

**Toshio Satou**

Illustration by  
Nao Watanuki





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









**Tiger Nexamic**

Chief of the  
fistfighters. Boasts  
invincible muscles  
that repel even  
Phyllo's blows.

**"MWA-  
HA-  
HA!"**

**"YOUR  
FISTS  
FALTER!"**



**“Yes!  
Please  
make me  
stronger  
!”**

**“You  
lament  
your  
weakness,  
feeble  
child?”**

**Demon  
Lord Satan**

He descends upon the holy  
training grounds, but just  
how strong is he...?

**Lloyd’s training menu includes a  
one-on-one with a demon lord?!**





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



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Nao Watanuki

**YEN**  
**ON**  
NEW YORK



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### **SUPPOSE A KID FROM THE LAST DUNGEON BOONIES MOVED TO A STARTER TOWN 7**

**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 7

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Original Japanese edition published in 2019 by SB Creative Corp.

This English edition is published by arrangement with SB Creative Corp., Tokyo, in care of Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation © 2021 by Yen Press, LLC

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First Yen On Edition: October 2021

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Satou, Toshio, author. | Watanuki, Nao, illustrator. | Cunningham, Andrew, 1979– translator.

Title: Suppose a kid from the last dungeon boonies moved to a starter town / Toshio Satou ; illustration by Nao Watanuki ; translation by Andrew Cunningham.

Other titles: Tatoeba last dungeon maeno murano shounen ga jyoban no machi de kurasuyouna. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen ON, 2019– Identifiers: LCCN 2019030186 | ISBN 9781975305666 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975306236 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975313043 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975313296 (v. 4 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975313319 (v. 5 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975313333 (v. 6 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975313357 (v. 7 ; trade paperback) Subjects: CYAC: Adventure and adventurers—Fiction. | Self-esteem—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.S266 Tat 2019 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019030186>

ISBNs: 978-1-97531335-7 (paperback) 978-1-9753-1336-4 (ebook)





E3-20210909-JV-NF-ORI



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## Character Profiles

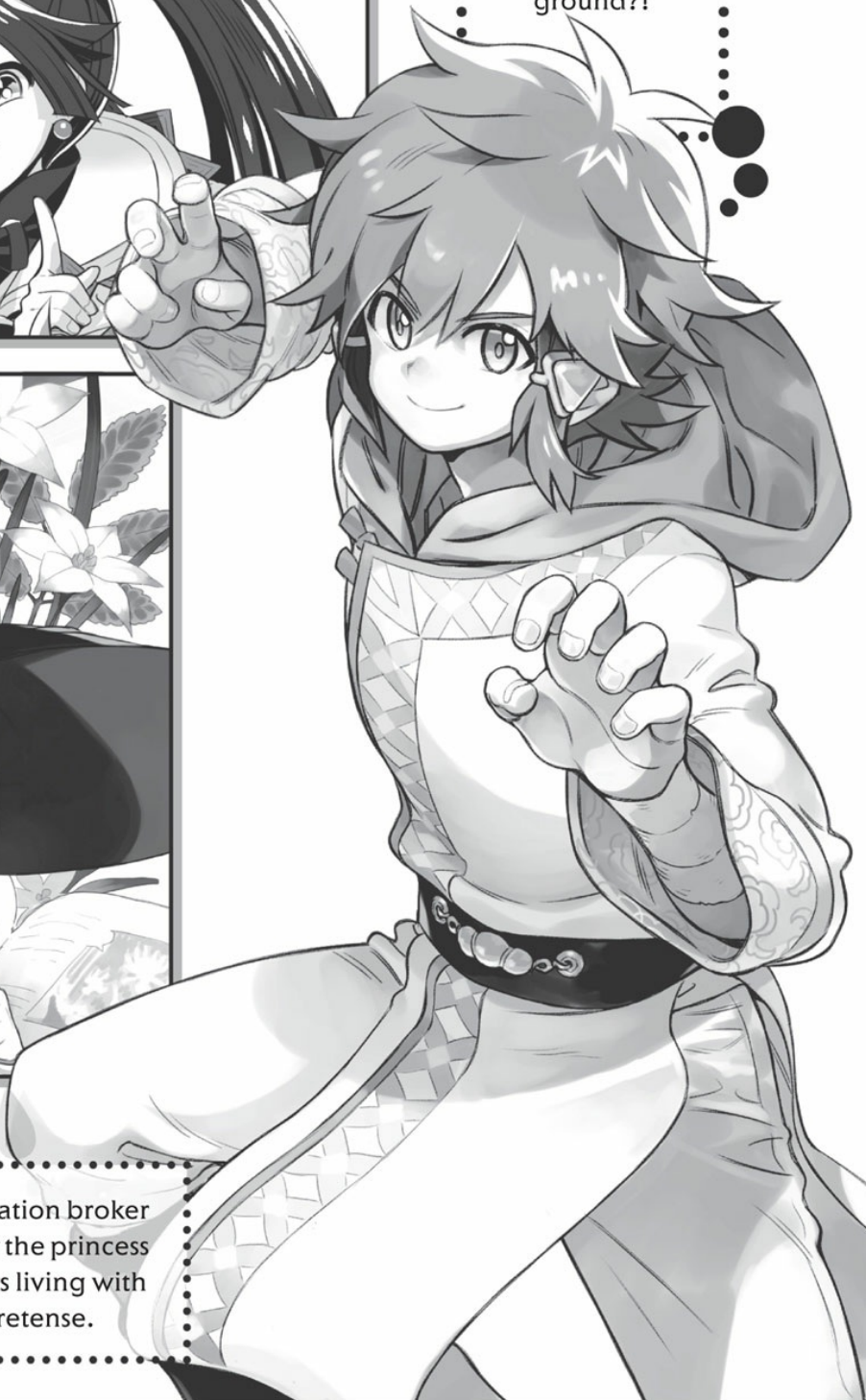
### Alka

Chief of the town of legend. Dotes on Lloyd like he's her own son. If she felt like it, she could easily destroy the world.



### Lloyd Belladonna

Excessively strong villager raised in the town of legend. Will he get even stronger in the holy training ground?!



### Marie the Witch

Disguises herself as an information broker on the East Side but is actually the princess of the Azami Kingdom. Enjoys living with Lloyd too much to drop the pretense.





**Selen Hemein**

Former Cursed Belt Princess.  
Devoted to Lloyd, who  
changed her destiny. ♥



**Riho Flavin**

Skilled mercenary. In it for  
the money. Lately seems  
preoccupied with Lloyd's  
every move.



**Phyllo Quinone**

A martial artist in love  
with Lloyd. Her fists have  
lost their edge lately...  
What's on her mind?



**Allan Lidocaine**

Son of a decorated noble  
family. Meeting Lloyd has  
only spread his fame.



**Anzu Kyouin**

Ascorbic ruler. Master of  
the blade. Astounded by  
Lloyd's power.



**Renge Audoc**

Young chief of axmen.  
Loves elegance. Always  
carries a tea set.



**Tiger Nexamic**

Powerful chief of  
fistfighters. Loves muscles.  
Ally of Renge.



**Lena Eug**

Self-proclaimed Dwarf King.  
Has many plans to restore the  
world to its rightful form.



**Satan**

Calls himself the demon  
lord of the night. Laments  
the weakness of mankind.

# Chapter 1

## Suppose a Kid from the Last Dungeon Boonies Tried to Level Up in a Midgame Town

The Ascorbic Domain.

Located at the base of the Sacred Mountain, Keihi—so tall that the clouds obscured the peak—it was a land rich in natural splendor.

Rivers collecting Keihi's melted snow wound through the territory, and people gathered in settlements along those banks. Each community once had its own unique customs and culture and was among more than a hundred clans—but over time, these groups had split and merged, and these days, there were approximately thirty clans remaining.

But with so many different motives and demands, the region had never lacked for conflict.

As a result, the one thing all clans had in common was combat. Politics meant physical strength, and vice versa. When Ascorbic people talked about a political tug-of-war, they mean it...literally.

As time passed, the clans' means of defending themselves became codified into martial arts. For a while, they closed themselves off, protecting their land and the skills their lives depended on. But in recent years, contact with their neighbors in Profen had opened their borders.

They'd spent decades rejecting outside influence, resulting in their unique cultures, and now tourists were flocking to see them—proving that nobody could predict the next hot trend.

The sudden influx of cash left all the clans going *To hell with this isolationist crap!* and throwing themselves into luring in the tourist trade.

The Ascorbic fad got pretty gnarly; for a while there, the cutting edge of fashion was modeled after Ascorbic training outfits, and even Azami had an



Ascorbic restaurant open on the North Side.

Leaving no straw unturned, trying every trick in the book to pull in outside money—it was inevitable someone would try commodifying their martial arts.

The Ascorbic Domain was now the holy land of combat training. They'd become the sort of country that was advertised with slogans like "Interested in fencing or archery? Just want to lose a few pounds? Try one of our training programs today!"

With peace achieved, it fell to the Kyounin clan to keep the country running. The ruler was known as the Sword God, and the lands held by the Kyounin clan were where every swordsperson in the world wanted to be.

The temple where the Ascorbic Domain's ruler dwelled was a mystic place, shrouded in morning mist.

A solemn wooden building. The roof was covered in heavy tiles that struck awe into the hearts of all who sought it out, held aloft by vermilion pillars, faded by years of rain, yet no less sturdy.

It was a temple as imposing as those who dwelled within.

"Fff... Haaah!"

At the center of the misty courtyard, one woman was working up a sweat.

She was furiously swinging a sword, her kimono fallen to her waist, shoulders bare, chest clad only in a cloth wrap. This alone made for an alluring sight, but the sheer ferocity on her face banished such thoughts, and her blade moved too swiftly to allow even an appreciative gasp.

Her intensity was as sharp as the *tachi* in her hands, like either one could slice leaves in twain. At the intersection between sensuality and strength, she had raised her practice to a level so high, one could mistake it for a religious rite intended to purify the land she stood upon.

Anzu Kyounin.

Ruler of the Ascorbic Domain, lauded as the Sword God despite her youth.

Her sheer skill and generosity were enough to bind together the fiercest of fighters. World-famous swordsmen sailed in, going, "The Ascorbic Domain ain't

all that!” and, days later, could be found bowing to their new master. Weak boys spent a few days with her and emerged bona fide adventurers. There were countless similar tales.

As the sun rose, the morning mist cleared. A servant had been waiting for half an hour, but seeing her master’s blade begin to slow, she called out, “Lady Anzu!”

“What is it?” Anzu continued training, not even sparing her servant a glance.

“A letter arrived from Lady Renge.”

“Throw it out.”

“Er...but...”

“It’ll be the usual twaddle, telling me to bow out of the Sacred Mountain Rite. No point reading it.”

As explained before, the Ascorbic Domain was currently peaceful—but that didn’t mean no conflicts arose between the clan chiefs. One source of conflict was the rite Anzu had mentioned.

It was a martial arts tournament held every four years. The victor of it was considered blessed by the Guardian Spirit of the mountain, and tradition held that they were placed in charge of the entire domain.

In essence, they held an election every four years. They voted with their skills in battle: Might makes right. It was a simple trial by combat—no gerrymandering or proportional representation involved.

Even as she trained, Anzu smirked. “Feed it to the goats. I can see her turning red right now! Hah!”

She unleashed an especially large swing. “And how are the students faring?”

The servant shook her head sorrowfully. “No signs of improvement, I’m afraid. They’re all still bedridden.”

For the first time, Anzu paused her blade. She turned to face her servant.

“It’s been three days. If it’s food poisoning, they should be getting better.”

“We brought the doctor in again, but... No better, no worse. He says it may



not be food poisoning...but has no clue what else it could be.”

“So it might not be food-related... Considering these repeated requests to withdraw from our final opponent, the Audoc clan...” She sheathed her blade and rubbed her chin, thinking.

“Lady Anzu, are you trying to say...?”

“Yeah, they’ve been poisoned,” Anzu growled. “Explains why they aren’t recovering.”

The servant steeled herself. “If their condition doesn’t improve, we are prepared to take—”

“Nah. Renge’s a fool, but we won’t be defeating her by sending a crowd of amateurs in, waving blades wildly.”

“But that leaves you as our only fighter! Or do you have an ace up your sleeve?”

“An ace? Hmm...”

A boy’s face floated into her mind.

They’d met at the conference of kings at the hotel Reiyokaku. He’d polished her *kodachi* sword with a single swipe of his cloth, honing the blade like new—all with the gentle smile of a quiet country boy.

“Lloyd Belladonna, was it?” Anzu drew the *kodachi* in question and threw it at a nearby tree.

*Thnk.* The blade slid into the trunk like it was made of butter. The blade was so sharp, it seemed to meet no resistance at all.

“Impressive, Lady Anzu. But what brought that on?”

“I’ve got an idea where we might get an ace. I’ll have to leave home for some time.”

“...Oh? Where to?”





“Azami. Gonna do a little scouting.”

“Scouting?! Lady Anzu, you mean you’re personally recruiting new members to join the Kyounin clan?”

“Gotta show I mean business. The king of Azami asked me to do him a favor, too, so it’s perfect timing.”

“But it’s too dangerous! The Audoc clan might attack you on the road!”

“You’re worried...about *me*?” Anzu breathed out, moving through the air like a leaf on the wind, slicing a nearby tree.

The blade seemed to pass harmlessly through the trunk, and she quietly sheathed it again.

A few moments later, the tree slowly toppled over.

“—! My apologies.” The servant bowed, and Anzu waved it off.

“Azami have themselves a dragon slayer and the Cursed Belt Princess... And even if I fail to recruit them...”

“What will you do then?”

“Then I’ll just have to challenge them to a practice round to test their strength. After we’re finished, they might just come begging to join my clan!” Anzu grinned and headed back into the temple to change and pack for her trip.

Watching her go, the servant remembered that last swing and shuddered.

“Lady Anzu’s *iai* sword technique is faster than *sound*. And she has the secret art, Scattered Blossoms. I feel sorry for anyone who rejects her offer and has their skill tested...”

She shook her head, pitying strangers from a far-off land—never once suspecting that the ruler she placed her faith in would wind up running through Azami, tears in her eyes.

After all, Azami had the kid from the last dungeon boonies, wielders of legendary weapons and armor, and a number of former enemies who’d switched sides with their powers intact.

Meanwhile...on the east side of Azami, the land the nameless servant pitied,

two girls were talking about the Ascorbic Domain.

“Are you saying a demon lord might be there?”

Marie was wearing an extremely witchy outfit—pointy black hat, black robes, elaborate jewelry. Across from her was someone who looked like a little girl in a white robe with her black hair styled in pigtails.

“Mm, and not the one that Sou and Eug released recently. It’s been there since ancient times, long enough to get classified as a ‘Sacred Beast.’ Kunlun needs a new guardian beast, so it might be worth scouting.”

Alka was reading from a travel pamphlet, trying to pass this off as her own knowledge. Marie scowled at her. Some people wanted to seem smarter than they were.

“‘Since ancient times,’ but you only just noticed? I mean, you’re immortal and over a hundred yourself. And that’s a travel brochure! Why does the chief of the legendary village of Kunlun know less than a travel agent?”

“Oh, going for low blows? Haven’t you heard the idiom *Nobody can see the farthest with all these trees*? Plus, you’re a princess, and you didn’t know, either!”

“It’s so incredibly famous, it never occurred to me! And it’s *can’t see the forest for the trees*. If these people wanted to see farther, they could just climb up its branches...”

As this conversation had already revealed, Marie the Witch was actually the princess of Azami, and Alka, the undying chief of Kunlun. As this conversation also proved, they were both extremely immature.

Kunlun had lost its guardian beast, and Alka was on the hunt for a demon lord capable of replacing it. By doing so, she hoped to thwart Eug’s plans to unleash all the demon lords and bend the world to her will.

Alka took a sip of a beverage so laden with milk and sugar that it barely qualified as “coffee.”

“This Sacred Beast is treasured as the Domain’s Guardian Spirit, so I should easily be able to chat it up.”



“You’re just gonna headhunt someone else’s demon lord? ...You know, not really many of those wind up being treasured...”

Marie’s primary experience with demon lords had involved one nearly taking over her country, so...she wasn’t a fan.

Well aware of that history, Alka offered some supplemental information.

“It isn’t being *evil* that makes them demon lords. It’s just easier to label them that way. They’ve been transformed into creatures of instinct, driven by a craving for what they lack...so if they were good to begin with, or they recover some memories, they might *not* be evil. But recovering their memories could make some creatures out there worse than any demon lord...”

“What memories?”

“Whoops. Basically, even an idiot can serve some use. Anyhoo, I’m gonna take a quick jog to the ocean down south.”

“Wait, I thought you were going to the Ascorbic Domain? The ocean? With all that’s going on, you’re gonna hit the beach?”

Alka looked indignant. “I’d love to go swimming, but...I heard Shouma’s getting up to something. So I’m gonna be way out at sea, looking into that. No telling what he’ll do next...”

Shouma was a villager from Kunlun who’d joined Eug’s side, and Alka spent a great deal of time chasing down any rumors about his activities. She was like a shopkeeper who showed up to see how the store was doing on their day off.

“That sounds rough... You have my sympathies.”

“If they’re treating this thing like a Guardian Spirit, Eug won’t be able to do much to it. I’m only really here to recharge my energy off Lloyd’s tender flesh, so don’t get too carried away with the sympathies.”

“I take ’em back! You’ve hit all new levels of creepy, kid grandma!”

Tender flesh didn’t really recharge anything.

But Alka had said his name, so Lloyd popped his head out of the kitchen.

“You called?”

His voice as gentle as his smile, Lloyd was wearing an apron, a plate balanced in his hands. He'd been busy washing up, and there were some soap bubbles on his face.

*"Gasp!* Those bubbles! Are you putting up the act of a klutz?! If only it was whipped cream and not dish soap... Close enough! Here I come!"

"Lloyd! She's just asking for another cup of coffee! Black as night! Delivered directly down her noseholes to her brain! Only way to snap her out of it now!"

"Er, I'm confused, but...sure!"

Alka loved Lloyd a bit too much, and this sometimes made her a living nightmare. It generally fell to Marie to restrain her—which she was getting rather good at.

"Marie! What am I supposed to lick now?! I have to lick something!"

"What an awful compulsion! Here, lick this tree sap, and maybe it'll finish you off for good."

Even your average anteater wasn't this into licking things. But that was our Alka!

"That's spiteful even for you, prodigal student! Who taught you to be so mean? ...Anyway, I'd better get to back to the village and start packing."

Lloyd came back in with the coffee. "Chief," he said, "did I hear you talking about the Ascorbic Domain? ...What's up? Are you doing some training there?"

He definitely sounded interested in the holy training grounds. He handed Alka her coffee.

"Lloyd, when you think about it, I spend every day doing nothing but training. Yes...training to be your bride—!"

"Right, Master, your black coffee."

*"Blergh!* So bitter!"

"Awake now? Now go home, I'm busy."

"...Sheesh, I dunno who you take after. I'll come again, Lloyd! *Mmph-smooch-smooch!*"



With a flurry of thrown kisses and a show of great reluctance, Alka teleported back home.

When she was out of sight, Lloyd muttered, “The holy training grounds... I’d like to visit the Ascorbic Domain someday.”

“Oh, really? First I’ve heard of it.”

“Yeah, lately, I keep thinking, *I want to be stronger, or I’d like to learn some powerful techniques.*”

“...Huh. Right.”

“I’m sure I’m too weak to be worthy of the holy land, though. They’d just laugh in my face and send me packing.”

“...Er, no, I don’t see that—”

“Oh, sorry, didn’t mean to bug you. I’ll get back to these dishes!” Lloyd sheepishly slunk back to the kitchen.

As he left, Marie frowned, sipping her own coffee. “I get that growing up surrounded by the heroes of Kunlun would make him think he’s weak, but...the Domain won’t know what to do with him...”

Lloyd had grown up on the edge of civilization, and only the superhuman could possibly train him. So his suggestion put her at a bit of a loss. The Ascorbic Domain’s training programs would be as useful to Lloyd as a dumbbell meant for children would be to the bench-press world record holder.

A few days later, at the Azami Military Academy...

“A guest lecturer, Colonel Chrome?”

“That’s right, Allan,” Chrome said. He glanced at the students celebrating the end of the day’s classes. “You’ve all been getting a bit too soft, so the king’s arranged for someone to drop in and whip you all into shape.”

“...Who?” Phyllo asked, hand snapping up. She was a martial artist and always the first in line for this sort of thing. Her usual impassive demeanor had given way to a visible desire for self-improvement.

Her look just made Chrome wince. He scratched a cheek awkwardly.

“The king insisted it was, uh...top secret.”

“Top secret?! ...That sounds like a big deal!” Allan exclaimed. He looked tense. His knuckles tightened around the hilt of his ax.

“Hard to tell. But if the king’s being this dramatic, then it must be *someone* significant. Make sure you arrive in good condition.”

But even as Chrome was warning the students, the Cursed Belt Princess—Selen—sidled up to her crush, Lloyd.

“A guest lecturer! What will they do to us? I’m so scared, Sir Lloyd! I think we’d better go home, sleep together, and be in the best shape possible! Not just today but forever! And in all future lifetimes!”

Her words spiraled quickly away from *romantic* into *cursed*. Like she was casting a hex that would affect generations to come.

Phyllo grimly pulled her away. “...Never fear, Selen. You have your belt’s auto-guard... I’m the one who should be scared.”

“Liar! You’ve got the highest stats in this group! You crack boulders barehanded!”

“...As ladies do.”

What sort of lady from what world? And what do the gentlemen crack there?

Caught between them, Lloyd offered a more constructive proposal.

“I think we’d all better go straight home to get ready for tomorrow.”

“Right you are, Lloyd! Unlike these loons, you always say the right thing! That’s why you’re my master!” Allan was propping Lloyd up, but he was technically the heir to a local lord.

“You’re the one who most needs to worry about his condition, Allan,” Chrome growled.

“Huh? Wh-why me?”

“Well, everyone is putting you on this pedestal. I dunno what this guest lecturer has planned, but odds are they want to get a look at you in action. Make sure you’re here. If they turn out to be a wandering swordsman or a

mercenary trying to make a name for themselves, be prepared to gently defer or handle yourself well enough that it won't blot your record. Got it?"

"Colonel Chrome! You're jinxing me! This is called foreshadowing! Why am I always the one getting attacked?!"

"Well, you're the damn dragon slayer. The name alone makes you sound worth beating..."

Allan Toin Lidocaine. There was no end of stories about him—how he'd knocked a dragon unconscious, summoned the spirits of ancient warriors to save the realm, *etc.*

"Ugh... I wasn't even involved in most of those stories..."

The vast majority had been entirely Lloyd's doing. But bad timing or a calculated choice on the part of the military bigwigs had resulted in Allan becoming far more famous than his actual abilities warranted.

Chrome was well aware of this and doing what he could to soften things for Allan.

"We know you're trying harder than anyone, okay?" he said, scratching his cheek. "But between the rumor mill and the top brass wanting a hero to be the face of the realm... Just consider it the price of fame."

"I need an accountant to handle all these expenses," Allan wailed.

This was exactly the setup the sharp-tongued mercenary Riho usually pounced on, but...today, she just seemed out of it. Riho had beady eyes and a dangerous-looking mithril arm, but her vibe was more like flat soda on this day.

"—Are you even listening, Riho Flavin?" Chrome asked, worried.

This finally got her attention. "Ah, sorry, yes, Colonel. Top condition, will be ready."

Selen and Phyllo both glared at her suspiciously.

"What's wrong with you, Riho? You've been in a daze all morning."

".....And you haven't eaten. Your tummy hurt?"

"No, nothing like... I'm fine, I'm fine. Quit your fussing."



Lloyd was looking worried now, too. “Are you sure, Riho? I can take you to the nurse’s office if you want.”

“No, I’m seriously fine. I just gotta get home. Got an errand to run.” She hustled off, leaving a crowd of perplexed stares in her wake.

“Hmm...” Allan rubbed his chin. “That’s not our usual ruthless mercenary, huh?”

“Exactly! I miss her dexterous dunks on your dumb ass.”

“...I...figured she’d at least try to get you to pay for her next meal. Seeing as you’re famous and all,” Phyllo said.

“She’d call it the surcharge of fame, take the money, and slam the restaurant door in his face.”

“...With a grin over her shoulder, telling him that fasting might be his one shot at getting handsome.”

“You’ve convinced me that this is preferable,” Allan grumbled, wiping a tear.

“If Riho’s not in good condition, then tomorrow...”

Lloyd was the only one still looking worried.

“Don’t worry, Sir Lloyd!” Selen cried. “Riho’s issues are never physical.”

“Y-you’re right. Riho’s way stronger than I am,” Lloyd said.

“.....Uh, Master...”

“I dunno if I can keep up with this guest lecturer’s training. I know Chrome always keeps the workouts light, just for me. Argh, no, I can’t think like this! I’ve gotta look at this as my chance to get stronger!”

“””” .....””””

None of his classmates could bring themselves to insist he was already plenty powerful. They knew only too well he’d just take it as empty flattery.

Lloyd and his friends spread out through the streets of the Central District, bound for their respective homes...but trouble was already afoot.

The moment Allan was alone in a narrow alley, a low voice growled, “So

you're Allan Toin Lidocaine?"

"Mm? Yeah, but... Huh?" Allan turned, and the speaker revealed themselves.

A hand-stitched mask, a kimono, and a sword. Between the swelling at the chest and the voice, this was likely a woman—Anzu. Her eyes flashed through the gaps of her mask.

"What do you want? Kinda sensing a little hostility here..."

Anzu ignored his question, folding her arms.

"*Hngg*," she growled. "So this is the dragon slayer? Is he hiding his true power? Or have my instincts dulled?"

She muttered to herself a moment longer, then made up her mind. She unfolded her arms and let out a long breath.

Then she put a hand on the hilt of her *tachi*.

Her aura was as ferocious as any man-eating beast.

Allan picked up on this at once—and instantly decided she was a mercenary or wandering swordsman looking to make a name for herself.

"I told Chrome he was jinxing me!"

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

That foreshadowing had come to pass in record time. Allan was cursing his luck, but this only distracted Anzu momentarily. She was almost immediately ready to fight again.

"Dragon Slayer Allan! I've heard the tales..."

"Ah, yeah, yeah, I know! You heard the rumors and decided to make a name for yourself?"

Allan seemed to be past caring at this point.

"Not...quite, but fine! Let's see what you're made of."

Anzu lowered her center of gravity, and Allan raised his ax.

"You know my name, but I don't know yours."

"I've got my reasons for concealing it."

“Suit yourself...but if I win, you can tell me then.”

First strike would win, to hell with self-defense. Before he even finished speaking, Allan’s ax had left his side, swinging toward Anzu.

His arm muscles rippled, his ax sweeping sideways...sending a gust of wind blowing down the narrow alley.

“Did I get her?”

A sideways blow in a space this narrow meant she couldn’t dodge to one side, but...

“No such luck, kid.”

“How the—?!”

The voice came from *behind* him. Allan turned his head...and found Anzu sitting on the blade of his ax. Through the slits in her mask, he could tell her eyes were smiling.

His arm was extended behind him from the swing, and she was sitting cross-legged on it—yet he couldn’t feel her weight.

“How am I so light?” she asked, as if anticipating his question. “Well, that would be a secret.”

“Dammit!” Allan swore and yanked his ax upward...but Anzu just spun through the air like a leaf, fluttering back to the ground.

“Can’t fault your form—you sure put your back into that. But power alone won’t ever hit me.”

“If you’ve got secret skills...then I imagine you’re from the Ascorbic Domain?”

“Whoops, did I reveal too much? I’ve clearly been in mentor mode too long.”

Anzu shook her head...and then it was her turn to strike.

*Claaaaang!* The force behind the blow surpassed his wildest expectations. Just blocking it left Allan’s hands numb.

“Augh!”

“I ain’t done yet! Show some mettle!”



A slice, thrust, sweep, slice, thrust, sweep... She launched a flurry of swings so fast that he had no time to breathe.

“Is that all you got? Is the dragon slayer nothing but a PR prop for Azami?!”

“Don’t hit me where it huuuuuurts!”

She’d touched a nerve and got him mad enough that he managed to break her flurry, going on the offensive, not caring if she cut him.

But his sacrificial blow...was blocked easily.

“Tch, not even that’s enough to get you?”

“That wasn’t half-bad! Can’t argue with the strength, at least. Hone your technique a bit and—”

“Oh, shut up! Don’t start talking like the fight’s already done!”

Allan swung his ax as if trying to cut Anzu’s assessment in half.

Asked about her state of mind later on, Anzu Kyounin would say: “Armies often prop people up with names they don’t deserve.”

“—Were you disappointed?”

“Honestly, yeah. For a while, I figured Azami wasn’t worth my time.”

“—But not now?”

“.....” (Anzu appears lost in her memories.)

“—Can’t fault your tenacity or your fortitude. But it’s time we wrapped this up.”

Lightly brushing aside Allan’s blow, she found an opening and went for a leg sweep. Allan lost his balance, leaving himself open. But just before the back of her *tachi* hit home— “Who goes there?!” A voice rang out, and Anzu stayed her blade, turning toward the source of it.

Rough canvas pants, a linen shirt, tanned skin, and silver hair—Merthophan Dextro, a soldier turned government aide.

Allan had not expected help to arrive and could not disguise his surprise. “Colonel Merthophan!”

“Don’t call me Colonel. I’m an agricultural adviser now.”

“You’re gonna point that out every time, huh?”

“I was delivering wheat from Kunlun and saw you’d got yourself mixed up in more trouble.”

Once upon a time, Merthophan had been part of a demon lord’s scheme to usurp the country. To make amends, he’d been assigned fieldwork in the boonies—Kunlun. He’d taken to farming like a fish to water and, upon his return to Azami, been officially placed in charge of improving their yield.

But the military intensity had never left him—and he glared at the masked swordswoman.

“I heard you’re constantly fending off mercenaries trying to boost their reputation, but I didn’t think I’d run into one personally.”

Anzu, meanwhile, was grinning, pleased by this unexpected opportunity. It was just like having a second helping served the moment you were feeling unsatisfied by your portion size.

Forgetting her original objective, she turned her *tachi* toward the new arrival. “Merthophan Dextro... The biggest war hawk the Azami military ever had.”

“Like I said, I’m an agricultural adviser now.”

He was very insistent on this point.

“Agri— No matter. I was just craving a little more. You’ll make a perfect round two.” Anzu kicked Allan out of the way, ready to face Merthophan.

“Gah... C-Colonel Merthophan, she’s legit!”

“Well, as a former soldier of Azami, I can hardly let this stand. And she scoffed at farming! Very well. Allow me to demonstrate the power of fieldwork!”

Merthophan raised his hoe. Anzu’s eyes went wide, but then she grinned.

“A hoe, huh? Fascinating.” She adjusted her stance, and the air crackled with tension.

Allan could only watch, gulping, as the two edged closer to each other.

“Let’s do this, not-a-colonel... Ready?”

““Fight!””

And Merthophan immediately stripped down to his loincloth.

“Heeeeeey!!!! We’re in the middle of a fight here!!!!”

Anzu’s voice was extremely loud. For good reason.

Merthophan folded his clothes neatly, tugged at the cloth on his rear, and answered with downright-creepy earnestness. “Yes, which is why I’m taking this seriously. As you desired.”

“Nobody desired *this*! Nobody wants to see any of this! What even is that thing?!”

“What else? Traditional farming wear. Loincloths are basic—and the best—combat equipment.” Tying a bandanna around his head, his muscles on display, Merthophan was ready to fight.

Anzu had been caught off guard, but she wasn’t the Sword God for nothing. She’d already recovered.

“You think nudity will give you an advantage in a fight against a woman? Azami sure does like dirty tricks.”

“Hmm? Dirty? I washed it in the river just two days ago.”

“A whole two days ago?! And in a river?! Didn’t need that mental image!”

The silver-haired man pulled up the front flap, inspecting it, and Anzu let out another yelp of horror. She might legitimately hurt her voice at this rate.

“Uh, sorry,” Allan said, genuinely meaning it. He sounded like an agency manager apologizing for the star’s bad behavior.

“No need for you to—” Anzu half turned toward Allan, but Merthophan didn’t let that opening escape.

“Gotcha!” He slammed his hoe into the pavement.

