

Toshio Satou

Illustration by
Nao Watanuki

14

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



Toshio Satou
Illustration by
Nao Watanuki



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Eve vs. Shoma! A clash of titans!

She acts confident, but how strong is she really?

Eve (Final Form)
A man-made demon lord, the fruit of Eug's research.

“Best I kill you first.”

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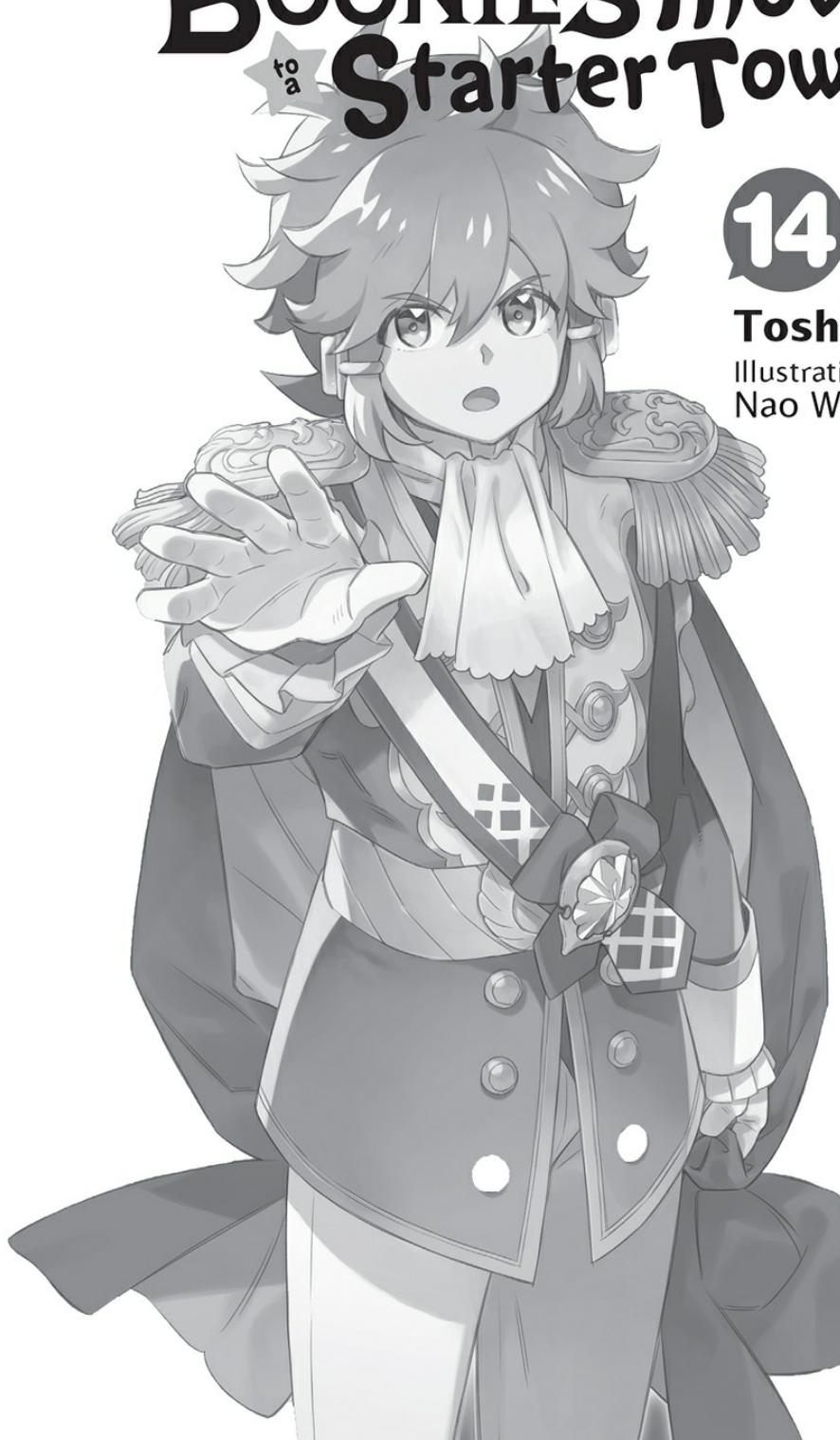
Blinded by Love: So Far Gone She'll Share Her Bank Balance and PIN Number

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BOONIES Moved
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 **YEN
ON**
NEW YORK

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SUPPOSE A KID FROM THE LAST DUNGEON BOONIES MOVED TO A STARTER TOWN 14

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 14

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Suppose
There Was a
Mid-Series
Redesign

Character Profiles



Lloyd Belladonna



Marie the Witch



Alka



Selen Hemein



Riho Flavin



Phyllo Quinone



Rinko



Jin Ishikura

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

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

The human form of the cursed belt, Vritra.



Renge Audoc



Mena Quinone



Sardin Valyl-Tyrosine



Merthophan Dextro



Choline Sterase



Shouma



Asako Ishikura



Eve Profen



Eve (Final Form)

Director Ishikura's daughter. Currently possessed by Eve.

A wicked queen behind many nefarious schemes.

Eve combined Eug's demon lord research to give herself the ultimate body.

Prologue

I remember waking up with my stomach in knots.

Here at the Cordelia Research Institute, they were doing advanced research on medicine, agriculture, the military—all kinds of stuff. I was receiving treatment as a medical test subject.

My condition was untreatable by modern medicine. I'd been taken to one hospital after another, and finally wound up here, in an entirely different country.

I'd been living at the institute for a full year now.

At first, I missed my friends and old home, and everything made me anxious, but eventually I adjusted. I did miss Japanese food, though.

The scientists here were nice, but odd. My dad could be stern, but Chief Rinko was like a kid, all smiles. Seta with his trademark bedhead, Eug as small as she was competitive, and Alka who was gorgeous but aloof. Tony called himself chubby, but he was always willing to share his snacks. I might have been too sick to get out of bed, but all of them kept me cheerful.

Seta insisted he was just hiding here to escape his boss—my dad—and Tony claimed he just wanted to slack off and chow down. They might not be the most admirable people around, but that's what made them fun.

At first, I thought Alka was unapproachable, but once I got her talking about her brother, she opened up. She was almost foaming at the mouth whenever she told me how cute he was.

She talked nonstop for half an hour, and I thought, *Who is this lady, a school principal?* It did not take me long to list “brother” as a word I should never mention when she was within earshot.

But she didn't just talk about him. She showed me pictures, and he was definitely the kind of baby-faced boy you couldn't help but dote on. Word was he'd died in an accident when Alka was only nine, and she was here researching ways to bring him back to life—which just sounded crazy. I never quite worked up the nerve to ask her about it.

The end came so fast.

It dawned like any other day.

There was a quiet knock on the door. I sat up and checked the clock.

The sun had barely risen, and I felt a thrill of fear. Was something wrong? Was the building on fire? I was still half-asleep, not thinking straight.

In came the last person I expected—the president of the country. She wore a fancy black suit, and walked with a cane—at her age, her back was bent, and she needed the support. She spoke with warmth and candor, but her dark glasses hid her eyes, making her emotions hard to read—I'd always been a little scared of her.

