord...”

Marie shook her head, dismissing all concern for Allan’s safety. “Anyone possessed by a demon lord is given untold power. My father never trained a day in his life, and it still turned him into a force to be reckoned with... If someone like Allan is under their control, it’s genuinely terrifying.”

Marie had actually fought her possessed father, so this was highly convincing.

“Yes, I was helpless against His Majesty in that state. Even Lloyd can’t let his guard down.”

Merthophan shook his head. He had a lot to regret.

“.....But Master Lloyd will be fine.”

“That’s right! Sir Lloyd would never lose!”

Phyllo and Selen exchanged confident nods.

Micona folded her arms, shaking her head. “I’d rather he crush Lloyd Belladonna for good...but when I was possessed myself, I made things hard for Allan. So just this once, I’ll root for them both to come out okay.”

“Way to bend over backward for ‘em, Micona.”

Satan was busy talking to Anzu. “If Lloyd looks like he’s in trouble, I’m jumping in, match or not. That might wreck your precious rite, but...are you down?”

“Am I down, Satan? I’ll be cutting in before you even move.”

“Glad to hear it. But I want Lloyd gaining some confidence, so let’s both try and hold back until we really *have* to step in.”

“...You’ve got the makings of a first-rate teacher.”

Satan scratched his head sheepishly. “If I’d heard that earlier, maybe I’d have picked up a teaching license. Oh well.”

“A demon lord with a license? That’s a good one. How long ago should I have told you this?”

Anzu was just playing along with the gag, but Satan stared absently up at the sky.

“Good question... Honestly, I’d rather like to know myself. Ha-ha-ha...”

Meanwhile, Allan wasn’t absent so much as astral projecting. Where Lloyd was pleasantly motivated, he was depressingly hopeless.

“They’re totally telling him not to hold back for a demon lord, aren’t they?”

He could feel the conclusions being leaped to. The hands holding his possessed ax were clammy with sweat.

“Advice from that spiky guy. Trying to make him come after me first!” Surtr snarled.

“Who is that guy anyway? If he’s a demon lord, aren’t they the ones we should be worried about?”

“Well...sorry, Allan, if I even think about him, I can feel control slipping.”

“Whoops. But I do wonder—argh, I feel so left out.” He drooped again.

Both Nexamic and Renge slapped him on the back.

“Mwa-ha-ha! Sir Allan! Go for broke!”

“Show us the elegance of the dragon slayer!”

They gave him a sudden push, and he stumbled up onstage and almost tripped but managed to take a knee and stay upright.

“Yiiiiikes, that was close.”

Disaster averted.

And the crowd erupted.

“Huh? Wh-why? What are they cheering about?”

Renge and Nexamic were shouting over the crowds.

“Perfect, Sir Allan! A beautifully elegant entrance!”

“Mwa-ha-ha! Posing on one knee! Ready for anything! Nice flex! You’re nailing it!”

Yes, this had somehow read as “fired up and ready to go.” The crowd had seen it as a dramatic jump to a superhero landing.

“Augh, I was considering just running for it, but now I can’t even do that!”

The crowd was all in a tizzy over his “performance.” Nobody could see that his expression was as gloomy as an office drone on a packed Monday train.

A moment later, Lloyd slowly arrived on the stage. One step at a time, trying to fight the pressure—with the crowd from Azami shouting support from behind.

“You’ve trained hard! Everyone’s got your back! Do this, Lloyd Belladonna!”

Scrunch.

“Save Allan!”

His mind made up, Lloyd’s eyes met Allan’s.

Master versus student.

The cheers were growing rather weak.

“Uh-oh...”

“This doesn’t look...”

“Is he gonna be okay...?”

The famous dragon slayer...versus a wimpy-looking kid.

The entire venue thought the same thing: He didn’t stand a chance.

“Why not just abdicate, Anzu?!” Renge roared. “You can’t put this feeble child into a no-holds-barred match! That’s madness! Or do you think you can take advantage of Sir Allan’s kindness? Are you clinging to power that desperately?!”

Her concern was clearly genuine.

Anzu looked at her like she was nuts. “Renge...when you drink tea all day and never fight, it dulls the instincts. You oughtta get back in the thick of it.”

“All you can do is sling insults! Inelegant! At least stand ready to throw in the towel.”

She kept yowling, but Anzu just shook her head. “Put a lid on it...the only time in your life you’re gonna see a fight this good. A demon lord up against a superkid like Lloyd!”

“Lady Anzu, we can see all your teeth, and it’s terrifying,” Marie said.

“Whoops.” She quickly put her game face on. “With the Domain on the line, I shouldn’t be stopping to enjoy myself.”

“It’s not that I don’t understand, just...”

Even as they spoke, the third battle was about to begin.

“Anything to say to each other?” the Priest Chief asked, largely because if the Kyounin clan won three straight battles, the rite would be over far too early,

and he wanted to drag this out a bit.

This was Allan's last chance to prove he wasn't possessed, and he did his best!

"Um, Lloyd—"

"Don't worry, Allan! I'm here to save you!"

Lloyd was resolute!

"That's nice, but if you could just listen—"

"Satan taught me a new ultimate move! First, I'm gonna break your legs! Once you're immobilized, I'll step in and save you!"

"Lis— Break my leeeeeegs?! That's the opposite of saving!"

Horrifying threats coming out of Lloyd's cute face were too much for Allan. When the demon lord in his ax heard the word *Satan*...well, Surtr didn't let that slide.

"...What, are you an apostle of that spiky asshole?"

"Well, he taught me a lot!" Lloyd exclaimed. "I don't know what you mean by apostle, but I guess so?"

"Right, say no more, baby! Let's do this! Time to throw down! Sound that damn gong!"

Surtr was already halfway to crazy town.

"No, wait," Allan begged, trying to drag this conversation back to his point.

The Priest Chief apparently thought Allan was rushing him and signaled the Priest Squad to ring the bell. "Let the third battle begin!" he shouted and raced off the stage.

Drums pounded. And the instant he heard the signal—

"Die, spiky apostle! You know how much Dom Pérignon I bought?!"

There was a flash, and heat rays burst out of him.

Allan—well, Surtr—had struck the first blow. Fully in pent-up rage mode, fragments of memories pouring out of him in a howl, the demon lord fired everything he had at Lloyd.

““Yikes!””

Both humans were equally startled. The sudden explosion knocked Allan backward off his feet.

Ka-boooooom! The rays struck the ground at Lloyd’s feet, and a pillar of fire turned the sky red. This huge opening move left everyone gaping—Allan included.

“Did I get the little—?!” roared Surtr, the only one into this.

Allan’s mind finally caught up. “I sure hope not! The plan was to get in close and tell Lloyd the truth, remember?! You’ve ruined it! You’re already totally out of control! Do your promises mean nothing?!”

So he *did* have a plan.

Surtr was totally not listening, though. “Yeah? Then you oughtta thank meeee!”

“Huh? For what?”

“If you’d tried that, you’d have gotten yourself killed for sure! Look at ‘im!”

Meanwhile, offstage—Renge took one look at the pillar of fire and turned to Anzu. “See?! Lloyd’s doomed! Throw in the towel!”

The pillar had certainly shocked Anzu, too, but...she was already grinning.

“Look again, Renge.”

“At wha— Huhhhh?!”

All eyes turned toward the same thing: the sky above the pillar...where Lloyd was flying, wreathed in *Aero*.

“Mwa-ha?! Was he blown up there?!”

“No, he’s...flying...”

The boy they’d thought was weak was doing something they’d never seen, and neither of them could process it.

It even cooled Surtr’s head. “If you’d tried to grab him and he used that wind...you’d have been torn apart. Damn, I really *can’t* keep it together, huh?”

“Right. Okay, this time I’m glad you lashed out. But please, try to control yourself.”

Allan could easily imagine what Lloyd’s *Aero* would do to him, and a shudder ran up his spine. Meanwhile, Lloyd was looking down at them...and shuddering himself.

“Gosh, Allan’s really strong. Didn’t even hesitate to throw that at me! If I hadn’t used the Wind Cloak, I might have been done for.”

Allan had nothing to do it—that was all Surtr.

“Hey, boy!” Surtr yelled—a bit more controlled. “That’s a cool name! Wind Cloak, huh?”

“Yes, Satan named it for me!”

“Augh, I *hate* him *so much*!”

“Control! Keep control! You can’t throw a fit every time you hear his name, Surtr!”

He did have a *ridiculously* fast fuse. When they’d been human, Satan and Surtr had the same bad taste in women—so this was the opposite of opposites attract.

But Allan’s screams were getting through to the demon lord.

“You’ve got a Wind Cloak?! Then I’m gonna use a Fire Cloak! Wreath myself in fire and burnnnn!”

“Surtr! That’s just suicide!”

“Oh. Good point. Don’t wanna be a juicy roast, do we?”

Having narrowly avoided full-body burns, Allan breathed a sigh of relief. “Dammit, I’m gonna have to surrender. Even if I’ve gotta go down on all fours —”

Then he remembered the camp he was representing.

“Crap, no—if I do that, they’ll find out I was tricking them and kill me! I’d be nothing but an enemy spy!”

A hellish death lay before and behind him. He was tearing his hair, trying to

think of a third option.

“Argh, I’ve just gotta keep Surtr under control and lose with my limbs intact!”

“Yo! You could also try winning. Let’s smash Satan’s apostle!”

“Surtr, get a grip! Gotta rein them emotions in! Don’t you dare look at that other demon lord!”

Meanwhile, Lloyd was flying around, watching.

Maybe he’d just lost his nerve, but he looked like an eagle wheeling as they homed in on their prey. As a result, the crowd was getting spooked.

“That’s the *Aero* flight he used against me,” Micona spat. “It was total improv then, but he’s made it his own.”

She seemed equally annoyed by the loss and his evident improvement.

Since Allan wasn’t moving, Lloyd was taking a cautious approach, but he told himself he shouldn’t be so timid and got ready to swoop in.

“I can’t beat Allan if I hesitate! I’ve gotta risk life and limb!” He gritted his teeth.

“No way, Lloyd! I don’t wanna risk those thiiiings!” Allan wailed.

Both looked equally desperate, but Allan was winning on pathetic.

“Come back to us, Allan! Rahhhhh!”

“I am! Argh, I wish I was anywhere else...”

Lloyd started doing flying hit-and-away tactics, tackling Allan as he swooped by.

“Man, he’s good! Spiky apostle! But how’s this?!” In the ax, Surtr sensed Allan was in trouble and spat flames like a jet, knocking him out of Lloyd’s path.

Riho saw Allan spinning around at the mercy of a flaming ax and gasped, “Look, he’s like a puppet! Really proves he’s possessed!”

Selen nodded. “I thought there was a veeeeery slight chance he wasn’t, but no longer!”

“If you thought that, why didn’t you do something, Belt Princess?!” Allan

yowled.

But there was no fighting the possession theory now.

“That yowl is definitely very Allan... If I keep on the offensive, maybe I can knock some sense into him! I’ve gotta try!”