Anzu grimaced, barely avoiding the loincloth man’s surprise attack. The look on her face was tinged with the kind of desperation usually reserved for tropey “Now I can never get married!” types of situations.

The cracks in the pavement looked more like the work of a sledgehammer



than a hoe.

“Er...,” Anzu said, turning pale. “You can do *that*...with a hoe?”

Incidentally, the blade of Merthophan’s hoe was an artifact called the Tablet of Destinies, a fact that would make basically anyone clutch their head and demand to know why they hadn’t found a better use for it.

Merthophan, meanwhile, seemed confused by the question.

“Hone the spirit of cultivation, and you can plow the earth and pavement alike.”

“I’m so sorry,” Allan said again.

“You knock that off,” Anzu barked—this time not turning around. Then she glared at Merthophan. “Trying to rattle me with a bunch of nonsense? I ain’t gonna fall for it!”



The very air around her altered.

She bent her knees, leaning forward—but this time, her *tachi* was sheathed. And she did *not* close the gap. She remained still, leaving plenty of space between them.

“Hah...!” Anzu drew.

“*Hngg!*”

And her blade hit Merthophan.

He barely managed to block it. There was a *clang*, and sparks flew from his hoe.

Anzu’s *tachi* was already back in the scabbard, and she grinned at him.

“Think you can beat my *iai* sword technique?”

“*Iai?*” He opened his eyes wide. The loincloth dug into his crack. “Was that the Kyounin clan’s ultimate technique, Three Door *iai*? Never thought I’d see that used in Azami.”

“Well spotted. You know your stuff.”

“My first time seeing it in person,” Allan said, expressing his surprise through exposition, like he was in a *shounen* battle manga. “That range is daunting. Gives no chance to close the gap.”

Merthophan said nothing. He just stood still, looking grim.

Anzu grinned triumphantly. “Guess the tables are turned now,” she observed. “If you’re out of tricks, feel free to throw in—”

“Loincloth extend!”

“Aaaaaaaaah! Get this filthy thing off me!”

Merthophan’s loincloth had shot out, trying to wrap itself around Anzu. Well aware of the state of his laundry, she did everything she could to avoid it—desperation beyond measure. Shocked by the very nature of the attack, she nonetheless managed to evade capture.

“So close! Another inch, and I’d have rendered you helpless.”



“What’s your problem?! That’s beyond dirty!”

“I disagree. Hiding one’s trump card is a legitimate strategy.”

That’s not what she meant by “dirty”...

“You should be hiding everything! You’re in your damn underwear!”

Asked about her state of mind later on, Anzu Kyounin would say: “No comment. I don’t even want to remember it.” (Anzu looked grim.) “—I figured.”

“To break through her stance... That’s one incredible loincloth!”

Well, at least Allan was impressed. Let’s hope he doesn’t try to copy it—not that anyone else could.

“You’re within my range. Never mock farmwork again!” Merthophan’s loincloth made several more grabs at Anzu.

“Augh! Urp... Euaghhh! Stop it, you pervert!”

The blushing maiden inside her was definitely coming out now. If that loincloth nabbed her, she really would be in a level of crisis that made her “unmarriageable.”

Anzu wound up fleeing the scene at sprinter speeds, screaming at the top of her lungs.

“After her, Allan! We cannot allow violence in the streets of Azami!” Merthophan shouldered his hoe, loincloth extending— “Ex-colonel! I hear you! But please put some clothes on! As an active soldier, I can’t allow your current behavior, either!”

Allan went scrambling after them, clutching Merthophan’s clothes.

As this chase went on, a cadet from Azami was skipping merrily through the evening streets of the East Side.

She wore a red armband identifying her as an upperclassman. Indomitable features, uncontainable boobs. Lloyd’s group knew her as Micona Zol.

Was her merriment caused by her freedom from the day’s classes? Apparently not.

“Mwa-ha-ha! Today’s the day I catch Marie bathing!”

This calls for an explanation. Micona Zol was madly in love with Marie—to a clearly inappropriate degree.

She was comparatively rational when it came to matters not involving Marie or Lloyd (who was staying at Marie's house). But she did tend to pull rank and get involved in the most obnoxious ways.

Also, within her body, she harbored the power of the demon lord that was a treant, the Erlking—yet retained some shreds of sanity. This made her an academic curiosity, at the least.

At the moment, she was on her way to peep on Marie's bath, Micona's daily ritual—of beyond dubious intent. Reaching Marie's shop on the East Side, she confirmed there was steam rising from the bath and, with practiced ease and zero hesitation, slipped around the back.

“Okay, okay! Today's the day I finally get to feast my eyes on Marie's supple limbs... Oh?”

Excitement giving way to heavy breathing, Micona...found someone else already peeping.

“Oh? Micona?”

“...Selen Hemein.”

What were the odds? They both went to the same school!

Selen was here for only one purpose: She was on a stakeout, waiting for Lloyd's turn in the baths. In her hands was a pair of matte black binoculars...far too imposing a pair to be standard equipment for a soldier on patrol.

““ ..... ””

Without need for words, each knew why the other was here.

There was an awkward silence—like being in a sex-toy shop and running into someone you knew but didn't particularly like.

Micona shook her head and koala-hugged a nearby tree.

“Well, as long as we don't get in each other's way... But peeping head-on runs a high risk of being spotted.”

Selen shook her head proudly. “Never fear, Micona. All ladies know how to make themselves invisible. Not only is the finish on these binoculars matte, but the lenses are also specially treated to minimize reflections. No stray gleams will give my position away.”

“...How much did those run you? Five ninety?”

“Three ninety. I haggled.”

“I would have thought four would be the lowest offer they’d take. Impressive.”

“Impressive,” huh...? Micona’s knowledge of the market was rather alarming.

Selen puffed up her chest, pleased by the compliment, though peeping was not an activity that deserved compliments.

“Praise will get you nowhere, Micona. But if Marie happens to take her bath first today, I could see my way to lending them to you.”

“...Really?”

“Yes. And the window’s open. The chance of a lifetime—for both of us.”

“Clearly, we have to work together.”

This sounds like a lovely story of rivals working together—except they’re here for a glimpse of their crushes.

And as they spoke, someone entered the bath.

“He’s here! Here, here, here! Whoo-hoo! Yeehaw!” Selen cheered quietly, panting.

Micona shot her an appalled look. “I’m cringing just looking at you...”

“Yippee— Oh, never mind, it’s Marie,” she said under her breath.

This changed Micona’s manner entirely. She signaled Selen for a binocular pass like an egocentric soccer star. “Hey, give those to me! Hurry, hurry, hurry!” (This was spoken in low tones.) “I know. Here.”

“Yahoo! Yowsers! Yee-to-the-yay-to-the-haw!” (As quietly as possible.)

“I don’t see what you’re all worked up about. Talk about cringe...”



She's you from four seconds ago.

Meanwhile, Marie's curvy silhouette was moving around on the other side of the steam. Micona was nearing peak excitement, desperately fighting off the urge to blow that steam cloud away, eyes peeled to the binoculars, ready to burn the image into her retinas.

But this moment of bliss was destroyed in the most unexpected fashion.

"Auuugh! Run for iiiit! Pervert on the loooooose!"

Threading her way through buildings from over yonder, Anzu burst into the peeping party.

"Wh-what the—? Yikes!"

"A masked...swordswoman? *Hngg!*"

Anzu came in already off-balance. She crashed into Micona, who was clinging to the tree, then stomped on Selen, who was lying flat in the grass. She had clearly not expected there to be people hidden here, so she quickly apologized to the two peeping janes.

"Argh, owww... Yeesh, did I step on you? My bad! Never figured there'd be someone here...and I'm being chased by a degenerate, so gotta dash!"

This was all delivered at the top of her lungs, echoing through the space behind the shop.

"Owww... Who was that? Why was she yelling?" Selen asked.

In the bath, Marie had heard that yelling and was rattled by it.

"Huh? What was that all about? A pervert? How terrifying! I'd better close this window," she muttered.

The window slammed shut.

Micona crumpled to the ground, like the entrance to paradise had closed before her very eyes.

"No...nooo..."

She'd been so close...! The despair on Micona's face was like that of a grade school student who had forgotten their summer homework entirely, and now

was piled up in front of them on August 31.

“I feel your pain, Micona,” her fellow stalker sympathized. “But you’ll get another shot. We still have these top-tier binoculars, and someday soon—”

But Micona’s expression grew even more tragic. She pointed at Anzu’s feet.

“My feet?” Anzu said. “I did hear a weird noise... Did I step on something?”

She moved, and there was a *crunch* of glass breaking.

Everyone looked...and beheld the sight of Selen’s favorite bargain binoculars, pulverized.

“N-nooo... My three ninety...” Selen crumpled to her knees.

In the distance, they heard Merthophan’s bellow. “Where are you?! There’s no escaping a farmer’s wrath!”

“Put your clothes on, Ex-colonel!”

“Crap,” Anzu whispered, getting ready to run. “S-sorry, but I gotta skedaddle! I’ll pay you back later, promise!”

When would this payment take place? Neither Selen nor Micona saw that happening. And she’d blown their best shot at an eyeful—so they were ready to extract payment of a different kind.

“You think you can just leave?”

“Then you’re a fool.”

Double stalker power. Their anger was boiling over the surface.

“I promise I’ll pay you! Trust me! Let me go!” Anzu pleaded.

Neither paid her words any heed. Their eyes went super dead.

“Let’s cut her to pieces, Micona Zol.”

“Yes, she can fertilize the grass of this lot, Selen Hemein.”

Faced with undeniable threats to her life, Anzu instantly snapped into a combat stance. “C-clearly, you’re no ordinary girls...”

“Let’s fillet her.”

“If we leave her to soak in the tub overnight, it’ll be easier to harvest the nutrients.”

“Damn! That’s messed up!” Anzu drew her *tachi*, hoping to fight her way out of this jam.

But... *Snap!*

“Wah! What’s with the belt?!”

Selen was wearing a cursed belt possessed by Vritra, and it was attempting to grab the sword.

“Vritra! Bind her!”

“Yes, Mistress!”

Both ends of the belt came after her, but Anzu managed to dodge them both, leaping backward.

“Wha—? Are you the Cursed Belt Princess? The legendary local lord?! Of all people to crash into...”

“Yes,” Micona boasted. “And I am the famous head of the second years at the military academy, Micona Zol!”

“...Yeah, never heard of you. What’s a ‘head’? Like a class president or something?”

It wasn’t exactly a recognizable title. The difference in fame between the legend of the local lords and a class president was like night and day.

Micona never took this sort of thing well. She was shaking like a leaf.

“Not only did you close the gates to heaven, but you’re also treating me with open contempt? ...Sure, I may not be as famous as Allan Toin Lidocaine, Selen Hemein, or Lloyd Belladonna... The class before me hogs every bit of the glory. No matter how hard I work, this is all I get. Might as well change my name to Micona Also-ran.”

She’d spiraled into a full-on depression. How obnoxious!

Anzu searched for an escape route, her attention entirely on Selen. She spotted a path through the trees just wide enough for her to slip through, and

the main road beyond it. Her expression brightened.

“If I go through there— Right!” She took a swing to push Selen back and turned to run.

A new tree sprouted in the gap she was headed for. It wasn’t every day new trees grew before your very eyes, and Anzu let out a strangled shriek.

“Eeep! Wh-what the—?” She stared at the tree, baffled. It grew not from the ground—but from Micona. “A-are you...even human?!”

Micona was already scowling, and this insult only added to her rage.

“Of course I am! I’m an ordinary girl who just happens to have a treant parasite living inside me!”

“How is that ordinaryyyyyy?! How does that ‘just happen’?! Aiieeeee!”

Before Anzu even finished speaking, a root wrapped around her foot, hoisting her into the air. But even upside down, she easily cut herself free and escaped, landing upright.

Asked about her state of mind later on, Anzu Kyounin would say: “Their eyes were filled with darkness, ready to claim my life.”

“—I understand you’ve struggled with wormy things ever since.”

“Not just wormy things. I’ve been known to flinch compulsively at the very sight of belts and tree roots.”

“—You have my sympathies.”

“Seriously not funny...”

Someone she’d never even heard of was throwing out treants, and that outlandishness had her head spinning. And the ultimate in outlandishness, Merthophan, finally caught up with her.

“There you are! Go get her, loincloth!”

His drawers snaked through the trees, making a grab for Anzu.

“Not funny at all! What’s wrong with this country?!” She swung her *tachi* wildly, like a kid trying to keep flies away. She was clearly well past her limit.



A loincloth man, a cursed legend, and a treant cherry on top—Azami was a treasure trove of bonkers personnel.

But rather than stop to marvel, she had to make her escape. She used her swordsmanship to cut down several trees, forcibly opening an escape route, and ran like a rabbit.

“You aren’t getting away!”

“Taste the power of the class head!”

“Loincloth! Loincloth!”

Loincloths, belts, and treant roots—Azami’s three wriggliest weapons, all hot on her heels...

Meanwhile, in an alley on the North Side—an area packed with shops, catering to new arrivals coming through the city’s main gate...

After dark, there were few people on the back roads, and the din of the main drags sounded far away. A woman was walking down one of these alleys. She wore a cadet’s uniform and sported a bulky mithril arm despite her slender frame—Riho.

She had a rather large paper bag in her arms and was on the alert. With her villainous features, she totally looked like she was on her way to a shadowy back-alley deal.

“Nobody around, huh...?”

When she was sure she was absolutely alone, she opened the bag and took something out.

Inside was—

“Heh-heh-heh... Fresh out the fryer!”

—donuts. Everything from chocolate-chip donuts to those dusted with cinnamon sugar—a whole bag full of tasty treats.

“I mean, I was just gonna buy some pickles, buuut...they had a sale, so...I ain’t exactly the donut type, but I can’t pass up a bargain!”

Nobody heard her excuses.

Riho loved donuts, but she'd heard enough jabs from other people—*You don't seem the type*, or *Aren't those for girly girls?*—that she'd wound up buying and eating them in secret.

And she was buying pickles, which she didn't even like, to disguise her purchase. Like adolescent boys hiding porn between two other magazines at the cash register.

To fit more donuts in, she'd gone without food and been listless all day. She was very intense about this whole thing.

Eyes gleaming, she peered into the bag. "Which should I try first?"

".....Chocolate's a safe bet."

"I know! Chocolate donuts are the best! But I'm gonna go with custard-filled!"

".....Why?"

"That shop uses farm-fresh eggs! They sell the eggs, too— Auuuugh! Phyllo?! Why are you here?!"

Riho's reaction was just as dramatic as an actor's.

Phyllo remained stoically impassive. ".....Mm."

"'Mm' doesn't explain anything!"

".....You seemed listless... I got worried. Glad you're doing okay."

"Oh...right."

That was a good reason to follow someone. Riho scratched her head awkwardly. Hunger was the best seasoning, but taking it to such extremes that people followed her home was perhaps a bit much.

"Sorry, didn't mean to cause concern."

".....I'll just tell everyone who was worried that you were eating a lot of donuts...but you were scared they'd make you fat, so you didn't eat anything all day... Even you act like a girl sometimes..."

"Hey! Stop! Don't do that! I've got a rep to maintain! That last comment especially!"

“...Why? You *are* a girl. You can tell by looking...and the glimpse of a softer side just adds to your appeal.”

“Softer side?! Auuugh...” Riho went bright red, but Phyllo just looked forlorn.

“.....While I have no appeal at all.”

“That’s not true; you’ve got plenty. I mean, you’re damn near as strong as Lloyd himself!”

“.....Mm.”

The compliment just seemed to deflate her further. Riho realized something might be legit wrong here. She decided the donuts could wait.

“What’s up? Not like you to be so hard on yourself. For better or for worse, you usually don’t let anything get you down.”

“.....Just feeling burned out. I guess. Body and mind...feel dull.”

“Burnout, huh? Isn’t that just the reason idiots give for quitting their corporate jobs when they can’t shake the student mind-set?”

“.....That sounds a bit unfair.” Then she attempted to explain the basis for her claim. “...We found Mom...and learned who our dad was... Maybe that’s why.”

During a film shoot in Rokujou, Phyllo and her older sister, Mena, had rescued their mother from a curse cast by a crime syndicate and restored their family. This had involved a shocking discovery: Their father was actually the king of Rokujou—and very much the type that was at the beck and call of his people.

“Yeah, I guess I can see that,” Riho said.

Phyllo’s training had all been to help find her mother. But with that goal accomplished, she was now adrift.

“I did the same thing with my ‘sister,’ Rol. I spent years ready to drop everything and run at a moment’s notice, but suddenly, I don’t have to. Kinda leaves you feeling lost.”

But her voice had a bounce to it, and she was smiling, like now that it was all over, she could laugh about it.

“.....How’d you get better?”

“‘How,’ uh... Well, I still gotta earn money for the orphanage. And there’s these weirdos out there trying to start a war. Plenty of reasons left to keep honing my skills, so I just threw myself into classes, I guess.”

“...The Jiou Empire... Dr. Eug’s plan to develop the world through war...”

Riho flexed her mechanical arm, staring into the distance. “Yeah. I was a war orphan, so I’d rather there not be any more kids like me. Especially for such a dumb reason.”

Phyllo looked at her with respect. “...You’ve got your head on straight. Wish I did.”

This last comment bugged Riho, but she decided not to dig deeper. Instead, she slapped Phyllo on the shoulders.

“No point beating yourself up. Do what you’ve always done. Train. Fight someone strong. Maybe you’ll figure things out.”

“...Mm...okay. Then I’m gonna go for a run. Training.” Phyllo vanished at dizzying speeds.

“Geez, she really wears it all on her sleeve. I can see how things might be hard for Mena...”

Riho looked after her, still worried...but a cute little *squeak* from her belly canceled that thought. Remembering how hungry she was, she snatched a donut from the bag—the custard one she’d mentioned earlier.

The rich yellow of the yolk-heavy custard, the donuts still fresh from the fryer...the scent tantalizing her nostrils—it all spoke to Riho, donut sommelier.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” she purred with a wicked grin. She opened her mouth wide.

“Come on in!”

It was the moment she’d been waiting for, the first bite, the pinnacle of flavor — “Aiiiiiieee! Those worms! Wormy worms!”

“Ahh... Huh? Augh!”

Ruined once more by Anzu’s dynamic arrival. Anzu had half shed her kimono,

heedless of the skin that bared. She'd also decided the mask was too hard to breathe in and cast that aside, fleeing bare-assed through the streets. She must have had bad luck, because she picked the alley Riho was in, crashing headlong into her.

Both landed on their backsides.

"H-hey! What's your problem? You can't just— My donuts!"

They'd left her hands when she fell. The bag was soaring through the air—*Roll-roll-roll—splash.*

All the donuts went rolling into the drain.

"Ah...ahh... My donuts... I was looking forward to those all day..."

The only thing she still had was the jar of pickles...pickles she actively detested.

Feeling her eyes growing damp, Riho quickly wiped them and turned the full power of her beady eyes on Anzu.

"What did those donuts ever do to you?!"

"Uh, s-sorry... Ugh, this again? You're not gonna come after me with anything wormy or squirmy, are you?"

"Hell no! What do you mean, 'again'? Are you running around town doing this to everyone's donuts?! Squirmy what? Get a grip, lady!" Riho's mithril arm took on a sinister glow.

Mithril-amplified magic power. This was Riho's go-to magic attack, one that had even led to her winning a sorcery tournament.

"Er, uh, wait! Is that mithril?!"

"You noticed? Saves me the hassle of explaining! Say your goddamn prayers!"

Asked about her state of mind later on, Anzu Kyoujin would say: "Who has time to pray when you're a second away from dying?!"

"—Forgive the question."

".....I prayed once I was safely back in my lodgings. A prayer of thanks!" (Anzu looked very proud of herself.) "—Oh, so you *did* pray."



Deciding Riho was bad news, Anzu turned to run. And an all-too-familiar voice rang out behind her.

“Riho! Get her! She ruined our peeping and destroyed my property!”

It was Selen. A number of questions shot through Riho’s mind: Why was Selen after her? Ruined their peeping how? Why was Micona here? In any case, rage cast such concerns aside.

“Catch her?” Riho barked. “You mean vaporize her!”

An alarming phrase indeed. There was nothing quite like a food-based grudge.

They were soon joined by a loinclothed man and Allan’s ugly mug. Anzu felt like a monster of the week discovering that the heroes were teaming up.

“Ready to surrender?” Merthophan growled. He might look like a streaker, but he was all fired up and duty bound, so...cut him some slack.

Riho’s stomach squeaked adorably, her eyes boring into Anzu.

“What should we do with her? Stick an explosive magic stone in her mouth and throw her off a rooftop?!”

Her stomach growls might be cute, but her threats weren’t. Memories of the donuts’ demise were putting Riho fully into overkill executioner mode.

“No, no, no, I didn’t do anything to deserve... Wait, you mean that?” Anzu was slowly realizing Riho was past mercy.

“We can’t throw her off a roof,” Selen said. “We have to disguise it as a cordless bungee jumping accident.”

“Good idea, Selen Hemein! Let’s put that plan in action!”

The method of execution was proving quite a hot topic.

Surrounded, Anzu put up her last resistance. “You ain’t getting me without... Mm?”

A gust of wind blew through the alley—one of those sudden gales that passed by narrow spaces. Seizing her chance, Anzu leaped into the air, directly upward.

“Jumping won’t help you now!”

It looked like an act of desperation...but Anzu caught the wind and was blown off into the sky.

“My secret art: Scattered Blossoms!”

Making her body impossibly light, Anzu vanished into the night sky, framed briefly against the rising moon.

“Vritra!”

“Sorry, Mistress. She’s already out of range.” The belt hung its buckle, dejected.

“Drat! I thought we had her.”

“*Hngg...* Well, I’ll just have to inform Choline there’s a suspicious individual on the loose.”

“Ex-colonel, if you don’t have clothes on, she’ll be furious.”

The group staring bitterly up at the sky was the cutting edge of Azami—in more ways than one.

Meanwhile, Anzu breathed a sigh of relief.

“I’m saved... I just gotta nab Lloyd and get the hell out of this country. And a few promising soldiers, while I’m at it...”

Anzu landed on the roof of a distant house and pulled a letter out of her pocket.

“A request to serve as a guest lecturer at the Azami Military Academy...”

Relieved at her narrow escape, she had forgotten something important. Several of the people chasing her had been wearing military cadet uniforms. And Micono had even identified herself as the head of her class...

“They’ll be surprised to see the ruler of the Ascorbic Domain show up in person to give them a taste of training from the holy land. Should be a few knees shaking tomorrow! Ha-ha-ha.”

There, under the moonlight...Anzu jinxed herself.

Night became day, and the next morning...Anzu was in a reception room at the military academy. Chrome placed some tea in front of her, looking tense.

The young ruler of the Ascorbic Domain. There were countless stories of her feats, and in person, she lived up to her reputation. She might not be on Lloyd's level, but the rumors were clearly all true—and so Chrome was looking extra grim.

"Relax, Colonel," Anzu urged.

"I'm an open book, huh?"

"That you are. Don't worry, I don't bite."

Chrome loosened up a little. "We'd like you to take over training for the day. With the Domain's reputation as the holy training grounds, we'd be honored to have you take us on." He bowed his head.

Behind him, the king of Azami—Luke Thistle Azami—appeared.

"Oh, Lady Anzu! We meet again."

"Your Majesty, it's been a while. Since the meeting at Reiyokaku."

"Indeed. Sorry for my late arrival. The military is staging a festival soon, and the meeting ran long."

"The Festival of Military Glory? Is it that time of year already?"

This festival opened up the academy and training grounds to the public, with the goal of making the military seem more approachable. It had everything from equipment normally off-limits to civilians available for hands-on demonstrations, parades with military bands, and several other spectacles.

"I heard the Ascorbic Domain holds a tournament this time of year... Thank you for taking time away from it."

"Don't worry, I have my reasons. I appreciate you arranging such a lovely hotel room."

The king stroked his mustache, pleased to hear her accommodations had proven satisfactory. "Hoh-hoh-hoh! Did you sleep well?"

"....."

"".....No?"""

They had not expected that sudden grim silence. Chrome and the king

exchanged puzzled glances.

“—Your Majesty, did you screw up again?”

“—I don’t believe so! The bed and room should have been first-rate!”

Anzu picked up on their consternation and winced. “No, no, sorry... I was just busy offering prayers of thanks and got to bed a little late.”

“O-oh! Prayers... I suppose you do have sacred mountains and beasts—I admire your devotion to your faith! A good ruler is a model to their citizens.”

“S-Sure... I’m just glad I survived. Mm-hmm.”

Chrome frowned at this, but it felt like something best left unprobed. He glanced at the clock and rose to escort Anzu to the classroom.

“It’s almost time. The cadets are waiting.”

“Every time I close my eyes, I see the squirming— Oh, time. Right, catch you later, Your Majesty.”

“Hoh-hoh-hoh! Don’t go too hard on them!”

Chrome and Anzu moved to the hall, walking in silence for a minute.

“Uh, Colonel Chrome,” Anzu said, with a suddenly childish gleam in her eye. “Is Lloyd Belladonna among these cadets?”

“You know him? Oh, right, Coba did ask he work at Reiyokaku the day of the conference of kings.”

Was she here to recruit him? He gave her a look, and she grinned, slapping his shoulder.

“Don’t worry, I won’t try to steal him until after he graduates. This time, I have to return a favor.”

This was clearly why she’d personally offered to train the cadets. Nodding, Chrome decided to offer a word of advice—concerning the biggest roadblock in any attempt to lure Lloyd away.

“Just a word of warning, Lady Anzu.”

“Spit it out.”

“Our cadets are, uh...a motley lot. Especially those around him.”

“What a loaded phrase! A threat designed to keep him in your clutches?”

Chrome just smiled awkwardly. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

He opened the doors to their destination.

At the training grounds of the Azami Military Academy...

A large room with wooden floors, lit by skylights, allowed the cadets to train as much as they pleased without fear of the weather. The room had all the training equipment and practice weapons you could need, as well as an obstacle course. If you looked closely, you could see many a nick on the walls and what appeared to be the word *Help!* clawed into one corner.

It was large enough that the military bands also used it for practice, and when it was time for the festival or victory parades, they’d occupy the room, the sounds of their instruments mingling with the grunts of the students and the roars of the instructors—making it an aural hellscape.

On this day, there was a line of nervous students, their eyes locked on Anzu’s face.

The room was abuzz. Everyone knew the reputation of the holy land, and it was unprecedented for the ruler of the Ascorbic Domain to personally oversee their training. It certainly explained why this had been classified as top secret.

Anzu herself was leaning on her sword, looking over the students’ faces.

“This everyone from both years, Colonel?”

“There are a few late arrivals, I’m afraid.”

“Not an issue—I’m used to handling that type. Ah!” Anzu saw an adorable chestnut-haired boy, fidgeting nervously as he gazed back at her.

Her true purpose here—Lloyd Belladonna.

He was shocked she met his eyes, like an ordinary citizen was surprised when a crook spun around and stared straight at them.

“His interior and exterior just don’t match up, but that’s fine by me. I’ll chat with him after training.”



“Lady Anzu, it’s time.”

“All right, listen up, fledglings!”

The air in the room crackled. The silence was instantaneous.

“Allow me to do a formal intro! I’m the ruler of the Ascorbic Domain, Anzu Kyounin!”

“I knew it!”

“Seriously?”

“Daaamn...”

Another stir ran through the room. Chrome frowned.

“Hold your tongues—,” he began.

Anzu stopped him. “The commotion’s warranted. This is basically a king stopping in to train you all—but my title ain’t a reason for you to shrivel up!”

Chrome nodded and glared at the students. “This is a rare opportunity!” he bellowed. “And a credit to the king of Azami! Put your backs into it and come out the other side better soldiers than ever before!”

“Yessir!” the students shouted, snapping to attention.

Anzu rubbed her chin, pleased. “How green... Those who are interested in training under us tend to be overconfident types that have never known defeat. Instructing this lot will be a nice change of pace. Right, you three, over here.”

Anzu gestured to three upperclassmen. They jumped but quickly lined up in front of her.

She grabbed three practice swords and handed them over. “Alright. Come at me! I’ll fight you off barehanded.”

They just blinked at her. Even with a wooden sword, a bad hit could be fatal. And three at once...

“What? Can’t even do that?”

“You’re sure? We’re only students, but...we know how to handle ourselves.”

They glanced toward Chrome—who just nodded.

“Don’t worry, it won’t cause an international incident.”

The upperclassmen hefted their practice swords, glanced at one another, and moved quickly into a formation. One on each side, and the third behind her—all carefully avoiding fighting her head-on.

Anzu whistled. This was clearly something they’d practiced a lot.

“Nice,” she praised. “You weren’t all talk, huh?”

“We can coordinate attacks as well as any guild member.”

“Sounds like fun—”

But even as she spoke... *Bam!*

The sound of feet hitting floorboards came not from the three around her, but from the crowd watching. The unexpected sound momentarily distracted Anzu...and in that brief second, three attacks came in—one from above, one from the side, and one from below.

Flawless coordination. It left her virtually no room to escape. Three swords swung inexorably in Anzu’s direction.

“I thought I saw you glance away—that explains it. You got me there!”

Anzu’s confident smile never wavered. She jumped straight up...and twirled through the air, moving like no one they’d ever seen. It was like a plastic bag abandoned on the road, caught by a sudden gust of wind.

The force of the students’ own attacks lofted Anzu toward the rafters.

““““What?!””””

“You even coordinate your surprise!”

At peak waft, she suddenly plunged downward, landing on one student’s head and pinning him to the ground. A leg sweep and an elbow to the chest took down the other two, rendering them helpless in a single flowing motion.

All three had been defeated in the blink of an eye.

Chrome clapped. “Splendid. So this is the secret art from the Ascorbic Domain, Scattered Blossoms? A technique to control the weight of your body. Very impressive.”

The cadets applauded along with him.

Anzu grinned, helping the three upperclassmen to their feet. “I didn’t actually plan to show that off, but your students know their stuff.”

Chrome looked humble. “I’m not the one who drilled that into the upperclassmen. My predecessor was an accomplished instructor.”

“Oh? You’ve got someone else teaching these techniques? I’d love to meet them.”

Said predecessor was the loincloth man she’d had a harrowing encounter with the day before, but Anzu had no way of knowing that.

With her demonstration concluded, they were ready to move to proper training.

“Wow! I’ve never seen anyone flutter like that. Wonders never cease... Uh, Phyllo?”

“.....Mm.”

While Lloyd had been delivering rapturous praise, Phyllo had taken a step forward.

Her face was always grim, but the aura around her showed she meant business. You could almost see the electricity crackling around her.

“Got a lively one here! You saw that fight and want to challenge me? You’re either a real idiot, or—”

But when Phyllo put her fists up, Anzu gulped, her grin fading.

“—or you’re the real deal.”

A bead of sweat ran down her brow. She grabbed a practice sword.

“Sorry, I don’t see myself beating you empty-handed.”

“.....No problem. I’m here to learn.”

All on her own, Phyllo had mastered the style left by Pyrid the Fierce God.

Anzu was ruler of the Ascorbic Domain, the current Sword God.

This was a lineup that could really rake in the cash. The crowd watched

breathlessly. Someone shifted, a floorboard creaked, and...they clashed!

Phyllo took a big step in, her kick aimed high, hurtling toward the side of Anzu's head. Anzu went low against the ground, her blade swinging at Phyllo's neck. Not wanting to take their opponent out, they slide past each other.

"Excellent!" Anzu cried, swinging around...and unleashing a strike.

Phyllo knocked the blade aside with one hand.

"Can't believe you deflected that barehanded!"

".....Hah!" Phyllo had gone right from that deflection into a body blow.

Anzu struck the ground with the tip of her blade, using the recoil to knock herself backward out of range.

*Thnk! Bam! Shpp!*

Their steps were cracking the floorboards. Fists struck the air so hard, there was an audible *crack*. The air around them shook enough to make every eardrum ring.

Despite the ferocity of the battle, Phyllo's expression remained unflappable, and Anzu let out a nervous laugh.

"Azami just keeps on surprising me!"

".....Not done yet!" Phyllo stepped in again, grabbed Anzu's arm...and went into a hip throw, trying to slam Anzu to the ground. ".....Gotcha—"

"Phyllo, not yet!" Lloyd yelled.