She was shifty in a way that felt calculated; nothing she did felt trustworthy. Like a classmate you talk to pretty often but would never call a friend.

She had the same condition I had, and I remember that my father got unusually worked up when he heard the news. “I’m sure we’ll find a cure here!” he’d said.

“Gooooood morning! How’s it going, Asako? It’s your favorite prez!”

President Eva.

Founding a brand-new country in that day and age spoke to just what a powerhouse she was. Stockbrokers all over the world watched her social media accounts like a hawk, trying to stay on top of the turmoil she caused. Even in Japan, I hadn’t gone a day without seeing her name in the news.

Learning we had the same condition only made me sympathetic for a minute—I just found her too suspicious to actually *like*.

“Ohayo! Good morning! Did I wake you? Whoopsie-daisy!”

Her theatrics were a bit too much when I was still half asleep, and I felt sick to

my stomach.

“You’re in good spirits today, President Eva.”

“Ohhh...I’m faking it. My body’s fallen to pieces! I imagine you know the feeling.”

I’d heard she didn’t have much time left. And that made her boundless cheer all the more frightening.

“How’ve you been, Asako? Getting along with your dad?”

I was not awake enough to hide that. I’m sure I made a face.

“It’s still pretty awkward. Better than before we moved here, I guess.”

He was a workaholic and never came home, and I’d held that against him.

I knew he was focused on trying to find a cure for me, but...it still pulled us apart. And my father was so bad at expressing emotions that his own employees called him a snake behind his back. Most of our interactions were strictly professional.

When I said nothing else, President Eva babbled on.

“Asako, there’s something I’d like your help with.”

“What?”

“Come accompany an old lady on her morning stroll! And maybe join me for a checkup along the way. It won’t take long.”

Just in case, I asked, “Does my father know about this?”

I felt bad about this as soon as I asked, but President Eva didn’t bat an eye.

“No. I was in such a rush I haven’t mentioned it to him. We’ll have to fill him in after the fact, but I swear I’ll be there to take the blame.”

She was acting all innocent, but it was like she had a veil draped over her face—and I didn’t trust that.

But however suspicious of her motives I might be, my father worked for her—I couldn’t reasonably refuse. This was *her* country—we had to do what she said.

That judgment proved my undoing. Maybe I was still dreaming of a prince on

a white horse who'd come to save me. Or it was just a normalcy bias—either way, I failed to recognize the threat.



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I allowed President Eva to escort me somewhere deep within the lab.

It was so early there were almost no other scientists around. At the time, I didn't realize she'd specifically chosen a route that would prevent anyone from spotting us.

She led us deeper and deeper into areas I'd never been before, and that knot in my stomach grew more pronounced.

I didn't know if she was trying to calm me down or just feeling talkative, but President Eva was prattling away like an expert tour guide.

"I heard about an island filled with OOPArts that modern science couldn't explain. Just rumors, not worth believing until I saw them with my own eyes. Oh, how my heart danced!"

I might have been a kid, but even to my ears this sounded like a hackneyed fantasy. But President Eva was acting like it was *real*, and that fanned the flames of my fears. Like people who insist they've seen a ghost, or people who try to get you to invest in some shady get-rich-quick scheme.

"It was like turning a faucet and having oil gush out! Naturally, there's a price for it... Oh, not to change the subject but I heard in Japan you can turn a faucet and tangerine juice comes out. Is that true?"

"There's a few of those in Ehime Prefecture."

"What a fascinating country!"

President Eva seemed pretty excited. She kept derailing her own line of thought. It was only later when I figured out why she was so worked up—and by then it was too late.

"And what really got my juices flowing is that nobody had even recognized this oil for the liquid gold it was. I got my start doing fortune-telling for the rich and powerful, so I was well-versed in the literature and got it right away. You name it, I read it: manga, light novels, weekly tabloids, dusty old tomes—the more you read, the more you know. So I figured it out!"

She clearly wanted me to ask about it, so I did.

"What?"

“It’s the fountain of dreams.”

She looked extremely serious about this.

Her phrasing made everything sound like a joke, but on this note alone she clearly meant business.

I didn’t know what to make of it. But between the joke and the truth, I caught a hint of something sinister.

“When you find a treasure in an antique shop, you snap it up, yes? So I made the entire island *mine*. Founded a country on it so no one else could take it over. Fortunately, the island’s resources and location made it of little value to anyone else, and everyone thought I was just being kooky and rich. Made building the nation easy.”

President Eva talked about founding her country like you would talk about splurging at an electronics store.

“I was *so* glad I’d been making political connections and basically mind-controlling people through my fortune-telling. Anyhow, that’s how I got the oil faucet!”

What she was discussing should hardly be delivered with such childlike wonder.

“Then I just started gathering people. Didn’t matter if they had brains or not! Just went for raw numbers. We entertained and spread the news by word of mouth, making it easy for the talented to join us. The plan was going so well.”

“Past tense?” I asked.

President Eva’s shrug was a tad dramatic. The kind of phony gesture you see in the movies.

“I was tapped in, but then I got this diagnosis.”

The levity in her tone remained, and her laugh echoed down the corridor.

“I had to push my plans forward, open the oil faucet all the way, figure out a road map to curing my condition—I did it all.”

“Um, you keep talking about oil and dreams, but what is it *really*?”

“.....”

It was the first time I'd silenced her. For a minute, I heard only her footsteps. Then she made up her mind.

“It's *magic*, honey.”

Like she was delivering a punchline—but there was no mirth in her tone. Her whole aura had changed, like she'd been replaced with someone else entirely. And that's not an exaggeration.

“And I'm not about to fail now. Not when I'm this close,” she muttered.

Then she turned back to me, her old self again.

“I invited your father here—the great Jin Ishikura—to help cure my illness. He was a talented scientist, and you have the same condition—so he's really motivated. He agreed instantly to help research this magic, even though it must have sounded far-fetched. Thank goodness!”

President Eva clapped her hands together the way you would at a shrine. It felt so insincere.

At this point, we'd reached an ominous-looking door, the kind of heavy security door you only see in sci-fi films. Bulky enough that I'd have readily believed it led to a bank vault.

President Eva stood before the LCD, tapping away like she'd done it a dozen times before.

“Okay, okay...was this one retina or was it a fingerprint?”

She took off her sunglasses and leaned forward, like a grandmother trying to make out the fine print on a newspaper article. With her glasses off, there was a mean gleam in her eyes—more like a battle-scarred veteran than a little old lady.

I shivered. The silence scared me, so I found a way to fill it.

“Um, you mentioned a checkup, but what exactly are we checking?”

There was no need to be taking my height or weight first thing in the morning. But I figured this would be a safe question.

“Oh, yeah, that was a lie.”

This blunt admission left me wide-eyed.

“Huh?!”

With my strangled yelp, the door opened.

The room inside was frankly bizarre. There was a chair that leaned back like one at a dentist’s office, a ton of pointy instruments, and electrodes—similar to the ones that measure brain waves—dangling from the ceiling.

As I gaped at it all, President Eva smirked.

“No use hiding anything at this stage, so I’ll just tell you. We’re going to perform a rather difficult experiment to see if we can fully remove the affected bits and prompt a full recovery.”