Somehow Allan’s desperate screams had actually made things worse for him.

“Okay!” Lloyd yelled, and his attacks grew even faster.

“Rahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!” (It was Lloyd’s most powerful tackle yet!)
“Rahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!” (Allan shrieked in the face of certain death.) From the sidelines, it sort of maybe looked like they were both going full throttle. One of them was just trying to escape with his life, though.

One man swooping through the air and back down for another tackle. The other lurching this way and that, his ax on fire. It wasn’t a battle you saw every day, and the crowd was eating it up.



“How they’ve grown! Magnificent, Lloyd! And Sir Allan!”

“Splendid! Lloyd, you’re positively elegant! Hang in there, Sir Allan!”

Nexamic and Renge were cheering, too.

The man himself—Allan—was about to die. “Eek! Aaaaaah!”

“Yo, yo, don’t lose your nerve on me! We’ve gotta pulverize Satan’s apostle! Get the grinders ready!”

Talking more like a meat cleaver than a battle-ax, Surtr was steadily losing control. Allan just kept running, desperate to survive.

“I’m only human!” he wailed. “Death *will* be the end for me!”

“Nah, man! Everyone gets *one* free extra life!” Surtr’s argument was more than a little mad.

“I ain’t like you demon lords! Humans only get the one life! That’s why I’m so desperate!”

“No, I definitely died back then, me and all the other lab workers...” Surtr trailed off into silence. When he spoke again, all the rage was gone.

“Um...yeah, I dunno what I was thinking. Resurrection is pretty atypical.”

“You just worked that out?! Augh! Damn, Lloyd! You’re gonna be the death of me!”

One false move would get him splattered. Allan was barely avoiding certain doom.

“Allan,” Surtr said, sounding genuinely sorry. “This is all my fault. You’re gonna get killed over a misunderstanding.”

“Geez, if only you could have been this calm earlier! Any idea how we can get outta this?”

Sounding more serious than ever before, Surtr explained his plan. “I have one suggestion. You’ll have...to break me.”

“Huh?”

“If I soak that boy’s blows head-on a few times, I’ll shatter into a million

pieces. And then I won't lose control again."

"Where's this coming from? What'll happen to you if the ax breaks?"

"I'll probably die."

"....."

"...Of course, death is different for us. A century or two'll go by, I'll probably pop back up somewhere, doing the whole demon lord thing. Same as at the lab. So don't worry about me!"

Allan dodged another of Lloyd's swoops, saying nothing.

Only when he was safe again did he let himself respond.

"I can't!" he cried. "You've got a goal! You're looking for the one you love!"

"I said, do it! My crazy ranting brought this on you! Go on! Smash me to bits and prove you're free of my spell! Everyone will know you're back to your old self! Big ole happy ending!"

"I can't go along with that!" He dodged another swoop. As bad as this situation was, Allan had principles.

All Surtr had was regrets. "I'm a demon lord. And all we are is remnants of the past, acting on instinct, trapped by memories we've lost. I talked you into putting me in your ax on a whim, and...I never should have done that."

"But that spiky-haired one isn't losing his mind like you do. You sure there isn't a way to keep your marbles?"

"I bet he's recovered more memories than I have. That's why he's not easily losing himself—but I dunno how to get my own memories back. Before it's too late, you've gotta—"

The voice from the ax was fading out, and he could barely hear it.

Dodging again, Allan barked encouragement. "Don't be a fool! You've got a loved one on the line! That's why you've been wandering all this time!"

"You're the fool! You're in real danger, here! Show them you've broken my spell! Tell them it was Eug's fault that Surtr was ever here! Prove your innocence!"

“I’ve met demon lords before!” Allan yelled, yanking the ax up toward him like he was grabbing a fistful of Surtr’s shirt. “And you’re way better than they were! Even if you do snap from time to time!”

“Do you have the power to control me? Just ‘cause I’m *relatively* sane? You don’t!”

“Yeah, no chance in hell! I can’t fight a demon lord’s power!”

“That’s my point! You’ve gotta—”

“But if it was a friend who did dumb shit sometimes—*that* I can stop.”

“A...a friend?”

A wind-cloaked tackle whooshed by so close, it sent Allan flying.

“Shut up and listen!” Allan roared. “You know we’ve got shit in common, right? We’re both a bit oafish, prone to putting our feet in our mouths—but we had a great time sharing tales of woe!”

“Yeah...it did feel a lot like hanging out in a diner all night, shooting the breeze.”

Allan glanced toward the Azami crew, laughing to himself.

“I’m already dealing with a crazy belt princess, a miserly mercenary, and a deadpan martial artist who destroys everything she touches. I’m pretty good at curbing my friends’ worst impulses.”

“.....You’ve got it rough, man... Argh, dammit! The urge is riising again!”

“Simmer down, buddy!”

Surtr’s flames were raging, and he started yelling at himself, trying to keep control. “Yeah, keep it together, Surtr! You don’t need to rage at that spiky douche! With his lame jokes! That phony arch tone! You know he was doomed to be a lifelong virgin!”

“What did you call meeeeeeeeeeeee?! You’re the virgiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiin!”

Mere moments after they’d said he wouldn’t easily lose himself, Satan lost it completely—the shocking truth was too much to let slide.

Their affections had been pure. Their cries were pathetic.

And Surtr's rage...vanished.

"Uh...why?"

"It's gone... You've got me under control! Our wavelengths synced...which means..."

"I'm also—"

"You're also—"

""A virgin.""

A very sad common ground, but it had allowed Allan to control the demon lord.

Meanwhile, Lloyd had been moving in for another *Aero* tackle and was shocked by Satan's sudden fury.

"Satan? Yikes!"

He lost control of his own spell and crashed into the ground so hard the shock wave sent Allan and his ax flying.

"Oof!"

The blow knocked Allan out, and he collapsed in a heap.

"Whoops," Lloyd said, pulling his head out of the dirt. "I didn't pull up in time... Wait, where's Allan?"

He didn't realize he'd just won.

"Th-the winner is—Lloyd Belladonna! And the Sacred Mountain Rite victory goes to the Kyoujin clan!"

Lloyd looked surprised, then nodded. "Good! My attacks must have woken Allan up. It looked like he had the ax under control! I'm sure he freed himself from the demon lord's possession! He's so strong!"

Like always, he was giving credit to everyone but himself.

"If I was any help at all—well, I guess I'm now strong enough to make it a good fight!"

His newfound confidence seemed real, at least.

“It’s been a long time coming,” Riho muttered. “But he’s taken the first step toward self-awareness. Thank you, Satan...Satan?”

Satan was crouched over, his face buried in both hands.

“You can’t say that in front of all these people... I was trying to hide it! Yes, I’ve never been with... And when we get to sharing stories—I almost got caught so many times—”

The rare sight of a demon lord kicking himself. No one dared interrupt.

“Mm? Huh? Is the fight...?”

When Allan woke up, the faces of his friends were all staring down at him.

“You up, Allan? The fight’s over.”

“.....You were knocked out of bounds and hit your head. The Kyounin clan wins.”

Riho’s and Phyllo’s reminders were enough to fill in the blanks.

“So I lost...right! I’ve got big news!”

He wasn’t possessed. Eug was involved. He’d managed to control Surtr, who wasn’t a bad guy... There was so much he wanted to say that he tried to scramble to his feet.

Marie stopped him, however, urging rest. “Calm down, Allan. We heard everything—from Surtr.”

“Oh? You—”

“I told ’em everything,” his ax said. “How you were trying to uncover Dr. Eug’s plot and took me with you as evidence. And that you were fighting to keep me from going berserk the whole time.”

“So you’re cool now? No more raging?”

“Seems like. Not as long as you’re holding my reins, heh-heh-heh!”

The demon lord let out a hearty chuckle, and Allan wound up laughing with him.

“Geez, if you weren’t possessed, why didn’t you tell us?”

“And if you weren’t, you shouldn’t have let it attack! That cancels any boost your reputation may have gained.”

“...Given your assault on the clan HQ this morning, you’re one to talk.”

Seeing his friends ribbing each other like always, Allan felt a great sense of relief. He was back home. Then he picked himself up and turned back to the dejected Audoc and Tiger camp.

“Sir Allan...” The rite lost, Renge was clearly beside herself.

“Sorry,” Allan apologized, bowing his head. “I lost the fight. I wish I could have lived up to your expectations.”

Renge gave him a warm smile. “No, it’s okay. I had no idea Lloyd was that strong. I’m glad you’re unharmed.”

“Thank you. I’m just...”

...not that strong.

Before he could finish, a look of passion swept over her.

“Sir Allan was so strong, he forced Lloyd to show his true potential! His growth so great, he literally soared!”

“Uh...what?”

“Mwa-ha-ha! Genius! Unconscious instruction! Lloyd grew through battling you! Only Sir Allan could turn a chick into a phoenix in a handful of blows! The kind of bungle only a truly great warrior could make!”

Lloyd had come into that fight able to fly, but neither of them had realized how dangerous Lloyd *always* was.

“Uh...wow,” Allan muttered, unable to process how fast things were spinning in his favor.

Renge took his hand, giving it a squeeze. “You may have lost, but thank you for demonstrating your power, Dragon Slayer. You’ve quelled the bad blood and shown us a battle for the ages. One I’ll never forget.”

“Mwa-ha-ha! Me either. I’ll store this lesson in my pecs and show my clan an even more powerful Tiger Jump!”

“Uh, sure...”

Even after this, they still believed in him...and Allan had to doff his hat to that.

Mid-guffaw, Nexamic remembered something. “But now Anzu’s betrayal...”

Whoops, there was one more source of confusion that was still around.

“Nexamic, about that. Truth is—”

It was all Eug’s lie, but before Allan could explain, Anzu stepped in.

“Renge, Nexamic, I hate to break it to you, but I’ve got no plans to betray the Domain. You’ve both bought into someone else’s baloney.”

“What? You can’t keep up the lie after all this!” Renge frowned, her suspicions unwavering.

“I mean, I am pretty tight with Eve from the Profen Kingdom, but that’s it.”

“There’s no truth to the stories? You swear? On my pecs?!”

“Can I swear on something else, Tiger?”

“Mwa-ha-ha! See? You refuse! Guilt confirmed!”

He was flexing his pecs again, and Anzu rolled her eyes at him. She wasn’t earning the Audoc and Tiger clans’ trust back this easy...but really, if she *had* sworn on his pecs, that would be far less trustworthy.

Allan broke the uncomfortable silence. “Renge, Nexamic, she’s telling the truth. Lady Anzu hasn’t betrayed anyone.”

And if Allan vouched for her...

““We’ll take your word for it, Sir Allan!””

They immediately reversed their positions. The blind faith the dragon slayer had earned was reaching religious levels. Suspicions melted like snow.

“Allan,” Surtr growled. “If you’d just said something at the start, none of this would have happened.”

“I know, Surtr. Don’t spell it out.”

With the air cleared, the leaders of the Domain were now chatting happily. Allan stood by, looking like he wasn’t sure if he had to pee.