Victory in her grasp, Phyllo frowned, wondering why. But mid-throw, Anzu answered for Lloyd.

"Wrong move."

The throw's momentum vanished.

"Scattered Blossoms," Chrome whispered.

Phyllo figured it out—but it was already too late. Anzu had reduced her weight, altering her center of gravity, while Phyllo lost her balance, and the hip throw failed to complete.

Anzu fluttered around behind her, the edge of her practice sword pressed against Phyllo's neck.

"That was a close one! I had it figured at eighty to ninety percent my loss. Feels like I snatched a victory from your hesitation."

".....What hesitation?" Phyllo blinked.

Anzu sighed. "Your skills are astonishing, but your spirit isn't with them."

".....That's...so vague."

"I guess the best way to put it is...you don't know what you're fighting for. If you had a clear purpose or hostility, that throw would never have allowed me time to use Scattered Blossoms."

"....."

This seemed to strike a nerve, and Phyllo turned her gaze to the ground.

"Happens a lot," Anzu noted. "Hone your strength enough, and everyone hits this wall. It's a luxury afforded to those who get too strong."

She pulled Phyllo to her feet and turned to the cadets.

"If the tip of your blade doesn't know where it's going, what is there to fear from it? Know what you want to be. Know what you want to do. Be it honor, money, or even just old-fashioned bloodlust—find that goal and practice!"

The idea that money and bloodlust could be useful motivations definitely resonated with some cadets.

"B-bloodlust?" Lloyd said, shuddering.

Anzu nodded. "All that matters is that you're motivated, and bloodlust can be very motivating. I fought far more frightening opponents just yesterday; they were all ready to kill me."

The blood drained from her face, and she trembled at the memory, leaving the students wondering. As she spoke, the door to the training room slammed open, and the late arrivals appeared.





\*

Asked about her state of mind later on, Anzu Kyounin would say: “I was an idiot to think I’d got away clean.”

“—Please calm down.”

“If I’d been at all calm, I’d have realized they were wearing cadet uniforms! How could I have missed that?! I should have known that would happen!”

“—Please calm down.”

“You’re late!” Chrome barked.

“Listen, Colonel Chrome,” Riho began, not the least bit sorry. “We were reporting to Colonel Choline. Wound up chasing a criminal around yesterday.”

Apparently, their pursuit of Anzu had required an in-person interview with their superior.

“It’s true, Colonel Chrome!” Selen said, fuming. “She destroyed my binoculars!”

“Why did you have binoculars?”

This was a good question, but Micono waved a hand dismissively.

“That doesn’t matter now! As the head of the second year, I, Micono Zol, demand we put out a warrant for this swordswoman’s arrest!”

“Do you even have a name? Can’t issue a warrant without one,” Chrome grumbled.

“Sorry, sir.” Allan looked deeply apologetic. “She seemed familiar, but it was after dark, and the attack came out of nowhere...”

“And Allan’s inherently useless,” Selen snapped.

Chrome scratched his head. “Well, we’re in the middle of a guest lecture here. And our lecturer is—”

He pointed at Anzu...who’d turned white as a sheet, staring at the girls in horror.

They all recognized her immediately.

““““Ahhhhhhhhh!””””

“Eeeeeek! N-not you—”

Their screams echoed through the room.

“What’s up? Lady Anzu...?” Chrome asked, blinking.

Lloyd stepped in. “Come now. We’re in class! We’ve got a great instructor visiting!”

“Class, huh? What’s this lady teaching?” Riho scowled, not disguising her scorn at all.

“Er, uh...the importance of bloodlust?” Lloyd said, already forgetting everything but the part that sounded the worst out of context.

“What a lovely topic for education!” Selen cried. “I don’t know who she is, but clearly, she oughtta be the target of *our* bloodlust.”

“Yes, it’s been a very impressive class! She easily dodged blows from three upperclassmen at once!”

“Oh? Well, let’s see her get away when *we* surround her. We’ve got some grudges to unleash...”

Faced with three vengeful girls obviously uninterested in hearing what anyone had to say, Anzu immediately lost all confidence. She began backing away, looking desperate.

“Augh... Help, Lloyd!”

She was so frightened, she’d turned to Lloyd before she knew it, hiding herself behind him and clinging to him in fear. But that action only added fuel to the fires. *A certain someone* wouldn’t stand for that.

“Hands off hiiiiim! How dare yoooooou!”

Bloodlust certainly added an edge to Selen’s movements. She was like the type of enemy that buffed all their stats if you performed the wrong attack. And she likely had no upper limit on that effect.

Meanwhile, Lloyd was still trying to piece things together. “Er, Lady Anzu, have we met before?”

“You don’t remember me?!”

It seemed he’d entirely forgotten her. Perhaps he’d just been far too stressed about meeting all those important people.



“Yo, yo, yo, yo, abusing your position as guest lecturer to harass underage boys?!” Riho asked.

“The treant power clearly isn’t enough for her! I’ll have to use Abaddon’s as well! And with her attached to Lloyd, this is my chance to finish them *both* off!”

Micona was in final battle mode, an insectoid shell covering her, unleashing shock waves of envy.

“Stop!”

A line zipped in the air between the two sides—like the yellow tape around a crime scene, except made of Merthophan’s loincloth.

“Ew, gross, Merthophan!”

“Don’t worry! I washed it this morning. Calm yourselves! This is the ruler of the Ascorbic Domain, Anzu Kyouin. If anything happens to her, it’ll cause an international incident!”

“You’ve caused one just by revealing your loincloth in her vicinity!”

“Y-yeah!” Anzu yelled. “I’ll make it one! Put that loincloth away! It’s caused me so much distress already!”

Just a few minutes ago, she’d confidently promised that no international incidents would occur, but that was clearly a thing of the past. Snot and tears were flying everywhere.

“First! Get away from my Lloyd! Then we’ll talk!”

“Pick one: Surrender? Or death? And pay for her binoculars!”

“And compensate me for my donuts...that I don’t even like!”

Upon facing these demands, Anzu spun on her heel. “Colonel Chrome, can I ask you to run out and buy a few things for me?”

She pulled out a wallet. Like she was being mugged.

A while later, in the reception room at Azami Military Academy...

Riho was perched on a comfy couch, devouring donuts. Selen and Micona were gazing with wonder at a pair of tricked-out binoculars. Merthophan

merely had his arms folded.

Anzu was sitting awkwardly across from them, like she was crumbling under the pressure of an interview.

Lloyd and Phyllo were standing to one side, looking totally lost.

When she was sure their anger levels had died down, Anzu had apologized and explained her actions.

“So—*munch-munch*—you pegged Allan as weaker than his rep—*munch*—but when you went after him, loincloth Merthophan jumped in, and a chase ensued. So Allan sucking is behind it all!”

“How am I getting blamed for this?!”

“I see. Based on these binoculars, she’s not lying.”

“Lemme borrow those, Selen Hemein. Yes, I can see clearly—she’s not lying.”

“You guys are easy to please...”

Replacing the lost items at the root of this strife and offering a clearly genuine round of genuflection had certainly cooled everyone off.

“I cannot apologize enough,” Anzu said, still not daring to lift her head.

“Anyone would run with a loincloth man after them... You really should knock that crap off, Merthophan.”

“How dare you! Traditional farming fashion is *not* crap!”

“You’re not on a farm!”

For a moment, it looked like the matter was settled, but then Selen brought another point up. “By the way...it seemed like you’re acquainted with Sir Lloyd. Can we get a *detailed* explanation there?”

The darkness lurking behind Selen’s eyes and the twitching of her cursed belt sent a shiver down Anzu’s spine. “Eep!”

“That look on your face saddens me. Do not fear—I am not normally prone to extreme measures.”

“Augh! The belt speaks! And it talks like a suave boss?!”



It certainly surprised everyone who heard it for the first time. Especially the suave-boss thing.

It seemed Lloyd had finally remembered how he'd met Anzu.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "You're the lady from the meeting at the hotel! Weren't you the ruler of the Ascorbic Domain? Sorry, it completely escaped my mind."

He still hadn't remembered her name, but that was forgivable. He'd been so focused on being a good waiter.

"Yeah, so...uh, that's how we know each other. So please put the belt away, seriously," Anzu requested, retreating to the far end of the couch, knees pulled up to her chest. There was no trace of regal dignity left in her.

Merthophan—who, rest assured, was back in uniform—voiced the question on everyone's minds.

"But for the ruler of the country to come in person? We were expecting one of the students from the Kyounin clan. You must be busy with the Sacred Mountain Rite right now."

"Uh, yeah, I'd have loved to do just that, but...it wasn't an option."

"In what way?"

Anzu explained her situation.

"So that's why I'm really here. I was hoping to scout some talent from Azami to help join in the rite. Then everyone but Allan sent me packing! Ha-ha-ha!"

"Fine, I'm weak! I admit it!" Allan shrank himself down as small as he could get, and Anzu slapped him on the shoulder.

"You've got potential! Everyone else is just freakishly strong. You come train in the Domain, and we'll whip you into a better man in no time!"

"Y-yeah?"

"Point is, I want a few of your best to come with me. Paid work, of course. I'd appreciate all your help. Especially Llo—"

Before she could even say his name, he was down on his knees before her. She blinked at him, and he put his head all the way down to the floor, fingers

lined up neatly in front of him.

“What’s this, Lloyd?”

“Lady Anzu, will you hear my plea?”

“Uh, sure... I mean, I’m asking you here...”

“Please train me! I want to get stronger!”

“““Huh?””””

This would astonish anyone.

Everyone present, Anzu included, thought the same thing: *Is that even possible?* Lloyd, however, had never once suspected that he was anything but feeble. He thought this was the perfect opportunity to change that.

“Everyone knows how strong Allan is, but you’ve evaluated him as weak and promised training would help! I’m even weaker, but if I could train and learn an ultimate attack...then I wouldn’t be the weakest link anymore!”

“The stories about Allan are wildly exaggerated...,” Selen said.

Allan nodded vigorously. “I wish I’d done any of that...but it was mostly your doing, Lloyd.”

Anzu was deeply unsure how to handle this request. It was like a sprinter who was an Olympic gold medalist showing up at a children’s sports club and going, “I need to be faster!”

“Just a minute... Uh, look, everyone— Er, Lloyd, can you get us some tea?”

“Sure thing! I’ll be right back!”

“What’s up, Lady Anzu?”

Anzu looked around, trying to get to the bottom of this confusion. “Does Lloyd...not know how strong he is?”

There was an awkward silence.

“Aughhhh...,” Anzu groaned, burying her face in her hands. “How do you even wind up like that?”

“Lady Anzu, the thing is...,” Chrome began.

Chrome explained how the boy was born in Kunlun and how he'd misinterpreted his own deeds. From time to time, he was forced to stop to rub his aching head or ignore an outburst of ravings from Selen as he continued his explanation.

"That...sounds like the plot of a novel. But I've seen his strength with my own eyes. You have my sympathies."

"It would be a huge relief if we can actually convince him of the truth. Both as an asset to our military and to prevent us all running around cleaning up after him."

Chrome sighed...and Anzu slapped her knee.

"Right! Leave that to me, Colonel Chrome."

"You have an idea, Lady Anzu?"

"What else is training for?! I'd be happy to oversee his."

"But he's already so strong," Allan said. "What would be the point?"

Anzu tapped the side of her head—reminding him to use his noggin. "Flip that idea. If he's convinced he's weak, then we just gotta trick him into thinking he got stronger."

She grinned, letting that idea sink in.

"From what I hear, the main thing he needs is confidence. If he thinks training transformed him, then his self-awareness and evaluation of his own abilities might catch up to how the rest of the world sees him."

"Are you...sure? Aren't you in the middle of the Sacred Mountain Rite?"

"I owe you one. Also, if he joins the rite, that would really help me out. I'll do whatever it takes to keep myself in charge. My fate is in your hands."

She was clearly putting all her cards on the table.

"Nice and simple," Riho said, grinning. "The kinda deal I can go for."

"Appreciate the help!" Anzu nodded. Then her voice dropped to a whisper. "Just can't let anyone else into that shrine..."

"Mm? Didn't catch that."

“Never mind.”

At this point, Lloyd came back. “Here’s your tea! Oh, Lady Anzu, what about this training?”

As he placed her cup in front of her, she grinned.

“No problem on my end! The more the merrier!”

Lloyd happily hugged the tray to his chest.

“I’m always up for travel when someone else is picking up the tab,” Allan said.

“Training! Bridal training!” Selen exclaimed.

“You’ll need a leader, but I’ve got a lot on my plate. If poison’s involved, best to ask *her*...”

“I’ll pass. While Lloyd Belladonna is gone, Marie will be all mine!” Micona exclaimed.

While the cadets from Azami made their choices, Phyllo alone remained silent, looking downcast.

Anzu turned to her. “You come along, too,” she urged. “Never know what you might get out of it. Call it a journey of self-discovery.”

“.....Mm.”

Riho watched that with great concern.

## Chapter 2

### A Blow to Confidence: Suppose a Teacher Was Trying to Teach Einstein

A river wound through a valley carved between sheer cliffs.

A man in a straw hat stood on a small wooden boat, waiting for ferry passengers.

In the distance was a verdant bamboo thicket and the Sacred Mountain, its peak hidden in the clouds. The Ascorbic Domain was entirely composed of scenes that looked like a traditional ink wash painting come to life.

The valley was as peaceful as it was splendorous.

*Vroooooom! Vroom, vroooooom!* Blaring engine noises like a biker gang, a steamship was hurtling up the river—wrecking the view and making the ferry leap like a rodeo ride.

On this earsore of a ship were our heroes.

“Come on! Faster! Faster!”

“Ma’am, any faster than this, and the ship’ll—!”

But Selen paid no heed to the crew’s warnings, shoveling even more coal into the furnace.

“Yo, m’lady! What the hell are you doing?!” Riho shouted.

“Augh! If this ship would only rock more...!”

Ten minutes earlier...the exact same ship was headed upstream at a much more relaxed pace, allowing everyone the luxury of enjoying the scenery: the mottled sunlight as they passed beneath a wooden bridge, fish leaping from the water, the ever-changing, ever-beautiful sights on the banks...

“Nothing like booze with a view!” Marie said, her eyes never actually leaving

the drink in her hands. She'd been sent along as the resident apothecary—after all, people *had* been poisoned. Meanwhile, Micono had stayed in Azami to spend time with Marie, and she was probably whining like an abandoned puppy by now. Our thoughts and prayers.

“Are we sure we can trust this witch?” Anzu muttered. “I know booze is the best medicine, but she’s had a *lot*.”

Riho heard this and came over. “The potions she makes are far better than the average market stall. She knows her stuff.”

“I’ll take your word for it, but can she handle *herself*? She can barely walk straight! I’ve heard the drink goes to your head on a ship, but...she’s about to fall overboard...”

Marie raised her glass, clinking it against someone else’s. Clearly three sheets in the wind.

“Marie, we’re not here for pleasure,” Lloyd reminded, looking after her no matter where they were. Such a good boy.

“Marie!” Anzu called. “The ship’s a-rockin’! Might wanna sit still.”

Marie wheeled around, breathing a cloud of booze vapors. “Anzuuuuu! Drink wiff meee!”

“I would love to, normally, but... Whoa!”

The ship bucked quite hard, well beyond rockin’.

“That was a big one! You okay, Marie...?”

“Auuuuuuugh!”

A heave that big, and even someone sober was liable to get knocked down. Lloyd and Phyllo made it look effortless, but in her drunken state, Marie had no defenses against this sort of thing.

Off-balance and staggering, Marie flailed her arms for a handhold...and found Lloyd.

“Marie... Gah!”

She managed to pull him down with her. She was so drunk, she wound up



lying on top of a boy. Yeah, it already sounded like a crime in progress.

“Ahhhhh!” Selen screamed. “Who said you could do thaaaat?!”

Seeing the incident unfold had sent her right into stalker mode. As soon as the rocking died down, Selen wheeled on Anzu.

“How far till the next bit of turbulence?!” she hissed, no light in her eyes.

Anzu shook her head. “Don’t worry, it’s all smooth sailing from here, Selen.”

Clearly, she’d mistaken Selen’s question for concern about future dangers... but Selen was not someone who could be contained by such rational notions.

“Oh no.”

“Uh...yes?!”

“Then I’ll have to make some!”

“Make... Wait, what?!”

“All the coal! To me! I’ll wreck this ship if I have to! Make these decks heave! Throw myself on Lloyd! And join the nautical mile high club!”

Thus, Selen began shoveling coal. All so she could stage a lucky “incident” with Lloyd.

She was certainly dedicated to her cause. Riho tried her best to stop her but was struggling to stay upright at all.

“Urp...m’lady Selen...please slow us down! This is bad!”

Selen was past hearing *words*. She threw even more coal on the fire. She only stopped shoveling when the rocking got so bad that even *she* got seasick.

“Urp...I guess that’s fast enough to make the ship rock... Ah! Now I just have to use it to propel myself into—”

“.....Not happening.”

“Why not, Phyllo? Urp... At this speed, the effects will be even more dramatic than—”

“.....We’re already here.”

“Huh?” Selen blinked at her.

In the distance, they heard Anzu screaming. “Hard to port! Crap! That’s not enough! We need sherry!”

“Lady Anzu! *Port* and *starboard* aren’t liquors!”

Thanks to Selen, the steamboat ended up doing a drift turn into the wharf. The rainbow in the spray was gorgeous.

Without enjoying the view one iota, the crew from Azami had safely reached their destination.

“O-oh no! Urp...I sacrificed my semicircular canals for nothing!!!! Urp.”

“Quit screeching, Belt Princess... W-we all feel sick...” Allan staggered onto the dock, and the others soon followed.

“Allan! Don’t look this way! Your face is making me even more nauseous!”

“M-my plan failed... I can’t...puke in front of Sir Lloyd... There are lines no girl can cross!”

“Bleeeeeeeergh!”

“...Aaaaand Marie just crossed that line...”

So much for “safely.” Marie had clearly sustained critical damage...but perhaps she should learn to drink in moderation. She was emptying the contents of her stomach into the river like how a slot machine sprayed coins when you hit three sevens.

“Oh? What’s wrong with everyone—? Uh-oh, Marie!”

Lloyd, however, was completely unaffected. He wound up patting Marie’s back.

“I—I want Sir Lloyd patting my back...but not surrounded by that sour smell. Argh, I feel like I just paved the way for my rival...”

While most of the party was barely able to sit upright, Phyllo was totally fine.

“.....You all need...to train your inner ears for balance...”

Meanwhile, Anzu was pointing ahead to their destination...while on her knees, clearly struggling to stand upright herself.

As the last of them successfully staggered onto dry land, they found...

“Wow...that’s...long.”

...stairs. A long, long, long stone staircase stretching as far as the eye could see. The kind of staircase that gave you a stitch in your side just looking at it.

“This is the famous Ascorbic staircase! One of the hundred unmissable landmarks of the Domain. We’ve also got the famously pointy mountain, Rapier Ridge, and the Bamboo Backwoods, both beloved by tourists—”

“I-it’s a tourist attraction? I mean, it certainly is an overwhelming sight, but...” Clutching his nauseous stomach, Allan looked up at the loooong staircase.

“Warriors wishing to practice with us must first pass this trial! It’s part of the training! New recruits are forced to go up and down these stairs, from the temple to the town, to procure food! Not while seasick usually. Sorry for springing this on you.”

“You’ve got nothing to apologize for, Lady Anzu. It’s all this idiot’s fault.”

“I hardly deserve that insult! I merely acted on a maiden’s... *Urp!*” Selen held it in.

Despite Anzu’s pallor, Lloyd’s eyes had lit up at the mention of training.

“I see! This is part of the training! I’ll do my best!”

And with a smile, he picked up everyone’s luggage. The sheer quantity of it would shock the weight-lifting champion of the world, and Anzu was clearly floored.

“L-Lloyd?!”

“Climbing normally would hardly count as training! That would be far too easy! You at least need to be carrying *something*.”

“T-too easy...? You’re seriously gonna carry all that?!”

He went bounding up the stairs, carrying not only the baggage, but Marie (who was in no shape to walk) and Selen (who was just catching a ride).

“Um...” Anzu forgot that she was sick. It was like she’d leaned over the rail to puke, but the sight of the dolphins and whales was so enrapturing that it cured

her seasickness.

She'd known Lloyd was strong but hadn't quite grasped how off-the-charts he really was.

"If you're surprised by that, you're in for a rude awakening," Riho warned.

Anzu grinned. "He's something else, huh? I guess we've got this rite in the bag."

She watched Lloyd vanish into the distance, nodding to herself...and then remembered the other half of the deal.

"But I've gotta find a way to train him...train a kid who doesn't even call these stairs a challenge. That's a high bar..."

She started her own ascent, but her steps were heavy, like she had a burden of her own to bear.

Not long after, Lloyd came running back.

Anzu was only halfway up the stairs herself and had no clue what he was doing here.

"What's up, Lloyd? You forget something?"

"Er, Anzu, you've got company up ahead."

"I do? You don't mean..." Scowling, Anzu raced up the rest of the stairs.

The grounds of the temple served as the home ground of the Kyounin clan. It was a gravel garden so well maintained, you might mistake it for a park. In the distance, you could hear a waterfall stemming from a river that came all the way from the Sacred Mountain itself.

And in the center stood the Kyounin clan's temple—an imposing building of vermilion pillars and expertly laid tiles. It stood out against the green of the bamboo around, making tourists and challengers alike gasp in awe.

In the mornings, swordsmen sighed, and by the evening, they were whimpering—that was the song of the Ascorbic Domain. Those who came to challenge the masters of the blade gasped at the sight of the building, and by the time the day was through, they were begging for mercy.

On the stones of the temple grounds, a woman in a red dress was sipping tea.

She appeared to be around twenty. The dress and her hat belonged in a fancy ball, or on a castle balcony.

*Ka-clunk!* The sound of a bamboo fountain did not at all jibe with her vibe, and she'd clearly brought her own table, chair, and amber-colored tea.

"Who's the lady in the fancy dress? Friend of yours?"

Judging by her folded arms and frown, Anzu knew exactly who it was.

"We'll never be friends. Whatcha doin' in my house, Renge?"

Renge glanced over the brim of her teacup and then smiled. "I see you didn't bring any *elegance* back with you, Anzu."

"Nothin' elegant about parking yourself in the middle of the path!"

Anzu's rage was pointedly ignored. Renge rose to her feet and curtsied to everyone behind Anzu.

"My name is Renge Audoc. Head of the Audoc clan. A pleasure to meet you."

This only served to piss Anzu off more.

"They ain't pleased to meet *you*. Why are you here?!"

"For tea! A moment of elegance I would never dream of missing."

"That's not what I was asking! State your damn business! Not that I can't guess..."

Renge drained her cup, looking thoroughly poised. "Then I hardly need explain. Withdraw from the Sacred Mountain Rite, Anzu."

"Hell no. Even if I have to fight on my own, I'm still a match for the entire Audoc clan."

"I thought as much. But what if it wasn't *just* the Audoc clan?"

Someone jumped down from the temple roof.

...A macho man, heavily tanned, muscles bulging everywhere. He wore a cape and a masquerade mask...and a pair of briefs. An outfit so deviant that it silenced all.

He threw his cape aside, pumped his thighs and ass, and flashed his pearly whites.

“Mwa-ha-ha! Call, and I appear!”

“Dammit, Nexamic!”

The macho man wiggled his butt from side to side, wagging a finger and clucking his tongue.

“Do the whole name, please! My name! Is! Tigeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeer! Nex! A! Miiiiiic! Top star! Number one of the Tiger clan! Master of fists and bodybuilding! My best feature is my hamstrings!”

“”“ .....”””

The hotter he burned, the colder the glares.

“What are you even doing here, Nexamic?!”

“As my hamstrings lead me! So does my whim! Concern for the future tiger cubs led me to this spot!”

“We’ve formed an alliance,” Renge announced, taking another sip of tea.

Nexamic turned toward her like he was disputing a ref’s call.

“Renge! Why would you say that?! The hamstring story is so much better! Remember to ham it up!”

“The Audoc and Nexamic clans are working together,” Renge said, ignoring him completely.

“But you hate each other!” Anzu exclaimed, baffled. “Why would you...?”

She headed toward the half-naked muscle man, leaving her confused guests watching from the sidelines.

“At least *try* to be elegant. It only takes a moment of thought.”

“Mwa-ha-ha! We aim to prevent the Kyouin despotism! Our past is water under the bridge! Sweat pouring from a brow! We’ve clasped hands! Locked biceps! Hi-yah!”

“.....” Anzu was clearly already getting fed up with his antics...and getting

worried about her own enemy, Renge. “You really oughtta reconsider this alliance...”





“As long as I tolerate his appearance, personality, and odor, he is an extremely useful ally.”

“Yet you can’t even bear to look at him? He’s literally the opposite of your favorite ‘elegance.’”

“Yes.” Renge pointed dramatically. “And I find you being in charge of the Ascorbic Domain so intolerable, I would team up with the least elegant man alive! A little BO is nothing in comparison!”

This amounted to a declaration of war.

“Lady,” Anzu said, shaking her head. “I know I called you a country bumpkin once, but are you still bearing a grudge? Even then, you wouldn’t shut up about elegance. Your desperation is painfully obvious.”

“What?! You’re a bigger bumpkin than I’ll ever be! Just because you can pull off a kimono doesn’t make you stylish! And that’s not the point! Don’t drag up old history!”

Renge widened her stance, arms folded. Not...an elegant pose.

“So what else is this about?” Anzu asked.

Nexamic was clearly feeling left out. “Mwa-ha-ha! We’re here to deliver an ultimatum, Anzu Kyounin!”

“So spit it out already. Damn.”

“You’re teaching the way of the sword to women and children, so that even the weak can defend themselves!”

“So what?”

“That is wroooooong! Women, children, and the weak should first get themselves some *muscles*!”

“Not everyone can just—”

“Your musculature dismissiveness is unethical! The gods will not stand for it! Nor will my muscles!”

Don’t bring the gods into this, please.

Nexamic was back to his posing routine, flashing teeth and hamstrings.

“What an appalling stance,” Riho said.

“Everyone here is like this,” Selen whispered.

“No, no! They aren’t, I promise! The majority are totally sensible!”

“Muscles to all! Spreading kindness adorably! Tiger! Is! Cute!”

“I’m afraid I’ve lost my composure. I must have another cup of tea and restore my elegance.”

“Stop it, both of you! You’re destroying the Domain’s reputation! And after all the hard work we did to make ourselves look marketable...”

Anzu buried her face in her hands, trapped between the muscles and the tea set. This must be a tough place to rule.

“Never fear! When I am ruler, it will be even more marketable! Drug-free muscles everywhere! The most marketable, unproblematic market of all! And I! Am Tigeeeeer ☆ Nexamic!”

Anzu gave him a look of contempt. “Unproblematic? With what you did to my students? ...What *did* you do?! Fess up!”

“Mwa-ha-ha! All the Kyoujin warriors were bewitched by the power of my hamstrings!”

“We poisoned them.”

“Renge! The hamstring story is way better!”

“I put poison in some tea and handed it over, and nobody suspected a thing.”

“Oh, you’re seriously going to just confess to that?”

“She must really not want to get lumped in with the macho man.”

“Why did they team up, then?”

Nexamic was doing some double-biceps poses. “Mwa-ha-ha! The tiger hunts at night! With all his might! Remember that!”

“That’s lions...”

Tigers only had a hunting success rate of about 5 percent. They’re actually

pretty crap at it, FYI.

But this dude didn't really listen to other people. That's probably why the contingent from Azami was just watching events unfold.

Renge poured herself a new cup of tea and offered a proposal. "It's functionally two against one. The Audoc and Tiger clans would be more than a match for the Kyouin clan, even if your students were up and about. Ready to withdraw?"

"Course not."

Renge seemed surprised by this confidence. "So your guests...are here to bail you out, I assume?"

She took another look at the group from Azami, nodding, and then rose to her feet.

"I spy the cause of your confidence! The reason why you remain unflinching in my presence! The rumors *were* true!"

"The Dragon Slayer—Allan!"

".....Huh?"

Allan found two fingers pointed at him and started paying attention. Between the seasickness and the sickeningly long stairs, he was so tired, it had been all he could do not to puke.

"...Er, why are they pointing at me?"

"You weren't listening?" Riho scoffed.

Renge and Nexamic were still carrying on.

"Azami's living legend! The man who buried dragons with his aura alone and who summons the heroes of ancient times! Allan Toin Lidocaine! I can see why you'd be so confident. A solution even I deem elegant!"

"Mwa-ha! His muscles alone seem to be two or three notches below me, but clearly, the energy hidden within that body is beyond my imagination! I can feel it radiating off him!"

".....Get it now?"

“Urp...not really...”

As Allan fought off another wave of nausea, Renge came over and hesitantly bowed.

“It’s an honor to meet a legend in the flesh, Allan. While I have your ear, might I offer a proposal?”

“A proposal?”

“Yes. More specifically, would you care to join the Audoc clan in the fight to come? We are both masters of the ax, and you would be most welcome.”

Renge was already trying to convince Allan to switch sides—clearly assuming he was the cleanup hitter and MVP. Him turning his back on this team would strengthen her team and weaken her opponent’s tactic, which certainly worked in the baseball world.

Between his upset stomach and his complete lack of understanding of the subject at hand, Allan answered with silence.

“Naturally, not for free. You may name your price.”

“I’ll teach you how to make the Nexamic Clan Special Strength-Training Protein! Tips on becoming the cutest tiger possible direct from yours truly!”

“And naturally, we’ll provide plenty of the Audoc clan’s custom tea blend.”

“Huh? I mean, I could go for a cup of tea, sure.” Allan seemed to be under the impression that she was a maid offering him tea.

“It’s a deeeeeeeeeeeeeeeal! How elegant! Tea is justice! Tough luck, Anzu!”

Renge had gone into a bowlegged fist bump, and behind her, Nexamic expressed his delight in a classic Sergio Oliva pose, serving up a real gun show.

“Mwa-ha-ha! You should have stopped us, Anzu! But the rite and the muscles are ours!”

Anzu’s response to all this?

“Oh, go ahead, take him.”

It was to put up no resistance at all. Naturally! Lloyd was all she cared about.

“...Er? You’re sure?”

“Yep. Take your spoils and run, thief,” Riho urged.

“Removing his bulk gives the rest of us more room,” Selen said.

“.....We don’t take returns,” Phyllo added.

It almost made you feel sorry for Allan. This harsh treatment was making Renge and Nexamic suspect a trap, however.

“This is all a bit too easy,” Renge muttered.

Meanwhile, the only one trying to stop Allan was Lloyd.

“Hold on, everyone! This is Allan! He’s one of our best!”

This was more the reaction Renge had expected, and she was visibly relieved—and launched into a speech she’d clearly had prepared.

“This is survival of the fittest! The ultimate in elegance! Your words have no meaning!”

“Mwa-ha-ha! We’ll take care of him!”

“Oh, thanks, sorry,” Allan said. “You’re carrying me because I’m sick, right?”

The macho man had thrown him into a princess hold, and Allan was putting a very positive spin on this. It was obviously a distress-inducing predicament, but Allan was not in any state to resist.

“Can you defeat our alliance with the remainders?” Renge crowed. “They seem like a drab bunch. We’ve clearly already won!”

“Yeah! Not a muscle between them! A heap of puny string beans! I have to assume they’re all meat-dodging, rabbit food-eating vegans!”

“.....Not true. I love kebabs... And Riho loves donuts...,” Phyllo corrected.

“Dammit, don’t bring that up *now*!”

Riho’s panic drew smiles from Marie, Selen, and even Lloyd. Clearly, they were onto her.

“Mwa-ha-ha! Say what you will! Toodle-oo! You shall repent your sins!”

Cape swirling, laughing wildly, Nexamic left the scene, Allan cradled in his

arms.

“We’ll accept your surrender at any time. Let’s settle this with elegance.”

Renge folded her chair and table, shouldered them and the box with her tea set, chugged the rest of the tea pot on the basis that it shouldn’t go to waste, hoisted up the hem of her skirt, and stalked away.

“So elegant...”

The contingent from Azami all shook their heads. At this point, Marie finally remembered she was here to treat Anzu’s students.

“Forget Allan! Where are my patients?”

Lloyd, though, was still flustered by Allan’s requisitioning.

“Are...we sure we should just let them take Allan?”