“A...full recovery?”

“Exactly! A heist to regain our health! A prelude to greatness!”

“Why couldn’t you just say that...?!”

My mind finally caught up. She was hiding something. That’s why she hadn’t told my father and had come to pick me up so early.

“Aren’t you a clever one!”

President Eva looked legitimately impressed. She slapped her withered old palms together. Then she glared balefully down at them.

“The thing is—this body’s giving out. And I can’t just sit and wait, can I? I’ve got to cut every corner I can. Even if that means betting against the odds.”

“This is a long shot?”

“It was a very long one. Getting Eugy going without Chief Rinko picking up on it—oh, that woman might just be choosing to turn a blind eye. But if she knew we might be sacrificing you, Asako, even that egghead would put a stop to things.”

“Sacrifice?!”

“Worst-case scenario, you’ll die.”

She wasn't sugarcoating anything. Then she smiled at me.

"I mean, think about it, I'm not exactly going to risk my own life, am I? The whole reason you got the pampered treatment here was so you could help me hedge my bet. Of course, I didn't tell your father *that*. If he ever found out, there'd be hell to pay."

"Uh..."

She was so brazen that my mind just refused to process it.

Ohhh, she wants to experiment on me to make sure the procedure is safe before she cures herself. And if it fails and kills me, she'll just move on to Plan B.

I could just see her dressed like a film director, shouting "Take two!" into a megaphone.

"Who do you think— Augh!"

Just as I finally started to feel anger, she grabbed me with surprising force for her age and tried to shove me through the door. Hung up on life, fluttering like a candle before Death's final wind—I imagine she was just past caring about anything else.

"Would you rather we *both* die?! It'll be fun, come on! You'll be saving me! No expense or effort spared to save the life of the president! Ordinary citizens rarely get the chance to serve their country like this! You should be honored!"

"I didn't pay my taxes just to get killed in return!"

President Eva was so worked up that she didn't seem to care whether her rapid-fire arguments made any sense. Weak as I was right then, I could barely shove her off me.

I must have pushed her away harder than I thought. She hadn't expected me to fight back, and tempers flared. She forgot to maintain her cheery act—the woman before me now was an authoritative figure, and one who would not hesitate to kill.

"You little bitch!"

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a black object. It didn't take me long to realize it was a gun.

She pointed it at me, ranting.

“The healing process will fix your wounds, too! But I might as well just shoot you through the heart! Easier than hitting your knees—even if you do die, we’ll just try that other rune, and bring you back to life! There’s good money in that!”

She put her finger on the trigger; she knew it was no use ordering me to stay still.

“No! Help!”

“Oh, this will help! You, and me! But mostly me!!!!”

She tried to put the barrel to my head, to make sure she didn’t miss.

I was just trying to do *anything* about the approaching gun.

We wound up grappling at each other. A sickly girl, and an old woman. I managed to pry her off me and scrambled away.

But I’d never been this far into the lab. I didn’t know my way around. I didn’t know which way we’d come, or which way to go, and she caught up fast.

“You stupid little... Goddammit!”

President Eva tried to shoot me, but had been in such a rush she’d left the safety on.

I had to do something about the gun if I was ever getting out of this. I leaped at her.

“L-let go!”

“Never!”

A bang echoed through the corridor. Like the starter pistol before a race.

“Ah!”

“Ah!”

We both gasped. A red flower bloomed on President Eva’s white blouse.

The flower grew larger and larger. *I’d* done that. I felt my legs buckle under me.

President Eva finally realized our struggle had ended with her getting shot,

and she glared at me.

“You...li... *Hurk...*”

With that wound in her chest, she couldn’t breathe properly. She wheezed a few gasps, toppled back against the wall...and didn’t move again.

A metallic scent in the air made me sick. My stomach heaved.

President Eva was dead, her head hanging down, but she was still glaring at me—and that was too much for me to bear. I turned and ran.

The guilt quickly caught up to me. Between that and the fear—the world went black.

“Help me! Anyone... Daddy!”

I had dreamed about a prince on a white horse, and I was still clutching at that straw as my consciousness faded. A massive tremor shook the lab—and I passed out for good.

Hotel Reiyoukaku—a luxurious establishment built along the mountain pass leading from Azami to Rokujou.

The heads of state were assembled here for a meeting.

Anzu Kyounin, ruler of the Ascorbic Domain, was scowling with her hand on her chin.

Across from her was Luke Thistle Azami, King of Azami—a merry old man with white whiskers.

Between them was Sardin Valyl-Tyrosine, King of Rokujou. He was middle-aged, with slicked-back blond hair and a hearty smile. He was also known affectionately as the Dumb Dandy. Beside him sat his bodyguard and wife, Ubi.

Finally, representing the local lords was Allan’s father, Threonine Toin Lidocaine, who cut an imposing figure.

They were gathered here to discuss how to handle Eve of the Profen Kingdom, and her plan to use demon lords to throw the world into disarray.

The mood was hardly cheery.

“Is this all of us?” Anzu asked. “I mean, I figure *she*’s not invited.” She looked

rather despondent.

"I imagine she'd have happily shown up if we had extended the offer," the King of Azami said, only half-joking.

"Ha! True," Anzu admitted, shaking her head. "And she would probably invite me for tea on the way out."

"You and Eve were fairly close," Threonine said.

"Were we?" Anzu said, making a face. "In hindsight, it all makes sense. It feels more like she was just buttering me up to gain intel."

She scratched her head and got more specific.

"She asked me about the Sacred Mountain's dragon, and about the Mastema Fruit. That was probably all part of her scheme to place the demon lords under her control."

"If the former turned out to be a demon lord, she could enslave it. And those fruits were used as a means of trapping the demon lords, yes? Eve may be outlandish, but nothing escapes her."

Threonine sounded impressed.

Anzu leaned across the table, looking closely at the King of Azami.

"She backed off quick once she found out the dragon wasn't real, but I bet you've got more to share there. Right, Your Majesty?"

She had one hand on her hilt, ready to move in.

"Indeed," the king said. "We'll be covering that, and the details of Eve Profen's plans to destroy the world. Following which, I'd love to hear your thoughts on how we proceed from here."

Sardin beamed at him.

"Then let's get this meeting started! First, give us the rundown on Eve's evils."

Anzu jumped in before King Azami could answer.

"Is it true Eve was pulling the strings behind Jiou's war with the world?"

Eve had been right here with them as they discussed plans on how to deal

with *that* crisis—while masterminding the whole thing. Anzu was fit to be tied.

King Azami stroked his beard, maintaining a soothing tone.

“Trustworthy Jiou citizens cited several sightings of someone matching Eve’s description in the vicinity of Jiou’s central city. Those reports were suppressed by their superiors.”

“The top brass were in on it, then?” Threonine asked. “She’s been entrenched there for a while. And planned to have them take the fall while her demon lords crushed Azami. Which brings us to my question— I’ve heard a certain local lord had deep ties to Jiou, and Eve?”

“Tramadol? He distributed wine laced with a curse that altered people’s emotions.”

Threonine looked aghast. He and Tramadol had never got on well, but they shared the same title.

Sardin had fallen prey to that scheme himself.