“But still,” Renge mused. “We’ve lost our chance at the throne! How inelegant. And frustrating.”

“Sorry, Renge. I’ll make it up to you.”

Renge twitched at that phrase. “Th-then, Sir Allan, will you officially join the Audoc clan?”

“Will I what?”

That was a proposal—albeit a roundabout one.

Nexamic had her back with a macho smile and a thumbs-up. “Nabbing him first, Renge? Well...truth is, I’m planning on stepping away from my clan awhile. Merthophan...he’s my new brother. I intend to learn more about functional beauty from him. I may regret it, but...Sir Allan’s all yours!”

“Um, Ex-Colonel Merthophan’s your brother now?”

There was a bit too much information in that speech for Allan to process, and Renge didn’t give him time.

“We’ve got a great future together! And if...um, you want to tie the knot right away...I wouldn’t object. I’ve basically already accepted your proposal.”

“Um, hang on...tie what knot? Propo-what? I’m so lost.”

Allan’s brain was in stack overflow. His brain never had a great CPU, and “proposal” was so far from his normal vocab range, he totally drew a blank on it.

“Sir Allan, just the other day you told everyone you’d proposed! To my shame, I was too drunk to recall the event.”

Renge was fidgeting, beet red, never once doubting that Surtr’s rage-filled rant about his cabaret girl love had been directed at her and come from Allan himself.

“Um, that was actually Surtr...”

“You accepted my elegant scones with such passion, convincing me I had not been hearing things.”

She was off in the clouds.

“Yo, Allan,” Surtr said. “How hard were you working this lady? You must have been pretty far along if she took my rant that way.”

“What kind of asshole turns down a scone? They were good!”

“Traitor,” Surtr hissed.

“I may have forgotten, but deep in our cups, we promised to get married... The memories of it may have escaped me in the morning, but...Sir Allan, how could I possibly object?”

“Okay, okay, Allan? Allaaaaaan? What *else* did you do?”

“Nothing! Damn, Surtr, settle down!”

“Boy! Boy with a face like an old man! How’d it go?! Gimme the deets!”

“Now the other demon lord’s after me?! What good would ‘deets’ do you?”

Nothing more had happened than Renge drinking too much, but both these virgin demon lords were convinced that couldn’t be true. Like typical teenage boys.

“Look, I didn’t do anything! Quit leaving room to imagine stuff, Renge! And if you don’t remember what happened, don’t just guess!”

He was doing his best to plead innocent.

But the girls from Azami were all giving him horrified looks. He was definitely falling prey to the “protests too much” logic.

“String a girl along and then tell her she imagined it? Wow, that is so scummy.”

“You’re the last person I wanna hear that word from, Belt Princess!”

“...Scummy.”

“That doesn’t mean I want it from the rest of you, Phyllo! It hits hard!”

Merthophan started lecturing over his loincloth. “An Azami soldier’s behavior should always be impeccable. Take responsibility here, Allan.”

“Huh? This makes *no* sense! Your outfit is the furthest thing from impeccable!”

Allan was really coming apart at the seams now, visibly reeling. While that conversation went badly awry, another problem arose.

“What now...? We’ve wrapped up too early!”

The Priest Chief. Since Kyounin had won the rite in three straight fights, sweeping their way to victory, there was a ton of empty time ahead.

And he was desperately trying to think of a way to fill it.

“If the audience floods us with complaints about it being over too quick, it’ll be my reputation that— Hmm?”

His ears had deftly caught the phrases *responsibility* and *tie the knot*. He quickly approached to confirm.

“Ladies and gentlemen, do I hear you’re getting hitched?”

“Honestly, you’re making me blush, Priest Chief! That you heard everything is extremely...elegant! Sir Allan and I were just discussing our wedding plans.”

“So I’m locked into this now?!”

They ignored Allan’s protests. This was exactly what the chief needed.

“Your love moves me—what say we hold the ceremony right here?”

This was a step ahead of everyone else and elicited a chorus of surprised yelps.

“I—I am the Priest Chief! And this is a site where holy rites are performed! And there’s a ton of guests craving m— *Ahem!* I mean, waiting to celebrate your vows.”

All he cared about was keeping things running smoothly, and he’d decided their marriage would be a great time filler. A concept that would turn all brides and grooms in the world against him...

“We heard! We know what you’re actually after!”

“You did not! I swear this is unrelated to the Kyounin clan sweeping their way to victory and ending the rite too soon!”

“...This guy can’t even lie convincingly.”

Allan was just looking horrified all around.

“By all means,” Renge said. Snap decision!

“Er, wait...huh? We’re doing this? What about the clothes? You’d need a wedding dress... Wait, we’re getting married?! Why?!”

Allan was now deeply confused. Fussing about clothes instead of his own participation in the event was proof his priorities were jumbled.

“Mwa-ha-ha! Lucky you are, Sir Allan! We prepared all manner of clothes—not just swimsuits! And that includes tuxes and wedding dresses!”

Nexamic pointed to the clothing rack, and mixed in with the bikinis and aprons was a range of formal attire for all occasions. Lord only knows what other wacky events they’d put in that box.

“Why do you even have those?!” Allan wailed.

“Thank thee, Sacred Beast!” Renge cried. “I never imagined the joke events we put in to mess with Anzu would pay off like this!”

“Don’t think you’re off the hook for *that*, Renge!” Anzu growled, not pleased their cheating had a happy outcome.

For better or for worse, they had basically everything they needed to throw an impromptu wedding, and Allan’s mind was screaming—his heart the only thing here that wasn’t ready.

“Yes, I—the Priest Chief—was prepared for this eventuality! Come, let’s make this a wedding for the ages! No charge!”

“Great! Come, Sir Allan! I can’t wait to say our vows! Sorry, Anzu, maybe some other day.”

“I’m not in nearly as big a hurry. I mean, are you even sure about this? Here, now, with Allan dragging his heels?”

“The day you desire an elegant wedding is the day it should occur! You’ll have to wait your turn, Anzu, sorry.”

“If it was that easy, no woman would ever have to worry... Also, quit trying to make this a contest.”

Anzu was as irked as she was concerned, but Renge had Allan in an armlock and was already picking out a dress. Total shojo manga eyes.

“Renge’s aggression is a valuable lesson to us all,” Selen declared.

“Don’t take tips from *her*!” Riho yelled.

Meanwhile, the Priest Chief was getting the stage ready. It *was* a ritual venue, so they just had to drag the stuff out of storage—and in no time flat, they had a simple marriage setup ready.

“See? Thoroughly prepared! Let the fill—ahem!—holy ceremony begin!”

“World’s first wedding as schedule filler... It’s so sad!” Marie shook her head.

Phyllo just pointed at Renge. “...Hard to call that ‘sad.’ She’s totally into this.”

Renge was in a full bridal gown, makeup flawless, arm in arm with tuxedo-clad Allan. Definitely not letting go.

“Yes, if you hold a wedding ceremony in front of a crowd, it’s a fait accompli. Better write that down... You agree, right, Sir Lloyd? Let’s go scope out some venues soon.”

“Um, I don’t—”

“Don’t ask him that, and don’t follow Renge’s lead, Selen. No seducing, either!”

No telling when the Belt Princess might decide it was time for a surprise wedding.

The contingent from Azami had all missed their chance to intervene and wound up just standing around, watching events unfold. The groom himself was in a similar state.

“Is this how the Ascorbic Domain does things?”

“...I feel I *should* deny that.” Anzu sounded glum. “But honestly...nobody would believe me.”

Meanwhile, the Priest Chief held up the megaphone. “And we will now be holding a surprise wedding between Renge Audoc of the Audoc clan and Allan... What was it? Er, Sir Allan!”

A stir ran through the crowd.

The audience had seen the setup taking place but were largely baffled by it. Nobody had expected *this* to happen.

The nominal groom was in the same state of mind. “This is a bad idea,” he argued. “Look, the whole vibe’s changed. Renge, we shouldn’t—”

“I noticed that, too! It would be far more elegant if we had three children already.”

“Three?! Wait...you’re starting to remind me of someone...”

Her selective deafness was really giving Allan belt-themed déjà vu.

“Ha-choo! Oh dear, where did that come from? Do I have a cold?”

“...I think I know the cause. Don’t worry, not a cold.” Phyllo had been reading Allan’s and Renge’s lips, and she gave Selen a sympathetic back pat.



The audience may not have caught up with the surprise wedding concept yet, but Renge had chosen her dress well, and when she stepped into view, the crowd gasped.

“Come, Sir Allan. Escort me! Elegantly.”

“E-escort—?”

She gave him a tug, and he did as he was told. His awkwardness just sold the young groom vibe and got the whole venue on his side.

As they started down the aisle, the drummers starting pounding.

A simple ceremony, but no less impressive for it. The happy (?) couple reached the Priest Chief to thunderous applause. This audience caught on quick.

The chief cleared his throat and waved for silence. “First,” he started, raising the voice amplifier. “I’d like to deliver a few blessings. Is Allan’s boss here?”

“No, no, we’re not at blessings yet—this whole marriage thing is crazy!”

Allan was still trying to back out...

“Boss? I supposed that describes me,” Merthophan called out, totally talking over him.

“You sure about this?”

“Fear not, Riho Flavin. I’ve made speeches like this before.”

“I meant your clothes.”

A loincloth and bandana—it took a leap to even see that as “just in from the fields,” and Riho had plenty to gripe about.

“Slipped my mind!” Merthophan cried. “An occasion like this demands a tie! Appreciate the heads-up, Riho Flavin.”

He produced a white hand cloth out of his loincloth and looped it around his neck. If you tried insisting that was a necktie in a restaurant with a dress code, they’d call the cops.

“Mwa-ha! Brother Merthophan! I’m expecting a speech that’ll leave my

hamstrings quivering!”

“Why would they do that? Oh, because it’s so long they go to sleep?” Anzu said.

Nexamic ignored her, giving Merthophan a hearty backslap.

Thus, one strange show pushed another up onstage to act as Allan’s boss.

You’d think a loincloth boss would make the crowd cringe, but they seemed to be into it. Odds are his status as the current Daikon Drubbing Duel champion had made him explosively popular.

He took the magic stone voice amplifier, straightened the hand-towel tie, and launched into a speech. “My name is Merthophan Dextro, and I was formerly the groom’s commanding officer. Allan, Renge, congrats on your wedding.”

Taking the whole situation in stride, the loincloth boss continued to ramble. All Allan could do was give him a silent stare of protest.

“Allan is a wonderful, dedicated man. I’ve never seen him train with anything less than one hundred percent commitment. He may be a bit too serious—sometimes I regret not teaching him how to take a break every now and then.”

It was your classic wedding speech template—heaps of praise, the occasional joke.

“Allan and I wear the same (military) cloth and share the same goals! We are comrades in every sense of the word. We’ve been through the trenches together!”

With that loincloth dangling, this took on a whole new meaning.

“Objection!” Allan yelled. “They’re gonna read that all wrong, Ex-Colonel! Wrap it up!”