Anzu waved a hand airily. “Don’t worry, they won’t hurt him. And...”

“And?”

“...from the way they’re acting, there’s something else going on here. If we have one of us in their camp, we might find out what.”

“What do you mean?”

“Two clans that would never even speak to each other forming an alliance... and accusing me of despotism? Someone must be filling their heads with nonsense. And making a mess of things.”

Anzu shook her head, muttering under her breath.

A few hours later, in the home turf of the Audoc clan... The area was covered in thick beech trees, and the region was known for the shiitake that was cultivated on their felled trunks.

As the struggles for control of the Domain heated up, the axes initially used for woodcutting grew into proper combat tools, and the region became known as the holy land of the axmen. For all their leader’s obsession with tea, they grew nothing of the sort, and it was all imported.

But more to the point—in the depths of that forest lay a small, hidden cave.



At a glance, it looked like a bear's den, or perhaps a bandit's hideout. If this were a JRPG, you would expect to find a handy consumable—rather than a rare item—and feel pretty confident that the chest containing it would respawn regularly. It gave off that sort of vibe.

The back of this cave betrayed those expectations. There was a proper floor, couches, and a table—even a computer. A very cozy little room, less like a cave than a manga café.

Nexamic and Renge were standing on those floorboards.

“Mwa-ha-ha! Our scheme—”

“—was carried out with the utmost elegance.”

““Lady Eug.””

They bowed to a girl who looked maybe fourteen years old. She was wearing a white lab coat, wrestling with some sort of machine.

She was surrounded by a pile of drills and other tools, many of which were clearly beyond the technological level of this world. The girl shoved this pile out of her way and sat down cross-legged on her worktable, baring her canines in a broad grin. She had the specific type of arrogance that made you sure she'd throw a fit any time she lost, even if it was a game of Othello or no-stakes poker.

There was a lollipop in her mouth—but this was actually an item designed to restore her magic.

“You pulled it off, then?” Eug asked.

“Yes! My hamstrings charmed the crowd!”

“What did you actually *do*? And stop pointing your ass at me!”

Nobody wanted a forty-something dude yanking his cape aside and sticking his butt out at them. Eug was as old as Alka but appeared to be a teenager, so the visual was quite unfortunate, and her scolding was extremely warranted.

“Don't worry, the Kyounin clan's students have all fallen prey to the poison you provided. The effect is lingering most elegantly.”

“Nice. Glad it came in handy.”

“I then demonstrated the teatime of confidence. Tea is the epitome of elegance, after all.”

“Hmm, yeah, I think your elegant shtick could probably use a little more variation, but...let’s call it a job well done.” Eug nodded approvingly, despite their one-note buffoonery.

Proud of his success, Nexamic twirled his cape, striking a pose.

“And! Anzu returned with backup from another land! But my adorable love was so strong, it swiped her allies away! Our sole remaining threat is the top of the Kyounin clan, Anzu herself! And she’s no match for the topless Tiger Nexamic! No strings attached! And! Hamstrings!”

“Put some clothes on.”

“She had several ringers with her, but not an elegant soul among them, so I deemed them of no consequence. They also seemed more green tea than *proper* tea.”

“...Odd basis,” Eug muttered. She was a coffee person herself.

This was hardly her only gripe, but...

*No point bickering. I need them on my side if I’m gonna pull this off.* She grit her teeth, forcing herself to smile.

“But why are you helping us for no reward?” Renge asked.

“Renge!” Nexamic roared. “You’re not that foolish, surely!”

Was this a rare glimpse of actual intelligence? “Huh, you—,” Eug began, sounding momentarily impressed.

“Surely, it’s muscles! She wants some! Don’t worry, Eug! This Tiger will put together a workout routine just for you!”

“Hell no, dumbass!” Eug yelled, cutting him down.

“Aha! Then! You must have no tolerance for evil! The evil called—Anzuuuu!”

“Eug, are you sure that Anzu’s planning on making the Domain a part of the Profen Kingdom in return for a permanent position of power for the Kyounin

clan?”

It seemed Eug had fed Renge a nonsensical story about Anzu selling out her own home.

“Yep, yep, that’s why she’s been palling around with Profen so much. Laying the groundwork.”

“Curse you, Anzu... You were once a better woman than that...”

“Renge! We must thwart our ruler’s ambitions! And shatter her antimuscle campaign! Two birds with one stooooone!”

“Yeah, sure, sure. More importantly, is it true the victor of this contest gets to enter the Sacred Mountain shrine?”

Completely ignoring all babble about muscles, Eug went right for the thing she cared about. What purpose did she have with this shrine?

“Yes, a baptism by the Sacred Beast in that shrine allows you to serve as the ruler of the Domain for four years.”

“That’s what I wanted to know! That’s all that matters. You can go now! Good work.”

Like a hostile boss, that “good work” was lip service only, but neither of her minions picked up on the details. They bowed respectfully.

“Very well! I’ll let my muscles cool down!”

“I must serve our guest some tea—be well!”

“Oh, I forgot! I’ll welcome him with muscles and protein! Mwa-ha-ha!”

When they were gone, Eug rolled her eyes. “Ugh...seriously, having to work with those clowns is so stressful.”

She rolled her lollipop around her mouth. Her eyes were on the ceiling of the cave as she talked to no one in particular.

“But if I start griping now, I’ll never finish—at least they’re easier to manipulate than Sou and Shouma.”

Eug hopped down off the table and collapsed on the couch—facedown, head in a cushion, kicking her legs behind her.

“Auuugh, if only I had Alka’s physical strength! I’d be free! I could do whatever I wanted even in this backwater world! No—”

She stopped kicking and flipped over on her back, gazing into the distance, lost in the past.

“If the experiment had succeeded...none of this would have happened.”

The unpleasant memory made her crunch down hard on her candy.

“Whoops, can’t do that—don’t want lose all the magic I’ve got stored in there.”

Eug got up and carefully put the sucker in a test tube–like container for safety. Then she sighed again.

“Even if I can’t have physical strength, if I at least had a little more magic...I wouldn’t have failed in Azami, wouldn’t have had Lloyd after me for the dumbest reason... Mm?”

She sensed eyes on her.

Eug spun around and found someone in a bunny costume poking their head around the corner.

They were a very cutesy pink bunny, entirely out of place here. They even moved adorably, like they had been well trained at an amusement park, their every gesture honed for maximum appeal.

They came bounding out, waving both hands, and called out to Eug in an extra-cutesy tone. “Yoo-hoo, Eug! Long time no see!”

“Eve...”

Eve spun the suit around, giggling...and this made the bunny head fall off. The person inside hastily put it back on—this sequence was not at all cute.

“Close one! Almost went out of compliance.”

“Compliance with what?”

“Personal guidelines? Eh-heh-heh.”

The bunny made a show of being extra adorable, attempting to recover. Her name was Eve Profen. Her gender wasn’t entirely clear. Despite her

appearance, she was in charge of the kingdom of Profen—though no one knew what she really looked like. From her voice and the occasional glimpse of the person within, you could maaaybe tell she was female.

She skipped squeakily over to Eug and patted her shoulders. “You look tired! The plan not going well?” She sounded like a boss trying to have an open discussion.

“It’s going fine! We’ve taken most of the Kyounin clan out. And the Audoc and Nexamic clans have allied. They bought my lie—hook, line, and sinker.”

“A common enemy sure melts the snow fast!”

“Times may change, but people don’t.”

“But what about the key to all this? Still no sign of the Sacred Beast?” Eve poured herself a cup of tea and settled down on the couch. Rather than gripe about this, Eug poured a cup for herself and got some snacks ready. Clearly, they’d known each other awhile.

“If *you* can’t find it, Eve, this demon lord must be unusually cautious...”

Eug offered Eve some cookies. Eve slipped a hand out from a slit in her costume and ate one through it. A bizarre spectacle.

“*Munch, munch, gulp...* This shrine can’t be opened with brute force, which sure makes it a primary suspect. We think this demon lord is the lab chief?”

“If it is, we definitely want her on our side. She was always a little difficult, but...”

“No worse than Sou and Shouma?”

Remembering how worked up their love for Lloyd had made those two, Eug winced, but then she shook her head, banishing those thoughts.

“It’s clearly set up so you have to follow the proper procedures. Even if it isn’t the lab chief, it has to be one of the stronger demon lords. A card like that would help us plunge the world into chaos and help force it to advance.”

Eve nodded. “This means we’ve gotta hurt Anzy,” she said almost sorrowfully. “I got all chummy with her hoping to learn more about the Sacred Beast. She’s so nice! It’s almost blinding.”

“Don’t worry. As long as we can get this beast-slash-demon-lord, Anzu can have the Ascorbic Domain.”

“That would be optimal. Argh, I can’t wait to get civilization back! Can’t even use this electric kettle in public.”

Eve poured herself a new cup using water that had boiled in no time at all.

“Getting this demon lord would be a huge step toward that. After all, it’s strong enough that neither of us can get to it on our own!”

“Right. And if it is the lab chief, then the holy sword—the Last Key’s system is as good as decoded! A huge boost to our plans.”

Eve took the eyes off her costume, stuck an arm out of it, picked up her tea cup, and drank it through the eyehole.

“So much for compliance... That’s a genuinely terrifying way to drink things.”

“But not against my personal guidelines!” Eve threw a peace sign out the eyehole. This was a creature so eldritch, it would make any child cry.

Eug shook her head, and Eve put the eyes back.

“Other than this demon lord, do you have the pieces in place to plunge the world into chaos?”

“We’re growing treants in the Ascorbic bamboo forests. Tricky to raise them here, but promising. If they succeed, we’ll be mass-producing some nasty monsters. Standard weapons from the current technology level won’t scratch them.”

“And once the Jiou Empire unleashes a wave of monsters, everyone will be begging for our newfangled weaponry! ...It all makes sense!” Eve waved her arms happily, and Eug grinned.

“The longer the war goes on, the more they’ll want better weapons. They’ll study and improve the ones we give them. The new weapons will be a stepping-stone to putting that new tech on existing weapons and spreading it. Ten years from now, every home will have an electric kettle.”

“Yesss! So—have you invented the weapons that will spark this surge in science?”

Eug gave her a look like *Who do you think you're talking to?*

"I had the dwarves make a hundred self-propelled artillery units. Then we got a thousand submachine guns and automatic handguns, a bunch of transceivers, and other things that'll help with the war effort, all stored in the cave on Rapier Ridge. That's a holy ground, so the locals never go near it, thankfully."

"Bravo!" Eve said, flopping her paws together. "If they accept automotive and telecommunication advances, that'll be a huge step! Computers! Appliances! Cell phooooones!"

She was starting to sound like a commercial.

"Once they're ready, we can start on planes or the like," Eug noted. "If we can make this war last a century or two..."

"Necessity will force them to research a hybrid of magic and science the world over! We'll have technology far beyond what we once knew! The stuff of dreams! Flying cars and everything the movies promised!"

"As a scientist, I hate relying so much on other people, but I've got a lot on my plate."

"There's only so much you can do on your own. But if the entire species works together, with the ultimate scientific power, this time—!"

"We might be able to control the Last Dungeon device."

"Yes! I can't wait! Come! Heave! Ho! Up and at 'em!"

Eve was dancing wildly. After a furious jig, she pulled something out of a hip pouch.

"And I have a present for you, Eug."

She danced back to Eug, holding out two large eggs.

The aura on them was so ominous that Eug gasped. "No way! Two demon lords?!"

"Captured them wandering around. Thanks to that egg you made! Should shore up your forces."

"Thank you, Eve. I owe you one."



“One of these was calling himself Satan! Gotta expect great things with a name like that!”

At the mention of “Satan,” Eug’s face fell, like she’d just learned her birthday present was a knockoff.

“Oh...I know him. He was wandering around outside Kunlun, and the children threw stones at him until Alka showed up to drop a meteor. Battle ended before he even showed his second form...but he’s definitely on the wimpy side.”

“You don’t say? Guess the name was a lie.”

“Demon-lord names aren’t really very useful to determine that sort of thing. I think some of the staff who got mixed up in this mess are just borrowing bits of trivia from video games...and don’t really get the implications... They were never the type to study.” Eug took a sip of tea, thinking. “I believe Satan is... Seta. From the year before me.”

“Oh, same division?”

“Smart guy, but crap at presentations. Alka and I had to bail him out every time. His bedhead always made him look like he had horns, so we used to tease him, calling him Satan. He joined the project because he was worried about global warming and rising sea levels.”

“Well, we definitely solved global warming and diminishing resources. Outwardly.” Eve pointed at the eggs. “The other one was a turtle on fire, called itself Surtr. Any ideas?”



Eug shook her head. “Not from that alone, no. Not like I knew everyone at the lab...and there were people who weren’t even researchers.”

“Yeah. Like me!”

“So this Sacred Mountain beast will be vital. Anyone strong we can’t identify? Better to have them under our thumb before their memories return. If their minds come back, we might have to shove them into these eggs, and they’d be useless to us. Like Vritra—Director Ishikura. He only left the egg because Selen called out to him, which proved the hypothesis. And if the beast is the lab chief, it’s all the more important we make her ours. I could never tell what that woman was thinking.” Eug rolled the egg around her hand with a frown.

Eve leaned her elbows on the table, nodding. “It’s tricky, huh? If they get their memories back and think like us, then they’d be an asset...but there’s no telling if they’d be willing to go along with our nefarious schemes.”

Eug squinted at that phrase. “I’m not trying to rule the world. I just want to elevate it. And to make that happen, I have to take charge. Who would want to be king of a fantasy world?”

“I know, Eug. You just want to try again. But Alka...” Eve shook her head and got up to go.

“Leaving already?”

“I am the king of Profen. But don’t worry, I’ve got time. After all...”

She struck a pose like a politician making a speech before a crowd.

“...I used to be the president! I’m making good use of old skills! The power of experience!”

“And experience suggested that costume was a good idea?”

“That and a few other things. I *was* pretty famous, after all. Didn’t want any demon lords seeing me and getting their memories back.”

“Fair. You were famous for a *lot* of reasons that could well jog memories.”

Eve poked her with a finger. “And if demon lords remember things, they look less like monsters and more like people. Makes them harder to capture. And

there's a wide range, kids and grown-ups..."

"They take on the human forms they had at the moment in time that was most precious to them."

"Make sense. So for you, that was when you were fourteen? You started college then, right? You skipped so many grades! That was when you first met Alka."

"....." Eug answered with silence.

"Meanwhile, Alka wound up looking nine years old. Your lifelong rival's most precious memory was of something else. Must have made it feel like you didn't matter. Then again, her reason being what it was..."

At this point, Eve saw Eug's face crumpling and hastily tried to patch things up.

"W-well, I'm sure if the experiment succeeds this time, she'll reexamine that, too. It's a real shame she isn't with us on this, but you can't let it get you down. You go get this shrine open and secure the Sacred Beast! Buh-bye!"

And with that, Eve was gone.

"...Sigh." Eug let out a long exhale, like a heartbroken teen.

"Yeah...every time I see myself, I remember the shock of meeting her. Meeting a genius greater than myself."

Eug turned her gaze toward the spot where Eve had been sitting...and remembered the bizarre sight of a young arm reaching out from the gap in her costume. Eug frowned.

"Eve's strongest memories...aren't from being the president, but from when she was much younger..."

Meanwhile, back at the Kyounin territory...

Inside the gorgeous temple, the solemn main hall had been filled with makeshift beds, like a field hospital, with the clan's best fighters all groaning in agony.

Marie and the servants were tending to them, to a chorus of regrets and

lamentations.

Once they'd finished changing the wet towels, Marie looked at the medicine she'd brought with her and her patients in turn. She seemed worried.

"...What's wrong, witch?" Anzu asked.

Marie shook her head. "I prepared medicine based on the symptoms you mentioned, but...I'm afraid it doesn't seem to be helping."

"A poison that won't kill 'em, but keeps them out of the fight for a while. That's a very specific effect," Anzu said, scratching her head.

"I've never seen these exact symptoms before. Where did they get this poison? You'd need advanced knowledge of the field..."

"And those two both have muscles for brains. There's definitely someone behind all this, dammit. You've gotta be exhausted, though. Take a break. And thanks."

Anzu led Marie to a reception room.

There, they found the rest of the contingent from Azami looking worn out from the ship and the stairs and the encounter with Renge and Nexamic. Well, especially with him. You don't often encounter a weirdo of his magnitude.

"How'd it go, Marie?" Riho asked, munching on a rice cracker.

"No signs of improvement. Gimme one of those."

"Sweet or savory?"

Marie took a sugar-crusted one and angrily bit into it, frustrated by her inability to heal the students.

"Thanks anyway, witch," Anzu said. "Don't take it so personally."

"What was their problem?!" Selen fumed. "They just ran their mouths off, doing whatever they wanted, and then turned around and left!"

"Just like you do!"

"Who taught them their manners?!"

Everyone gave her a look, hoping she'd take the hint and be a little more self-

aware, but Selen remained staunchly oblivious.

“The chiefs of the Audoc and Tiger clans... They were certainly characters.”

“.....Are they really clan leaders?”

“I’m afraid so. They really are in charge, to our nation’s shame.” Anzu scratched her head and launched into a longer explanation. “First, the barrel of muscles, Tiger Nexamic. Master of fisticuffs, head of the Tiger clan. That clan has spent years honing the art of unarmed combat, but somewhere along the way, they started placing far too much emphasis on raw muscle. They’re strong enough, but...a bit off.”

“.....I feel like their mental fortitude is stronger than their muscles,” Phyllo commented.

“And the lady in the red dress is Renge Audoc. Only daughter of the ax-wielding Audoc clan’s previous leader. We’ve been at odds since we were kids... but she’s actually strong.”

“From what I’ve heard, she can fell any tree with a single swing of her ax.”

“Then they grow shiitake from the fallen trees. And since she always goes bowlegged when she swings, I used to call her ‘bowlegged mushroom girl,’ and that made her real mad...and once she was in charge, she went for a drastic makeover...”

“I’d be mad, too.”

“So basically, she dresses like that to try and change her clan’s image. She’s got all her students in tailcoats, too. Must make it so hard to fight in those outfits...”

“I cannot believe she had the nerve to say we had no elegance! In what world are Sir Lloyd and I not elegant?!”

Selen was smoothly dissing everyone else by omission...which was probably what had got her dismissed in the first place.

“Sorry about that.” Anzu bowed her head as ruler of the Domain. “But even with our history, I don’t know when she got *that* hostile.”

“So...what format does this Sacred Mountain Rite take?” Riho asked.

“It’s a divine ritual, offering a battle up in honor of the Sacred Beast. We draw straws on the specific battle type; there’s a bunch in there from serious duels to more gimmicky stuff.”

“You...draw straws?”

“Yep. All down to the will of the mountain. And the head of the clan who wins five battles running is the next ruler.”

“I can’t imagine pulling that off solo,” Selen remarked.

“If it was a one-on-one battle, I could handle it.” Anzu nodded. “But if I pull a three-legged race, I’d be instantly disqualified. Hence, me needing your help.”

She slapped her hands together like she was bowing before the Buddha.

“I can’t wait!” Selen exclaimed, leaning forward. “But in return, if there *is* a three-legged race or any other event that would place me in direct physical contact with Sir Lloyd, you have to agree to let me take part.”

Her motives were transparent, but Phyllo just gave her a look of pity.

“That nonsense aside,” Riho said, “Lady Anzu, don’t forget that you promised to train Lloyd.”

“I’ve got that covered,” Anzu assured, slapping her chest. “He’s even worse than I thought, and it’s a daunting task, but don’t you worry.”

Lloyd came back in, carrying some food. “Meal’s ready, everyone! My first time ever making sushi!”

He was holding a huge tray with a dazzling variety of seafood. White and red fish, shrimp, shellfish, even some egg—it was a sushi platter designed to make everyone forget about the battles waiting for them the next day.

“Wow, so this is sushi? It was worth coming here for this alone.”

“.....It’s good.”

“This would pair great with sake!”

“Augh! If only Sir Lloyd was grown-up, I could get him drunk...or I’d get intoxicated and make him look after me!”

“Man, m’lady, you are *dedicated* to that cause. Don’t break laws when you’re



abroad!”

Anzu looked pleased by their reactions. “Heh-heh, enjoy it all you like. Remember, if you move here, you can eat this every day. Hoo, that hit the spot!”

Anzu had knocked back a shot of sake. Lloyd was on his knees next to her.

“Lady Anzu, I can’t wait to train with you tomorrow!”

He was so tense about it, she instinctively reached out to rub his shoulders.

“Stay loose there, kid. Don’t worry, I’ll make you way stronger.”

“You will? Thank you so much! Thank you!” He was so delighted, it made Marie worried.

“Lady Anzu,” she whispered. “Are you sure you should be promising that?!”

“You oughtta loosen up, too, Marie. Lloyd’s crazy strong, but I know more about wielding a sword. There’s definitely things I can teach him. Maybe he’ll awaken to the might of the blade and become a legendary swordsman! Leave both our names in the history books!”

Odds were the booze was fueling this confidence, but it was only making Marie look grimmer. She’d worked with Lloyd long enough to know just how easily he thwarted optimism. Especially her own.

“He’ll exceed your wildest expectations...,” she grumbled.

“Good! Let’s establish a legend for the ages!”

Marie’s warning shot had clearly failed to find its mark. She scratched her cheek awkwardly.

“Well, let’s just hope he doesn’t leave you crying tomorrow.” She looked anxiously back at the door to the main hall. “And I really want to know who’s capable of making that poison.”

Meanwhile, there was one person every bit as excited as Lloyd.

“Eh-heh-heh! Tomorrow, I’ll put my plans in action!”

Selen. She was staring at Lloyd like a crafty strategist. Almost certainly up to no good.

Next to her, Phyllo finished her meal quickly and gazed up at the moonlit sky, lost in thought.

Riho brought her a cup of cold green tea...and pressed the side of it against Phyllo's cheek. "Ha!"

".....!"

"Geez. You wouldn't usually let me do that... Still troubled, huh?"

".....Mm." Phyllo took the tea and sipped it.

"Well, if it's burnout, then hopefully, the training tomorrow will help you find a new goal."

"....." Phyllo answered with silence, and spotting that, Anzu staggered toward her.

"Yep, yep! Worried about the future? Join my students here, Phyllo! We'll all aim for greater heights together!"

"Her worries aren't an opening for an invite, Lady Anzu."

Riho and Phyllo both glared at her, but Anzu just slapped their shoulders.

"Just trying to help!" she cried. "What do you say?"

".....I already have a master." Phyllo glanced at Lloyd.

"Fair enough," Anzu said and moved on.

Phyllo turned her gaze back to the moon. ".....I found Mom...so why am I so lost?"

Regardless of their varied emotional states, the next day, they'd all get a taste of training in the Ascorbic Domain.

The morning of their second day in the Domain...

On the temple ground was a gravel-paved training field. Anzu narrowed her eyes against the blinding sunlight.

"Perfect day for training."

If it was raining, she would have said, "Training to fight in the rain is practical! Perfect day for training!" If it was snowing, she would have said, "Make the

snow your ally! Perfect day for training!” So basically, no days were imperfect in her book. Like a team captain who’s always trying too hard.

The contingent from Azami was lined up before her. They weren’t wearing their usual clothes or their cadet uniforms, but the Kyounin clan’s traditional training gear.

The boys wore clean white *gi*—a typical martial-arts uniform—with a hood. These doubled as sturdy travel wear. A popular item for all times of the year, they were often thought of as what to wear when you just didn’t care or a default look when you were in a hurry.

Meanwhile, the girls’ uniform were significantly cuter in red.

The tops had subtle flowers embroidered and even a few frills. Below that, they wore formfitting leggings of the same color. An outfit designed for breathability and ease of movement but with an added fashion-conscious layer, they’d been the top-selling item in the Ascorbic Domain’s clothing industry for three years running.

Riho had already altered the outfit to her own liking, sleepily rubbing her eyes. She pinched the red fabric.

“I hear the ladies in the more dubious East Side shops wear this to drum up business.”

It certainly was a fashion choice with many practical advantages! Professionals must go through crates of them.

“Definitely falls under too much information, Riho. Makes a ruler sad.”

Anzu grimaced, hanging her head. She was glad for the sales but would rather they be used for their intended purpose rather than to spice up an adult-oriented drinking establishment.

Meanwhile, Lloyd looked thoroughly pleased with his white garb, moving his arms around, chuckling.

“This is so comfortable! The girls’ version looks perfect for fighting, too!”

“Never change, Lloyd,” Riho said.

Lloyd looked confused. He’d passed by these dubious shops on many

occasions and remained thoroughly untainted by them. May he stay a pure boy forever.

The stalker gunning for his affections also stayed true to herself, regardless of the country she was in.

“It leaves a *bit* too little to the imagination, but the freedom of movement is worth it! This way, Sir Lloyd and I can grabble to our heart’s content! But if I’m up against him... I know! I’ll just call it an emergency endurance test!”

“Cut it out!” Riho shouted, slapping her.

Anzu made a show of clearing her throat. “*Ahem!* Everyone ready? All right! Being worked up this early ain’t a bad thing, but it’s time we focus.”

The sun had cleared the horizon, beating down on them. The misty morning had clearly done a class change to the blistering midday sun.

“...Sorry.” Phyllo bowed. She had a hoodie on over her red training gear.

“You’re so serious, Phyllo!” Selen said, impressed.

“Everyone is, compared to *you*.”

“We’re already losing focus... Geez, every one of you has nerves of steel,” Anzu remarked, sighing.

Lloyd, though, was hanging on to her every word—totally focused and ready to go.

“So sorry, Lady Anzu! What should we do?”

Deeming him exactly the right amount of tense, Anzu laughed approvingly. “That’s how it should be!”

At the same time, that was itself a burden.

“Heh...I let the booze get to me and promised the moon, but he’s gonna be a challenge,” she muttered.

He’d let a *kodachi* bounce off his forehead without sustaining any damage. His physical abilities were so beyond the pale; what could you even do with him? Even underplaying it, she was like a house cat compared to him.

Anzu felt like a first-time director trying to give acting techniques to an award-

winning veteran star.

“But...I can’t go dashing his hopes, either. These are the holy training grounds, and I’m the ruler of it.”

She met Lloyd’s eye and made up her mind. She put the force of a training instructor in her voice. “All right, kids, you ready?”

“““Aye, aye!”””

Riho shucked off her sleepy vibe, and Selen her rapturous delusions, both ready to train.

In the shade nearby, Marie muttered, “She’s the real deal,” impressed by Anzu’s demeanor.

“Good answer, fledglings! Normally, we’d kick things off with some distance running and push-ups, building the bodies you need, but you’re all soldiers! Let’s assume you’ve got that covered.”

“Yes, I have run far too many laps already.”

“I know for a fact that you’ve snagged Lloyd with your belt and let him drag you for plenty of those.”

“The point of running is to improve your heart and lungs, so I am merely training my heart by clinging to Sir Lloyd and feeling it race.”

“I think your heart is already plenty strong!”

They were already back to bickering. Anzu rubbed her forehead.

“...So what *are* we doing?” Phyllo looked a bit desperate.

Anzu recovered and glanced toward Marie.

“Right, right, this box... Ugh, it’s heavy.”

“Thanks, Marie.”

“No problem. I’m your assistant today! What’s in this heavy thing?”

“These.” Anzu answered. She reached in and pulled out—a sword.

“Swords! Real ones?! Can we?” Lloyd asked, eyes sparkling. No boy can resist.

“You betcha.” Anzu grinned. He’d taken her bait.

Selen and Riho spotted a hint of craftiness.

“Lady Anzu, what are you up to?”

“Planning on using these swords to make Sir Lloyd realize his own strength?”

Anzu nodded confidently. “He’s got physical powers beyond mortal ken, but the way he carries himself is amateur hour. If we get a few stances and forms in him, he could very well get even more ridiculous.”

“Even *more* than now...?” Marie gulped.

“Just a possibility. If he learns how to carry himself and then crushes his opponent in the rite, he might finally get a little confidence. And if that helps him realize his own strength... All right, let’s practice!”

Anzu started passing out swords.

Selen took one from her and held it up, staggering from the unexpected weight.

“Whoa, that’s *pretty* heavy! You wave these things around?!”

It was several times the weight of the rapier she usually used.

“Yep! So maybe show a little more respect.”

Riho held up her own blade...to her eye, so she could appraise it better. “This isn’t too shabby.”

“Yeah, the clan blacksmith made it. Puts his soul in each hit of his hammer! Can’t lump that in with the crap you find in souvenir shops in Azami and Rokujou.”

“Wow...can I take it with me?”

“Sure, call it the price of doing business.”

“Whoo-hoo! You’re the best, Lady Anzu!”

Riho was now as excited as Lloyd, for very different reasons. Money was clearly the key to her heart.

Meanwhile, Phyllo seemed reluctant to take a sword at all.

“.....Swords...”

She'd trained in hand-to-hand combat all this time, so picking up a blade and switching to armed combat now...

Well aware of that feeling, Anzu grinned and handed her a blade.

"Don't get cold feet here. I ain't saying you need to become a swordswoman. I'm saying trying something new will help you gain some perspective. A change of pace, you know?"

Phyllo nodded and took the blade. "...Mm...like this?"

"Yep, looking good. Take a few practice swings."

With Phyllo's height and training, her form was already beautiful, every bit as impressive as Anzu's own.

"Oh-ho," Anzu said.

".....Mm?" Feeling Anzu's eyes on her, Phyllo looked back. "...Well? Anything off?"

"Quite the opposite. You're looking great. When people who don't know better start waving a sword around, they make a whooshing noise with every swing. But your form is already good."

".....Mm." Phyllo took this praise with the same serious expression she always had.

So Anzu brought the topic from the previous day up again—the one about her becoming a student here.

"I know I was drunk yesterday and half joking, but you should give serious consideration to studying here."

"....."

"If you've lost your purpose, then help me with mine—master the Kyounin arts and help make us the top clan in all the world."

".....But..." Phyllo glanced at Lloyd. Her master.

"I know, and I'm saying it anyway. He doesn't realize what he can do, right? So your relationship is one-sided. That makes him less your master and more the target of your admiration."

“.....My admiration...”

Lloyd had learned Pyrid the Fierce God’s style direct from the man himself. As a practitioner of that style, it had seemed natural for her to see him as her master—especially since he was clearly stronger than her. She’d never questioned it before, so being told it was nothing but admiration came as a shock.

“Admiration isn’t a bad thing! I wanna help you with that...but I also can’t stand seeing someone of your talents going to waste.”

“.....Even so...”

Seeing her still stuck on something, Anzu patted her shoulders. “I ain’t gonna force you. But leave it in the back of your mind... Mm?”

*Clank, clank.* Anzu turned to see what the noise was...

...and found Riho with a sword in each hand, one under each arm, and a fifth one in her mouth. Truly a wild sight.

“Er, uh...what—what are you doing?”

Riho took the sword out of her mouth, grinning. “I’ve decided to become the world’s first quintuple wielder!”

“Quin...”

“And to do that, I’ll be taking all five of these swords home with me! With each blade of this quality...I’ll be rich!”

Anzu had not expected her to take the free-sword notion to this extreme and was forced to doff her hat.

“You sure know how to bleed people dry, but...you’ll hurt yourself doing that, so knock it off.”

“I’m not so easily swayed! My mind is made up! I *will* master the five-blade... Mm? I haven’t used that sword yet! I’ve changed my mind, Anzu! I’m gonna be a master of the sextuple blade!”

“...I thought you said your mind was made up.”

Riho had equipped the sixth sword between her thighs. She now looked like a



very confused circus performer.

It was like she'd combined the passion of a veteran housewife taking advantage of every discount with the craftiness of a gamer who'd found a new exploit, equipping swords all over the place. Anzu couldn't help but laugh.

"I only said you could take the one, but...whatever."

She decided it was time for her to give a demonstration.

"Eyes up here! What matters most is your strength of will—what you want to protect and what you want to win. If you have a clear goal in mind, then no matter the person, your soul will harbor a blade."

"...A strong will...in the soul..." These words seemed to speak to Phyllo.

Keeping her mettle raised, Anzu turned to face a distant bamboo thicket.

"If you want to cut down a faraway tree...then place that will in your soul and your blade...and transform it with your slice!"