“A waste of good vintage wine,” he said. “The very thought of using such fine wine to spread a curse gives me chills. My wife and I were reduced to tears—”

—*Crack.*

Before he could finish, Ubi moved too fast for the eye to see, leaving Sardin’s neck bent at an awkward angle.

“Hush.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Always refreshing to see the world from a new perspective. Hold on...” Sardin hastily put his head back upright.

Rubbing his neck, he smiled and got back on track.

“Oww... And I’ve heard Eve was conducting human experiments in the Hell’s Lock prison near the Rokujou border. Can we get the details on that? My old friend Amadine was held there, which makes it rather worrying.”

Amadine had attempted to seize control of Rokujou. As Sardin said the name, the smile faded from his face. It was a rare moment of seriousness.

“Experimenting on turning cadavers into weapons... That’s not something I or

Rokujou can let slide.”

Amadine had commanded a mafia syndicate known as the Rising Blue Dragons. They’d taken Ubi captive, leaving Sardin at their beck and call. Rot had set in across the kingdom, and Amadine had sweet-talked them into helping fund research into the forbidden art of necromancy. They’d then used that dark magic to turn his wife into a half-zombie.

If necromancy had been used here, too—or even if necromancy had simply been a step on the way to these human experiments—his anger would not subside anytime soon.

Anzu grinned at this rare glimpse of Sardin’s true self.

“I like that look, Sardin. You remove the ‘Dumb’ from the Dandy and lose half your brand.”

“Whoops! Here, witness my glamorous mid-life pose!”

“Worst pose yet,” Ubi scowled.

“Well, now,” Threonine said, shaking his head. “This meeting will bring Eve’s crimes into the limelight, and we’ll agree on how to deal with her—but honestly, it’s hard to decide where to begin. I mean...she’s Eve Profen.”

“If we aren’t careful, she’ll just leave us to eat her dust.”

Everyone agreed she would not be easy to convict.

As they all continued to frown, King Azami’s expression made it clear he had a plan.

As if waiting for that moment, the door burst open, and a woman in a white coat swept in.

“I hear ya!”

“Wha?! Who is this?!“ Anzu yelped, nearly drawing her sword.

The woman grinned at her. It was the kind of grin that made it clear she’d wanted to shock everyone.

“Mwa-ha-ha! Did I startle ya? M’lady, thou art on our turf.”

“Turf, my foot! Who the hell is this?!“

Threonine, however, had recognized her—and his eyes nearly popped out of his head. “Y-you’re... Weren’t you missing?!”

The woman struck a pose. “You bet I was! I’m Lou—er, Luke Thistle Azami’s wife and queen, Rien Cordelia. You can call me Rinko.”

Anzu and Threonine looked equally aghast.

“This lady needs to chill out! And...she’s way too young!”

“She was this age when she went missing! How do you explain that, Your Majesty?!”

King Azami saw their surprise and chuckled. Ubi leaned in, curious.

“You don’t seem to be hiding your age with makeup, and if you were, I’d want tips. Don’t tell me you got turned into a zombie like I did?”

Rinko was clearly in her thirties, tops.

She flashed a grin at Ubi.

“Sorry, this is just your classic no-makeup look. But your zombie idea ain’t actually that far from the mark.”

She sat down next to King Azami, folding her legs and spreading her arms wide.

“I’m what your world calls a demon lord. Does it make sense now?”

“““—?!”””

Everyone gasped.

Rinko looked delighted. “So is Eve Profen. And here’s the kicker—”

The reveals were dropping like bombs, and their minds could not keep up. But Rinko was still adding more to the pile.

“Eve, all the demon lords, and I came here from another world!”

All these outrageous ideas left everyone speechless.

“Um,” Anzu said. “Sorry, I think you’ve lost me. Can someone break it down for me?”

“Oh,” Rinko said, turning her way. “I wanted to thank you, Anzu. Your

ancestor decided to venerate me, and that let me hole up in the Sacred Mountain for a while.”

“Hole up...in *that* Sacred Mountain?!”

Anzu had only just given up on understanding the situation, but now that she had received these specific details, her brain had sprung a leak.

“Yeah, I was still in my demon form and happened to wander across the domain when he shouted, ‘The Guardian Spirit!’ and like, built me a shrine and forbade anyone from going near it. It was a real comfortable place to hang.”

She was face-to-face with the legendary dragon god? Anzu put a hand to her chin, thinking—the shock pushed her back around to calm.

“Okay... My dad said the dragon thing was made up to bring in tourists, but even as a kid I thought the legends were weirdly specific for a fabrication. Uh, are you actually a guardian spirit?”

“I didn’t really guard much, but if you wanna see my dragon form... It would, uh, smash this room up.”

“Er, no, let’s not,” Anzu declined, feeling like her brain might literally explode.

Sardin finally gathered his wits again.

“If Eve is a visitor from another world, what motivates this series of disturbances?” he asked. “Her actions hardly seem like the best plan for, say, world conquest.”

They were far too roundabout. Plunging the world into chaos would just leave her stuck rebuilding it afterward—and she’d been ruler of Profen, a huge country. She had access to more traditional options.

“Fanning tensions between Jiou and Azami, having them take each other out — The economic downturn would be a huge drain on her, too. And I’m sure Eve is aware of that.”

“Indeed. Jiou’s a mess, and Azami’s hardly unimpacted,” King Azami said. “There are tensions remaining between them, the local lords, and the other major nations. It could well stagnate the economy for decades.”

“Yeah,” Rinko said, nodding. “She ran her own nation back in her old world, so

she definitely knows that stuff.”

“So her goal lies elsewhere?”

Rinko paused, looking grim. “Her goal *is* the chaos. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Just chaos?!” Anzu spat, looking ready to draw her blade. “Like an angry teenager?! What good does that do?!”

“It slows *me* down.”

“What?! All this, for *that*?!”

“Yup. Just a distraction. What Eve really wants is to go back to her world armed with a monopoly on rune magic, immortality, and all the weapons she’s developed in her time here.”

Rinko stared at her hands, whispering to herself.

“She made it so I’d have reasons to care about this world. She fanned the flames of Eug’s guilt. And she pulled the wool over Alka’s eyes.”

“Er, um...Rinko?” Threonine asked, but she didn’t seem to hear him. She kept on muttering.

“She alone will have the magic at her disposal. I dunno what’s fun about turning on all the cheat codes—even in a game, all the fun comes from barely squeaking by. Standing at the pinnacle of the food chain with no threats around? Three days in, you’d be bored out of your mind.”

At this point, she noticed everyone staring at her and pulled out of her reverie.

“Oops, sorry about that, ha!” she said. “Uh, anyway, her plan is to plunge this world into chaos, leave me dealing with the mess, and skedaddle off back to the world we came from.”

Everyone looked aghast, so Rinko moved on to her mission statement.

“Of course, I’m not gonna stand for that! I aim to have my bones buried here in this world, and I ain’t about to let that bullshit mess it up.”

Threonine took a sip of tea and took in the whole story.

“As outlandish as this may sound, I understand the gist.”

Anzu turned back to Rinko, her brow no longer creased.

“Can’t say I followed all of it, but the last part—‘I wanna keep the world safe so I can live with the man I love’—I can wrap my mind around that. You’re a good woman! Don’t let her go, King Azami.”