“Hngg, did I get too passionate? Well, everyone, let’s give him a round of applause!”

“It’s the clothes! They twist all words! This is a wedding! Technically!”

Allan’s yells drove Merthophan off the stage. No one wanted to be a loincloth aficionado’s “comrade.”

Meanwhile, Renge hadn't once batted an eye. "I don't care what underwear you prefer, Sir Allan."

"Come again, Renge?! Please, tell me you know this is crazy!"

No sooner had Merthophan left the stage...

"Yo...what the.....?"

There was a stir by the entrance. A murmur ran through the crowd.

What was it? All eyes turned...

"Man, fine-tuning Surtr took me *forever!*"

A girl came walking in. She looked to be mid-teens and wore a helmet with goggles, like a coal miner. She was acting like she owned the place, and the crowd was baffled.

The entire Azami contingent yelped, """"Dr. Eug!""""

With her fated rivals assembled, Eug grinned diabolically. "Heh! Surprised to see me here, are you?"

Once again, the answer was a chorus—

""""We forgot about you!""""

All caught up in the insanity of Allan and Renge's wedding, everyone had completely forgotten that the evil mastermind was still at large.

"How do you forget *me*?! I don't deserve open mockery, assholes!"

It was no way to greet an old enemy. Eug bit her lip, tears in her eyes, muttering, "I hate them so much!" Then she hastily wiped her eyes, getting back on topic.

"Ha, I figured you'd have heard about me by now—you all live to get in my way."

She had nearly driven Azami to the brink of destruction. Her arrival was a serious threat.

"Your meddling in the rite is unforgivable, Dr. Eug!" Merthophan roared—completely ruining the vibe with his attire.

“Put some clothes on! Damn, this is a holy ritual; you can’t have a bunch of wild foreigners running around wrecking stuff! Have a seat and watch it play out. Go on—no chitchat. This is a religious thing!”

It seemed Dr. Eug thought the Sacred Mountain Rite was still in progress.

Already deeply uncomfortable with the whole wedding thing, Allan jumped at the escape her entrance provided.

“I’m all for wrecking stuff! Let’s have big ole throwdown and start over! With less crazy!”

“Why so eager?”

Eug might be a genius, but the idea that anyone would try to fill time with an improvised wedding was beyond her, so after a moment’s thought, she reached the conclusion that the rite was over, and this was some sort of closing ceremony. As anyone sane would.

Since Nexamic and Renge looked thoroughly pleased with themselves, she never doubted their victory. “Ah-ha. This whole groom outfit is sure hinky—this one of those weird local costumes the whole closed-border thing drummed up?”

They were really just having a wedding.

Eug never once imagined her allies had found out the truth and were smiling happily, having bonded over muscles, and taken a step toward matrimony. That’s why she was still smiling herself!

“Congrats, Renge!” she called. Renge took that to mean “on your marriage.”

“Th-thank you! I never thought you’d offer us your blessing, Dr. Eug!”

That was an odd response.

Allan took one look at each of them. “Why would *she* congratulate us?” he muttered.

Eug was just as thrown by this. “Why wouldn’t I? I’ve been planning this for ages!”

“You were planning this?! This mess is your fault?! Don’t you have anything

better to do?!”

“What?! Do you have any idea how hard I’ve worked for this?!”

“My god! You’re like somebody’s nosy aunt!”

Growing frustrated, the Priest Chief thrust his oar in.

“Erm, pardon me... This whole thing is just a way to kill time, but we don’t need *more* trouble, so if we could proceed?”

“Kill time? Whatever, sure, go ahead.”

“Appreciate your cooperation!” he boomed, bowing, and then launched into the next phase of the ceremony.

“Very well! You may now kiss the bride!”

“What in the— Huh?! Back up!”

Finally sensing something amiss, Eug darted over to Nexamic, demanding a briefing.

“Yo, what the hell, Tiger Nexamic? We’ve won the rite, and this is a new ruler crowning ceremony or whatever, right?”

Smiling broadly, he wiggled his pecs at her. “Nope! Afraid we lost the tournament in three straight battles, and now we’re killing time with a wedding!”

“How does that work?! Nobody gets married to kill time! And why do you look so happy if you lost? Don’t you care what happens to the Domain?!”

They both beamed at her.

“Forgive me! I’ve just reached a valuable realization about natural muscle growth and...”

“It seems the whole betrayal thing was a rumor! Allan told us the truth! It’s best to talk these things over.”

“How did today go so wroooooooooooooong?!” She threw her helmet, making it spin on the ground. That would win her bonus points at the comedy club.

“I’m guessing she’s the source of the lies?” Riho asked, watching Eug’s

tantrum through half-lidded eyes.

“Argh, why are my pawns always like this?! They always make their own decisions at the last second! Argh, good thing I got this ready.”

Her emotions were a whole roller coaster. She suddenly got really quiet and stood up, reaching into her pocket.

“.....! She’s armed!” Phyllo braced herself.

Eug proceeded to scatter Mastema Fruit capture devices around—like an angry toddler. They cracked like eggs, and smoke poured out...along with little fire turtles, about a yard long each. Their rough, rocky shells were tinged red like a volcano.

“Couldn’t figure out how to analyze it for some reason, but at this size, they turned out to be ideal for mass production! I turned failure into triumph! I am perfect!”

“So many Mastema Fruits,” Anzu commented. “We had those stored safely until the theft a few decades back—are you the culprit’s kid?! Have you been cultivating them in secret?!”

Eug shot her a toothy grin. “What if I was?”

“It’s your fault the Kyounin clan and the Sacred Beast— You’re gonna pay for this.”

Not the least bit intimidated, Eug cackled aloud. “Rejoice!” she said. “For I *am* the one who stole them. Believe that as you will.”

The sinister aura about her was strong enough that Anzu put a hand on the hilt of her katana.

“Who the hell is this kid? Another demon lord?”

“That’s something you don’t need to know. Right now—we’re about to get a fire show from the demon lord Surtr!”

This last part was shouted like the MC at an outdoor performance. There were dozens of red turtle monsters shuffling around now—and the Azami crew were facing them down, gulping.

“Oh dear. These things are dangerous!”

“Like the locusts at the exhibition match or foundation-day festival.”

Both Selen and Riho had fought mass-produced demon lord clones before.

“Priest Chief,” Anzu called out, “we’ve gotta evacuate. This is an emergency!”

But Mr. Save Face was less concerned with evacuating than evading responsibility.

“N-never! Not on my watch; not while I’d be blamed—”

“This ain’t the time! Get the audience out before they panic! Before anyone dies!”

While she went after the chief, Nexamic’s muscles rippled toward Eug.

“Eug,” he boomed.

“Ha-ha! Even you’re surprised, Tiger Nexamic? Yes, I am behind—”

Meaning she was controlling the demon lords. She was the one threatening the Domain. She had fooled them all!

“Astonishing!” Tiger roared. “You prepared a display like this for the wedding?! You’ve made this Tiger cry!”

He seemed to have entirely missed her point.

“—it all...what?” Eug gave him a long, searching look.

Renge joined Nexamic. “My, my, my, my! Eug, you shouldn’t have! I don’t even know how you found out Sir Allan and I were getting hitched—sorry, Anzu—much less had time to prepare entertainment! There’s only one word for it—elegant.”

Anzu took one look at the two of them and sighed. “Neither of you sees anything wrong here? Also, the apology joke got old real fast.”

Even if she wasn’t in a rush to marriage, or even considering the possibility, it would get on your nerves.

But the two dolts just kept gushing.

“Mwa-ha-ha! Tigers symbolized a thousand years, and turtles ten thousand!

Perfect for the occasion! Genius, Eug!”

“That’s cranes! Cranes flying!”

“Everyone cranes their heads to see my hamstrings, but what of it?”

“Didn’t need to know! Can you not react the way I want *once*?!”

The Priest Chief was starting to melt down. “Invaded by turtle monsters? How can I explain that—?”

Immediately evacuating the crowds would be the right choice. He knew that... but he saw himself being accused of lax security, allowing all the cheating, forced to apologize at a press conference, and living out the rest of his life in shame, and...he was desperate to avoid that.

“Nexamic keeps blithering about how these turtles are a good-luck display—mm, wait!”

The absurd mix-up within earshot had given him his second crazy idea.

The people in the crowd were whispering, going, “Are those monsters?”

Then the Priest Chief took the stage, clapping for attention. He cleared his throat, and the voice amplifier squealed. All eyes turned toward him, and he spoke into the magic tool.

“And so! Now! Eug...was it? Whatever! This individual has brought us wedding entertainment! A kind of turtle called a Surtr!”

“Goddammit!” Eug roared, furious her years of research were getting turned into a sideshow.

She raced up to him, protesting vehemently. “Are you completely stupid?! What are you even thinking?!”

But the Priest Chief had his rudder turned toward “cover-up” and was not letting go.

“Yes, it’s gonna be a real spectacle! Reminds me of my second wedding!”

“Good god! Wait, second? Two people married *you*?!”

Personal history aside, the Priest Chief was hell-bent on convincing everyone this was all part of the plan.

Not giving Allan and Renge a chance to act, he wheeled toward them, yanking them into his deception. “Come, now! Allan! Renge! Let’s see you work together! Take all these turtles out!”

This forceful suggestion didn’t exactly convince Allan that it was even possible.

“They’re supposed to be good luck, but we’ve gotta take ’em out? If this was actually entertainment, why would we be doing that? It’s the demon lord Surtr! If you’re gonna try and cover—”

“Right, who wants a slice of Surtr?”

“They’re not the wedding cake! Who stabs the symbol of longevity? That sounds like it’ll backfire big-time!”

This was hardly standard wedding practice, but Renge herself was super into it.

“Okay, we’re on it, Priest Chief! Come, Sir Allan!”

“Uh...huh? Is this actually working? Is this how people from this Domain think?”

The crowds clearly weren’t panicking yet, so Allan decided he’d better go with the flow.

“All right! Let’s slice up Surtr! Typical Azami fun times! Didn’t think I could do this here! Audience, just relax! My friends from Azami—and the other clans—are gonna strut our stuff!”

Allan, the dragon slayer, a man of many legends.

Moments before, he’d been flinging fire like a demon lord. If he said there was no problem...

“For real? This is part of the show?”

“They got me good!”

“I totally thought they were monsters!”

...The concerns turned into cheers.

“Between the Priest Chief and Allan, bedlam’s been averted. That makes it

easier to fight.”

“For once, I’ll give him credit.”

“...Now...we just have to beat them.”

“Yes, let’s trounce these foul...lucky symbols!”

The Audoc and Tiger clans clearly fell for the lie, too, and were cheerfully throwing themselves into combat.

Even with the balance tipping against her, however, Eug remained confident of victory. “What, you’re actually gonna fight? Against demon lords? Your strongest card isn’t even here, so good luck with that!”

“Wait,” Marie said, “you mean Master Alka? What did you do to her?”

“Ha-ha-ha, her too. You haven’t even noticed? Poor girl.”