She exhaled...and drew her blade too fast for the eye to see. There was a brief pause, and in the distance, a tree began to lean—bamboo leaves rustling as it fell. Everyone locked their eyes on the severed trunk. It was cut clean through.

Anzu bowed.

Marie, Selen, and Lloyd all started clapping—even Riho managed to do so, despite the six swords.

Phyllo rarely showed any excitement, but now she was clapping excitedly. ".....Bravo."

Anzu raised a hand. "That's nothing," she said modestly. "It's a trick you can pull off after testing your mind with mental puzzles, your body with ceaseless training, and of course—strength of will. All of you could do that someday if you work hard enough."

*Someday.* It was an optimistic phrase that visibly perked Lloyd up.

"All right, Anzu! I'll work hard!"

"That's the spirit! Start by practicing your swing!"

"Okay! Here I go!" Lloyd threw himself into practicing his draw, copying

Anzu's motion.

Riho and Selen started whispering to her.

"Promising start. If he trains like this and gains some confidence..."

"...and scores some decisive victories in the rite, he might actually start to assess himself accurately."

Anzu nodded, proud of herself. "After swinging a sword long enough, you learn how to handle these things. Keep the compliments coming, though!"

"This is great, Lady Anzu! If Lloyd realizes how strong he is, he'll start accepting high-difficulty quests with me!"

"If he recognizes his strength, he'll recognize the strength of my love! I want his confident arms around me!"

Selen was instantly so deep in fantasy that Phyllo had to step in.

".....That's one thing that will never happen."

Delusions shattered, Selen turned angrily toward her. "And why not?! *Gasp!* You're not suffering under the conceited illusion that he'll fall for *your* paltry charms instead, are you?!"

"...No...I...have no such charms..." Phyllo looked so dejected, it took the wind out of Selen's sails.

"Wh...what's wrong with her?"

"Ugh, is she still stuck on that...?" Riho just rolled her eyes.

But Anzu was a die-hard big-sister type and jumped right in.

"Being all harsh on yourself gets you nowhere. Strength of will! Be like Lloyd and throw yourself into this."

She pointed at the boy, who was clumsily swinging his sword. He'd clearly almost never held one before, and it was hard to say he looked cool—more like a kid who'd just watched an anime, trying to imitate the moves the characters used.

".....Mm."

But it seemed to resonate with Phyllo. Her expression went from half-empty to half-full.

Anzu looked pleased to see this, but when she glanced at Lloyd's flailing, her smile stiffened. "He may be a monster, but...this sure shows his age. Better at least teach him how to swing that thing."

She took a step toward him to start correcting his form.

"Lady Anzu! Don't!" Marie yelped, looking alarmed.

Startled, Anzu glanced her way. "What's wrong, Marie? You've turned very pale—"

*Snk.* As she turned, something scraped her cheek.

"Mm? Did a bug sting me?"

She reached up and touched it...and found blood on her fingers.

"What—?"

*Snk.* Something hit her kimono. When she glanced toward the sound, she saw a neat cut in the cloth.

"It tore...but why here? Wait—" Anzu's eyes went wide, and she looked at Lloyd again.

The boy was wildly swinging a sword around. Each swing he took was causing cracks in the pavement. And these were gradually getting larger.

Anzu quickly jumped backward.

"I was watching Lloyd this whole time since it was just so cute," Marie explained. "Then I heard him mutter, 'Think I'm getting the hang of it,' and he started swinging harder and now he's doing the whole *iai* thing..."

"He's actually creating shock waves from that wild flailing?!" Riho yelped.

The ground at her feet cracked.

"Uh, Lady Anzu!" Selen screeched. "What happened to the mental puzzles? Or the strength of will? I thought you needed that stuff! But he's doing it already!"

“Without... That’s ridiculous...”

Lloyd was really getting into it now and swinging even harder.

“Uh, this is bad news,” Marie whimpered. She’d lived with Lloyd awhile and was speaking from experience.

Heedless of the worried looks he was getting, Lloyd followed up the flurry of wild swings with a finishing move of his own creation.

*Rummmmmble...*

All the tiles on the roof of the Kyouin clan’s temple were blown away.

Lloyd’s arm was fully extended...and his eyes screwed tightly shut. He was completely unaware of the devastation his swing had caused.

The servants inside were running about with *naginata* poles, yelling, “What’s this?!” They were clearly assuming the Audoc clan had attacked.

“Mm? Do I hear people yelling? Nope, stay focused.”

Lloyd got ready to start flinging around indiscriminate long-range attacks again.

Marie and Anzu threw their hands up. ““Stop! Stoppp!””

Lloyd blinked at them, and Anzu took his sword away.

“Sorry, it’s too dangerous! Far too dangerous!”

The note of genuine panic in her voice—and the fact that she’d taken his sword away—made Lloyd visibly deflate.

“S-sorry. Right, nothing more dangerous than a wimp like me waving a sword around. I was just having so much fun—I’m sorry.”

“Th-that’s not the problem, right? Lady Anzu?”

“Right!” Anzu clarified. “First, let’s start with a wooden sword! I got it backward! These are for seppuku! Switch to wood!”

She went around taking everyone’s swords away. And then handed out some wooden blades.

“Okay! Let’s all recover and try again! Super-fun wooden-sword time!

Swordplay starts and ends with wood! Lots of depth to it! Are you buying that, Lloyd? Please say yes!”

“S-sure, okay! It was so nice of you to let me hold a real sword first. I appreciate the gesture!”

He’d certainly spun that in a positive light.

“Hokay, wooden swords!” Anzu said. Surely, he couldn’t produce any shock waves with *those*.

Meanwhile, Riho was staring dejectedly at the wooden blade. This *clearly* wouldn’t be worth selling. “If I have to use wood, one is plenty...”

“.....Already done with the sextuple wielding?”

“Don’t dismiss wooden swords,” Anzu said. “I meant what I said! We all start with wooden blades.”

She started hitting a straw dummy.

“When you strike like this, you feel the hit in your hand. It echoes up the wood to your palm. Do that enough, and it starts to feel like the wooden sword is a part of your body.”

“.....A part of...my body?”

“Yep. And you’re a martial artist yourself, so you know how much force you can put out when your whole body’s working in unison.”

“.....I do... Each muscle...in sync. A burst of power...”

Anzu folded her arms, grinning. “Right now, your will and your body aren’t in sync. Best cure for that is to beat the hell out of a dummy.”

“.....Beat the hell out of it?”

“Until you can’t even think. Until you get so tired that you collapse on the spot and can’t get up. Then ask yourself—do I want to keep going? Why? When you’re that tired, your true motives come floating to the surface. When I’m stuck on something, I grab a wooden sword, head into the bamboo thicket, and hit trees until dawn. Give it a shot.”

“.....Mm.” Phyllo nodded and headed toward the bamboo thicket.

“But you’ll miss out on tomorrow if you go overkill! Okay, you lot try these dummies out. You too, Lloyd.”

“Okay! Got it!”

“Your stance... Your hands go here. Like you’re squeezing the hilt. Then you swing down like so.”

“Uhh...”

“It’ll be a bit awkward before you get the hang of it, but it’ll come in time. All right! Smack away!”

They all began striking the dummies.

“This certainly requires a lot of energy.”

“I’m definitely not meant for swords.”

Selen and Riho were already grumbling.

Lloyd, meanwhile, had yet to hit his dummy. He was staring grimly at it.

“At the military academy entrance exam...I failed big-time with a dummy. But this time!”

He had failed the dummy test...because he’d pulverized it, but his hits had been too fast for the test proctor to see, and it had been chalked up as an accident.

The painful memories were lending him strength now.

“This training is designed to hone my swing... Gotta make a smooth, clean strike...as strong as I can!”

“Good luck, Lloyd!” Marie called.

Lloyd put his full might behind a swing.

“Yahhhhhhhhhhhh... Augh!”

*Slpp.*

““““Huh?””””

The wooden blade had gone rocketing out of his hands. He’d been so stressed, sweat had greased his palms.

His horrified yelp made everyone turn and look...

...*Foom*. With a sound beyond description, the wooden sword broke the sound barrier, leaving a sonic boom in its wake as it rocketed off toward the upper atmosphere.

Everyone looked to the sky, like they were following a golf ball.

*Boom!* And the wooden sword...knocked the tip off the famous bladelike peak of the Rapier Ridge. Like snapping the tip off a utility knife.

“Auuuugh!” Anzu wailed. “The Rapier Ridge! One of the hundred sights of the Ascorbic Domain! A tourist attraction!”

There were now only ninety-nine tourist attractions, and witnessing that moment had snapped Anzu’s heart like the wooden sword had snapped the mountain peak.

“I-I’m so, so sorry! I totally let the blade slip out of my grasp... Is it in the thicket somewhere?”

Lloyd started searching in the wrong direction.

“L-Lloyd, I don’t think it’s *there...*,” Marie said.

“Really, Marie? But I heard some strange noises from that direction....”

“You did? Oh, right...”

*Thwack! Crashhh... Rustle. Thud.* They were clearly the sounds of something getting hit hard, and it collapsing...and they kept repeating...

The sounds of Phyllo training. The look of horror on Anzu’s face somehow got even worse.

“.....Hah! ...Hah!”

“Eaugh... Th-the entire thicket...”

Phyllo had taken Anzu’s advice extremely literally and was beating the hell out of every tree in sight. Her raw strength was so great that even with a wooden sword, she was taking out a sturdy bamboo tree with each strike. Like a bear pissed because someone interrupted its winter sleep.

Running out of trees in one thicket, she moved toward the next...but that

thicket was...

“Auuuuuugh! The Bamboo Backwoods! Another of the hundred sights! Another tourist attraction, gone!”

Yes, this was the famous thicket behind the Kyounin clan’s temple. Phyllo was so absorbed in her training, she failed to realize she was ruining the view.

*Thwack! Crashhh... Rustle. Thud.* Mowing...no, terraforming her way through the tourist attraction, Phyllo soon made it possible to see what lay on the other side.

“Yo, Phyllo! Don’t cut that thicket!”

“.....Huh?”

“Er, um...yeah, she’s sure something... Take your eyes off her for one minute...”

Anzu sounded like a mom who’d let their kid help with the gardening only to realize they’d mistaken the veggies for weeds and pulled them all.

Now there were only ninety-eight tourist attractions, and witnessing that moment left Anzu looking...almost bemused.

“.....Oh...not here? Sorry.”

“Well, it’s my fault for not specifying...and for underestimating your strength...”

“Don’t look so sad, Phyllo!” Lloyd cried out. “I messed up, too! We’ve just gotta try and make up for it!”

“.....Mm!”

It was cute how they were both so fired up, but...

“No matter how many swords I drop, I won’t give up!”

“.....If this thicket is off-limits, then where...? Maybe that pretty garden?”

Their next lines were just ominous. Lloyd’s especially. Depending on the angle, it could result in fatalities.

Deciding it was best to prevent further damages, Anzu leaped in. “No, no, no,



no, you're good! Please, no more!"

She looked so exhausted and limp that Lloyd instantly jumped to the wrong conclusion.

"Oh...I can't even swing a wooden sword. You must be disappointed."

"No, no! That's not it, Lloyd! W-we just need a break! A nice long rest! Okay?"

"Okay! Then after the break, we can practice—"

"Nope! You're both super strong! Clearly! Wooden swords won't be nearly good enough! So, uh...after the break, we're gonna go straight to the next training session!"

"I thought you said we should start with wooden blades..."

"Look, if he keeps going, we won't have a temple to sleep in tonight."

No more wooden swords for Lloyd.

"Oh no...I haven't even taken a proper swing yet, and we're already on the next step? I'll be left behind..."

Somehow, he'd managed to convince himself that he wasn't keeping up, making him feel down.

A little earlier, at the Audoc-Tiger clans' joint training grounds...

They were hosting the drills on a desolate clearing, with only a few scattered tufts of grass and paltry pieces of training equipment—each side brought their own.

These two forces had only just allied...and barehanded brawlers and ax-wielding avengers didn't exactly have compatible fighting styles. There was no training they could do together, and these training grounds were mostly used when both sides needed to meet up. Like a schoolyard.

The assembled fighters' classes were obvious at a glance.

The Audoc clan was in suit-like formal wear ill-suited to athletics.

The Tiger clan was basically naked—very athletic, but lacking all concept of shame.

If you added their outfits together and divided by two, you'd probably get normal clothes. If modern humans saw this scene, they'd assume someone was filming a variety show.

Renge and Nexamic stood at the head of their respective clans—with Allan between them.

“Why is this happening?”

He'd been hauled out here without so much as a by-your-leave and was now feeling extremely uncomfortable. Rubbing his eyes, he tried piecing together the timeline.

*Uh...yesterday, I was feeling sick and thought some of Anzu's people were taking me to the infirmary, so I went with them and fell asleep the moment I hit the pillow...and the next thing I knew, I was here. Cool. That clears up absolutely nothing.*

Until moments before, he'd been convinced he was about to meet up with his friends. But instead, this half-suit, half-nudist co-op brigade had rolled in, and his mind was still reeling.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Renge enthusiastically exhorting both rows of students.

“Like we said yesterday! With elegance! The dragon slayer himself has joined our side!”

“Er, I have? Nobody told—”

Before he could finish, Nexamic's bellow drowned him out. “Rejoice! Let your throbbing muscles throb in perfect harmony!”

“Er, harmony?”

““““Yeeeeeeeeeeeeeah!””””

Allan's feeble protests were drowned out by the roar of the crowd.

“At long last, we can elegantly pulverize the detestable Kyounin clan!”

“Mwa-ha-ha! With Allan on our side, a single gluteal flex will turn them all to dust! I swear this to you! I swear it on my hamstrings!”

Allan was starting to get his bearings.

*So I accidentally went with the enemy? Why didn't anyone stop me? ...Not one of those girls would even care. And it's my fault for being too sick to think...*

While Allan was regretting everything, the speeches bellowed on.

"Now it's time for the Dragon Slayer Allan's joint training exercise!"

"Huh?"

"Sorry for springing this on you, Allan. But our two camps have been struggling to work together, and we need you to galvanize things! Elegantly!"

"Elegantly?"

"It's rare we get an opportunity to be trained by a living legend! Do you have your post-training protein ready?!"

"Protein?"

Allan was used to dealing with outrageous personalities, but these two were so forceful, he was reduced to mindless parroting.

"Charm us with your elegant dance!"

"Charm us with your cute muscles!"

The guidance they were providing was, uh...definitely gonna be read the wrong way by at least one person in any crowd.

Allan decided that this was getting nowhere and maybe he should try honesty.

"Um, sorry, I'm not nearly as strong as you think I am. I'm actually pretty weak."

He tried to make this sound grimly factual, but they just took it as humility.

Renge's reddish eyes flashed with respect. "Such modesty! I'd love to take the dirt under your nails, brew it in some tea, and make Anzu drink it! Maybe then, your humility will rub off on her!"

"...What? Uh..."

Allan was getting used to dealing with exaggerated stories of his exploits—in

that he'd learned no one would ever believe a word he said.

*Guess I'll just take a swing or two? If they figured out my actual skills, they'll probably let me go.*

If words wouldn't do it, he'd just have to use actions. Demonstrate his weakness! A very optimistic approach to negativity.

"Hmph!" he said, taking a few swings. "Hah! Take that! And that!"

He was using standard training moves so ordinary, a stir ran through the crowd.

"Surprisingly normal."

"I can tell the difference! I think!"

"Uh...maybe if he took those clothes off..."

"Or put a proper suit on..."

At the least, none of them were impressed.

Renge wasn't head of the ax clan for nothing. She was giving his thoroughly ordinary swings a long, hard frown.

"...Hmm. How drab."

"Renge!" Nexamic bellowed. "He's at a level our eyes cannot begin to comprehend!"

"Let's hope so..."

*C'mon! Figure it out! I suck! Just admit it and let me go back to my friends!*

"Is he actually wea—?"

Seconds before his wish came true...

*Boom! Ruuuuuumble...*

...the sound of shattering rock filled the air.

"H-hey! Look at that!"

Someone pointed, and everyone turned. The tip of the famously pointy Ascorbic landmark, the Rapier Ridge, was collapsing.

...You guessed it. This was caused by Lloyd's wooden sword.

"R-Rapier Ridge?! But how?!"

Neither the Audoc nor Tiger clan had any way of knowing the truth.

And the timing of it was uncanny. They all hit on the same explanation.

""""He destroyed a mountain with a practice swing!""""

"No, no, no, no! Wait, listen—!"

Allan put up a hand to deny the claims, but Renge grabbed it, eyes glistening.

"That was magnificent! Elegant! I am ashamed I ever doubted you!"

"Mwa-ha-ha! My pecs are shaking with awe! Chant his name!"

"Allan! Allan! Allan!"

*Of all the times for that mountain to exploooooode!*

He was mad at the mountain, but the source of this misunderstanding was the kid he admired most. Having blown his one chance at escape, Allan was forced to resign himself to his fate.

Allan was not the only one at a total loss.



“Oh man... Two tourist attractions...gone...”

Anzu was in mourning, her spirits as broken as Rapier Ridge.

“Come on, Lady Anzu. I feel you, but you’ve gotta pick Lloyd back up.”

“That’s right! He’s now *less* confident than before he came here! You’re in charge, aren’t you? At this rate, he may well refuse to join the Sacred Mountain Rite! And then what will happen to my three-legged race?!”

Riho and Selen’s lectures got Anzu’s mind back on the task at hand.

“Right... Got to protect my title, or there’s no point in any of it. I can do it!”

“Can you? Is there a way to train Lloyd that will satisfy him without collateral damage? In my experience, if you let him actually *do* anything, the results will be beyond your wildest expectations.”

The note of grim urgency in Marie’s voice only made Anzu grin. At the least, outwardly.

“I do! There’s one thing I can do that Lloyd can’t. Yo, Lloyd! Change of scene!”

“Where are we going?”

“The next training ground!”

She took them to a riverbed. Water ran from the Sacred Mountain over several gentle waterfalls, out across the breadth of the domain.

“What a nice river! What do we do here? Swimming?”

“Oh? Why, Lloyd, are you not a good swimmer?” Anzu asked.

“Uh, no. I’ve only just learned to dive for a full hour. The average time back home was six hours, so I’ve still got a long road ahead.”

“.....*Ba-hem.*”

Lloyd’s ideas—well, Kunlun’s—were so far removed from those of mere mortals that Anzu wound up in a coughing fit.

Everyone but Lloyd quickly circled her.

“Hang in there, Lady Anzu. If you’re surprised by that, you’ll never survive this.”

“You’ve got a training idea that’ll work on him, right?”

Anzu got a grip but did *not* look all that confident. She decided to brief the girls first.

“The next activity is just crossing the river...without getting wet. Water Walking.”

This was pretty absurd.

“Can Ascorbic people *do* that?” Marie asked, incredulous.

“Not a lot of us. And even those who can mostly spread cloth on the surface and run on that. I use the secret art, Scattered Blossoms, to make myself light enough that I can cross without the cloth.”

“.....I’ve done it with cloth before...but even then, only after a lot of practice...”

“Geez, you never cease to amaze.” When Riho said it, it somehow sounded like a backhanded compliment. “If Phyllo can’t do it without the cloth, then this might be a challenge even for Lloyd.”

“Ascorbic people train for a year to Water Walk using cloth, but I bet Lloyd can manage it while he’s here. Without the cloth.”

“High praise indeed...and you’re probably right.”

They’d all seen him in action up close, so they believed he could handle any training.

“If he sees me do it without the cloth, goes, ‘If I try real hard, I can do something that amazing, too!’ and succeeds, then he’ll gain some confidence. Then maybe someday, he’ll figure out that normal people can’t run on water and then start to realize how wrong he’s been about everything.”

With everyone on board, Anzu next turned to Lloyd.

“Okay, Lloyd! Next activity!”

“Er, okay... Huh?”

Anzu had turned to demonstrate her Water Walking...but a gust of wind blew past and snatched the towel out of Marie’s hands.



“Oh...ohhh!”

The towel landed in the center of the river.

“Oh, I’ll go get that,” Lloyd volunteered and walked across the surface of the river to get it.

“How did you do thaaaaat?!”

He came back across the water like this was totally normal, but hearing Anzu scream, he stopped, surprised—and *still* didn’t sink.

“H-how?!”

“What the heck? How are you doing that? How are you standing *still*?!”

“Er, um... Everyone back home can do this? You just vibrate your feet a bit to stop yourself from sinking, or stay floating just by yelling!”

That last phrase left everyone speechless.

“I-is it weird? Our chief once made a habit of taking naps on the ocean... I guess you don’t see that in the city much...”

“Naps? You...can fall asleep like that?!”

This was so off the charts that Anzu’s legs buckled under her.

“So, Lady Anzu! What sort of training will we do on this river?”

Lloyd looked at her expectantly...while standing on the water, unaware he’d just torn up her plans and sent them downstream.

“Er...uh...” She was groaning like a zombie, clutching her head. Finally, she blurted, “Ah! Such a shame! I was planning on going farther upstream and having you practice climbing the waterfall! But the flow’s a little too light for that. The training won’t work out! We sure have had less water lately. Too much sun! Sorry!”

She was trying to lie her way out of it.

“She’s throwing in the towel.”

“.....Totally.”

“Abjectly.”

“Can’t say I blame her.”

What else was she supposed to do? He could already do the thing she’d meant to teach him! The girls all gave her a look of pity, and Anzu seemed ashamed of herself.

“Ugh, I was so confident...and the waterfall thing is just a stupid lie. Nobody could possibly do that,” she muttered, hanging her head.

Naturally, Lloyd bought the fib at face value. “Leave this to me!” he cried with supreme confidence. “Is that all? You should have just said so!”

“No, no,” Anzu said, her voice dead. “I mean, it would be nice if there was more water, but with all this sun...”

“Just say the word, and I’ll make it rain!”

“Huh?”

“Just you wait! I’ll make it rain enough to raise the water level here! But will that cause problems for the neighbors?”

“Er, uh...probably not...”

“Got it! I’ll just use finesse!” Lloyd started writing something on Marie’s towel with his finger.

“Ha-ha, make it rain? Didn’t think I’d hear any jokes from you, Lloyd. It’s a joke, right?”

She turned to the girls, seeking confirmation. None of them were laughing.

“I...so want that to be a joke, but...can he really? Really?”

“He totally can,” Riho replied, slapping her shoulder. “He restored a river run dry from drought!”

“Ha! Ha-ha-ha. You’re all hilarious! This some sort of inside joke?”

The drawing on the towel started glowing, and Lloyd flung it to the sky.

A few minutes later, the sun vanished as dark clouds gathered around the Sacred Mountain.

“I’ve been practicing,” Lloyd explained. “Now I can make it rain in a specific

location for a short time! The chief called it the *guerrilla downpour* rune.”

“*Guerrilla downpour...rune...*,” Anzu echoed. This was drowned out by the roar of water.

The river’s level rose, threatening to burst its banks.

“Is this the right amount, Lady Anzu? Or do we need more?”

Lloyd was talking about the rain like he was asking if he’d put enough rice in her bowl.

Feet growing wet from the spray, Anzu just stood there. “How is this...?”

“Lady Anzu! Look out!”

The sudden rain had caused a flash flood.

“Whoa! So the training is to fight against this current? I’m not great at swimming, but I’ll do my best!” Lloyd enthusiastically started swimming upstream.

“You’re kidding... How do you label this ‘not great’?! ”

“Uh...Lady Anzu! Evacuate! We need to evacuate!” Phyllo grabbed Anzu before the waters swept her away, and they somehow made it to safety.

The “finessed” water volume caused no fatalities, but...

“You gotta be kidding... Nothing makes sense anymore...”

...the unreasonable flood seemed to have swept away the last shred of Anzu’s reason.

Once again, a little earlier, at the Audoc-Nexamic clan’s camp...

The impressive effects of Allan’s practice swing (hilariously enough) had both camps all fired up about this training exercise. Who wouldn’t be excited to receive instruction from a man who’d just blown up a mountain?

People were doing squats, swinging axes, oiling their bodies till they shone, or enjoying a relaxing teatime... Honestly, 30 percent of them were doing things fundamentally unrelated to training, but they were certainly super into it.

“Sir Allan! How’s my ax swing look?”

*Stronger than any I've ever done...*, he thought. "Not bad at all!"

The man in question looked pleased as punch and kept on swinging.

"Sir Allan! How are my abs?!"

*Ridiculous.* "Not bad at all!"

"Sir Allan! How's my oil-polished body?! It gleaming enough for ya?!"

*Uh...* "Not bad at all!"

Allan had long since given up on saying anything else, but everyone seemed satisfied.

*The happier they get at half-hearted compliments, the guiltier I feel...*

If he was actually getting paid for this, it would amount to a duplicitous self-help seminar. Just as Allan was getting scared of the blowback if they ever figured out the truth, he heard voices raised in anger.

"Who do you think you are?!"

"You want some of this?!"

He turned to find a suit-wearing Audoc clansman and a half-naked Tiger clansman scowling furiously, both looking ready to throw down at any moment.

"Not elegant at all... What's got into them?"

"You there! Your muscles are overheated! Take a cooldown!"

The conflict didn't die down—and the topic?

"Sir Allan belongs with the Audoc clan! He's elegant! And wields an ax!"

"Nonsense! Look at his body! He belongs in the Tiger clan! My muscles say so!"

Apparently, they were fighting over him.

*"Hngg..."* I hoped we'd avoid outright brawls today, though I can't blame them for fighting over Sir Allan! But displaying such vigor before the man himself is hardly cute." Nexamic shot Allan a sheepish grin.

"S-sure..."

“Sir Allan.” Renge smiled, standing next to him. “It falls to you to silence this squabble. Simply make it clear that the Audoc clan has the advantage and is right for you.”

“Renge! That will never do! His strength, his masculine odor! This is a man meant for the Tiger clan! Right, Sir Tiger ☆ Allan?!”

“Huh? Uh...”

“See? You’ve put him on the spot! How dare you just add *Tiger* to his name! It lacks all elegance!”

“Renge! You’ve got Sir Allan’s arm in a hold, trying to use your feminine wiles! Do you truly deem that elegant?!”

“I—I am not! You bumpkin!”

Allan just wanted them to stop fighting over him and was feeling deeply sorry he’d allowed the Azami military’s dumb PR stunt to go this far.

“Listen, both of you—and you...,” he said weakly.

Words from the mountain-shattering dragon slayer instantly silenced the conflict. Everyone snapped to attention.

““Yes, Sir Allan?!””

He racked his brain, trying to find words that would stop this conflict. “Uh... so...I don’t think there’s any point in fighting here. I think you should let the past be water under the bridge.”

Nexamic and Renge looked unconvinced, and that vibe spread out through their clans...

Both the Audocs and the Tigers appeared ready to throw down, and neither clan leader seemed inclined to stop it.

Why was this happening to him? It was all so unreasonable! A sudden wave of frustration washed over Allan. “I said! Stop fighting! Let floodwaters sweep the past away!”

Instantly...there was a roar. The sounds of rushing water shook the very earth, and all eyes turned toward it.

A distant river burst its banks.

“Whaaaaat?!”

Even at this distance, the deluge was clearly carving boulders and sweeping them downstream, swallowing up entire bamboo thickets. A few minutes later, the flow subsided, and the river returned to normal.

You guessed it. This was all because Lloyd had used a rune.

But nobody here had any way of knowing that, and the sight blew their minds.

“Sir Allan mentioned floodwaters...and the river flooded!” someone whispered.

With that, everyone got on board.

“That explains it! The river marks the border between our territories! He’s swept away the division between our clans!”

“Let the floodwaters sweep it all away! Gone are the conflicts between us! Here to stay is mutual understanding!”

“And he only flooded a river with no farms or houses next to it! He must have targeted it specifically!”

“How would I even—?” Allan had only just now learned all that information, but before he could protest, Renge grabbed his hand.

“With your incredible magic, you have shown us the path forward! How elegant! The most elegant of elegance!”

“I heard you also summon the heroes of yore...so I guess floodwaters are as easy to you as before-breakfast bicep flexes! Color! Me! Impressed!” Nexamic turned, barking instructions at both clans. “Take Allan’s lesson! Let it resonate! Tonight, we feast! A feast to celebrate peace between our clans!”

““““To Sir Allan!””””

“Thank you, Sir Allan. With you here, we can forge lasting peace!”

Not only was he not allowed to go home, but he was also now the bridge between the two clans. Allan was really starting to panic.

As Lloyd's rain magic left Allan high and dry...

"He's destroying common sense as easily as he destroys landmarks!"

...Anzu was clearly panicking just as bad.

"Lady Anzu!" Marie yelled, shaking her. "Remember, you're a confident ruler! Snap back in character! If you allow yourself to get demoted to *hapless*, you'll never seem capable again! Look what happened to me!"

"I've lost all confidence... I'm not fit to rule..."

"Get it together! You *are* the ruler! Quit your whining! Rulers don't whine!"

Marie was desperate to keep Anzu from repeating her mistakes.

"A very convincing argument, right, m'lady? Wait, where's Selen?" Riho asked.

".....She left."

There was no sign of her.

"Come to think of it, she's been up to something all morning... Seemed like she was working on a plan yesterday, too."

As Riho pondered this, Lloyd came swimming back from the waterfall. Despite the boulders being swept downstream, he looked like he'd been out for a light jog.

"I'm back! I guess it wasn't enough? The water level dropped real fast. What do you think? Should I make it rain again?"

Everyone violently shook their heads. They'd had enough guerrilla downpours.

"Th-that's plenty! You're good!"

"Huh? Did I do something wrong?"

Their objections had been a bit too forceful, and Lloyd started to suspect he'd screwed up again.

"No, we're just all tired," Riho added. "The Audoc and Tiger clans wore us out! So we're thinking, we've had enough for the day. I mean, Anzu's so tired,

she's actually lying down..."

Anzu was flat on her face, weeping her eyes out.

"My confidence... If there was just one way I could defeat that kid...but there isn't!"

"You're still whining! Lady Anzu, stop that!" Marie was shaking her, desperate to stop the birth of another permanently pathetic character.

"Tired...? That...seems a bit beyond tired..."

"...It won't kill her. Master, you should dry yourself... Here. Towel."

Deeming this something that should not be seen, Phyllo successfully dragged Lloyd away from them.

"Nice work, Phyllo... Geez, where's m'lady Selen when you need her?"

"Oh? You called?"

As if she'd been waiting for her cue, Selen came walking in from the direction of the temple, carrying a large pot. She'd put an apron over her red uniform, going for that newlywed chic.

Riho gave her a dubious frown. "I wondered what you were up to—but I didn't expect you to be cooking."

"The Ascorbic Domain is for training! And training means bridal training! And bridal training means cooking! Therefore, I have prepared Selen's Special Extra-Nutritious Stamina Soup for Sir Lloyd! Enjoy!"

Selen proffered up her new soup, but since it was only for Lloyd, nobody seemed very interested.

"A bold move," Marie muttered.

In her arms, Anzu was now sucking her thumb.

"I see that look on your faces," Selen said. "I am perfectly aware that Sir Lloyd is a far better cook, and cooking isn't a skill that can be learned overnight, so if he eats this, it will only turn him against me."

"Uh, yeah...", Riho said.



“But right now, while he’s tired from training? A golden opportunity! A nutritious soup at this moment would be like water at the far side of a desert! Am I right, or am I right?”

“.....I understood all those words.” Phyllo seemed disinclined to compromise further.

“If I can get him to say I’ll make a good wife someday, that’s essentially a roundabout proposal!”

“““...Yeah, that won’t happen.””” All three girls gave Selen a look of pity.

The pot she’d placed in front of them was...beyond description.

It was less a soup than a stew and one of those country-style deals where the ingredients had been simmered to mush. The color was like she’d added red food coloring to some sweet-potato skins and boiled that, or possibly like the secret ingredient was ink.

It was a genuinely alarming shade. If there was a frog of this color, it would 100 percent be poisonous. Birds of prey would ignore it on instinct.

Was it *shocking pink*? No, given the odor of the concoction, *poison pink* was perhaps more apt. If a brand known for selling out on launch day made a smartphone this color, they’d all stay on the shelf. The employee who’d proposed this color option would find himself hounded and cornered.

One look at it had rendered them incapable of speech.

Selen was insisting this was technically soup, so Riho summoned all her courage and inquired about the recipe.

“So...what kind of soup is this? Did you...try it yourself?”

“Of course I did! It’s delicious! As creamy as it is spicy!”