“Aw, thanks,” Rinko said, blushing from the sudden praise. The king was blushing with her, too. They were like two enamored lovebirds.

“Ha-ha-ha!” Sardin guffawed. “We can rest easy with a demon lord on our side! But marrying one is quite a feat, Your Majesty.”

“I know,” King Azami said, smirking.

“Then again, my Ubi is rather like a demon lord sometimes, so I think we’re similar. Just my little Sardin joke—”

Crack.

Ubi moved too fast for the eye to see, leaving his neck bent.

“Loose lips?”

“Break necks!”

Sardin’s humor had lightened the mood a bit.

Threonine urged Rinko on. “That clears up Eve’s intentions, but specifically how are we going to corner her?”

“Your attention, please!” Rinko cried, like she was about to launch into a business pitch. “All I want from you is one simple thing! Make Eve admit to even one of her misdeeds!”

“Just one? After all the evil she’s been up to, we just need a single confession?”

Anzu would clearly rather accuse her of all the crimes and make the punishment that much more severe.

“One’s enough!” Rinko insisted. “We only need the one.”

“Can we ask why?” Threonine said.

King Azami answered for her. “Now that she’s lost control of Jiou, the only legitimate asset she has is her own country—Profen.”

That got everyone’s attention.

“Profen’s military and upper classes have complete faith in Eve’s leadership. It would be no exaggeration to say they see her as a living god. Even if it placed them in open conflict with the rest of the world, they would take up arms the moment she gave the word.”

“I’m aware of how she’s positioned herself. The masses may be one thing, but the wealthy classes and military have a downright unnatural degree of loyalty.”

Threonine’s sources agreed that they were blinded by the prosperity she’d provided over the ages.

Rinko took back the reins.

“But if her myths start to crumble? If we can convince them their ‘stable leadership’ was actually Eve treating her own citizens as disposable pawns? The whiplash might well be severe.”

Sardin nodded as realization set in. “If they start to doubt, then the military and oligarchy will be slower to act.”

“Exactly!” Rinko said, pointing at him like an enthusiastic teacher. “She can’t turn to Jiou, so the best way to disrupt her plans is to go after her own citizens. We can take our time to diminish her assets, rattle her, and crush her when she starts to make mistakes. That’s our goal here.”

It was gonna be a long game, but it made sense to Sardin. Odds were high that Eve still had cards up her sleeve, and this approach would be much safer.

But Anzu voiced a fundamental problem.

“But while we inch to a solution, won’t Eve just slip off back to her old world? And isn’t that a problem for us?”

“Ha-ha-ha!” Sardin laughed. “It would be a shame not to give her a taste of her own medicine, but perhaps that would be *our* safest bet.”

“It won’t be,” Rinko said, making a face. “I know her. She’ll head back there all immortal, spend a century or so conquering, then get bored and come back to

mess with us again.”

“Hngg,” Threonine scowled. “That does sound like her. I can see it already.”

“A century or two from now...we’d be leaving a mighty headache for our great-grandkids,” King Azami said. “It’s our duty to take down this hedonistic menace once and for all.”

True, this should be handled during their time. No one wanted to leave these problems for their descendants to solve—everyone here had subjects, students, or children to worry about.

“Well, that’s motivating,” Ubi said, breaking her silence. She was ready to fight for her daughters.

Anzu was no less fired up, her fingers flexing round the hilt of her sword.

“This mess is our generation’s, so let’s mop it up ourselves. But ain’t that all the more reason not to give her time to get away?”

This was a reasonable concern, and Rinko responded by laying out a document on the conference room table. It was a picture of a sword with a futuristic design.

“No need. The key is still in our hands.”

“Key? This funky-lookin’ sword?”

“Isn’t that...the holy sword?” Sardin asked.

“Bingo!” Rinko said. “That’s what our enemy’s been after. This’ll let the demon lords—residents of the other world who aren’t in their right minds—out of the Last Dungeon. And it’ll let Eve pass through the Last Dungeon back to that other world.”

“Ah-ha, quite powerful. You know a lot about this sword.”

“Well, yeah, I made it.”

This latest bombshell made Anzu bury her face in her hands. “My head hurts.”

“My original plan was to take a vacation here, and once I had my fun, I would head back to the old world. I figured a standard key would be no fun, so I made it look like a sword. And I didn’t want any other demon lords using it for evil, so

I made sure they couldn't touch the thing. Plus, you need serious strength to pull it out of the rock. Though I sort of goofed it up and made it so I couldn't touch it, either. Sometimes unparalleled talent comes back to haunt you."

"Seems rather roundabout..."

"But more fun! Well, partly. Also because if someone was strong enough to pull out the holy sword, I figured I could get them to mop up the otherworldly demon lords for me. That aside, Azami's got the thing in our possession. That gives us a real advantage."

Rinko folded the document back up, moving on to the nitty-gritty.

"So first up, we're gonna send our best and brightest to Profen. Focus on Eve's control of Jiou and how her funding of Hell's Lock let her privatize the prison. We've got evidence on both, so let's try and get her on the record for one or the other." Rinko struck a karate pose. "Meanwhile, I'll be guarding the holy sword with my life!"

Sardin looked nervous.

Making Eve admit to any of her crimes—that was a daunting task.

She was a political mastermind. Not once had she ever placed herself at a disadvantage. She employed obfuscation and outright deception while keeping her own country stable and prosperous.

Seeing no path to victory, the finest minds all looked anguished.

Rinko knew full well just how good Eve had been at being president back home, so she scratched her cheek.

"But we're up against Eve, right? She's just gonna wriggle off the hook."

"And we'll be demanding answers on *her* turf. We have no clue what she'll have waiting for us."

"I just can't imagine her playing into our hands."

Each voiced their concerns. Eve had taught Threonine a lot, and he looked especially anxious.

"Not up for going toe to toe with your business teacher, Threonine?" Anzu

teased. “I get that. We were on friendly terms, which makes this worse. For all her goofiness, she can be real intimidating. Like if you make her mad, there’ll be hell to pay—I sound like a kid, but it’s a real worry.”

With those thoughts in mind, Sardin asked, “With these two this discouraged, I’d love to step up, but we could use a fallback.”

“Way ahead of ya.”

“Mm! Way ahead.”

Rinko and King Azami nodded at the same time. Clearly, they’d been hiding something.

“Ho-ho! We have a plan in action. We’ll be sending in the one person even Eve can’t handle.”

“Such a person exists? Call me curious.”

Rinko’s grin widened.

“She’ll *hate* it. If you’re up against a crafty mastermind—send in the total opposite. A pure, innocent boy.”

““““Oh.”“““

Threonine, Anzu, Sardin, and Ubi all looked convinced.

“Anyone need me to name names?”

“Lloyd Belladonna, I assume,” Sardin said.

“Not exactly a stumper,” Rinko chuckled.

“We’ll be sending him to Profen as my proxy,” King Azami said.

“I’ve heard rumors,” Anzu said, leaning over the table. “Is it true you’re planning on making him the next king?”

Her interest was more for curiosity’s sake, but Sardin was taking this seriously.