She was actually talking about Lloyd—she’d sent him into battle against Satan and was assuming he was long since out of commission. Grinning wickedly, she pointed at each of her foes in turn.

“I mean the usual kid! With him gone, you’re really in for it! I bet you’re just waiiiting for him to get here, but...”

“Yo! Who’s missing? Just spit it out already,” Riho snapped.

“Isn’t it obvious?!” Eug yelled. “I’m talking about Lloyd!”

“You called?”

“Why are yooouuu heeeeeeeeeeeere?!”

Lloyd had popped out of the crowd, hand raised. He must have been standing where Eug couldn’t see him, and his timing was devastating.

“Huhhhhh?! You’re kidding! How?!”

She’d been pretty much screaming all day now. Her throat might not last much longer.

All her confidence was gone, and her arms were thrashing around like she was drowning on dry land.

“This makes no sense. It can’t be,” she muttered, then refocused her

unreasonable rage on Lloyd. “You can’t be here! You can’t be in one piece! You should have been wrung out like a rag!”

“Huh? Why?” He just blinked at her, the picture of health.

“Don’t play dumb! You were fighting Satan! What happened to Satan?!”

“I’m right here, Eug!”

“Why are you on their siiiiiiiiiiiiide?!”

She had to be tasting blood in her mouth by now.

Like someone who’d just done a string of screamo numbers at karaoke, Eug clutched her throat, swallowing, and then pointed a shaking finger at Satan.

“I—I pretended it was training and had you fight! You were punching the crap out of each other! How are you both uninjured?!”

“I see, so that’s why you— You may be a genius, but you always did take shortcuts,” Satan noted.

Eug was too rattled to read any meaning into that, but she raised her voice again, trying to shake off her fears.

“W-well, you might have Satan, but I’ve got Surtr! Attack! Demon lord clones, make Satan eat his words! You’re the symbol of fire; burn everything!”

At her order, all the turtles opened their mouths, which glowed red—and then balls of intense heat shot out. They were fireballs like molten lava, so strong they gouged the earth, striking fear in the heart of all.

“Yikes, a direct hit would end you!” Anzu spluttered. It was definitely that bad.

Eug saw her shock and laughed, triumphant. “Ah-ha-ha-ha! No way are you defeating a demon lord! Only Surtr himself knows their weak point!”

“Oh, it’s the gem on the belly. Also, if you flip them over, they can’t shoot fire, so...”

“Why is Surtr possessing that aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaax?!”

She was gonna rip her throat right open at this rate.

First Lloyd, then Satan, and now the real Surtr. And the latter was busy explaining how to defeat his clones. Eug felt like a guest on a celebrity-impersonation show surprised when the real one shows up to dis the impression.

“Why does it always turn out like this?!”

Having screamed her way through all steps of a three-part gag, Eug crumpled to her knees.

Satan approached, his expression earnest and concerned—like they were at a reunion, and he’d run into an estranged classmate.

“Luck was not on your side, Eung. If I hadn’t remembered my past, things would not have turned out like this.”

Eug flinched. It had been a long time since she’d heard her real name. “Wha—Seta? You got your memories back?”

“Yeah, thanks to Lloyd. I’ve got the gist, at least.”

Eug wasn’t the only one who reacted to that. The cursed belt—Vritra—seemed to be dragging up distant fragments, too.

“Eung? And Seta?”

“What’s wrong, Vritra?” Selen asked, looking worried.

“Oh, nothing,” he said, covering. “Let’s just...focus on the turtles.”

Pretending everything was normal, he reared up, menacing their foe.

Now then, let us turn our eyes toward the battle in progress.

No need for fear, with plenty of might on their side and the weakness already known—it was like playing with a guidebook in one hand and a fully leveled party. The result was the pride of Eug’s research quickly being reduced to the level of a festive entertainment spectacle.

A one-sided combat demonstration.

“Come, Sir Allan! Eug was nice enough to prepare these turtles for us! Let’s smash them to pieces!”

“Uh, sure... You’re okay with that, Surtr?”

That last half was whispered to the real Surtr in his ax.

“Yep, go right ahead. Sucks I’ve gotta beat up copies of myself and help out the rom-com leads here, but...go on, be happy together. Ha!”

Surtr trailed off in a mocking chuckle, and Allan spluttered a few red-faced objections—it wasn’t like this wedding was his choice.

Oblivious to his crisis, Renge was clinging to his side, enthusiastically swinging her ax.

Each time a Surtr clone came at them, she flipped them as easily as you would *takoyaki*, showing no trace of the fear demon lords usually engendered. Her ax moves were pretty sweet.

“Come, Sir Allan! Be...elegaaaant!”

“H-how...?”

Once flipped, she smashed their bellies, easily shattering the clones, like she was breaking mirrors. They sprayed fluids and then vanished.

Seeing them dispatched so effortlessly turned the rest of the Audoc and Tiger clans’ positions from a dubious, “Is this a show?” to a confirmed, “Definitely a show.” They all waded into the fray as well.

“I’ll use ice spells for crowd control, Riho. You focus on flipping ’em!”

“Got it, Marie. Take that! Finish ’em, Phyllo!”

“.....Mm.”

Smashhhhh. (A Surtr easily shattering.)

“Vritra! Bind that turtle!”

“Yes, Mistress! For you, treant lady.”

“I’m the head of the second year! Micona Zol! And my roots are gonna stab right through that soft underbelly!”

Smashhhhh. (Another Surtr easily shattering.)

“Kyounin clan ultimate technique: Three Door *lai*! I’ve stopped them dead in their tracks! See?! I’m not a useless character! Go for it, Tiger Nexamic!”

“For our comrades, Renge and Sir Allan! For our new peace with Anzu! And for my brother Merthophan and his lessons on functional hamstrings! Secret art—Tiger Flip! Go, Brother.”

“Kunlun plowing art: Loincloth Drill! Comrades! Follow meeeee!”

Whirrrrrrrr. (A loincloth jauntily spinning.)

Smashhhhh. (A Surtr shattering while looking depressed about the weapon that doomed it.) A veritable smorgasbord of approaches, but the clones were quickly going down.

Eug had worked hard on them and been proud of her work. Seeing them get mowed down like cardboard made her feel like a husband whose wife threw out the robot model he’d been so proud of the day after he finished it.

“Y-you’ve gotta be kidding me... All the weapons I made...so easily? And what the heck is a Loincloth Drill?!”

“It’s what it sounds like! Best way to handle rocks when clearing new land!”

“I wasn’t actually asking, asshole!”

“Eung,” Satan said, “I don’t know what’s happened to you over the years, but letting your emotions get the better of you has always been your biggest flaw.”

Having a colleague she’d always looked down on make sound points just poured fuel on her fire. She gritted her teeth, then roared, “Don’t act like you know me! You can’t know what it’s like! Every second I spend in this world is a living reminder of my failure to stop the world’s collapse!”

“Eung, that isn’t—”

“I’m done holding back! I’ve got one more card—demon lord Surtr’s second form!”

Eug took the sucker out of her mouth and threw it at the one remaining clone.

Her “suckers” were actually batteries; she lacked innate powerful magic, so she had to charge them with power over time. When the sucker struck the turtle’s shell, it shattered, releasing a powerful glow.

The Surtr clone doubled in size, then tripled. The shell bulked up, a red glowing dent in the top...like a volcanic crater.

It was over a dozen yards wide now—far too big for any ordinary human to flip. And it was clearly poised to unleash a devastating attack.

Everyone had been cheerfully cracking shells, but this gave them pause.

“Can you flip this massive bulk without injury to life and limb? Can you still call this a sideshow? A demonstration?”

As if on cue, an absolute deluge of fireballs shot out of its back.

“Hark! I can hear my hoe calling! ‘Danger! Great danger!’ Everyone, fall back!”

The blade of Merthophan’s hoe was actually an artifact called the Tablet of Destinies, and it had a danger-detection function that the loincloth man relayed to those around him.

“Why is a hoe talking to you?! Augh!” Riho grumbled, but they’d all leaped back—and the ground at their feet turned into a sea of flame.

“Look out, Mistress! Ow! Hot, hot, hot!”

Selen barely managed to block a fireball with her belt, but the fire was so strong, even Vritra was acting like an old man sipping hot soup.

“Are you okay, Vritra? You sound like an old man sipping hot soup!”

“I-I’m fine, Mistress! This is no worse than the time I accidentally set the bath temperature to a hundred and twenty degrees!”

“What on earth are you talking about? That would scald you!”

Marie and Riho, meanwhile, were throwing ice magic around, trying to keep the flames from causing any serious structural damage.

“Dammit! This is *far* worse! Any ideas, Marie?”

“Argh, where’s that kid grandma when you need her?”

The Azami ranks were crumbling, and Eug got her toothy grin back.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! That’s the payoff I wanted! Serves you right!”

She seemed to have forgotten her original goals entirely. Her thirst for

revenge was clearly far more important than capturing the Sacred Beast.

“Ack, Eung... She was always like this! Pursuing the hedonistic pleasures before her, no matter how foolish that might be. How I suffered as her director... Hot, hot!”

“Vritra? What are you talking about?” Selen was getting rather worried about her belt’s state of mind.

Eug was giving them a nasty scowl. “Director Ishikura...don’t you start remembering stuff, too! I don’t need any more thorns in my side. Once this is over, I’ll stick you *and* Satan *and* Surtr inside some Mastema. That’ll weaken Alka, too.”

But not everyone was letting the situation get them down.

“Magnificent, Eug! It would never do to have the entertainment be that weak. My Tiger Hamstrings flex in awe!”

“The precise level of elegance I required for the grand finale of our first team battle! Splendid!”

“Both of you really oughtta be more afraid...”

Neither of them seemed to be able to get past the idea that Eug was *nice*.

Meanwhile, Surtr’s onslaught was only heating up. The giant turtle wasn’t exactly nimble, but the fire shooting from its mouth and back was enough to smart the skin of the audience in the distant stands.

Trying to avoid further damage to the crowd, Marie and Riho were building a wall of ice. The audience thought it was all part of the show and were still cheering.

“Sure, laugh away. You’ve got no clue how hard this is,” Marie muttered.

“Yo,” Riho wailed. “Ice can only do so much here! I’m running low on magic, too! We’re gonna need another plan!”

Still working on the wall, she scanned her friend’s face, hoping someone had an idea.

“They still think it’s a show for now, but if the stands catch fire—they’ll panic

instantly. And the stampede will almost certainly result in death,” Marie said grimly, clearly picturing the worst.

“Marie, you know I’d love to help! But treants and fire are a lousy mix!”

“Hngg, we’re reaching the limits of my loincloth’s power! The butt strap is ready to snap!”

Allan’s possessed ax seemed ready to give up, too. “Yikes, in my second form, it’s almost impossible to flip me—I impress myself sometimes!”

Possibly a *bit* conceited. Guarding the crowds, Satan scolded him for it.

“Hey! Don’t flatter yourself! Only thing worse than a virgin is a narcissistic one! They’re your clones, man; do something! I’ve got my hands full guarding the crowd!”