“.....Really?” Phyllo seemed unconvinced Selen had actually sampled it.

“I swear, it was very good! Certain I had found the way to Sir Lloyd’s heart, I adding the secret ingredient—a love-potion. My love was so passionate, I upended the entire bottle!”

“Not much of a secret ingredient if you just tell everyone, is it? And if you add

the whole bottle, it's not a secret ingredient—it's the soup base!"

The idiocy of this love-crazed admirer knew no bounds.

"Hear me out, Riho! It is not just a love-potion! There are a multitude of invigorating ingredients included! Love-potion, plus nutrition! And one aphrodisiac after another!"

".....You never cared about nutrition... Just your carnal instincts..."

Selen ignored Phyllo's comment entirely.

"Selen." Marie sighed. "Do you know what love-potions are?"

"They make your heart race if you try them!"

"Yes. Because they're poison."

"Po....." That silenced Selen.

Marie might be a horrendous cook, but she knew her potions.

"Dubious books of black magic may claim you can make love-potions from blackened newt, but they're not entirely wrong," she explained. "If you swallow a newt's poison glands, it'll certainly make your heart beat faster."

"O-oh...," Selen stammered, tears welling up in her eyes.

This was Marie's field of expertise, and she was just getting going.

"Since ancient times, frog poison has been used as a cardiotonic. It can help with palpitations, but it'll make your whole mouth go numb. Because it *is* poison."

"Urp..." Selen was just making noises now.

"Essentially, you're using poison to aim for a suspension-bridge effect. Do you understand what you've done here, Selen?"

This last line was clearly intended as a warning not to do it again.

"Aha!" Riho exclaimed, seizing her chance to kick Selen when she was down. "So you made a nutritious soup with great confidence and then ruined it with a bottle of poison! I should arrest you for attempted murder."

Her entire morning's labor gone to waste, Selen hung her head.

“Oh no... Oh no... Poison? That explains why it was such a weird color... I’m ashamed of myself now.”

“Oh good. You *did* notice the color!”

Marie seemed relieved that Selen possessed a shred of sanity.

“No matter how many times I’ve fed Sir Lloyd anesthetics, they’ve never worked! I should have known better than to pay top dollar for this poison!”

“““That’s what you’re worried about?!”””

She’d also confessed to an unpardonable crime, but everyone found themselves weirdly impressed.

Meanwhile, Lloyd rejoined them. He’d been busy drying his hair and had missed most of the conversation.

“Did I hear something about a stamina soup? Those are great when you’re tired!”

“Er, Lloyd...” Marie tried to stop him, but before she could, he smiled, picked up the pink soup...

“This looks great!”

...and he took a sip without the slightest hesitation.

“Er...”

“Oh...”

“.....that’s—”

Not the least bit concerned by the color, Lloyd kept right on drinking. Riho, Marie, and Phyllo all watched, wide-eyed with horror.

“See for yourself, ladies! This is love! The kindness to eat a bride’s gross food without complaint! The lynchpin of any marriage! Our certificate is as good as signed! In this instant, we may not be legally wed, but our souls are as one!”

Meanwhile, the soup’s creator...had fully recovered, spinning everything in her favor. Feeding your beloved literal poison was reduced to “gross food,” but clearly, the consequences would be far more dire. That was only common sense.

But Lloyd had long since burst free of the prison of common sense. He finished chugging his bowl of poison and gave his verdict.

“Ah-ha-ha! Can’t say I’m a fan!”

That was all he had to say?

“Uh, Lloyd... Are you feeling fine?”

“Sure? Hmm... My mouth is burning a little.”

Lloyd’s internal organs were so superhuman, they could neutralize any poison! An invincible liver!

Selen was now aware that love-potions were poison, but hoping the effect would at least get her to first base, she stepped in close.

“Well, Sir Lloyd? Is your heart racing? Do you like it?”

“Hmm,” Lloyd considered. “I’m sure some people would like it, but it was too much for me.”

He offered just a rational assessment. It seemed there was no physiological effect at all.

“Congrats on wasting your whole morning, m’lady.” Riho grinned.

But Selen’s eyes were not yet dead. “Love-potions never work on someone who already loves you. I have proven that theory!”

“A theory you’ve never mentioned before.”

“Perhaps this is a roundabout way of encouraging me to make an even more impressive meal made with love! He has faith in my potential!”

“Words are wasted on you.”

Criticism rolled off her like poison rolled off Lloyd.

But Anzu had heard Lloyd say the soup was too much for him and leaped to her feet. She’d been lying facedown in a riverbed, so you could see rock marks on her face.

With great gusto, she launched into a spiel about the importance of food.

“Lloyd! Don’t be picky! Eating is an important part of training!”

“Oh, Anzu! That’s right! You can’t get strong if you’re fussy about food.”

Apparently, Anzu had decided this dubious claim was her ticket out of the pathetic-character zone.

“Yep! Food is the basis of everything! The way of the sword is the way of food! Everything so far has merely been an appetizer!”

“I-it has?!”

Anzu, the Sword God herself, was insisting swords and food were one and the same. This was the sort of statement that would be a front-page headline in every weekly magazine and a topic of ridicule on every news discussion show.

“.....Do you even hear yourself?”

“So desperate to get out of the sadness zone. I get that...”

“.....The moment you get desperate...you’re already doomed.”

But heedless to Phyllo and Marie’s chatter, Anzu bulldozed on. “What are you eating here?” she asked, hand on Lloyd’s shoulder. “Pickled plums? Cilantro?”

“This.” Lloyd held up a shocking pink liquid clearly not classifiable as food.

“...That’s...poison...,” Anzu said.

Clearly, she had experience identifying poisons. Maybe it went with the job.



“Uh...you ate that? And...just called it a bit much?”

“Well, she went to the trouble of making it. It’s pretty spicy! Left my mouth burning. Wasn’t a fan.”

“Spicy...”

Nobody else would claim they “weren’t a fan” of poison.

“Well...I suppose from the color alone, it could be just like...too many beets, or...”

Maybe it wasn’t poison. Maybe her instincts were wrong. With that faint hope in mind, Anzu looked at Marie.

Marie silently shook her head. Warning her not to eat it.

“Whaa?!”

*So it is poison?!* she tried to yell, but the words wouldn’t form. In that moment, she permanently joined the ranks of pathetic characters.

Oblivious to all this, Lloyd delivered a finishing blow. “I’m sure you can handle everything! Even this spicy soup!”

“Urp.”

He’d blocked her escape as if he were born to do just that. Anzu was clearly going to wind up eating this no matter what she did. No backing out of it now. Her mind and body realized this fact, and...

“To hell with it. Let’s chug this thang.”

...she decided to jump on that sword herself.

“Ah! Lady Anzu!” Riho yelped, but Anzu brushed her off and gripped the pot’s handles.

“Just you watch, Lloyd! It looks gross as hell and is definitely so poisonous that even holding it in your mouth is inadvisable! But with my training—”

She lifted the entire pot to her lips and poured the pink liquid in.

““““Lady Anzuuuuu!””””

Screams echoed down the riverbed.

Anzu gulped away, then tossed the empty pot aside...

“You bore witness, Lloyd?” she said, proudly raising an eyebrow, a bit of pink dribbling down her chin.

“I—I did! It was very cool!”

“Good! The rest is in your hands.”

*Psshhhhhhhht!* A spray of pink shot out of her nose and mouth, and she passed out.

Riho and Phyllo carried her back to the temple.

“Welcome to hell,” Marie said softly. Now they were partners in patheticness.

While Anzu was busy passing out, Eug was in her cave laboratory in the Audoc clan’s territory.

She was doing an analysis of the demon-lord eggs Eve had given her.

On the walls around her were signs of wild beasts rampaging and desiccated cicada corpses. Eug had clearly been doing demon-lord research here for a while.

“Satan...is just what I figured. Nothing really stands out. How like Seta... Surtr, though... A fire turtle? That could have applications.”

Delighted, Eug flashed her canines, rolling Surtr’s egg around her palm.

“Demon lord—encasing capsules... One of my finest inventions. I figured they’d be tricky to mass-produce, but the Ascorbic specialty, the Mastema Fruit—it’s perfect for sealing them! Superstitious beliefs that the fruit could ward off evil became Words. I bet this is how Edison felt when he found filaments in bamboo!”

Eug showed no qualms about this comparison.

“If I keep pushing this research, I’ll even be able to seal Alka one day! Mwa-ha-ha!”

She was in a very good mood. Getting her hands on two new demon lords had her so happy, she was actively humming.



“It’s all going far too well... Yes, I should have used Sou and Shouma as Alka bait from the start! That way, they can’t interfere with my plans!”

She slammed one last key and was done typing. Eug hopped up from her desk like an office drone at five and did a few cute stretches, making her body pop.

“Almost scary how well it’s going! Welp, life has highs and lows. That’s how it maintains balance! That last round was a nightmare. Hope I never see that boy’s face again. The logic-defying power of innocence is basically my natural predator.”

“That boy” referred to Lloyd, of course.

Eug scowled at the thought, then slapped her cheeks, banishing him from her mind.

“Gotta make my wish come true, surpass Alka, and prove I was right...!”

She left the cave and began scaling the mountain. On her feet were a pair of jet boots, and these allowed her to thread the rocky shards.

She was headed for a cave halfway up the mountain, one even more hidden than the first cave. If this were a game, it would be an Easter egg hidden there by a crafty developer.

“Gotta do a little maintenance on the self-propelled artillery units. If those don’t work when we hand them out, modern convenience won’t make much of an impression.”

Eug landed on the side of the mountain, far above where man dared tread. She glanced around, trying to locate the cave where the artillery was hidden.

“This area is considered holy and is off-limits—which means people are afraid to come up here. Makes it a perfect hiding spot! As if there’s gonna be any divine retribution... Where *is* that cave? I used the Rapier Ridge as a landmark, but... Huh? Why is there a wooden sword here?”

Eug kicked the sword aside, glancing around. She couldn’t seem to find the pointy peak they’d called the Rapier Ridge. Because Lloyd had blown it up.

“Huh? Am I lost?”

Nope, she was in the right place. Just look a little higher.

“Oh, there it is—the Rapier Ridge peak. What the...? I see, it just collapsed and buried the cave.”

She nodded to herself. The tip was stuck right in the cave’s entrance!

“Wait! That ruined everythiiiiiiing?! Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!”

No one was here to witness her majestic double take.

Yes, when Lloyd snapped the tip of the mountain, it had flipped neatly upside down and landed in a cave—the very cave Eug was using to hide all her weapons.

Her yell of horror echoed through the mountains, and she sank to her knees in despair.

There was a long silence. Eventually, she recovered enough to run up to the buried cave entrance and peer in through the gaps around the upended peak.

It was a very tight fit, like the red-bean filling in *taiyaki*. The gaps were only wide enough for the smell of spilled fuel to leak out—even without a visual inspection, it was obvious everything in the cave had been crushed flat.

“Just extracting them all will take forever...and then the repairs on top of that... If this were an appliance shop, they’d be saying, ‘It’s faster to buy a new one than to get it fixed,’ and actually mean it, like, not even trying to pad their quota at all.”

Furious, Eug punched a nearby rock...and then hopped up and down, clutching her throbbing hand and cursing her luck.

“Who could have predicted a landslide? This place has been unchanged for centuries! Why would it suddenly collapse?!”

That wooden sword she’d kicked aside... Well, nobody would ever imagine that could cause this.

What had happened while she was buried in research? Searching for a cause, she moved to the edge of the cliff, scanning the area.

Nature’s splendor sprawled out before her.

“Wait, what’s that?”

She found some trees tipped over—like someone had taken a bucket and flung some water around.

She narrowed her eyes. “Did a guerrilla downpour hit the area? Causing the landslide?”

She looked farther downstream...and discovered the flood had also washed away the bamboo thicket she’d been using to cultivate treants.

“Did it—?!”

Fearing the worst, Eug broke into a run.

When she reached the thicket, her fears were confirmed—the waters had ruined everything. Selective breeding had made this monster exceedingly delicate, and the roots were all rotting.

Eug hung her head like a farmer who’d lost their crop to the blight.

“How...how?”

All the days she’d spent laboring over this crop flashed before her eyes. It had been positively therapeutic; tending to the bamboo thicket had helped her recover from wrangling Sou and Shouma’s erratic behavior.

“Dammit! I figured Azami...and Kunlun weren’t involved, so I relaxed...and brought divine retribution down on myself! Can’t I have one thing go right?! But you can’t beat nature, I guess. Just gotta regroup and try again!”

Well, none of this was nature. It was all her natural nemesis, Lloyd.

Eug had no way of knowing she was soon to come face-to-face with said supernatural phenomenon.

The evening after Eug’s grief-stricken resolution... The Kyounin clan’s territory was bathed in moonlight.

One woman was swinging a wooden sword.

Not Anzu—she was in bed, downed by the double whammy of poison soup and loss of confidence.

“.....Huh... Hah!”

It was Phyllo—dripping with sweat, so absorbed in her swings that she never

stopped to wipe her brow. She'd taken Anzu's advice to heart and decided to practice until she wore herself out, and that had taken her long enough that it reached this hour. She was staring at the void, swinging a practice sword—but it did not appear to be going well.

Not because she was tired, or unused to wielding swords.

"...I don't get it..."

Phyllo had no clear image of whom she was fighting. It felt like she was simply stirring the darkness with the tip of her blade. She'd spent her life knowing how her opponent would react to each blow that she unleashed, but she'd lost that and was badly adrift.

She felt blind, like she was playing a board game, but nobody had explained the rules. She had no clue what to do or how to win.

All she had was a vague unease, verging on panic.

Fresh off the success of rescuing her mother, the backlash had her flummoxed.

".....!" She swung again, trying to banish all these negative emotions.

"Phyllo," Lloyd said, coming up behind her.

"...Master."

Lloyd had seen her practicing alone and brought her some rice balls. "Getting hungry?"

".....I guess so."

He smiled like a mother and pointed to the river, reminding her to wash her hands.

".....Ow." She'd torn the skin off her palms, and they were still bleeding.

Lloyd had figured as much and took some bandages out of his pocket. "Let's get some ointment on those first. Marie made it, so it'll work wonders."

".....I'd rather eat."

"Nope."

“.....Meanie.”

Lloyd laughed and patched her hands up “You’ve punched people with magic stones and barely hurt yourself, Phyllo. Weird to see your hands this torn up.”

“.....It’s not going well...so I’m gripping too tight.”

“I know the feeling! When it’s going wrong, you just end up going ‘Uhhh!’ about everything.” He scrunched his whole face up as he made that noise, which got a smile out of her.

“.....It doesn’t make sense,” Phyllo said, staring down at her hands. “Everything turned out well...and that makes me anxious. Does that ever happen to you? This...shapeless fear?”

“All the time.”

“.....Didn’t even think about it, huh?”

It was almost refreshing.

“Fear and anxiety are with me whether things are going well or not. I’ve just accepted that fact. I think that’s how it works for most of us. Some people feel it more than others—I certainly do.”

He winced at that thought.

“But as an old hand at dealing with anxiety, I’m thinking this round of it is probably caused by some sort of realization.”

“...Like?”

She’d rescued her mother and “lost” her purpose—which was a form of realization.

“I started trying to be stronger and manlier because I realized how weak I was. I feel like the anxiety has been with me ever since.”

“.....Oh.”

“Knowing what the problem is makes it easier to be positive. If you know what to do, you just have to do your best. Here, your rice ball.”

“.....Mm...thanks.” Phyllo took a bite, reflecting on this.

*We rescued Mom...but if this isn't because I've lost my purpose...is it because I've realized something and have yet to become aware of it? Is there something I'm trying to avert my eyes from? Hmm.*

She was slowly knitting her brow together.

"Figure something out?" Lloyd asked, peering into her face.

"...Well...I've realized I really like salmon in rice balls," she said for lack of a better answer.

Elsewhere, by the light of that same moon, the Audoc and Nexamic clans were holding a feast at their joint training ground.

The Audocs had felled trees with their axes, and the Nexamics had built campfires from the wood, and both clans were shoulder to shoulder around these, laughing and drinking.

Both camps were already pretty sure they had this rite in the bag.

With Allan on their side, what could go wrong? He'd unified them, and all they had to do was destroy the Kyouin clan to achieve lasting peace.

With this crushing trust weighing on him, Allan was at a total loss. Like a newbie employee asked to perform a trick at his first office party.

"I wanna run, I wanna run, I wanna run..."

All these misunderstandings had blown his chance to escape, and he felt like a novelist on a deadline or a novelist right after a new volume went on sale or a novelist who'd just submitted an outline, ready to throw everything away and just run as far as his legs would take him.

Completely oblivious to this, Renge offered him some tea.

"Come, Allan! Knock it back!"

It was definitely nonalcoholic. Judging by her stagger, she'd definitely had some of the hard stuff earlier.

"I wanna run away..."

Her attention was only making it worse. He'd always been nervous around women, and feeling like the trust and attention were based on a lie was just

making him scared about the consequences once the truth came out.

“Mwa-ha-ha! Renge! You’re getting a bit too close! Try to be less obvious!” Nexamic had an apron on over his bare muscles, one stop down from the infamous naked-apron look.

“Obvious, how?” Renge retorted, turning bright red. “I apologize, Sir Allan. I lost my composure... Do you object to my company?”

“Uh, I dunno about *object*, but, uh...”

“Mwa-ha-ha! Don’t put him on the spot, Renge! Come, Sir Allan. We’ve got the famous Nexamic Clan daikon-radish miso soup over here! It uses radishes the size of my hamstrings!”

Nexamic allowed his hamstrings to peep through the apron. It wasn’t actively malicious, but...

“Oh? Trying to tempt Sir Allan with your creations?”

“Don’t worry, Renge! We’ve put your shiitake mushrooms in it, too! We’ve named it the alliance memorial soup!”

Allan wasn’t feeling up for any sort of soup, but he took a sip anyway. He drank for a long time, then let out a sad sigh, staring up at the moon.

Renge and Nexamic started whispering to each other.

“*Hngg?* Does he seem like his mind’s elsewhere?”

“I’m sure he doesn’t wish to fight his friends,” Renge explained. “He is as kind as he is elegant.”

“Aha! A man who would stop our petty squabble with all his might would naturally be opposed to conflict with his own people!”

“At this rate, he may wind up leaving us in time. Elegantly. And then...”

“Hmm. Our alliance exists because of him. If he leaves, it will all fall apart.”

His strength kept them together—and if he did depart, who knew how many would choose to follow him instead? That thought made Renge cross her arms and legs and groan.

“What a pickle.”

“Your accent’s slipping, Renge.”

“Aw, shuddup. You try thinking for once, Tiger Nexamic! Use that tiger brain... Ah, I’m sorry.”

She’d clearly been spiking her tea, and the booze was revealing her real personality.

At her urging, the nearly naked apron man in his forties did try thinking. With an indomitable grin.

“If he doesn’t wish to fight his friends, the answer is simple. We get them all on our side or have them bow out first.” He flexed so hard, his apron burst off him.

“Nexamic, that’s...”

“You guessed it! Tomorrow, I’m gonna hit up Anzu’s place and grab the others. If they refuse...then my hamstrings’ll silence them.”

“Is that really what Allan wants?” Renge glanced his way. Allan looked exactly as dumb as he always did.

“Don’t feel bad. I’ll handle the dirty work... You handle the future of our hamstrings, Renge.”

“I will refuse that elegantly. I would have accepted tea, however.”

“But you must! Hamstrings are far more romantic!”

They laughed, like they were sharing an old joke.

“To the Audoc clan...”

“...and the Tiger clan...”

““...and our future.””

Oblivious to all this, Allan was only worried about his own future.

“What’s gonna happen to me? When they find out, I’m dead meat...”



## Chapter 3

### A Valuable Truth: Suppose Admitting Weakness Is What Makes Us Strong

Their third day in the Ascorbic Domain.

It was the morning after their disastrous training. The sun was already well above the horizon, but Anzu was still curled up in bed, showing no signs of rising.

“.....I don’t wanna get up.”

Like a kid on marathon day or a first-year office worker on Monday, she seemed to be rejecting the very concept of morning. It didn’t seem like Selen’s special love soup (mostly poison) was really having any lingering effects, though.

She’d stayed up half the night worrying about how to train Lloyd Belladonna, a boy already so alarmingly powerful that it could scare the poison right out of you. Eventually, her solution had been to sulk-nap.

Riho, Selen, and Marie were all peering worriedly through the gap in the sliding doors.

“She’s *still* in bed?”

“She’s clearly awake. She just doesn’t wanna get up.”

“I wish we could let her sleep...”

They glanced over their shoulders at Lloyd.

“I wonder what kind of training we’ll do today? I’ve got to make up for my failures yesterday!”

He was super motivated! The girls all wanted to protect that smile.

“She has *got* to get up and train him, or he’ll end up with less confidence than

he arrived with.”

“Yes. Selen, this might be bit of an extreme measure, but—it’s your turn.”

“Coming right up! Vritra, do your thing.”

“Anzu loathes me enough already, but...very well!”

The belt Vritra was possessing shot out from Selen’s waist and, like every mother, yanked the covers off Anzu. If he was going to commit to the act, he should have asked, “Are you going to sleep all day?!”

This certainly startled Anzu. “Augh! Cold— Aaaaaah! Wormy worm! It’s too early for all that!”

“I am sorry, but my mistress demanded it! I’ll issue an apology in writing on the morrow.”

While she was still reeling from the shock of it, he got her tightly bound.

“Don’t! I’m in my nightgown!”

There was certainly a fair amount of thigh and cleavage on display.

“That is an inappropriate view. Allow her to change,” Riho said.

The ruler of the land was allowed to change into something more modest if only because Lloyd might see. So much for majesty.

“Er, really? That’s a permissible range, surely?” Marie asked. Clearly, she wound up showing off that much daily! Her own sense of shame had long since been lost to time.

“.....M’lady Selen.”

“Vritra, bind Marie. Tight.”

“No, wait! I didn’t do anything!”

Phyllo took one look at this. “...Master, let’s go.”

“Oh, is Lady Anzu up? I’m coming!”

And thus, the second day of training began.

Like the day before, they all changed into training gear and lined up. The main difference was how dead Anzu’s eyes were.

“What do I teach you? Is there anything Lloyd can’t do that I can? That would give him some confidence? And be *harmless*?”

She placed extra emphasis on that last word. Two landmarks had already been destroyed beyond repair in the blink of an eye. The cause was Lloyd, who was gazing back at her, trapped between expectation and anxiety. This just made her extra flustered, and she blurted out the first thing she thought of.

“Right, Lloyd! Can you go get some fruit from that forest? We call them Mastema Fruit.”

“Over there?”

“Yep, it’s pretty far! Mastema Fruit ward off evil, and we’ll need them for our activity. I totally forgot! Can you fetch a few? Might be hard to track down, but good luck!”

“Got it! I’ll be right back!” Lloyd bowed and was gone.

“Lady Anzu, did you think of a way to train with fruit?” Marie asked.

For a moment, Anzu’s smile was brilliant.

“.....Working on it,” she finally said, the smile crumbling.

Oh, that was concerning.

She was clearly just buying herself some time. She clutched her head and took a knee.

“Come on! You’re in charge! You can’t be...”

“.....Wait...someone’s coming.” Phyllo looked up toward the waterfall.

“Mwa-ha-ha! One of you is very perceptive!”

With his back to the sun, reeking of sweat, a man stood atop the waterfall, gazing down at them.

“You’re...the chief of the Tiger clan, Nexamic!”

“Yes! The owner of the hamstrings beloved by all! King ☆ of ☆ Cute! Tigerrrrrr! Nexaaaaa! Miiiic! My best feature—once again, for the cheap seats—is my hamstrings! You can call me Hamstring Nexamic!”

“Thanks, but no thanks.”

The girls were in vehement rejection mode, like he’d accidentally wandered into their clique’s— No, better not. Painful memories.

“Don’t stop yourselves! Tiger Jump!”

Oblivious to their clique, Nexamic kept on coming! Harassment personified. Contact HR!

“Tiger...Tiger... Right, Tiger Stop!” he shouted, sounding like someone helping a truck back up. But it wasn’t a truck; it was a half-naked forty-something. Nightmare fuel.

He came to a Tiger Stop far too close to them— Well, if he’d been another girl, it wouldn’t have been too close, but it was definitely close enough to make Selen look disgusted.

“Yes! I was waiting for those tears! They come with the bulging and the cute ham—!”

“Yes, you said that before! Do you not say anything else?”

“Mwa-ha-ha! Merciless!”

Mask. Cape. Undies. Around forty years old. Tiger Nexamic, in the flesh.

He looked so wild, it even distracted Anzu from her conundrum.

“Ugh, Nexamic,” she spat, on her feet again. “Just...to be absolutely clear... Are you here to fight?”

“Mwa-ha-ha! How distrustful! I merely came to train your guests!”

Having mistakenly decided that Allan was depressed over the idea of hurting his friends, Nexamic had come to deliver a sales pitch...that he thought would get the contingent from Azami on his side. The sales pitch was more of a pit, and he was preparing to get himself booted off the stage.

“Oh...?” Anzu frowned.

He launched into his prepared speech. “Yes! I wanted everyone to know the greatness of the Tiger clan! Surely, you won’t refuse? You are the Sword God! You’d rather cut off your nose than admit to a lack of confidence in your

training!”

“Nah, I’d say do your worst!”

“Mwa-ha-ha! I knew you’d say no— Wait, was that a yes?”

“I have no confidence in my training! Take over for me!”

“Er... Did you just...cut off your nose?”

Nexamic had been all ready to taunt her for refusing and was left blinking by her acceptance. To her, he was her saving grace. Just as she was drawing a total blank on how to train Lloyd...

“Why couldn’t you have shown up earlier?! Would have saved me the headache.”

“I...don’t get what’s going on here, but if you accept, great!”

“Yeah, go ahead! Do...whatever you’re up to.”

“Mwa-ha-ha! To ensure our victory in the Sacred Mountain Rite, we’re going to eliminate, recruit, or badly injure all your ringers! I mean, that’s a thing we’re absolutely not doing!”

“You...clearly are...”

The surprisingly honest forty-something struck a pose, pretending not to hear.

“So? Specifically, what are you going to do, chief of the Tiger clan?”

Nexamic planted a fat kiss on his bicep, then grinned. “Mwa-ha-ha! Thought I’d keep it simple! Simple! Is! Tiger!”

“I thought I asked you for specifics.”

Rather than do that, he kissed his bicep again and then pointed dramatically. “Combat!” he growled, his voice suddenly shudder-inducingly low.

Anzu failed to hide her look of surprise. “You really are here to crush the Kyounin clan... What the hell got into you and Renge?”

“Love for all things Ascorbic! You’re unfit to rule. That justified my ungentlemanly behavior.”

“You’ve really got it in for me, huh? Not that I was courting your favor.”

“I’m glad you’re on board. Ringers from Azami! Prepare to taste the charm and power of the Tiger clan! If you wish to join us, state your name now!” He crouched low like a wrestler.

“You’re alone? I figured you’d have a pack in tow,” Selen said.

“I’m here to bring the pain to a bunch of fledgling girls and a boy, none of whom should ever be involved— *Hngg?* Don’t see the boy... Whatever! It’s dirty work, but I can handle the task alone.”

“Can you?” Riho snarled. “You’ve got a big mouth, at least.”

“Riho, don’t underestimate him. I’ll step in if I have to, but hey, if he’s up for training Lloyd...”

“Mwa-ha-ha! Not happening! Not an option!”

Before Anzu could even finish, Nexamic took a huge swing. There was no skill behind it; it was totally telegraphed, not even aimed at the girls—just straight at the ground.

“Whoa!”

“Eep!”

“...Uh!”

The ground rocked so hard, none of them could move—and Nexamic lunged forward.

“The Tiger clan prides itself on power and surprise! Take this! Tiger—!”

But “surprise” was the forte of the Azami cadets.

“Vritra! Bind him!”

Few things were as surprising as moving belts.

Nexamic’s brief moment of grim intensity was instantly banished. His shock was so great, it sent snot spraying.

“Wh-whaaaat?! T-Tiger Stop!” He hit the brakes and tried to turn, but the cursed belt was hot on his heels.

“Not happening, you full-body compliance violation! I demand an apology in

writing so that we may handle this matter internally!”

“Why is a belt talking?! And why is it speaking like it’s my boss?!”

“I know! Even if belts could talk, they wouldn’t talk like that!” Anzu nodded sympathetically.

His Tiger Stop had left him helplessly belt-bound, and Nexamic soon found Riho and Phyllo on either side of him.

“Guess we should just punch him.”

“No, wait! That mechanical arm looks ungodly hard!”

“Yeah. I mean, it’s mithril.”

“Who makes an arm out of something that expensive?!”

Surprise round two.

“...I think...this calls for breaking some bones.” Phyllo cracked her knuckles, not mincing her words.

“No, stop! Tiger Sto—”

She didn’t even let him say “Tiger Stop.” Bound immobile, Nexamic was helpless to evade the rain of dual iron fists.

*Pow! Bam! Biff!* A dust cloud went up, and the sounds of bones and metal crunching echoed through the air. Without exaggerating, it was a flat-out execution.

“All of Azami scares me now,” Anzu muttered.

After that manga-esque all-out attack, Vritra let out a yelp of surprise.

“Mistress! And friends!”

“What’s wrong, Vritra? Huh?”

Riho and Phyllo stopped punching long enough for the dust to clear—and found Nexamic grinning indomitably, surrounded by an odd-colored aura.

“.....?!”

“Seriously?!”

Neither could believe their eyes. After all those punches, he didn't have a scratch or a bruise on him.

"Seriously, fledglings! Mwa-ha-ha!"

Vritra's binds weakened momentarily, and with a shout, Nexamic freed himself.

"You sure caught me off guard! I never thought a belt could move. You must be the famous Belt Princess! The sheer shock value caused some shrinkage—to my life span!"

Posing, Nexamic offered up words of praise, aura glittering all over him.

"What's the trick here?" Riho asked.

"Mwa-ha-ha! You wish me to explain?! You guessed it! This is the miracle of my hamstrings—!"

"It's a secret art," Anzu interrupted.

"No!" Nexamic bellowed. "You're ruining the mystique!"

She ignored him. "That's Tiger Nexamic's secret art, Rock Hawk. It makes him super resilient; takes a very powerful attack to get past it."

She made a face, like she'd had some painful experiences with it.

"It thwarted you, too? Even with your skills?" Marie asked, shocked.

"I hear that tremor in your voice, Anzu! In the many matches of the Sacred Mountain Rite, you have never once done me significant harm! Not with my steellike super-hard body!"

"No way!" Riho exclaimed. "Is that true, Lady Anzu?"

"Infuriatingly, yes."

"Mwa-ha-ha!" Nexamic bellowed triumphantly. "But while it's active, I can't move! I win every match in a time-out!"

Not many people could laugh that loud while revealing a fatal flaw. Everyone gave him a look of pity.

"That makes it sort of useless—why are you so pleased with yourself?"



“Because I’m just that cute, witch lady! If it is not a battle but a test of endurance, the victory flag belongs to the tiger! Tigers’ bodies are rock-hard!”

“They’re actually more known for being lithe...”

They’re cats, so...fairly flexible creatures.

Nexamic ignored this. Back to full overbearing confidence, he puffed his barrel chest up with pride.

“My pecs are pumped full of man-energy! Anzu cannot harm me, so neither will any of you! Especially you, poker face! Phyllo, was it?”

“.....Me?” She looked surprised to be called out.

“Your fists falter! They’re lost! That gives them no power!”

“.....!” A hint of a cloud passed over her face. This had been bothering her, too.

“Mwa-ha-ha! Did I touch a nerve? Well? Care to become a pupil of the Tiger clan?! If you and your friends join, I shall harm you no more! This training will be unnecessary!”

“.....No thanks.”

“Oh? Then let’s train some more! Tigeeeeeeer! Jump! Lovely Hip Attack!”

Cape fluttering, Nexamic bounded into the air, butt dropping directly toward Phyllo.

*Boooom!*

“Eeeeeeeek!” Marie shrieked.

The impact was like a falling boulder.

Phyllo barely managed to dodge. “.....What the?!”

Butts were usually among the softest parts of a person, but Nexamic had cratered the ground, leaving him grinning with his legs spread in an M-shape.