“My daughter says the boy is against it. Can’t say I approve of using this crisis to try and lay the groundwork,” Sardin said.

“You’re breaking character,” Ubi hissed.

"Whoops, pardon me. Honestly, we'd welcome Lloyd in Rokujou. He's the hero who saved our country, and both my daughters dote on him."

"Well, isn't he popular! Let's share custody and have him take over the Lidocaine holdings."

"How does that logic work?! Won't Allan object?!"

Threonine shifted uncomfortably.

"He's rather whipped by this lady of his—Anzu, your countrywoman, Renge. The local lords welcome a strong woman, but she's got him so browbeaten we're more anxious than hopeful. Honestly, I'm *worried*."

Anzu had been joking about Allan, but now she just looked remorseful.

"Renge doesn't mean any harm, really, but she does have a tendency to overreact. She can outdo Selen in the short term."

"Azami's Sterling Stalking ☆ Cyclone Selen Hemein?!"

Quite the title she'd earned. Arguably her love life was quite the draw.

"In the Sardin household, we do believe in free will...but let's get back on track, here. If he'll be there, that's reassuring. Even behind enemy lines."

"If she tries anything in a meeting, you've got me and Ubi—and Lloyd for another hundred strong," Anzu declared.

If you took a poll on the street to see which person here was most likely to rough you up, they'd unanimously vote for Anzu.

Rinko grinned, pleased to see the light back in their eyes.

"Starting to see some hope here, huh? Yeah, Lloyd's got that something special, far more than his raw stats would imply."

He hailed from the boondock town of Kunlun. His own might was considerable, but his unique background had him convinced he was weak—and that monsters were just oversized animals.

And his capacity for crazy conclusions led to him inadvertently solving problems and crimes. Most of the time, he never even realized the issues existed! The people around him were all convinced he was a miracle worker.

Rinko had spent comparatively less time with him, yet she already had utter faith in the boy.

“And it can’t be a coincidence that *he* pulled the holy sword.”

She flashed a grin.

“To ensure the wielder was worth entrusting this world to, I set the requirements not just to physical strength but also *kindness*.”

“Mm? What was that, Rinko?”

“Oh, nothing, Lou.”

Rinko smiled her way out of this, her hopes pinned on Lloyd like he was her own son.

In a basement in the Profen Kingdom, Eve/President Eva’s base of operations...

A man in his prime was looking over some papers, wearing a white lab coat.

He was tall and slim, almost gaunt—the kind of build that made the coat look good. His sharp, intent features were slightly snake-like.

Once an accomplished staff member at the Cordelia Research Institute, Jin Ishikura worked tirelessly to bring about the age of runes.

But in this world, he’d lost his memories and became a demon lord, the giant snake Vritra. He had terrorized—well, nobody at all; he’d basically just been Alka’s ride—then possessed a belt and gotten stuck doing Selen’s bidding, poor thing.

All those days spent wailing, “Please spare me, Mistress!” like he had a quota to meet. Now he’d undergone a full makeover to dapper dude. How had that happened?

Ishikura/Vritra glanced at his own reflection in his coffee with a derisive grin.

“Never thought I’d get back my old form. Yet, I can take no pleasure in it. I’ve been reduced to the devil’s own right hand.”

A hint of bitterness entered his expression. The devil in question—

“Yoo-hoo! We on track here? Iiiishikuuuura!”

—came prancing in wearing an adorable bunny outfit. This bizarre look was a means to keep her identity secret. Inside...

Pop!

The head was removed, and a cute little girl with black hair emerged. She was a fragile sort of beauty, like a secluded heiress fallen on hard times. There was a serious expression on her face that failed to mesh with her goofy actions.

Vritra averted his gaze from her.

“Keep that head on.”

“Aww, you’re so mean, Daddy!”

“Do not say that word when you’re using her voice and face!”

Gritting his teeth, Vritra focused on the paperwork. He refused to look her way, like that myth where you can’t look back over your shoulder for fear of eternal loss.

“My, my, how distant.”

Her name was Eve. In this world, she ruled Profen—but in the past, she’d been president of an emerging world power.

When the entire research institute got teleported to another world, Eva had been on death’s door, and Asako’s mind had been in a state of shock. That had allowed the president to take over Asako’s body. For a hundred years she’d kept anyone from finding this out—a strange sort of demon lord.

She plopped herself down on a random table, picking at some earwax.

“If I don’t get some air regularly, I get all sweaty. I gotta hide the immortality, so I made up the ‘Profen royalty always wear this mascot costume’ thing, but it sure has its downsides. Do you know how hot these get?”

“Why should I care? You’ve taken over my daughter’s body and are using it for evil.”

He sounded resentful, but she paid no attention. Now she was picking her nose.

“Wow, harsh! Not like I *chose* this body.”

Eve's pupils dilated with raw ambition. "I could have had that whole world in the palm of my hand! I was one step away...and it slipped through my fingers."

Vritra rubbed his eyes. His daughter was talking like the ringleader of a shadowy syndicate bent on world conquest.

Eve slipped into his line of sight, grinning maniacally and taunting him.

"I had the power to drop a meteor anywhere!" she proclaimed. "I had wheat that could be harvested once a month! I could alter odds to my liking! If only my body had been healthy, I could have unified the world before my death, a feat no other leader had ever accomplished!"



She slumped, dejected...then started dancing away from him.

"But! Thanks to that failure, I'll be heading back with a monopoly on the immortality rune! Well worth dying for!"

She wasn't one to let minor setbacks stop her.

"And you *will* return her body?" Vritra asked, still keeping his eyes off her.

"Totally! Once my new body is done. It's getting kinda rough in here. I get these fits, you see. I have to take a cocktail of drugs, regularly dose myself with her favorite chamomile tea, and keep her sedated...a hundred years of that."

"Such vile effort. Just don't you forget that my help is contingent on her freedom."

"I'm not about to sink a deal this good. You oughtta trust me on that, at least."

Eve turned her attention to the sinister pod in the back of the lab. Encased in culture fluid was a silhouette that appeared to be the nude body of an adult female.

"When my new body there is done, we'll apply the Mastema Fruit seal to move my consciousness alone into it. You know this process can be trusted—it's why you look exactly as you once did."

"True."

Even glancing at his palms, nothing seemed out of place. This was *his* body, and it proved convincing.

"And then your daughter's body will be hers again! At the rate these fits are increasing, she'll likely wake up in a few years all on her own."

"You've argued me into a position where I cannot decline. Even in this life, you are an extraordinary grifter."

It was certainly a spiteful remark, and Eve smiled back at him.

"Do watch your tone, Director Ishikura. You mustn't forget who has your daughter's body now."

"Death threats are a poor negotiation tactic. 'Hostages are of value only when

they're alive'—a well-known quote."

"Ominous! Who said that again?"

"You did, when you were president."

"I forgot!" Eve said, sticking out her tongue. "You're being so uptight! You oughtta be grateful you're so dapper again. This is far better than your snake or belt forms."

Vritra had been a giant snake, as well as a belt that dangled from Selen's hips.

As Kunlun's guardian beast, Alka had run him ragged, even using a piece of his skin as an apron. Selen had made his head spin with her all-night odes to Lloyd.