“Oh, shut up! I’m busy myself! And you’re also a virgin!”

Now matter how sad the barbs, they were not leading to a solution.

“Arghh, what a mess! But it spells victory. Suck on that, assholes.”

The more their spirits flagged, the broader Eug’s grin grew, until...

“Then I guess I’ll have to step in!”

“Wh-what?!”

A single line destroyed her confidence.

She’d never heard Lloyd sound so sure of himself.

“Lloyd?” Marie asked, concerned.

He just grinned back at her. “The move I learned training with Satan can easily topple this big turtle! Oh, and, Eug!”

“Y-yes, Lloyd?” she stammered, not expecting him to address her directly.

And of all things...he bowed to her. “Thank you so much!”

“Where did *that* come from?!”

Anyone would be astounded by entirely undeserved gratitude.

Lloyd totally missed her shock, simply explaining his point of view. “I thought I

recognized your voice, but when I saw the turtles, I knew! You're the amazing lady in the robe who introduced me to Satan!"

"Uhh...?"

Renge and Nexamic joined in, singing Eug's praises.

"You get it, Lloyd! She's an elegant genius and has done so much for us!"

"She can be a little prickly, but that adds to the charm! We must pump iron together later!"

That just made Lloyd respect her even more. "So you really are a great person, Eug!"

"I am not! I've got no charm! I'm prickly all the time!"

"Now, now," Lloyd said, blowing right through her protests. "I thought it was strange! This sudden wedding, then monsters for entertainment—but this is actually a way to train everyone, isn't it? You really had me going."

"Lloyd, the marriage is real. Elegantly real." Renge hit those *reals* extremely hard.

"Oh, was it? Sorry, it was all so sudden. Congrats again!"

"Thanks. Love and weddings catch us all by surprise! Don't they, Sir Allan?"

Allan's expression could not have disagreed more, but Renge had a tight grip on the ax with Surtr in it, so he couldn't say more. She had him wrapped around her finger already.

Their display of "domestic bliss" just sent Lloyd deeper in.

"And you prepared all these monsters as a final touch to my training! Right, Satan?"

Satan looked at him like he was crazy, but then an idea hit him. "R-right, Lloyd! Eung prepared this for you! A chance to demonstrate the results of your hard work!"

He totally twisted it to his advantage.

"What the heck, Seta?!" Eug roared. "What are you even talking about?!"

“It’s your final test! Use that ultimate move! Relax...and give it everything you’ve got!”

Lloyd nodded happily.

One slip, and lives were on the line. Normally, that would be enough to make Lloyd shrivel up completely, but certain it was just a test, he could dive in without fear.

“It’s a real trial by fire, but I think I can pull it off! Allan, Renge, consider this my blessing! And, Eug—I’ll live up to your expectations!”

“I don’t have any!”

Lloyd’s friends were pretty used to Lloyd’s logical leaps, and this was not even one of the bigger ones.

“You learned this new move for everyone!” Satan yelled. “Now’s your chance! Follow me!”

“Okay! I’ll do my best!” Satan slapped his hands on the grounds and extended his own shadow, trapping Surtr’s second form in place. “I can’t hold it for long, Lloyd! Give it your full strength! Become the wind!”

“Got it! Wind Cloak! Combined with the *rainfall* rune!” Lloyd raced round Surtr’s second form, fast as the wind.

This alone was no different from before...but the air in his wake was *moist*.

“I-is this...?” Marie looked again and saw Lloyd wreathed in rain clouds, leaping this way and that.

The clouds in his wake grew bigger, and a damp wind began to blow.

“That’s the *rainfall* rune...Lloyd’s specialty. But this is beyond rain—it’s a storm.”

“Exactly, young witch!” Satan bellowed. “Low pressure...followed by a sudden rise!”

Satan threw both arms up dramatically, like an orchestra conductor. At his signal, Lloyd cast *Aero*, hurtling skyward, toward the clouds above.

Surtr’s massive bulk was sucked upward after him.

The change in air pressure made their ears ache and their heads hurt—a cyclone descending directly at him...and the giant levitating turtle was turned upside down.

“It’s too big to float!” Eug wailed. “Th-this isn’t real! Lloyd’s never had this kind of technical confidence! I know him! He’s the outcast of Kunlun! Stronger than any regular human, sure! But not capable of feats like this! He’s *ordinary*!”

Satan grinned, like any teacher proud of their student’s growth. “All your doing, Eung.”

“M-my doing?!”

“You put me and Lloyd together. And like you—he’s a genius.”

“Huh?!” Eug’s face was a sight to behold.

“He works hard...and works hard to make sure that hard work isn’t in vain! What he lacks in technique and confidence, he makes up for with effort! The kind of genius who can come face-to-face with real brilliance—and not be discouraged. Remind you of anyone?”

She looked at Lloyd again, neither smiling nor angry.

Surrounded by superhumans in Kunlun, mocked for being the weakest kid around...he’d fought hard, trying to keep up. Just like she’d gritted her teeth and clung on for dear life when she first met Alka, he was a *real* genius.

“The same breed, huh...?” she muttered.

“That’s it, Lloyd!” Satan yelled. “Now just hit it in the belly! With the storm around you—with Tempest Cloak!”

“Okay! This is my ultimate move—Tempest Cloak!”

With a concentrated storm wreathed around him, Lloyd rocketed toward Surtr.

Rain, wind, lightning, and compressed air. All focused together into a bullet that pierced Surtr’s belly, far above the stage.

As everyone stared upward, the shell cracked...and lava spewed out of Surtr. *Fooooosh*.

For a moment, he sprayed molten rock, like blood from gaping wounds, then exploded like a firework, the winds sweeping the sparks away.

The spectacle was so outlandish, the audience didn't even react. His friends knew how powerful Lloyd was, but this left them gaping, too.

"That boy's something else, huh?" Satan breathed, nodding.

Lloyd landed before them, looking deeply satisfied. His ultimate move had worked.

"How was that, Satan?"

"Amazing! You nailed it!"

They high-fived.

A moment later, the crowd caught up. Convinced this was all part of the show, they erupted in cheers. """"What an incredible performance!""""

Obviously, nobody could do that for *real*. Wrapping yourself in storm clouds to punch an enemy? Puh-lease.

"That's Lloyd for you... Something wrong, Surtr?"

".....Mm." Surtr was being oddly quiet.

"I guess nobody wants to see themselves get pulverized, but...don't take it too hard, man."

That wasn't why he'd gone silent.

"The *rainfall* rune..."

"Oh, that? Lloyd's mentioned it before, but... Whoa, what?"

Surtr was possessing an ax, so tears were out of the question, but those noises definitely sounded like sobs.

"My research, complete...completed! Thank goodness. Now my home...I can save it from the eruptions! My...my home? I'm..."

This sounded significant, but Surtr wasn't the only one in tears.

"Hah...huh?!" Eug might have tears streaming down her face, but her brain had definitely given up on speech.

Lloyd came over to her, looking very earnest. “Eug, thank you so much for providing this chance for me to demonstrate the results of my training, and celebrate Allan and Renge’s wedding.”

“I didn’t, you twit! And are you seriously going to follow this with a wedding?!”

“Yeah...you can say that again! Only sensible person here.”

Allan looked ready to cry into his tuxedo sleeve. For the first time, he was entirely on Eug’s side.

“Aha!” Lloyd cried, beaming at her. “That reaction! That body language! I knew you were her! You can’t fool me!”

He seemed very proud of himself. Laughing, he began peppering her with questions. Mad respect in his eyes. That specific tightness that comes when someone you feared turns out to be cool.

“How long have you known Satan? What’s the secret to becoming friends with monsters?”

“For someone so clueless, you’ve figured *that* out? How?!”

“It’s true Eung and I go way back, but the rest...”

Unsure how to handle Lloyd’s unstoppable side, Satan looked to Eug for help...and found her beyond language, her mouth flapping like a goldfish.

“That was such a great show! I’m sure Allan and Renge were delighted.”

Renge was smiling and nodding, and Allan was looking grim and shaking his head.

“And thank you for making me stronger! I’m glad you’re a good person. I know you and the chief had that falling-out, but...what do you say? If you wanna make up, I’m happy to come apologize with you!”

This finally broke through her stupor.

“Sh-shut up, nitwit!” Eug snapped. “Seta! How is this like me? This is totally ‘happy accident’! Make up with Alka? If only it were that easy! Don’t make me hurt you!”

“Who’s the nitwit now, Eug?” Riho snarled. “You’re outta demon lords; there’s nothing you can do!”

The rest of the Azami contingent were lined up behind her.

Eug realized her predicament. And her lack of options.

“Tch, they took out all Surtr’s clones, and I’m in deep... I’d better run for it!”

Satan quickly blocked her escape route. “Whoa, can’t have you fleeing the scene! I’ve got questions for you. How’d the world end up like this? What happened that day—?”

Before Satan could ask anything else...a small meteor fell from the sky, aimed right at him.

Thunk!

“Oof!” With a very silly noise, Satan and the meteor wound up buried in the ground.

And Alka came in for a landing.

“I saw a sudden storm and wondered what was up—you’re back to life, Satan?! Your luck ran out the moment I headed this way! Give it up, fool!”

“N-no, I—”

“No denials! I’ve heard all the lies—”

Marie grabbed Alka before she could summon another meteor. “Ack, Master, he—he may not be human, but he’s on our side.”

“Huh? What, Marie? Why are you here? Never mind that! Who’s responsible for—?”

All eyes turned toward...

“It won’t end like this next time! I’m not making up with you, asshole!”

With Satan out of her way, Eug had opened a warp gate and was about to leap through it.

“E-Eug! Drat! She’s getting away! Who let that happen?!”

“You did.”

Marie had rarely sounded so annoyed, and Alka looked up at her in horror.

“.....So this is *my* fault?”

“...Yes,” Phyllo hissed. Alka recoiled like she’d been punched.

“No, no, no, there was a demon lord here! Why wouldn’t I assume he was the bad guy?! It’s his fault! He must be executed! Fetch the guillotine!”

“You can’t force reality to suit your needs!”

She’d grabbed Satan by his collar and was pulling him out of the ground, ready to behead him.

Dirt literally on his face, he was doing his best to get through to her. “Wait, wait! Alka! It’s me, Seta!”

“Seta...wh-what?”

Then Surtr—the one in Allan’s ax—spoke up. “I remember! I remember now, Seta! Yo! You haven’t forgotten me, right?”

“Oh, I remember that obnoxious voice all right. Much as I wish I didn’t.”

“Oh, Jesus! I could say the same. You all remember me? It’s ya boy, Tony! The lovely tubby guy!”

At this, Alka finally caught on. “Oh, the fat douche.”

No minced words, there. Surtr grunted. “Soften the blow! Argh, I blame the spiky-haired jerk over there! I oughtta set that dumb hairstyle on fire.”

“Don’t be absurd, Tony. I gave her a present, and you roll in the next day with Dom Pérignon! Just as her heart was leaning my way—all my efforts, dashed!”