“Not too shabby!” Selen shouted. “I guess you aren’t an Ascorbic chief for nothing. Perhaps we’d better wait for Sir Lloyd to return.”

“Yeah, no reason to play his game. And it’ll be good training for Lloyd.”

“I’d better step in. Letting him hurt our guests would damage the Kyounin name. I’d have loved to have him train Lloyd, but...”

Riho and Selen stepped back, and Anzu put her hand on her hilt—  
“Waiiiiiiiit!!!!” Phyllo yelled.

No one had ever heard a voice that loud rip its way out of her.

“?! Phyllo?”

“.....If I let Master or Lady Anzu handle this one...I feel like I’ll never change.”

“Okay,” Riho said, well aware of Phyllo’s current struggles. She scratched her head. “But if you’re in trouble, we *will* step in. That’s what friends do.”

“.....Thanks.”

They were clearly on the same wavelength, but Selen was looking from one to the other, baffled. “What are you two talking about?”

“It’s a girl’s little secret.” Riho winked.

“You’d better explain later,” Selen growled.

Neither seemed the least bit concerned, and Nexamic disapproved.

“*Hngg...* Even Anzu can’t defeat me, so why are you so sure of yourselves? ———!”

Before he could finish grumbling, Phyllo broke into a run. A body jab, then a leg sweep into a high kick. She landed a flowing combo. Each blow so powerful, the impact made the air shake around them.

But Nexamic was still grinning.

“Splendid force! Your power alone beats not only Anzu, but yours truly! I’m sorry I called you a fledging!”

“.....Is it not working?”

“No! How sad! Your step and your turn are not quite in sync! The hesitation in your heart is making your actions lag!”

“.....Argh!” Phyllo’s impassive face showed a rare glimpse of frustration.

Her rain of blows continued.

Soaking them square in the face, Nexamic continued his pompous lecture. “The power you unleash is astonishing! But your emotions are out of step with it. You’ve lost sight of why you’ve honed yourself! Power alone holds no appeal!”

“.....Dammit!” Losing her temper, Phyllo’s fists grew even faster.

Her flurry continued for several minutes—but in time, even Phyllo ran out of breath and began to slow down.

“Super! Hard! Secret Rock Hawk body! I can soak this all day.”

“.....!”

Nexamic’s smack talk was rattling Phyllo, and she took a swing that was a bit too wide. He didn’t let that opening pass. He dropped his Rock Hawk and punched back.

It was like she’d been working out with a sandbag, and it suddenly retaliated.

Phyllo lost her balance, staggering.

“*Hngg!*” Nexamic took advantage of this, too, tackling her bodily. “And just as we clash together! Super! Haaaaaaaaaaaaard!”

At the moment of impact, Rock Hawk hardened his body, turning him into a lethal weapon. The sound was decidedly unpleasant.

“Yo, Phyllo!”

“Phyllo!”

“Phyllo?”

“Was that bone...?”

Her friends started to run in, but she stopped them and spat blood on the ground.

“.....I’m fine. Still in this.”

“It doesn’t make sense.” Nexamic was clearly puzzled. “You must have trained considerably to obtain such power.”

He stroked his beard.

“And yet... And yet...I have no clue what you trained for! No matter how many blows I receive, I sense no purpose. But how could you train so much without one? ...Did you lose it recently?”

“.....Arrrrgh!”

Phyllo’s flying kick. Nexamic soaked it...without Rock Hawk.

“So I was right? You’re even sloppier now!”

“.....Gah!”

“Hngg!”

Phyllo was already performing a body jab, but Nexamic read that perfectly and hit her with a counter. His fist buried itself in her face. She bounced off the ground once and then twice.

Nexamic shook his head, looking sad. “All that strength, gone to waste. Let’s call that curtains, shall we?”

Phyllo didn’t move.

“Uh, Phyllo? Hey!” Riho called—but she was past hearing.

Phyllo felt like she’d been plunged into water.

Her exhaustion and accumulated damage had the world feeling out of focus and in slow motion.

One step from slumber, Phyllo remembered Anzu’s words: *“When you’re tired, you can ask yourself: What do you really feel?”*

*What do I really feel?*

When they’d found their mother, when they’d learned who their father was, when the family was together again, she’d been happy, supposedly. So why had that made her like this? What had made her weak?

Asking herself these questions, Phyllo was desperately searching the feelings that rose up from within her.

*If it was just losing track of my goals, I wouldn’t be this weak. When we saved Mom, I was happy...but there was a sadness with it. Why?*

Searching deeper, she remembered something from her past.

As a child, Ubi—her mother—had given her a used book on an old style of martial arts. This had set her on her path in life.

Then Ubi vanished, and they'd made a living doing mercenary work.

She'd worked hard to keep a lid on her grief, trying not to make her sister worry.

Mena wanted Phyllo to attend school, so she'd agreed to work for Rol—then the headmaster of the Rokujou Sorcery Academy.

And they'd met Lloyd, who'd thoroughly defeated her. She'd become Lloyd's student, hoping to polish her skills.

The whole time, her sister kept searching for their mother.

At this memory, Phyllo plucked an emotion from the depths.

*Oh. Somewhere deep down, I'd given up hope of seeing Mom again. And I'm mad at myself for it.*

Now that she thought about it, her quest for strength had been less about saving her mother and more...something else.

*The book Mom left behind, the vow I swore to her, and the future I never managed to have. I thought she was dead, and so I was searching for a way to be happy, for her.*

But the truth had been quite different.

Ubi had suffered but survived. Mena had never given up, going so far as to adopt a disguise to dig deeper into the underbelly of Rokujou...while also working for Phyllo's future.

For a girl who never did anything but fight and break things.

Mena had pulled it off. Phyllo had only joined in the last part, along for the ride.

*I just...made up my mind that Mom was dead. I'm an awful person. Why wouldn't that make me weak?*

She kept putting herself down.

*This is the negative emotion, the realization I was pretending not to see.*

But there was another feeling. A refusal to stay this weak. And it gave her a push.

*Why? What does it matter if I'm weak? Why can't I just give up on that like I did—?*

Even as she asked herself...a voice from outside reached her ears.

"Oh, hey! I got the fruit! There were kind of a lot, so it was really hard to gather all of them! *Gasp!* Phyllo?! What's wrong?!"

*Master Lloyd.*

As her mind waffled, his face came into view.

"I don't know what I can do, but I know if I do nothing...I'll regret it."

*Oh, I remember when he said that.*

"I want to overcome my own weakness."

*But he's so strong.*

"I want to be like the heroes in novels. You might laugh at me for saying that."

*I wouldn't.*

Thinking about the boy who was incredibly strong but thought he was weak made Phyllo smile. He was so desperate to fix his failings, to conquer his weakness.

Right now, he mistakenly believed he was weak, but even if he knew his own strength, he would find a new target and keep moving toward it.

He would never stop. And she wanted to follow in his footsteps.

"If you know what to do, you just have to do your best."

*I want to be like Master Lloyd, to be someone who never gives up. No...*

Not just like Lloyd. Like Mena, who never stopped hunting for their mother. Like their father and mother, who never stopped trying to restore their family.

Not just them, either. She wanted to stand proudly beside Riho and Selen.

With Lloyd in front, and them chasing after, always searching for what they didn't have, never giving up on their dreams.

"That's why I love him."

"The finishing blow! Tigeeeeeeeeer! Hip Attack!"

In the instant Phyllo made up her mind...Nexamic's buttocks were coming right toward her.

"Yo, Phyllo!"

"We've gotta save her!"

Her friends tried to jump in... But Anzu stopped them.

"Wait—something's up."

An instant later, Phyllo was on her feet, staring right at the approaching backside.

"Phyllo, you're up?! Dodge!" Marie shrieked.

Danger was swiftly approaching, yet Phyllo was grinning. Her smile was as indomitable as Nexamic's.

"What an awful sight to wake up to," she said, and her fist met his approaching behind.

*Ka-clang!* This did not sound at all like a fist hitting an ass.





Nexamic was sent flying, as if struck by a bat. A long drive to center field.

*“Hngg!”* He landed awkwardly, clutching his rear. “Your hesitation... It’s gone! How?”

Phyllo grinned back at him. “I admitted that I’ve got no tenacity and give up too soon!”

“She’s fast! Rock Hawk!”

*Bam!* This flurry was nothing like the last.

Nexamic had used his secret art but failed to stand his ground. He was pushed backward.

“You’ve got your all in it! You’re lifting my whole weight!”

“If I know what I have to do, I just gotta do...my best!” Phyllo roared.

Her volley of punches grew even stronger. His back was against the cliff, his retreat cut off—but Nexamic was still grinning.

“Now that’s a hard hit! Such a transformation! But not enough to harm this tiger’s body!”

“That’s no reason to give up! This is a declaration of intent!”

“What is it?”

“I want to proudly say that this is where I belong! I want to be with them! I don’t want to lose! I want to be friends! I want to make them feel safe! I want to grow! I want to laugh! I want to cry, too!”

Still, her fists flew, blows faster and more precise than anything she’d shown before.

A mark appeared on Nexamic’s cheek.

*“Hngg?!”* But Rock Hawk is still active! Don’t tell me you’re...?!”

There was something around Phyllo’s fists: an aura, like Nexamic’s.

Anzu put a hand to her brow. “What the...? Is that a secret art?”

“Phyllo has one of those?”

“There’s definitely something around her fists, and it’s not magic,” Marie observed.

“The power of will, only obtained after years of Ascorbic training! Impossible!”

“I’ve found strength of will! To open my way! And with this power, I can stand by their sides!” Phyllo somehow got even faster and began carving Nexamic’s skin.

“She’s hacking into me?! With the force of her punches?! I can’t believe it!”

She ended in a kick, launching Nexamic away, and went into a stance a lot like Anzu’s sword-wielding pose.

“I can do it now. Even if it’s nowhere near as strong as Master’s!” Phyllo held her hand flat, moving like she was drawing a blade.

“*Hnggg?! Crap! This is bad! Rock Hawk! Full power!*” Nexamic’s aura grew even thicker.

Phyllo’s *iai* chop reached his skin.

*Splat!* A diagonal cut was carved into Nexamic’s chest. Rock Hawk just barely managed to keep the blow from being fatal, but it broke the skin and drew blood.

“Mwa-ha-ha! Well done! But cutting one or two layers of skin won’t stop the tiger charge from—”

“Behind you.”

“Whaaat—? Auuugh!”

*Rummmble.* The entire cliff behind him crumbled. Her flurry had cracked the rock, and that final chop had brought the whole thing down. Tiger Nexamic was buried beneath it.

“I’m not at Master’s level, but I can do *this* just fine.”

“—!”

They could hear Nexamic’s muffled voice saying something under the rubble.

“Forever! Tiger! I’m still here! You have yet to defeat my secret art! Rock

Hawk!”

“But you can’t move unless you drop it.”

When he popped out, Phyllo’s hand was at his throat. She poked his soft, defenseless neck a few times.

“I win.”

Nexamic grimaced but congratulated her. “Well done, poker-face girl—no, Phyllo.”

“You were pretty tough yourself, Nexamic. Wanna go again?” She put her fists up, ready.

“Mwa-ha-ha! If I keep fighting you, my precious mask’ll get torn to shreds! I’m afraid I’m going to call this my loss.”

“Shame. It was just getting good.”

Both grinned, but then Nexamic’s smile faded, and he glared at Anzu.

“Obtaining an ally this skilled? You certainly have luck on your side, Anzu. But we’ll thwart your ambitions! We won’t allow you to sell out the Ascorbic Domain!”

Anzu looked completely baffled. “What? First I’ve heard of *that*.”

“Too late to play innocent! We’ll finish you off in the rite! Our alliance will emerge victorious!”

With one last cry of “Tiger Jump!” he was gone.

Anzu folded her arms, baffled by that final reveal.

“Uh, Anzu? What’s this about selling out your country?”

“I’m certainly getting along with Eve from Profen, but I’ve no intention of selling us out. I’d suspected as much...but it seems someone’s definitely feeding them a lie.”

She was not exactly containing her fury.

Lloyd came bounding over with the fruit. “Uh, Lady Anzu? I brought the Mastema Fruit, like you said.”

“The Mastema... Augh! Right! I did ask— Whaaat?!”

Lloyd had a huge pile of Mastema Fruit in his arms. And not just his arms—his hood was full of them, too.

“Um, is this not enough? I gathered all I could find...”

“Er, no...”

Mastema Fruit grew only in the Ascorbic Domain and were said to ward off evil, so it was rare you caught a glimpse of one at all.

“Lady Anzu, these are as rare as four-leaf clovers, right?” Marie asked. She was well aware of how absurd this quantity was.

“Yeah...and I was just trying to buy myself some time...” So why had this happened? Anzu put her chin in her hand. “Is it a sign?” she muttered.

“Um, Lady Anzu? My training?”

“Oh, uh...sorry, Lloyd. Something’s come up. I’ve gotta investigate. Thanks for the Mastema Fruit.”

“Er, r-really?” Lloyd visibly deflated.

“Stuff happened while you were gone,” Riho explained. “Let her have this one.”

“Stuff? Oh, you mean Phyllo and Tiger fighting?” Lloyd turned to Phyllo. Her clothes were all torn up, and she’d sustained some serious injuries...but she looked thoroughly pleased.

He’d never seen her look this happy.

“We were training,” Phyllo said.

“Oh! While I was gone? I’m so jealous!” Lloyd exclaimed.

“I think I’m stronger now.”

“Augh! I knew it! I could tell! Your whole vibe... It’s like you’re suddenly confident! I’d have loved to train with Tiger, too!”

“Would it help?”

“I’d rather he and Sir Lloyd had no contact at all,” Selen grumbled.

“True. I don’t want his butt anywhere near Lloyd.”

Nexamic’s attacks had been very close to harassment.

*Thnk.* Phyllo had moved over to Lloyd and tapped his chest with her fist.

“Master...no, Lloyd.”

“Er, yes?”

“—Thank you! I’m done losing!”

Lloyd had never once seen a smile that broad on her face.

He’d helped her recognize the part of herself she’d been denying, and she was grateful for it. She’d decided to try and catch up with him, both in skill and tenacity.

She wanted him—and Mena, and her family—to see that.

To show them all real love, not just admiration.

To demonstrate her newfound strength of will.

“Um, I’m a bit lost, but okay! That sounds great! I won’t lose, either!” Lloyd smiled back.

Then Phyllo turned to Anzu, bowing her head.

“Was someone cultivating these? Huh? What is it, Phyllo?”

“.....I must formally refuse your invitation to join the Kyounin clan. My one and only master is Lloyd.”

A Mastema Fruit in one hand, Anzu grinned. “Found your path?”

“...Yes...and I realized why I was lost. Because of him. He may not have realized that, but...it was his advice that helped me grow. That’s why he’s my master.”

“Can’t argue with that. I’ll just have to take your rejection in stride! Heh-heh-heh.”

“.....Ha-ha-ha.”

They laughed together. Then Phyllo turned and faced the girls.

“...I won’t lose to any of you, either.” Phyllo smirked. “You know what I mean.”

Selen frowned. “I have no clue where this confidence is coming from, but I suppose this makes you a worthy rival.”

“It’s all good.” Riho gave an approving nod. “I’m not in that race anyway.”

Phyllo looked at her, baffled. “...You’re my one real challenger.”

“How so?!”

“You’re girly? And you like donuts?”

“How am I girly? And don’t bring donuts into this!” Riho had turned bright red, which was...pretty girly.

This only poured fuel on Selen’s fire.

“Argh, I know it’s just *Phyllo’s* opinion, but I’m somehow less girly than *Riho*?! I’d better get started on a new love-potion right away! Not just a potion! A spell and a talisman and... I’ve got a lot of research ahead of me.”

“Mistress, that’s less *girly* than *arcane*...”

“They’re *both* my field! Then again, I don’t want to be more witchy than the actual witch...”

Whatever the flaws in her logic, Selen was certainly motivated.

The vibe around her had turned to comedy... But Anzu was looking grim.

“Someone’s cultivating Mastema Fruit? Does that have anything to do with replacing me as ruler? And where does the shrine come in?”

As she muttered, she turned her gaze upward to the distant peak of the Sacred Mountain.

## Chapter 4

### A Bad Joke: Suppose You Realized the World Had Already Ended

Not too long after Tiger Nexamic's attack...Eug had finally recovered from the previous day's disaster and was walking through the woods.

She was following an animal's tracks, using fallen brush as markers.

"I'm worried about the modified Mastema Fruit I'm growing. The treants and artillery, I can replace in time, but...without those fruits, I can't hold a decent number of demon lords. To open the Last Dungeon and unleash all the demon lords on the world, I need a means to control them and protect myself."

Muttering to herself, she walked farther into the forest.

"Yesterday was just a case of bad luck. That guerrilla downpour caused all of it. But my bad luck ends there! It shouldn't have damaged the Mastema Fruit... This ground is holy. The locals would never come here. It'll be fine. Totally fine."

Eug repeated this last phrase a few times, trying to convince herself. It was rather hard to watch.

She'd come to check on the modified Mastema Fruit for a reason.

And her hunch came true. There were no signs of the fruit she'd been cultivating. The whole patch was picked clean. Even the stalks had been pulled up by the roots, making it impossible to regrow anything.

"Arrrrrrrrrrrrrgh! I was right! Why was I right?! Dammiiiiit!"

There was no one to hear her screams. The fruit of her research had been stolen, roots and all, and screaming was all she could do.

Eug was on her second straight day of screaming, and her throat couldn't take much more of it.

“What even happened?” she screamed, examining the scene through her tears. “Monsters? No, Mastema Fruit ward off evil! They’d never come here, and they’ve got no flavor, so normal animals don’t eat them... Then humans? But the locals never just drop by. No one’s been here in over a year!”

Eug found a footprint in the dirt.

“So it *was* a person? Not that large a foot... Maybe a boy?”

Some kid’s prank? Were kids daring one another to explore the holy ground? A number of possibilities flashed through Eug’s mind.

Then she remembered something Renge had said: *Anzu called in a ringer, but he’s an inelegant country hick.*

“A ringer...from another country...”

One candidate floated into her mind.

Azami. A boy. Lloyd Belladonna.

“N-no... It can’t be. Not now... He wouldn’t be... He totally would! It’s like his life’s purpose is to stand in my way!”

Eug turned on her heel and headed toward the Audoc clan’s territory to demand a full explanation.

At the camp, the Audoc and Tiger clans were getting along great, exchanging techniques.

Chatter about bodybuilding, the effects of ax swings on back muscles, and elegant clothing. The topics exchanged were all very informative. At least, to the specific people assembled here.

Eug showed no interest in this newfound friendliness. She went straight for the Audoc manor...and found Renge slaving over some tea treats.

“Yo, Renge, how’s it going? I’m doomed.”

“Oh, Eug! Not often you come to me. Craving tea?”

“Nexamic’s out? Fine. I had a question for you.”

Eug was not even trying to disguise her foul mood, but Renge was in a far too good one to notice.



“Just one minute!” she called out and put the scones in the oven. Definitely displaying a good wife vibe. “Okay, ask away.”

“You mentioned the Kyounin clan had ringers...”

“Yes! One joined our alliance! A most wonderful man.” Renge’s cheeks turned beet-red, clearly thinking of Allan.

Eug was beyond noticing such subtleties. She glared at Renge. “...Tell me more about them.”

Eug was expecting a description.

Renge smiled confidently. “The rest had not a trace of elegance among them.”

“Just tell me what they were wearing, doofus.”

Renge clearly paid that last word no attention. She folded her arms, thinking.

“Well,” she said, “one was sort of aristocratic. Then there was a mercenary and a witch...”

Eug twitched.

“They had some very odd equipment. Like a stretchy belt and a mechanical arm...”

These were not...words Eug had fond memories of.

“Is it some new fad, I wonder? Are those unsightly things fashionable in *Azami*?”

“Wait! Stop, doooooofuuus!”

Eug was getting a bad feeling about this, and this sort of bad feeling always came true.

Renge blinked, unsure why she was being yelled at. “D-did I do something wrong, Eug? I apologize! I’ll put the tea on at once!”

“Tea isn’t gonna solve this! This is an unmitigated disaster! You fool! Why didn’t you tell me this sooner?!” Eug was pounding her head on the table, tears in her eyes. “Auuugh... Also, ow!”

Renge did not know what to do about this sudden outburst of self-inflicted harm.

“A-are you that horrified by their lack of elegance?” she asked. “Their pallid faces, clearly just there to make up the numbers, so inelegant—”

“No! You nitwit! Why? I gave you that poison to ensure our victory! Why did that wind up destroying everything?!”

Eug was now in a blind rage. Renge looked like a veteran employee flustered by their younger boss’s temper. It seemed like anything she said would get her yelled at. Dear reader, do you know the type?

“D-don’t worry, Eug. We have the legendary dragon slayer, Allan!”

“Oh god! I can’t believe this! You’re so stupid!”

Eug was well aware that Allan wasn’t that strong, but she was far too angry to explain this. It came out as a childish tantrum, not the least bit intimidating.

Renge was left baffled—but then Nexamic returned.

“Eug is right to be upset, Renge. The rest of the ringers are no pushovers.”

“Nexamic, did they—?”

He had clearly taken quite a beating.

“This is what they did to me despite my super-hard body using Rock Hawk!”

He shook his head, frustrated, gesturing to the cuts on his body. As he did, his trunks fluttered to the floor.

““Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”” Both girls let out bloodcurdling screams. Phyllo’s ultimate sword chop had clearly finished off his underwear.

“Such surprise for a few minor cuts...but had I fought longer, she might well have damaged my mask! Horrifying! Azamiiii!”

“Not your mask! Down below!”

“*Hngg?* Oh, sorry! Wrong tiger.” Nexamic took off his cape and wrapped it around his waist like a bath towel.

Eug had screamed quite a lot since entering the kitchen, and her throat was

scratchy.

“Like I said! I’m doomed! Everything’s going wrong!”

“I certainly have no elegant response.” Renge apologized on behalf of her entire country. Even Nexamic had the courtesy to sweat profusely.

“I never thought they’d be that good... The second greatest peril in Tiger history!”

“What was the first...? You know what? Never mind.” Eug decided it would just be some muscle thing and abandoned that line of inquiry. She sighed dramatically. “Sheesh... So that’s the extent of your love for your country, huh? I guess I expected better. It’s only a matter of time before Anzu makes you part of Profen now.”

This rattled them both.

“How harsh! We should only be harsh on our own muscles! They recover!”

“As time passes, tea and motivation cool alike! But love still remains!”

“Will you please drop the muscle and tea shtick? Ugh, whatever.”

Eug glared at them, clearly past caring.

“Then demonstrate some patriotism! I’m helping you without reward here. We’re well past being choosy on the methods. Poison or whatever, do anything it takes to beat them. Leave no stone unturned. The future of the Domain depends upon it!”

Eug glanced down at the two eggs in her pockets.

“I’m headed back to my lab. Gotta prepare for the worst...” Ignoring their stares, she turned and set off. “Why can’t anything go right? It’s always been like this. But this isn’t like the exhibition match in Azami. After all...”

She rolled an egg around her palm, peppering herself up.

“...I’ve got two new demon lords! If these can’t win, I’ll just be a laughingstock.”

Nexamic and Renge were left staring after her.

Then they hung their heads. “Renge,” Nexamic said. “After everything she

said, we can't worry about appearances. Cast aside your shame...or the Ascorbic Domain will cease to exist."

His pecs trembled, perking him up.

"You could probably use a little more shame...but does this mean you have a plan? One hotter than any tea?"

Nexamic nodded. "The tournament contents are determined by drawing straws—so if we finagle those straws, we can force a battle type that gives us the advantage."

Renge narrowed her eyes. "Interesting. We might not be able to take them in a real fight, but if we draw a game that makes the outcome depend on luck or brains, our odds at winning will be even—or at an advantage. Anzu's crap at games."

"But there's a chance the Azami contingent is great at them."

Nexamic's pecs twitched uncertainly, plagued with self-doubt.

There was a long silence, like a meeting where no one had any good ideas. This was gonna be a tough nut to crack.

Eventually, Renge said, "If we took a hostage..."

This surprised even Nexamic. His pecs grew extra active.

"Renge, even for the love of your country, that is lacking in your beloved elegance."

"You don't need to tell me that. But...if we invite them to tea, show them a good time...and let their friends jump to conclusions..."

"A bluff, then! Very well, I'm on board! We shall serve this hostage all the tea and muscles they could want, and victory will be ours! A win for everybody!"

It was unclear who would benefit from having muscles served to them.

"I'm grateful for your help, Tiger Nexamic."

"Not a problem! We're all in this together! We're on the same tiger! I'll help you to the bitter end, Renge!"

"Thank you. I think you'll find it's *boat*, not *tiger*..."

“Mwa-ha-ha! So it is! I’m on the biggest boat! My hamstrings have your back!”

With this dude around, any boat was the Titanic.

Nexamic was ready to catch anyone who slipped between his thighs, and Renge was getting carried away, imagining herself as a tragic heroine. They were meant for each other.

Imagining the villainy to come, they were both overacting to a degree that would definitely make any stage director stop the rehearsal.

“This is a *form* of elegance! Let us turn evil for the sake of our homeland.”

“But, Renge, who will we be entertaining?”

“It’s Azami we need to take out—and they had one boy who was clearly rather weak.”

“Oh! So they did! That twig of a kid! He must be their errand boy.”

“Likely the superhumans’ mascot. The one who smooths over all the conflicts.”

“I agree! He’s our one shot, much as it pains me to admit it.”

“We must start with clever words and elegance.”

“And finish with muscles!”

They sprang into action...and would live to regret it. Lloyd certainly was mascot-like—and the most superhuman of them all. It was like they were playing old maid and had confidently grabbed the joker.

Back at the Kyounin clan’s headquarters...

Mastering a new secret art had worn Phyllo out, and she turned in early. Selen was off developing some new stamina food, Marie and Riho were trying to stop her, and Anzu had taken the Mastema Fruit, investigating something with her servants.

The third day in the Ascorbic Domain had ended without Lloyd doing any training.

He was feeling out of sorts.

“I guess someone as weak as me isn’t gonna get stronger, even in the holy training grounds.”

Despite those words, he didn’t look ready to give up. It wasn’t like he’d done his best and failed. He hadn’t even been allowed to try.

“Am I that hopeless...?”

Quite the opposite; he was doing so well, everyone was sort of scared to let him try.

He wandered aimlessly around the grounds, gazing at the mystic mountains.

“But these buildings are so solemn! And I thought the stonework in Rokujou looked different... Hmm?”

In the dark of the clan garden, Lloyd saw something gleam. He frowned.

“Welcome!” Nexamic boomed. Posing to show off his muscles, he sidled over to Lloyd. This looked even creepier from a distance.

When he reached Lloyd, he went into the full Sergio Oliva pose, muscles fully pumped. “Well? How do you like my muscles?”

Okay, even close-up, it was creepy. Lloyd was unsure how to review this man’s posing.

“No need to look so tense! Be as flexible as a tiger’s fibers! See!”

Unable to bear watching this any longer, Renge came racing over. “You fool! You’re just scaring him off!”

“Renge! This is the classic advertising technique! ‘You, too, can have a bod like this! ☆’ And these...are my hamstrings!”

“You’ll never be a negotiator.”

Caught between the tanned muscles and the red dress, Lloyd was at a total loss.

“Um, what’s going on? I’m confused.”

“If you weren’t, you’d be psychic. Hi there! Lloyd, was it? My name is Renge Audoc. An elegant lady who loves and is loved by tea.”

“And these are my hamstrings! And I am Tiger.....Nexamic!”

These introductions were devoid of useful information, but Lloyd went ahead and bowed anyway.

“H-hi, I’m Lloyd Belladonna.”

Regardless of Lloyd’s hesitation—or perhaps just incapable of noticing it—Nexamic changed his pose and got to the point.

“Lloyd! We’d like you to come with us! You won’t regret it! You came to the Domain to obtain your ideal muscles, yes? We are comrades!”

“Would you care to join us for tea? We have some great leaves. Even the cups are first-class! And the macarons are most elegant. Well? Interested?”

It seemed their scheme was to lure him with tea and muscles.

They assumed that everyone else liked what they liked, too. That kind of thinking made communication impossible. But positive spins were Lloyd’s specialty, so he thought long and hard, trying to figure out what this might mean.

And the result...

*That’s right... When Anzu was training me, she kept sighing. That must be because I’ve got no knack for swords.*

No...it was because he destroyed two landmarks.

Lloyd’s thoughts just kept chugging full speed in the wrong direction.

*Oh! So she figured I might be better at fisticuffs or axes and spoke to those clans, asking them to train me!*

Lloyd had somehow found a way to give Anzu the credit for all this.

His look of confusion vanished. He’d come to the Ascorbic Domain to train, and it seemed like he would finally get to. Maybe he’d get stronger! Maybe he’d learn an ultimate attack! He was delighted.

He took both Renge’s and Nexamic’s hands.

“Thank you so much!” he exclaimed. “I have no talent for swords and am hardly worth training! Anzu must have asked you to help train me instead! I

can't tell you how grateful I am. I really want to get stronger, so I don't hold everyone else back anymore..."

They had not expected such heartfelt gratitude. Or those tears.

Nexamic and Renge exchanged glances, dumbfounded.

"Hngg... This is painful, Renge. It pains the heart—not my adorable pecs."

"I know... Geez, I bet Anzu decided this kid was too cute and was afraid to put him through any serious practice."

Renge scratched her cheek, mad at Anzu—but of course, Anzu was afraid. A level-30 character *would* be afraid of training someone who was already level 80.

Nexamic gave Lloyd a pat on the back, trying to cheer him up.

"Don't worry, Lloyd! I was once as frail as you! But then I discovered bodybuilding, and my body turned into this! Muscles will never betray you!"

"Stand up tall." Renge smiled. "Lack of confidence shows in your posture. Anzu once made me feel terribly insecure, but I overcame that thanks to my faith in the importance of elegant living."

"Muscles!"

"And elegance!"

""Having both will make you strong!""

It seemed the two were projecting their own past selves onto Lloyd. They were pouring their hearts to him, being genuine and forgetting they were trying to turn him into a hostage. Now it was more like they were looking after a poor abandoned puppy.

Lloyd sensed the mercy in their hearts, felt no need for caution, and happily ran off with them.

But as the readers all knew, he was no puppy—more like a wolf. And the kind that's a god in disguise.

"Surtr... Eve said something about a turtle, but who are you? Do I know you? Either way, I need you to get used to me while you're still a locust, or I'll never



stand a chance against them.”

Eug was in the depths of her laboratory, muttering to herself, wrestling with the eggs Eve had given her.

Her priority was drawing out Surtr’s power and controlling its abilities at will. That was her one shot at fighting Lloyd and company. She was engaged in an intense trial-and-error process, a ton of strange equipment and computers all around her.

And then Nexamic and Renge appeared.

“Did things go well?” Eug asked without turning around.

““Yes!”” they exclaimed proudly.

“Our plan is to rig the tournament content! Less serious battles, more luck-based games or events that play to our skill sets—turn the odds in our favor!”

“Cool, less a tournament arc and more a variety show. Definitely sounds like your best shot,” Eug remarked.

“What’s...a variety show?”

“Never mind. You’ll find out once the world is elevated.”

“Very well! I look forward to this elevation! Mwa-ha-ha!”

Rolling one of the eggs—Satan—around her palm, Eug grinned. “All right. I was getting worried there! Hmm, still doesn’t quite feel like enough... By the looks on your faces, you’ve taken other steps, I’m guessing? Explain.”

She’d seen the confidence in their expressions and even found herself wanting to trust them. She was sure they had another card up their sleeve.

“We have a hostage.”

“Oh! Way more aggressive than I expected from you two! Well done.” Eug looked delighted. “Variety games and a hostage to fix the outcomes... That should pull the wool over everyone’s eyes, even those who have an eye for legitimate battles! I bet you could even fool that demon lord!”

“Demon Lord? You mean the Sacred Beast?”

“Whoops, slip of the tongue. A-anyway, where is this poor hostage?”

“Sipping tea next door.”

“Oh? Not locked up somewhere? What, are they a little kid?”

“A very nice teenage boy.”

“He believed everything we told him! Made us want to return the favor.”

“Yes, we’ve got to do something for this good country boy.”

“A good...country boy?” Eug asked, twitching violently. “Is he...?”