"Those were equally horrid."

Yet there was a smile on his lips.

"Ohhh?"

Eve didn't miss what that smile meant. Visibly annoyed, she leaned back against the table and cupped her cheek.

"As long as you do your job, I'll keep my end of the bargain. The only reason I'd break my word would be out of sheer spite."

"Your new body and the path back to the other world—the final task at hand."

"Oh, and when it's all over, destroy the Last Dungeon so Lab Chief Rinko and Alky can't come after me."

Nodding, Vritra glanced down the page.

"Your body is ninety-nine percent complete and in final checks. Easy enough, even if I'm not an engineer. Very much a credit to Lena Eug."

"She made your body first! Likely her guilt at work. She feared that the accident she caused had killed your daughter," Eve said.

As she spoke, Asako's face smirked.

"She never imagined the girl was this close at hand. Shame she got taken out before I could spoil that twist! Once I'm back home, I'll never see her again."

She did not sound the least bit sad about this.

“It’s not that easy,” Vritra warned. “We’ll have issues accessing the system.”

“Oh? What, is this facility still not up to it?”

Vritra sighed and explained the problem. “It’s very Rien Cordelia. We can’t just smash the Last Dungeon. There’s a lock on the device itself.”

“A lock...and we can’t pry it open?”

“It’s less a lock and more like an output adjustment key. If we break in, the same thing will happen here that happened back home—or possibly far worse. Odds are high we won’t be able to touch the device at all.”

“Really? You mean that?”

Vritra looked almost pleased, seeming to admire Rinko’s handiwork.

“She made it so no one from the other world—demon lords or their servants—can physically interact with it. A tweak of the systems built into the holy sword.”

Eve put her costume head back on, perhaps wanting to hide how this flustered her.

“I should have known. I thought it was just a key to the Last Dungeon, but it controls the device itself?!”

“It was a measure against breaking the seal without the holy sword—and likely against you, personally.”

“The holy sword I baited Euge with was *actually* the key! Well done.”

Eve was rubbing her upper arms furiously—the same thing his daughter had done when she was annoyed. Vritra could tell she was more shaken than her words let on.

“What, do your arms itch?”

“Y-yes! This costume is awful for my skin. I should try a different softener. Maybe make a new one from scratch!”

It was a desperate attempt to hide her frustration. Vritra burst out laughing.

“Pardon me,” he said.

Eve growled, realizing he was on to her. But that also showed she wasn’t *that* beside herself.

“Well, fine! I’ll just have to do some fast talking at this head of state summit and get the sword out of them somehow.”

“Summit?” Vritra asked.

“Yup! And not one of those ones that bureaucrats hold to look busy. This one is actually significant.”

“How so? What could make you actually care at this stage?”

Eve smirked. “This summit is designed to drag Eve Profen’s misdeeds into the light!”

“That is significant. Very.”

He gave her a look of contempt, so she took her head back off just to stick out her tongue at him.

“I mean, I did inhuman experiments, manipulated Jiou secretly, made all these crazy weapons, threatened a local lord into cursing some wine that plunged Azami into chaos...and it’s all come out. Bit of a blunder!”

“Don’t say those words with her face.”

The cheerier she acted, the more convinced he was that she was thoroughly evil.

“This was bound to happen sooner or later, but honestly, luck is on my side.”

Unsure what that meant, Vritra frowned. “Is it? You have any reason for that confidence?”

“Well, yes. They’re all coming to Profen! My home turf! The enemy lair! I have options.”

She let Asako’s face grow grim.

“I bet they’ve got all sorts of plans themselves. Aiming to figure out my military strength, find out what other cards I’ve got up my sleeve...maybe even try to corner me socially, rattle me, get me to act before I’m well and ready?”

Nah, not Chief Rinko. She'd know better; she knows *me*."

"Yes, she's the one who might be an even worse person than you."

"Maybe she's got an ace I don't know about? One fear! Help me, Mommy! Or should I say 'Daddy' here?"

"Don't. Still..."

Eve seemed awfully sure of herself. Vritra was about to ask what she was hiding, but he kept his mouth shut.

"Heh. Ha-ha."

In the corner of his eyes, he'd caught her look of glee. A diabolical grin. It was a horrible expression to see on his daughter's face, and his stomach twisted in pain.

"Even if they've figured it *all* out, why aren't Lab Chief Rinko and Alky coming to kill me? It's sooo obvious. They can't—they love this world too much! Profen is right smack in the middle of the continent, every bit as big as Azami itself. If we snap and unleash the full strength of our rune-powers weaponry, the ensuing war would make the next century a bleak nightmare. Even those two won't be able to staunch the bleeding."

Her eyes drifted to the heavens, a blissful smile on her face.

"It was well worth leading those fools down the path toward love and affection!"

She had no qualms saying something so evil. She could not have been more contemptuous.

Watching her just reminded Vritra that she had his daughter held hostage, and nothing could be more terrifying.

Noticing his silence, Eve said, "Emotions just trip you up. A fact worth remembering, Director Ishikura. But I suppose that's not much use coming from the very girl tripping you up! Ah-ha-ha!"

When he didn't argue, she got even more carried away.

"I had this whole plan worked out soon after I took over your daughter's

body. Pseudo or real, if they've got *family* here, and all the emotions that tie them to this place—they'll no longer be capable of threatening a poor, sickly, unfortunate little girl. Of course, even if they do make the tough choice and go for the kill, I've got plenty of ways to turn the tables on them."

She was as immoral as she was insidious.

She'd spent over a hundred years laying the seeds of this emotional trap, all so that she could use Asako's waif-like looks as a weapon against them. A chill ran down Vritra's spine.

"I've got so many options, it's almost hard to choose! Giving them families was just the start. Giving them jobs, subordinates, responsibilities—that all works, too. Do they really think they can beat me while loyalty and love burden them?"

Eve sailed out of the room with all the glee of a child given a new toy.

She was a devil with his daughter's face. Vritra pulled at his hair.

"I had hoped the lab chief could turn this around before her body was finished...but we're not that lucky."

For his daughter's sake, he could afford no risks. All he could do was assist Eve's evil schemes and pray.

"To my great shame...if Asako—or Selen—learned of this, I'd never hear the end of it."

But as he sank into despair, he remembered something his daughter once said.

"Don't worry. At times like this, a prince on a white horse will come to the rescue."

She had put on a brave face, cracking a joke—and he'd done the same. *"This prince better have an appointment, or he's not getting through the door."*

Now he winced at the memory.

"A prince on a white horse," he whispered, staring at the ceiling. "If he can salvage this mess, I'll let him through, appointment or not."

With that, he went back to work.

A few days later, in a reception room at the Azami castle...

Lloyd and Marie were sitting on the couch, waiting for someone.

Technically—purely technically—Marie *was* a princess, so this was basically like going home. She wasn't sweating a thing, just chowing down on the cookies provided. From her expression, she was seriously considering demanding another plate.

Meanwhile, Lloyd might be a Kunlun-raised powerhouse, but he remained blissfully unaware of that, convinced he was just a wimpy kid.

And his actual position was military school cadet, the lowest rung in the Azami army. You could hardly blame him for sweating a summons to the castle. If you combined these two and split them in half, they'd each fare far better.