“I don’t have to listen to this shit, you goddamn nerd! She was in love with me! When I bought the Dom Pérignon, she said it was love!”

“Like hell it was! And you’re a bigger nerd than me!”

This storm of unfamiliar jargon meant those around them had missed the moment to stop the argument from escalating.

“.....If you two don’t hold your tongues now, you’ll be forced to write a formal letter of apology!” Vritra’s voice snapped like a whip. The buckle of the belt

snaked in between them, glaring at each in turn.

Both demon lords twitched—recognizing the gesture.

“Th-that’s gotta be...”

“No—for real? Director Ishikura?”

“...Been a while since I heard *that* name.”

Vritra turned toward Alka. “You’ve changed a lot, Alka—Akizuki. You knew who I was all along?”

“Urp.” This time, she reeled like she’d taken one right to the solar plexus.

Vritra shook the end of the belt like a head. “I assume the matter of my daughter gave you pause. Honestly...gah!”

“What are you talking about, Vritra? And the rest of you! It’s time for the closing ceremony!”

For a brief moment, things had turned very serious...but Selen was a master of ignoring the mood and unwittingly let Alka off the hook. She looked extremely relieved.

Meanwhile, Satan was scratching his head. “Who knew he’d be so whipped?”

“No, his daughter always had his number. And you’re still doing that head scratch, even as a demon lord?”

Satan realized his fingers were all the way inside his hairdo and winced.

“Well, now that I’ve got my old memories, yeah. But, Alka—what brought you here?”

“Oh, right! I came to see Lloyd and, while I was at it, see if I could make the Sacred Beast into a new Kunlun guardian...but what’s been happening here? I know you’re notoriously lousy with explanations, but...try.”

Seta made a face but felt he owed her that much. “I’ve got a lot of questions myself, but...we should at least stay quiet until the ceremony’s over.”

He looked over at Lloyd, still beaming with pride over his victory.

“Let me savor my student’s growth, Alka,” he said, beaming.

Chapter 4

A Mortifying Coincidence: Suppose You Met a VIP After Mistaking the Employee Entrance for a Bathroom

“Yes, that was a splendid ‘show’! I’ve never seen an ‘exhibition’ like it! Flawless ‘entertainment’! Ha-ha-ha! That’s definitely what it was!”

The Sacred Mountain Rite had closed out on schedule, and the Priest Chief looked pleased as punch. He was definitely emphasizing the deception, but it was pretty clear no one thought that fight had been real.

The results had been formalized, the Kyounin clan had won again, and Anzu remained in charge. Neither Renge nor Nexamic raised any objections—well, Allan said, “Seriously?” a lot, still finding it hard to believe he was actually married, but Renge ignored this completely.

And now they were all climbing the steep slopes of the Sacred Mountain, on the way for Anzu’s audience with the beast—Alka and Renge included.

As the slope grew less intense, they found themselves tramping through patchy snow, and the group leader wound up breaking ground for the rest of them.

“Why’d you end up splitting off from Micona?” Marie asked.

“Met an old friend,” Alka explained, expression neutral. “Today has just been full of surprises.”

“Same here, Alka, baby!” Surtr chimed in—even in an ax, his friendly disposition remained intact. “Never thought you’d have become a kid who talks like an old woman and acts like a wild thing! Not a trace of the old you left!”

The look on Marie’s face made it clear she wasn’t sure how to handle his takes or his attitude.

“Less chatter, more work!” Vritra snapped, every bit the boss. “There’s time

to catch up later—we’ve reached this shrine! You’re hoping to scout a guardian to replace me, yes?”

“Exactly. Anzu, was it? Let’s meet this beast.”

“Uh, so...”

Anzu was shaking in her boots, well aware that Alka was even stronger than Lloyd. She was picking her words carefully...or maybe just trying not to faint.

“We feel ya, Lady Anzu,” Riho said.

“Yes, that’s how I felt my first day in Kunlun,” Merthophan nodded.

“What’s wrong, Anzu? Muscle pains? Did you wish to get pumped, too?! A toast to your eyes and abs!”

“All you’ve done is pump iron, so you can’t even tell... I wish I was that lucky.”

“Is that envy I hear? Sorry I beat you to it, Anzu. I never imagined this would be how I finally won, but I guess you can ‘tell’—because I’m radiating wedded bliss.”

“That’s not what I’m— Argh, Renge. Never known real danger, never honed your senses...”

Neither Nexamic nor Renge had the slightest clue how terrifying Alka was.

They just saw a happy little kid, smiling innocently as she inspected the pamphlet she’d picked up at the base.

“Don’t worry; I’m not here to make trouble. Just gonna scout your beast, maybe have a little chat with it—you know, the one written here.”

“Yeahh...that beast from the shrine...”

Anzu made a face like she hated to be the bearer of bad news.

“Little lady, about this Sacred Beast. Sorry, but...”

“Yes, yes?”

“That was made up by the tourism board.”

“.....Excuse me?!” Alka stared at Anzu in horror.

“Like, a loooong time ago, there was a mass theft of Mastema Fruit used in

the rite. Probably swiped to sell to collectors.”

“And what’s that got to do with the beast?”

Alka’s intensity made Anzu flinch, but she persevered.

“The leader at the time was an ancestor of mine, and to keep anyone from finding out about the theft, he told everyone, ‘The Sacred Beast ate them!’ And the tourism board jumped on that lie and started advertising the beast like it was real.”

“Th-that explains why I’d never heard of it until I read the ad...” Alka crumpled up the pamphlet, then crumpled up herself, dejected.

“Then tourists started flooding the place, and they couldn’t back down...and ever since, it’s been the Kyounin clan’s duty to keep control of the Domain so nobody would find out about the lie. Sad, but true.”

“Seriou— Er, no! I knew that all along!” the Priest Chief lied.

Anzu ignored him, turning to the other Ascorbians. “I should have told you before. Truth is, the Kyounin have been lying for generations. Seeing how dedicated you both were to the Domain, the lie just started feeling sillier and sillier.”

Both of them waved their hands, dismissing her concerns.

“Mwa-ha-ha! It’s not on you, Anzu! We lost fair and square. What matters is not what’s inside, but what it inspires! Heartful! Inner muscle! Even if the beast does not exist, what matters is our love for the Domain!”

“The fault lies with those in the past. I can’t call it elegant, but we know the truth now, and that fact makes you the most elegant leader in history.”

The Domain leaders seemed to be closer than ever, but Alka was still reeling, her hopes dashed.

“B-but then...Kunlun’s new guardian! The means to control my power! Where will I find *that*? What fool stole the Mastema Fruit and caused this disaster?!”

“Calm down,” Anzu said. “The documents say it was a ‘girl in a helmet’ and ‘a pigtailed child in a white robe’ and that they claimed the fruits could help them ‘capture demon lords.’ Maybe that second girl was about your age? Uh...wait...”

Anzu's eyes narrowed.

Alka's eyes went wide; then she winced; then she started whistling.

"Fhew, fhew, fhewww! Well, no point worrying about past villainy!"

"You're just making noises with your mouth. And try not to be the cause of every bad thing, will you?" Marie scowled.

"Well, let's put that aside for now. I still need a new beast! My power's unstable! Eug's gonna win! Like she did during the ancient Mastema theft!"

An obvious deflection and pinning all the crimes on Eug. What a devil!

But Satan stepped in to save her.

"Um, Alka, would I work as a guardian?"

"You, Se—Satan?"

"You just need someone big and tough, right? I think my second form would work fine. Got nowhere else to be, so if you'll give me a home, I'd gladly take it."

Alka gave him a long, appraising look. "Hmm, your second form...wouldn't match the texts, but might be worth a shot."

She looked like she'd seen light at the end of the tunnel, most of her old good humor restored.

"Solid chance I can get my power back! And I'm reunited with an old comrade. If only the lab chief were here, all my problems would be solved!"

At Allan's hip, Surtr/Tony chuckled. "If she's alive, would she actually help? I bet immortality would go to her head, and she'd be holed up playing games somewhere."

"Extremely high odds," Vritra said. "On a more pressing note..."

"Your daughter?" Alka asked, looking grim.

The belt buckle bobbed up and down. "Indeed," he replied. "I can imagine why you'd want to avoid the subject. But if our team has reassembled like this... then there's a chance she's still alive and doing well. Gah!"

“Come, Vritra! We’re headed for the shrine! No time to waste on that!”

“M-Mistress! Augh, stop! No knots!”

Their once stern boss, firmly under the thumb of a girl young enough to be his daughter—his former colleagues all had the same grin.

“There were stories he couldn’t say no to his kid—I guess they were true.”

Seta/Satan had certainly been on the receiving end of Ishikura’s glare more often than not, but now he was scratching his head, enjoying the show.

“Surtr, I know you’re all deep in this conversation, but we’re at the shrine now...”

“Thanks for the heads-up, Allan! Wow, that’s...some vintage stuff.”

The shrine was certainly ancient. This looked less like the dwelling of a Sacred Beast than a place to offer prayers. If you’ve ever been to an Inari shrine, you’ll know the vibe.

Anzu opened the shrine doors. Inside were Mastema Fruits, an old sword, a scroll, a statue of a dragon...just a bunch of stuff nobody knew what to do with, jammed in here like a rented storage unit.

“Super tiny, a studio without a bath; nobody would wanna live here, let alone a Sacred Beast,” Alka muttered.

Anzu chuckled, then turned toward the dragon statue, muttering what sounded like a spell.

“It’s mostly a formality, but now I’m in charge for another four years. If you beat me next time, you’ll have to do the same.”

She shot Renge and Nexamic a grin, clearly offering a challenge.

“Mwa-ha-ha! I’ll study with brother Merthophan, achieve true muscles, and try my hand once more!”

“Yes, four years from now our children will be talking, and I shall show them how elegant their mother can be.”

“My opinion doesn’t matter at all, huh?”

Allan was in the throes of the marriage blues, still refusing to face the facts.

“Hokay, then let’s head on down. I came all the way out here, so I at least wanna get some good grub,” Alka said, leading the way.

The rest of them followed. But then Lloyd started fidgeting like he had to use the bathroom.

“It is pretty cold...um, Priest Chief? Is there a restroom around here?”

“Mm? A restroom?”

The chief had only recently taken over and didn’t know the area well.

He couldn’t just suggest using the bushes, however, so he looked around, hoping to spot something.

“Hngg...it’s my job to help if I’m asked... Oh!”

He’d spotted a door behind the scroll in the shrine interior. There was some old writing on it—and the design was reminiscent of the Holy Sword.

“A room in a place like that can’t be anything but a toilet—boy, that’s gotta be it! Go relieve yourself.”

“Uh, okay. Thank you!”

The Priest Chief gave him a push inside, and Lloyd sheepishly headed toward the restroom door.

“I’m good to go in, right? There’s no one else here.”

Without knocking, he put his hand on the door and pushed.

It glowed, a pattern of light momentarily racing across it.