“Yes, Anzu seemed to have taken a real liking to him! She was giving him first-class treatment.”

“Almost like she was buttering up someone who outranked her!”

“It was most amusing.”

“He’s worried about how weak he is, but she failed to train him at all! She’s unfit to rule!”

They couldn’t have...but one boy’s face filled Eug’s mind. A boy with a gentle smile, who never doubted his own weakness—Lloyd.

“No, no, no! No, no, no, no, no, no, no! Noooooooooo!!!”

This was *not* happening! Eug shook her head, trying to banish Lloyd from her mind. Eyes narrowing, she turned back to the two clan leaders.

“And this poor boy’s name is...? Please don’t be...”

Nexamic and Renge had no idea what this last “please” was about, but they led Eug to the lab door—outside was the area with the couches.

“Right here! His name is Lloyd!” Renge pointed right at where he sat, sipping tea. It was a bit hot for him, and he winced as he took a sip.

Eug’s worst fears slotted home like she’d just hit a hole in one.

“You imbeciiiiiiiiiiiiiles!” she screamed.

It was so loud that Lloyd jumped, looking around.

Eug fell to her knees, reliving the trauma of having all her plans instantly ruined.

This drew baffled stares.

“*Hngg?* What’s wrong, Eug?”

“We’ve taken such a nice boy hostage... It does weigh on the conscience. So inelegant.”

“No! You damn— Don’t you realize you’ve made everything worse?!”

Neither of them knew about Lloyd’s strength, so they had no clue why she was so angry.

“Don’t worry! This is certainly a shameful act devoid of elegance, but if we win the Sacred Mountain Rite and become the next ruler, we can pardon ourselves!”

“That’s not the problem! Did you really have to bring the most dangerous one here?!”

So many things had gone wrong that Eug was rolling around on the floor like an overwhelmed toddler. Nobody took it well when their plans didn’t work out, but this lady was well over a hundred years old. Make that a hundred-something.

Nexamic was never one to take a hint at the best of times. “Oh! Right! Eug, I had a favor to ask.”

“You’re gonna ask for something *now*?! I’m almost impressed!”

He took this spite literally, flexing his pecs and flashing his pearly whites. “Ha! Ha! Ha! Thank you. You see, Anzu refused to even train this boy.”

“Naturally! Wise decision!”

“Certainly, he has little potential.” Renge sighed. “I don’t blame her for being reluctant, but...”

“She’d never stand a chance! Nope! No ordinary person would!”

The two of them were assuming Lloyd was too weak to train, and Eug knew he was too strong—but somehow, the conversation still added up. Hilarious.

“Which means! We’d like your power, so we can train this purehearted boy!”

“M-my power— Wait, train *him*?! Lloyd?!” Eug reeled like a bomb had gone

off.

Renge just kept piling on. “You can do it, Eug! Your incredible inventions have done everything we ever asked for!”

“Exactly! That ‘electronic absorber’ that trains your abs while you sleep is now a must for every fisticuffs expert!”

“Exactly! Your ‘electric kettle’ and ‘magic canteen’ are a must for tea lovers everywhere!”

They were so impressed by Eug’s past work, their faith in her was unshakable! Even if it was intrinsically tied to their usual shtick.

“Doesn’t mean I can do this! Some things are just impossible!”

“Mwa-ha-ha! No need for modesty!”

“He’s all yours!”

Despite Eug’s tears, the two turned to go, calling to Lloyd as they left.

“Lloyd! We spoke to the amazing lady next door!”

“She’s wonderful! She makes all your wishes come true! Oh, and there’s more tea over there.”

Lloyd bowed his head at their backs. “Th-thank you! I’ll do my very, very best!”

““Good luck! To us all!””

It sounded like they were rooting for each other. Meanwhile, Eug was out back, ready to puke.

“Don’t do your best! Stop wishing him luck! Drop dead!”

“Er... Are you the lady next door?” Lloyd asked, coming closer.

Eug panicked. “If he sees me, I’m sunk!” She hastily grabbed some hooded training gear meant for men and put it on. It was the same white martial arts uniform Lloyd was wearing.

Worn over her clothes, it was bulky in a way that made her seem like an old master. When he stepped through the lab doors, he immediately registered her

as someone amazing and bowed his head.

“N-nice to meet you! I’m Lloyd Belladonna.”

“—I know,” Eug growled.

“You do?!” Lloyd shouted, overreacting. “You predicted my arrival! You’re definitely every bit as amazing as they said!”

Well, in this situation, at this timing, you couldn’t necessarily blame him for taking that comment as proof that she had precognitive abilities.

*Craaaap! I blew my chance to wriggle out of thiiiiiiiiiiiis!*

“What’s wrong? Why are you clutching your head—? Oh, are you having another vision?!”

*Nooooo! The horror of having you dogging my footsteps is giving me a headache!* Eug desperately lowered her voice to avoid any chance of him recognizing it.

“—Not this time.”

“O-oh. Sorry, guess I got ahead of myself. Uh, so I’m sure they told you, but I’m here for some training. I’d like to ask for your help!”

“—I know. Go home,” she growled, waving him to the door.

Lloyd wasn’t going anywhere. “I’m not leaving! No—I can’t leave! I need to get stronger! I can’t go home until I’m strong enough that I won’t hold everyone back!”

*Good god! You’re already too strong! What more could you possibly want?! Were the nerves between your eyes and your brain hooked up wrong?!*

“First, they tried to train me with a sword, but then they said it was too dangerous and took it away from me. Instead, they gave me a wooden sword, and I accidentally threw it.”

“That was youuuuuuuuuuu?!”

“Huh?”

“N-never mind.”

She'd been shocked into using her regular voice, but Lloyd didn't notice. He went right back to a recitation of his failures.

"Then we were supposed to do waterfall climbing, but it had been too sunny, and the waterfall wasn't strong enough, so I made it rain, but I messed that up, too."

"You agaaiiiiiinn?!"

"Huh?"

"Never mind. I mean, *I* mind, but you... Wait, did you also harvest all the Mastema Fruit?"

"Those fruit? Yes, I was told we needed them for training, so I found some growing in the wild and harvested them, roots and all!"

"I knew iiiiiiiiiiiit!"

They were going back and forth as fast as an interview with only softball questions.

*You oblivious kid! How do you crush every one of my plans without even trying?! It makes me want to reveal myself so I can yell at you for it!*

Eug almost did just that, but...if she was caught here, she really would be finished. She choked back her rage and returned to old mentor mode.

"—You're already strong enough. I have nothing to teach you. Go away."

"Sorry. Maybe I have so little potential, you feel like you have to lie, but..."

*I'm not lying! Who the hell told him he was weak?! How'd he get this idea in his mind?!*

Her best friend, Shouma. In his experience, being too strong meant the world was a depressing place. He didn't want Lloyd to go through the same thing, so he'd spent ages telling him how amazing it was out there.

"So I want some tangible progress! Please! Teach me an ultimate attack!"

*You really don't know?! Every punch you throw would be anyone else's ultimate attack! A fatality! Literally!*

Lloyd was pleading with her, tears in his eyes. Eug was so at a loss that she

had tears welling up in her own. There was a long, awkward silence.

“Your efforts will prove futile,” she said at last. “I advise against it.”

“Then I’ll put in so much effort that it *won’t* be futile! I feel like if I give up here, I’ll never get anywhere!”

“Look, you can’t just try hard and hope you’ll get anywhere! All it’ll do is make your failures sting more! Don’t you get that?”

“I see every failure as a paving stone on the path ahead! No—I’ll make them one! If I do nothing, I’ll never be anyone! Even if I get nothing from the training, then at least I can admit that to myself!”

“...If you admit to failure, that makes you a loser.”

“It doesn’t!”

“It does, nitwit!” Eug had long since lapsed into her normal voice, but Lloyd was getting too worked up to notice.

The more Lloyd stuck to his guns, the less the argument was about whether he was already strong than a debate on the merits of success and failure.

Eug sighed bitterly. “How can you admit to failure? We destroyed the world! Countless people died! It turned into a fantasy realm! We have to make it like it was before! Better than it was! Then it won’t be a failure! All those deaths will have meaning!”

“Er...what?”

“Never mind. Wait—”

An idea struck her.

*That’s right! He’s ruined all my plans! Maybe this is my chance to finish him off!*

Eug looked down at the demon-lord egg in her hand, grinning inside her hood. “Heh-heh-heh...”

“Er...huh?”

Her sinister chuckle had him worried.

“Very well,” she replied. “Come this way.”

Making sure her hood was secure, Eug led Lloyd out back.

He had no choice but to follow after.

Getting into her grizzled-mentor act, Eug guided Lloyd through the cave behind the lab.

It was a man-made space, carved out of a natural cave. Beyond that was an open rocky area...with a huge hole in the ceiling.

Moonlight poured down on the two of them.

Enough moisture reached this area that vines and ferns were growing, and beneath them...

“Is that training equipment?”

Weights for training were lying below the plants. The walls had nicks in them, too. It suggested that people had once trained here.

“It’s pretty far from the lab and wide-open. You should be able to cut loose here without any real problems,” Eug explained. She peered up at the sky from the depths of her hood.

Lloyd was looking worried.

“Er, um... What is this place? Are you going to train me?”

She nodded gravely and then threw the egg at the wall.

There was a *snap*, and the egg cracked. Once the dazzling light faded, a mystery man appeared, lying flat on the ground. Lloyd had been expecting yolk, so he was quite astonished.

“Whoa! Wh-who is he?” he yelped, pointing.

First, the man’s clothes. He was dressed like a nobleman with a white scarf.

Then his hair. It was a lighter shade of indigo, and it stood on end, rather like an owl.

And last, his face— Well, he just looked surprised to find himself here. The outer corners of his eyes drooped down, and lights flashed in his vision, flitting



in his periphery like butterflies.

When he ran his fingers through his hair, the action revealed an odd patch of skin—like he'd once had horns, but they'd been broken off. He was a very strange man, but since he was lying facedown, it was less “Scary!” and more “Is he okay?” The goofiness of this situation undermined his entrance.

The man scrambled onto all fours, looking around. Then he sprang to his feet, hand on his chin, growling like he'd just remembered something.

“Hmm...where am I? I was in a field, and children were throwing rocks, and they broke my horns... Augh! Where are my horns?! They're both— Wait, wait! A meteor fell on me, and I was flung aside, buried facedown in the dirt, and when someone finally pulled me out, it was some weirdo in a bunny costume... and now I'm here? Hmm...most confusing.”

“Er...is this man okay? Is he even human?”

At Lloyd's question, the man spun around, snapped his heels together, and bowed.

“I am *not* human. My name is Satan! The widely feared demon lord of the night! I despair of the corruption mankind has unleashed upon this world. If we leave them unchecked—”

This seemed like it might take a while, so Eug interrupted. “*Ahem*. So this is Satan. Basically a kind of monster.”

“A m-monster?! I thought so!” Lloyd put his hands up.

Eug pointed at Satan. “Your training is to fight that!”

“A monster? Alone? No, wait. Are you a monster tamer?”

This seemed to have impressed Lloyd.

“You sure do jump to conclusions.” Eug grinned. “But no matter. Satan, you'll be facing this boy.”

“Facing him? Why? And who are you?! Hmm...?”

He was finally getting to train. And with a real-life monster! Lloyd was super pumped and reached out to shake Satan's hands.

“Thank you so much! I really want to get stronger! Say good-bye to the old weak me! Thanks for helping, Satan!”

“Oh? So you’re weak! You lament the weakness of your kind? You have potential, young man!” Satan boomed.

“Yes! I lament it—human weakness and the feebleness of my heart! I want to hone them both!”

He meant his own shortcomings—not all mankind—but his eyes were so earnest that Satan just assumed they were on the same page.

“Fascinating! And you heard I lamented human weakness and seek the strength necessary to serve me! You have mettle!”

The fact that this conversation was adding up at all was basically a miracle. Watching it, Eug let out a hollow laugh.

“Seta never did listen to anyone else... Guess idiots are all on the same wavelength.”

Satan focused, causing whirlwinds to spring up around him. A sign he was ready for combat.

Lloyd gulped, awkwardly bracing himself. “I’m ready!”

“Come, puny human! Hone yourself all you like!”

“Okay! Hyaaahhhh!” With a cry, Lloyd swung his fist.

*Shnkkkk!* Satan soaked it with a smile. He was a demon lord! That meant he was obviously strong enough to take even Lloyd’s punch.

“Not bad! However! Your blows are weaker than rocks thrown by children! ... Those were very painful.”

“I’ll try my best!”

A series of thumps and impact noises followed.

“Hurt him bad enough that he can’t move... Huh, they’re not listening.” Eug stretched like she’d just wrapped up a job and went back to her lab.

“Gotta adjust Surtr till it’s useful... I hate wasted effort as much as I hate failure.”

“Rahhhhh!”

Lloyd and Satan’s battle was really heating up.

As always, Lloyd’s punches packed a superhuman wallop, and they were shaking the very air—but Satan wasn’t a demon lord for nothing. He was blocking the blows and dispensing advice.

“There’s a lot of power behind each hit, but your swings are far too wide! Go for a smaller, snappier flurry!”

“O-okay! Like this?!”

“Not bad! But still not enough!” Satan caught Lloyd’s fist and flung him through the air.

He was sent rocketing up through the hole in the cave roof to the world outside, and Satan went flying up after him. The Sacred Mountain was bathed in moonlight. From up here, they could see rocks in all directions.

Lloyd and Satan landed on those rocks, looking grim.

A massive gust of wind swept down from the peak.

Satan basked in it for a moment. “You’ve got potential in close quarters. But punches alone lack variety. You should add in some projectiles, which will allow you to attack from a distance.”

“From a distance?”

“Hmm.” Satan nodded. “Doesn’t matter what kind of projectiles! You always need a way to make your opponent flinch, or they’ll find a way to turn the tables on you. Any ideas? Magic, skills, anything’ll do. Go on, show me!”

“Got it! I can only use beginner spells... Will those do?”

“Of course! Even beginner spells can be a powerful weapon! If you wish to serve me, show me everything you’ve got!”

“Okay! Here goes!”

“Come at me!”

Lloyd cast his beginner spell—which, naturally, was incredibly powerful.

*“A-Aero!”*



A super-compressed swirl of wind rocketed toward Satan.

“Er...that’s the strongest *Aero* I’ve ever seeeeeen?! Craaaaap!”

Lloyd...had cast with his eyes closed. He was very surprised when he opened them and there was no sign of Satan.

“H-huh?”

Satan emerged from the shadows behind him, looking very shocked.

“Th-that was close! You really oughtta warn people! I was so surprised, I had to dodge by entering your shadow! Was that really *Aero*? That was more like a tornado!”

Satan had entirely forgot to maintain his grand tone.

“S-sorry,” Lloyd stammered, looking worried. “Was my *Aero* that weird?”

“Weird?”

“Was it?”

“It was amazing! It’s not often that the great Satan is genuinely surprised! You should be proud.”

Lloyd brightened up immediately. “R-really? Thank you! I know you’re just being nice, but I appreciate it!”

“Hmm! I’m not being nice! Have you never been praised before?”

“I—I guess the teachers at school did say I was good at wind magic...and I guess it has helped in fights before. But I was always barely hanging on and don’t really remember what happened.”

“I bet that’s the problem! Lloyd, when you chanted that spell, your eyes were closed. This is a manifestation of your lack of confidence. You assume you’ll fail, and you’re afraid to watch it happen! But succeed or fail, you need to observe the outcome with your own eyes.”

Satan was in full teacher mode now, and Lloyd’s eyes went wide. “Thank you.” He bowed his head.

When he looked up, there was a cloud cast over the boy’s face. What now?

“My lack of confidence...? I know...I really don’t have any.”

Satan walked over to him and knelt down to match Lloyd’s eye level. He smiled.

“I’m not saying you have to be confident all the time. But it won’t hurt to be more confident than you are. As it is, you’re just hurting yourself.”

“I’m...hurting myself?”

“Yes! And you are your own lifelong partner, one who’s with you from the moment of birth until the moment you die. If you can’t even believe in yourself, that’s very damaging!”

“A...partner...”

“Never turn your back on that partner! Know thy enemy, know thyself, and you shall fear not a hundred battles! Keep an eye on your goals, know what you can do, have faith in yourself—and any dream can come true. That’s how I got into a top-tier college!”

“Coll...ege? Is that like a military academy?”

Satan appeared to be as confused by the term as Lloyd. “Mm? Maybe it’s a school for demon lords? Odd...but no matter! Lloyd, *Aero* will be a great weapon for you. Anything else? Any other magic worthy of my servant?”

“...No, the only combat magic I have is *Aero*. That’s why I came to the Ascorbic Domain looking to learn an ultimate attack.”

Satan stroked his chin, thinking. “Hmm... Have you ever been hit by a stroke of inspiration in the middle of a fight? Like, ‘if I do this, it’ll make things much easier’? Those mid-battle instincts often lead directly to growth.”

Lloyd, too, put his hand to his chin, racking his brains. A human and a demon lord, thinking about ultimate attacks together. It wasn’t a thing you saw every day.

After a while, Lloyd’s face brightened like a light bulb after someone hit a switch. Clearly, he’d thought of something.

“Now that you mention it, I was casting *Aero* with my feet to make myself go faster, and I was able to fly for a short time, too! I was just trying to copy a

support magic spell called *Godspeed*...but ultimately, it was just an ordinary punch with a bit more speed added. I don't know if you can call that an ultimate attack..."

"Hmm...it could well be one, but... Aha! You said earlier that this was your only 'combat magic.' What noncombat magic do you have?"

"Oh, I know a rune that summons clouds and makes it rain. But..."

"Rain... Rain. Hmm. Rain and wind... Oh, a storm! I've got it! A brilliant idea!"

"A...a storm?"

"Yes! Exactly! Lloyd, combine *Aero* and those clouds, wrapping yourself in a storm! Call it a unite magic, like in that old game!"

"G-game?"

"Argh, you wouldn't get that. Kids today don't even own consoles! They all just watch Let's Plays on their smartphones... Talk about a generation gap!"

"Is this a board game? Or a card game?"

"...Hmm. I could've sworn there was a game, but... Odd. I'm sure I played it...I think."

Satan seemed confused by his own words, but he quickly shook it off and focused on Lloyd's ultimate-attack training.

"Never mind! For the sake of the world! You need an ultimate attack! Try practicing with a weaker version of *Aero*. It's important to control your output!"

"Er, but if I make the spell any weaker..."

"Throwing yourself into everything at full power is admirable, but keeping your eyes open and controlling it properly is also vital. One step at a time. First, you need to generate a small storm around yourself. Think you can?"

"I-I'll try!"

Looking very serious, Lloyd took Satan's advice to heart and began drawing an ancient rune on his palm. Then he released it toward the sky.

As clouds gathered overhead, Satan yelped, "L-Lloyd?! What the—? Who taught you that?!"



“Um, the chief of my village. It’s an ancient rune! Our chief is really amazing. She doesn’t just make it rain! She can also bring down meteors. What about it?”

“—Never mind. Go ahead.”

Lloyd went back to his ultimate-attack training.

Meanwhile, Satan was muttering to himself, like there was something nagging at the back of his mind.

“Rain... Meteors... Runes? What is it? I can’t quite remember...”

Meanwhile, on Azami’s East Side...Merthophan had cut through the unsavory nightlife district, headed for Marie’s shop.

“Reports said it was around here... Aha.”

With the owner away, the lights were out. Micona was sitting outside, looking forlorn.

*“Sniff...”*

A pitiable sight indeed. It was hard to tell if this was Micona or Hachiko, the loyal dog.

“What’s going on? How long has she been here?” Merthophan sighed. He was here investigating a complaint from a local resident.

Micona seemed disinclined to move. Concerned she was on a path to becoming the iconic statue where couples met up for dates, he asked, “Why are you sitting here, Micona Zol?”

Like she’d been waiting for someone to ask, Micona burst into tears.

“Colonel Merthophaaaaaaaan! Marie’s gooooone! Lloyd is off in some foreign realm, and I thought this was my chance to settle our battle! But my opportunity was an opportunity lost!”

Lord knows what she’d been planning to do with Marie in Lloyd’s absence, but she’d found the shop empty and waited here for three whole days.

“You can’t just sit here till she gets back! Also, I’m not a colonel anymore.”

Unsure what battle she was talking about, Merthophan decided to be pedantic. And he knew where Marie was.

“The prin—witch is an expert on potions. Anzu’s students have been poisoned, so she accompanied the others to the Ascorbic Domain. At my suggestion—”

“Who suggested that?! I’ll haunt you!”

“.....” Merthophan decided discretion was the better part of valor. “Uhhh, what’s done is done. You’re bothering the locals. Time you went home.”

She started whining like a dog that wanted to go somewhere its owner wouldn’t let it. Merthophan felt like a father dealing with a toddler’s tantrum. They were making a scene.

Then a surprising figure appeared.

“What’s this? Why is there a racket outside...? Ugh...”

Alka was dragging her feet, looking utterly worn out.

“What happened to you, Chief Alka?”

“I need energy...Lloyd energy... Oh, Merthophan! Listen! I went all the way out to sea, but there was no sign of Shouma, and I went diving and searching and diving and investigating his misdeeds, but I didn’t figure anything out, and now all the villagers think I was skipping out on real work.”

With the guardian beast gone, Alka was having trouble controlling her own powers, so this work had been extra hard on her.

Alka tried to stagger into the shop...but it was empty.

“L-Lloyd... Er? That’s odd... There’s no lights on. Is he asleep?”

“Uh, Chief...”

In her condition, if she learned Lloyd was gone, she might well explode. Merthophan tried to think of a way to hide it from her, but...

“Lloyd Belladonna’s not here,” Micona announced. Fastball.

“Oof!” The pitch hit Alka square in the heart.

“Augh! Micona Zol!”

“He’s with Marie in the Ascorbic Domain.”

The follow-up pitch hit the batter again! Alka burst into tears.

“A-woof...”

“A-woof...”

Now they were both whining!

“Two of ’em... Argh.”

Merthophan decided it was best to give Alka the whole story. This only pissed her off.

“Argh! I leave for one second, and they traipse off together! Aroo!”

“Argh! If I’d known Marie was going, I would have, too! Aroo!”

They each howled at the sky. Merthophan shook his head, pretty sure where this was going.

“Your next line delivered will be...”

“It’s obvious! Let’s go to the Ascorbic Domain!”

“I’ll come with you, Alka!”

“Figured as much.”

It was all too predictable, and he just rolled his eyes.

“If I let you two fly off, it’ll cause an international incident. I’d better go with you.”

“You’re in, Merthophan?!”

“Yeah, the Domain grows many shiitake mushrooms and daikon radishes. It’s a perfect chance to take a look!”

He was every bit as predictable.

“Let’s go invade, Alka!”

“Mm. But I’m exhausted... I won’t be able to fly for long.”

“Fly...? Huh?” Micono had not yet grasped Alka’s true nature.

“I’ll fill you in on the chief’s superhuman skills later—but let me look into how we can get to the Domain.”

With that, Merthophan immediately began removing his clothes, stripping right down to his loincloth.

“Heyyy?! Merthophan?! What are you doing?!” Even Alka was visibly appalled.

“Divining our path. The front flap of the loincloth is very good for it. Okay, loincloth!”

*Bleep!* (What a strangely electronic sound.)

“Point the way to the Ascorbic Domain!”

A detailed map of the route from their present location to the Domain appeared on his loincloth flap. A bizarre sight, indeed.

“...The heck is that?”

“This loincloth...was a newfangled cloth tablet?”

Oblivious to the girls’ horror, Merthophan swiped the surface of his loincloth with practiced ease.

“Hmm...one steamship is out of commission after a speeding incident, so the first available ship is the day after tomorrow. How fast were they going?”

*That* was your favorite love-crazed stalker’s doing.

“The day after tomorrow? Then I guess I’ll rest a bit and recover enough to get back in the hustle.”

“I’ll go home and get ready. For anything... Mwa-ha-ha.”

“Anything that won’t cause an international incident, please.”

And thus, three deviants agreed to crash the Ascorbic party uninvited. What would become of that?

Meanwhile, with Allan...

“Sir Allan! I made you some scones.”

“Uh, thanks.”

He was at a total loss. Renge was killing him with kindness.

And the half-naked macho man was nearby, smiling. This just made Allan feel

like he was being watched, giving him an ulcer.

“Why is this happening? If they find out how weak I am, I’m dead meat...”

The scones turned to ash in his mouth, so he took a big gulp of tea.

Renge was delighted to witness it. She’d made the tea herself and was thrilled to see him enjoying the cup!

“Way to knock it back! I’ll get you another cup.”

“No, no, this is plenty...”

“No need to restrain yourself, Sir Allan! The tea runs as hot as the blood in my heart!”

“We’ll have it ready momentarily. Bring the device!”

A student dressed as a butler arrived with an oddly modified pot.

“What’s this?” Allan asked.

“This is called an electric kettle. You do this, and it boils the water in no time! Isn’t it wonderful?”

“In no... Wow, that *is* impressive!” Allan had been doubtful, but it really did boil the water in a matter of seconds. He grinned like a little kid. “You’ve got some great things here.”

“I’m pleased you agree.”

As Renge busied herself with the tea, Nexamic jumped in.

“That’s not all! You see these abs? I mean, this device for training abs?”

“A what?”

“Behold! The electric absorber! Simply put this cute item on, and it’ll train your abs for you! And these are my hamstrings!”

Those were unrelated, but Nexamic struck a pose that showed off the device in question.

“It keeps my body beautiful! All thanks to Eug!”

“Yes, Eug has given us everything.”

*Eug.* That name got Allan's attention.

"...Hmm?"

Lena Eug. The very person behind the chaos of the Jiou exhibition match.

"Marie and Riho said she was trying to develop the world's technology...by causing a war." He gulped.

Two enemy clans had joined forces against the ruler of the Domain, employing borderline criminal tactics.

"They aren't bad people—I've been with them long enough to know that."

They had some strange ideas about Anzu.

Strange devices. Strange poison.

"So she's behind all this?"

If that was true, he couldn't just stand by. Plus, he was sick of being the last to find out and being at the mercy of his situation.

"This sounds worth asking about... Maybe I can find an excuse to rejoin the others."

"Uh...Sir Allan?"

His mind made up, Allan grinned. "Those devices are amazing! Renge, Nexamic, can you tell me more about their inventor?"

""Gladly!""

The joy in their smiles made him feel rather guilty.

## Intermission

### Suppose Someone Actually Said the Thing Time Travelers Always Say

“Dammit, Seta! Another all-night bender? You’re supposed to deliver a report today!”

“Ugh, Director Ishikura.”

“‘Ugh,’ my foot! You’ve been slacking off!”

“Have not! That last experiment was a success! I’ve earned a little R & R!”

“Geez. That’s why they call you the emperor of the night, or the demon lord. Don’t overdo it!”

“Who calls me *that*?! Last I heard, they were just playing on *Seta* and calling me Satan.”

“Akizuki and Eung.”

“Oh, the genius duo... ‘Demon lord’? Like one of the lab chief’s games?”

“Well, if you don’t want them calling you that, trying sleeping at night.”

“Director, I successfully made it rain! And you want me to plunge right into the next experiment?”

“Yes. Apparently, our final goal is to summon meteors.”

“*Meteors*? What possible use could that be?”

“Resource collection! Rare metals and the like...apparently. Good, right? Securing resources will help with your goal of stopping global warming, right?”

“Meteors seem so roundabout. It would be a lot more efficient to just summon oil... Well, except the smell.”

“Orders from our sponsor. No griping! And compared with some other

divisions, your targets are generous.”

“Other divisions? I hear we’ve got people working on probability manipulation and biological restoration...”

“That reminds me! You blow your presentation today, and you won’t get off with a mere written apology!”

“You mean our sponsor will be there? The president of that emerging world power? Oh man.”

“That’s why I’m telling you not to party all night! And comb that bedhead! It makes you look like you have horns!”

“You’re such a nag! That’s why everyone calls you a snake.”

“They what?! I’m not done talking, Seta! Come back here!”

“...an? Satan?”

“——! Wh-what? Oh, you’re...”

On the mountain above the cave.

Clouds hung low overhead, and Lloyd had been practicing his new technique when he’d noticed Satan staring into the distance and gotten worried.

Satan shook his head and grinned once more.

“What’s the matter?” Lloyd asked. “Something on your mind?”

“Oh, just lost in thought. Well? Getting the hang of it?”

“Yes! If I wrap a storm around myself, then I can hit my opponent with all of that! It’s a really good idea. So far, I can only get the wind around me, but that’s enough to let me fly at will!”

“...I know this was my idea, but...is it really that easy? So be it! Keep at it, Lloyd!”

“Yes! Controlling *Aero* and this new move are both your doing, Satan! I can’t thank you enough!”

“Y-yeah! Ha-ha-ha! Acquire new moves and prove yourself worthy of serving me!”



Satan didn't seem used to being thanked and blushed slightly. Then he spread his hands like he had the world in his clutches.

Lloyd definitely wasn't grasping what he meant by "serve," so he just said, "I'll do my best to serve!" He assumed it was some sort of teacher-student thing.

"Maybe this way, I won't be such a liability in combat! Even in the village! I can fight off monsters with Chief Alka and Grandpa Pyrid!"

*Alka*— That name made Satan turn pale.

"A-Al...Alka?!"

"Chief Alka's really incredible. She's the one who taught me the rune to summon rain! She can even make meteors fall!"

"....."

"And... Satan?"

"...Ruka... That's when... Eung and the president were...and then..."

"Satan?"

"...Oh, Lloyd. Just one question."

"Yes! What is it?"

"What year is it?"

## Afterword

My eyes often play tricks on me.

I played American football in high school, and there was a sign on the wall that said, SEIZE THE DAY! but the whole time, I thought it said, “Seize today!”

I thought it was weird sometimes, but I figured you couldn’t get to the next day without making the most of today and threw myself into sweaty practices, even in the summer.

I didn’t realize the truth until after I quit. I’m pretty sure football killed a lot of brain cells, but they were clearly dead to begin with.

So when I got a note saying, *We’re making a CD drama!* from my editor, well... years of work in retail had me used to reading *CD* as *conditioner* so I legitimately thought, *What’s a ‘conditioner drama’? Some new product line? What about the shampoo?*

I checked again, making sure the e-mail was really from my editor. When I read it again and processed what *CD drama* actually meant, I was so delighted that I wound up hugging my half-dry laundry.

Being a novelist, I am overwhelmed by the support I’ve had from everyone *and* by getting a CD drama... In high school, I would never have believed any of that possible.

That was back in the days when people actually believed that drinking water made you tired, and as a result, I once collapsed from heatstroke during practice. While I was recovering in the shade, the manager and the coach both told me that I’d been drinking too much water, so you can see why I have trust issues. I’d obviously collapsed because I *hadn’t* been drinking water, you fools!

I’d better move on to my thanks before I start crying and lose precious fluids.

To my illustrator, Nao Watanuki. Thank you for the wonderful drawings. I

know I made some challenging demands on you, but you always come through, and I'm grateful for it. Tiger ☆ Nexamic in particular turned out amazing.

Hajime Fusemachi is doing the manga, and Chapter 18—which follows the plot at the end of the second novel—was especially impressive. There are even more weirdos in Volume 3, so hang in there.

For my editor, Maizou, I'm sorry it's hard mode for you every time. I need to train more and become a writer who can make better progress. Before the Reiwa era ends, at least.

And a thank you to everyone involved in making *Suppose a Kid from the Last Dungeon Boonies Moved to a Starter Town* happen. I can only repay you with the work itself.

To the manager and the coach at my high school. I have no idea why you both wore color contacts at the summer tournament. But it helped inoculate me to all the unreasonable things that happen in this world.

The first volume of *Last Dungeon Boonies* has received ten printings, and the series has sold more than eight hundred thousand copies. And it's all thanks to you, the readers.

It still doesn't feel real. Being a writer doesn't feel much different from when I was a hapless office drone, chipping away at my novels and entering new-writer contests. I feel like the volume number and print numbers go up, but my sensibilities haven't changed.

How long will this series go on? What will happen to Lloyd? Where will Merthophan go? I hope I can live up to my readers' expectations and hope you will find out if I do.

I look forward to meeting you again in Volume 8. Toshio Satou, who was in the tea ceremony club in junior high, signing off.



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