This surprised Lloyd, but he just assumed Ascorbic toilets had cool doors and went right on in.

Beyond the strange door was a staircase leading down.

It was dark and hard to see, like it was leading into the bowels of the earth.

Lloyd gulped. These stairs went on forever.

“No lights at all? Ah!”

He’d taken a hesitant step forward, and like waking from their slumber, something embedded in the walls began to glow with a pale blue light.

“Domain toilets are amazing!”

Impressed, Lloyd followed the lights down the long staircase.

After a while, he found another knobless door. It hadn't been opened in years, and there was rust and dust around the edges, fusing it to the walls.

“Guess they don't clean down here much? Yikes!”

Like the lights on the walls, when he approached, the door automatically slid open. There was a scraping noise from the rusty bits.

And it opened very, very slowly.

Inside—was no toilet. It was an ordinary room.

“One of those spaces to change baby diapers? But isn't this a bit big for that?”

Lloyd hesitated a moment, unsure if he should go in, but the call of nature gave him the push he needed, so he stepped inside, knees turned inward.

“Sorry to intrude...”

It was a standard studio apartment layout; a single room divided into living, dining, and kitchen areas. Fully furnished, but no signs of having been used. Between the limescale and the thin layer of dust, it was clearly pretty old.

A pale blue light illuminated the living space.

Lloyd squinted and saw a figure lying down—and lights flashing on a device in their hands.

“Is someone there?” Lloyd asked—

And the figure leaped to their feet.

“Aughhhhhhhhhh! I blew iiiiiiiiiiiit!”

Lloyd jumped, gasping.

Shrouded in darkness, the figure kept wailing, oblivious to his presence.

“No! Nooo! I was so close! I almost cleared the entire series of death from start to finish without ever saving! I had plenty of instakill defense! I was all ready to go! But nooo, right outside the last boss it was all, ‘Do you want to save? Yes/No’ and without thinking, I said yes! The system tricked me! I was

defeated by supportive design! My saveless run is ruined!”

Lloyd had no idea what any of that meant.

“Okay, how long has it been...? Wait, that was like thirteen or fourteen years? Holy crap! Seriously? I only meant to play like an hour... No wonder I’m hungry!”

It sounded like a woman’s voice. Lloyd decided this wasn’t a monster, so he called out, “Um...”

The figure jumped a foot in the air, even more surprised than he’d been.

And without further hesitation, she went straight onto her hands and knees.

There in the dim blue light, head on the floor, she prostrated herself before Lloyd.

“Aughhh! I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” She hadn’t even looked at him, and she was already apologizing. “I had a little time to kill, so I started playing! Show mercy! Don’t make me do any work! I don’t wanna!”

This was less an apology than a dedicated shirking of responsibility. Downright refreshingly honest. Would she be willing to do anything *besides* her job?

Lloyd had no idea what to make of any of this, but he was pretty sure he wasn’t who she thought he was. More importantly, he really had to pee, so he decided to get to the point.

“Sorry, gonna borrow your bathroom!”

“Whoops, prostrating myself out of habit...er, bathroom? Wait, who’s this kid?”

He’d already closed the door behind him and was taking care of business.

A few moments later, he emerged to find her still going, “Why is there a kid...?”

“Sorry,” he said. “I asked if there was a restroom around and was told to go down here—I didn’t realize this was the caretaker’s office!”

“Caretaker? I’m not— No, wait, how’d you get through the door?”

Lloyd blinked at her. “Um, it just opened normally? It was a little dirty, but...”

“Not what I meant,” she said, shaking her head. “There’s a safety lock on it, preventing demon lords or other specific life-forms from interacting with it at all... Wait, are you a local?”

“Um, I’m not from the Ascorbic Domain. I’m from the Azami Kingdom.”

“Not what I meant by local, but... Okay, not one of *us* then. You really rattled me!”

He couldn’t make out her expression in the darkness, but she seemed bemused.

Lloyd bowed his head once more.

“Thanks again, caretaker. I really needed that! By way of thanks, I took the liberty of cleaning the bathroom. The limescale was getting pretty bad.”

“Oh, was it? Yeah, I hadn’t used it for years, so...thanks!”

“I’ll just wipe this down, too. You’ve really gotta keep the sinks clean, or bugs’ll come up the drains.”

“Don’t worry about that; I wanna ask you... Hngg?!”

Lloyd had pulled out his handkerchief—the one inscribed with the *disenchant* rune—and started wiping down the dusty kitchen with it.

The rune might be designed to lift curses, but as a side effect, it removed all grime. Even in the dark, she could see the kitchen getting dramatically clean and couldn’t believe her eyes.

“...! That’s Glyphic Idea Reaction Processing...aka runes...”

“Oh, sorry, should I not have?”

“N-no, it’s fine. What’s your name?”

“Lloyd. Lloyd Belladonna.”

“I’m Rien Cordelia. You can call me Rinko; everyone does. I’m just a nerdy lab researcher... Perhaps we’ll meet again someday.”

He couldn’t make out her face, but he could tell she was waving, so he waved back.

“Okay! I’d better run.”

She watched him go, then sat back down, picking up the blinking box.

“I’d love to game a little longer, but...if the world’s gotten to the point where kids are at his strength, maybe I’d better get moving. Gotta thwart *her* ambitions... Okay, just one more run before I do. Gotta beat this, at least.”

And just like she had been when Lloyd arrived, the woman grew absorbed with her blinking box.

“I see...so the Sacred Beast was a lie to attract tourists. No wonder Anzu wouldn’t talk about it.”

Up a distant tree...Eve was watching them all file down the mountain through a telescope sticking out of the mouth of her costume.

She seemed to be enjoying herself; she kept wriggling and chuckling.



The whole sight was downright disturbing, but she took a good long look at Alka, reading her lips.

“But they didn’t manage to open the mystery door, huh? Well, as long as Alka and the lab chief don’t make contact, I’m good. Whew! What a relief.”

Her primary concern had been averted.

“Can’t have anyone talking to the lab chief—not Alka or Eug. What’s this?”

Alka was saying something important. Eve watched her lips like a hawk.

“Oh-ho, so Satan’s gonna be the new Kunlun guardian? His second form isn’t thaaat far off the legends, so it might fit the bill. And that’ll give us the full Alka to deal with. Hoo, boy.”

Despite her words, no one listening would think she was the least bit concerned.

“Oh dear, oh dear. Well, that means we’ll have to go full bore on that other plan.”

She took the telescope out of her mouth and straightened out the head.

“The plan to kill Lloyd...”

That sounded ominous, but her comedic costume wriggled once, and she added, “Only reason Alka’s not on our side is because Lloyd’s filling the Roy-sized shape in her heart. If we take that away from her—will she still reject Eug’s scheme?”

She pointed across the mountain at Lloyd.

“Don’t worry! We’ll make it painless, Lloyd. Wait, where *is* Lloyd?”

She adjusted the telescope, scanning the area around Alka, then the shrine... and found Lloyd looking embarrassed and zipping up his fly.

“Oh, there he is! What, did he go to the bathroom? *Was* there a bathroom? Did he go in the woods? What a hick!”

Little did she know he was the one who’d pulled the Holy Sword, and that same power allowed him to open the door to take a leak.

“It’s gotta be me who makes first contact with the lab chief...don’t want anyone but me knowing the truth.”

Sadly, contact had already been made, and by Lloyd himself.

Best she didn’t know. Eve had her plans set and hopped off across the Domain, making squeaky noises.

Like a protagonist targeted by the last boss—but don’t worry; after all, Lloyd had been born under a lucky star, and his obliviousness could turn any event in his favor.

Afterword

I have extremely bad timing.

If I'm house hunting, I'll have it snatched out from under me moments after I tour the apartment. If I have curry for lunch, it'll be curry for dinner. If my electric razor breaks and I buy a new one immediately, it'll be on sale the next day, and I'll be all "If only I'd waited!" and if I have soba for lunch, it'll be soba for dinner.

So this is what happened when I heard the series was getting an anime.

One month in 2019.

There was still a chill in the air.

I had a frayed jacket on, and I'd been told we'd be meeting over dinner, but I still stuffed my face at a revolving sushi bar earlier—they'd had a flounder event going on, and I ate so much that they had to cut me off. And *then* I rolled into editorial, a thing I'm still not used to doing in the first place.

"This meeting's just gonna be about where the plot's going next," I cheerily assumed...

But the place they took me was a bit *too* fancy.

And with us were two reps from business rights—the people in charge of "media mix" plans.

At the entrance was an actual cloak room. Very polite.

The man at the counter was super professional and didn't bat an eye when I handed him a jacket I really should have been sending out to the cleaners instead. I should have dressed up a bit.

I could feel the tension rising. Along with a cold sweat.

The interior was gorgeous. Large and very fancy—maybe an odd comparison,

but the sort of place terrorists attack in Hollywood movies shortly before Steven Seagal shows up to beat the shit out of them all. Very cinematic.

The roast beef they served could easily have been mistaken for a steak.

My belly was still mostly full of flounder, and it proved no match for the invading roast beef armies. It was a bloodless victory. It tasted too good.

The supply of gastric juices was unable to keep pace with this beef-vasion, and I was forced to maintain stomach balance with injections of outside drink, but it was all too good to stop.

“There’s going to be an anime.”

“Yeah? ...*Burrrrp.*”

As I’m writing this, I’m going, “Maybe this isn’t a problem of timing. Maybe I’m just a raging idiot.”

Hi, everybody. I’m Satou, and this is why I’m fat.

I saw myself in a window just now and briefly thought a former sumo wrestler turned TV commentator was standing outside my house.

But I should talk more about the anime than the demands of my flesh.

I’ve already met everyone involved and been to a number of script meetings. Each one is filled with passionate discussions about how you look at things, what people were thinking, and all the mist and mystery light beams modern day bath scenes require. I’ve fielded a lot of questions about holes in the novel’s world-building that put me on the spot...so let’s just say I’ve learned a lot.

Everyone involved, myself included, is doing everything they can to make this a success. Look forward to seeing Lloyd in action! I feel like an uncle headed out to a play his nieces and nephews are putting on.

As far as thank-yous go...

Maizou, you’re always the best. I’d heard the GA editors are carnivores, and they weren’t kidding. I’ve never seen anyone put down that much roast beef.

Nao Watanuki, I know we’ve only made it this far because of your beautiful

art. Keep making Lloyd adorable and Merthophan toe the line.

Hajime Fusemachi, the success of the manga was the last push we needed. More crazy characters show up with each volume, but I know you'll handle them all.

Everyone at GA Bunko, I'm here because of you. I only hope I can continue to meet your expectations.

And I look forward to working with everyone involved with the anime.

Thanks to all my colleagues, past, present, and future, and all the advice and open ears you've provided.

And to my parents—I owe you so much. This time, joke-free.

And to all the readers who've followed me here—thank you for reading. I promise to devote myself to making this series even better and even more fun.

I hope we'll all meet again in Volume 9. I am Toshio Satou, and just as you all expected, this anime thing has made my hair fall out again.



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Boonies
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