"D-did I screw something up?"

"There's *nothing* to worry about. Drink some tea and settle down."

Lloyd obediently gulped down a cup. Marie thought that was adorable. Such a good boy.

Meanwhile, he was impressed with her calm demeanor.

"Gosh, Marie. Even a castle summons doesn't faze you! It's like you're in your own home!"

She was.

"Uh, yeah."

"Oh, wait—your mom's Rinko, right? I heard she might be remarrying the king next. When that happens, we'll have to start calling you Your Highness!"

"Remarrying? I mean she's...and I always was..."

All this time they'd known each other, she'd never managed to convince Lloyd of her true identity. This was his current grasp on things.

The assumption that she could never be a princess was discouraging.

And that awkward silence was interrupted by Rinko and the king.

“Welcome! Are you ready to order?”

“You aren’t our waitress for the day, Mom. Can you even cook?”

The king chuckled.

“Ho-ho-ho! Rinko’s cooking is out of sight! Well, the flavor and appearance are lacking, but the power of love makes it possible to force down!”

“So...it’s awful then?” Marie said, her eyes narrowed.

“Ah-ha-ha, they do say hunger and love are the best spices,” Lloyd offered.

FYI, they say spices originally spread because the world needed a way to mask the scents of food that was going bad.

“As long as you can boil water, you can stay alive. My motto!”

A very infantile protest.



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“That’s enough culinary discussion,” the king said, straightening up. “Let’s get down to business.”

“That wasn’t it?” Lloyd asked, looking surprised. “Since Rinko can only boil water, I assumed you wanted me to drill cooking skills into her. That would explain why I got invited here!”

Marie nodded. “That *would* make sense. Drill her so hard it corrects her character.”

“Darling daughter, I hear you are just as bad at cooking as I am. Possibly worse.”

“I can boil water and make my own tea, thank you. And make snacks for drinking beer.”

“Marie, pulling the tab on a can does not count as *cooking*.”

“Huh? Is that true, Mom?”

“Mm, learned that recently myself.”

This race to the bottom had the king at a loss.

“Ho-ho... We might actually need your help there. Soon.”

That last note sounded a bit desperate, but he quickly got back on track.

“Lloyd, in the near future, there’s going to be a world summit in Profen. VIPs from every country will be attending.”

“Like King Sardin and Lady Anzu?”

Lloyd already knew several of the attendees.

“Exactly! Your besties! You’re the king of networking!” Rinko shouted.

“Uh, you shouldn’t joke about that before a real king,” Lloyd said, scratching his cheek.

“Mom, did you call Lloyd here just to wind him up?”

“Well...arguably, yes.”

“Huh?” Lloyd gaped at her.

"Lloyd," the king said, formally. "I'd like you to attend this conference in my stead."

"Huh? Me?!" Lloyd's yelp echoed off the walls.

Marie looked just as shocked.

"What? Are you not feeling well?" she asked.

"Oh, no, he's in perfect health," Rinko promised. "Lloyd, you remember what went down at Hell's Lock?"

"Oh, yes. Unscrupulous entrepreneurs pretending they were a mental training camp holding self-improvement seminars but pocketing the admission fees and sending people to prison instead."

"Mm, basically all of that is wrong, but whatever!"

Rinko gave up on explaining things in favor of getting somewhere.

To clarify: Eve had been using the inmates at Hell's Lock for her inhuman experiments.

A man named Gaston had been assigned to do an undercover investigation, but somehow Lloyd had ended up taking his place, and had been incarcerated while convinced it was a self-help program. He had been furious to discover that wasn't the case, taught the 'unscrupulous entrepreneurs' a lesson, and thrashed the warden without ever finding out about the experiments.

"Oh? Was I wrong? They were unscrupulous entrepreneurs, though, right?"

"Well...they were certainly lacking in scruples."

Rinko had a long history with the chief 'entrepreneur' there (Eve) and was struggling to repress a smirk. With Lloyd in the picture, even the most nefarious of villains got taken down a peg.

"Heh-heh-heh... Thing is, these unscrupulous entrepreneurs were actually working for Profen."

"Oh! Profen was backing their misdeeds? They were nationally-sponsored swindlers?!"

"Indeed," King Azami said, rolling with Lloyd's version of events pretty well.

"And Profen was actually pulling the strings in the Jiou Empire, too. The goal of this summit is to demand answers and reveal the hidden truths."

"Th-that sounds awful... So why Lloyd?" Marie asked.

"A summit in Profen itself. Right in the middle of enemy territory, danger everywhere. Thus, we need a proxy."

"Certainly, you wouldn't want to go there yourself, but...why *me*?"

"Mm, since you experienced Hell's Lock in person, we'd like you to demand answers from King Eve yourself. And you're a forthright, honest boy—the type Eve is least equipped to handle."

That almost convinced Lloyd, but he soon lost his nerve.

"I'm just not ready to be a royal representative. Especially if I have to do something as vital as accuse her of crimes!"

Rinko moved to convince not him—but Marie.

"This is also like a dress rehearsal," Rinko said. "For when Lloyd becomes king himself."

She threw out a thumbs-up, her other arm over Lloyd's shoulder.

"Er, um...but..." Lloyd spluttered, pretty sure he had politely refused that offer.

But Marie pounced on the idea, throwing her arm over his other shoulder.

"Who cares if you're ready? Go out and represent our country!"

"Why are you suddenly into this, Marie?!"

Lloyd's path to the throne meant marrying her. She obviously had ulterior motives.

"Why so—gasp!"

At this point, Lloyd began to *think*.

Marie's the hero who saves the kingdom from the shadows! She'd never allow these misdeeds to go unpunished!

Marie was certainly fired up, but not from the moral high ground. She was

thinking more...between the sheets. But the conclusion he'd leaped to fit with the situation at hand, and he started nodding.

Rinko beamed, and she gave Marie a push.

"Naturally, she'll be going with you. As the princess."

"Yes! Because I'm a princess!" Marie said, beaming in kind.

"Got it!" Lloyd said, smiling. "You'll be her double! Having you along pretending to be the princess will certainly be reassuring! You've saved this kingdom so many times, I'm basically just your plus-one! I can handle that!"

His smile was bright and genuine; he meant every word, but those words cut like a knife. Even now he refused to consider the idea that Marie might be royalty. She pictured each one as a sword piercing her.

"...Gah!"

Her eyes pleaded, *I'm real!* but this appeal would work better if she improved her lifestyle. At the very least, she could put trash in the garbage can.

"Um, Lloyd," she tried. "I *am* actually a princess."

"Amazing, Marie. Already in character!"

Her soul left her body. The King and Rinko were both struggling to maintain their public-appearance smiles.

"*Snrk!*"

Nope, Rinko couldn't hold it in anymore. Marie hissed, "Mom!" but she had already broken.

"Having Marie work as a double will be worth a hundred aides."

"Absolutely! I'll just be her valet."

Lloyd's smile was enough to let Marie collect her soul. She looked rather pleased. *Pushover.*

"Er, Rinko...are we sure about this?" the king whispered, concerned for his daughter.

"Why not?" Rinko shrugged, whispering in his ear. "These miracle

misunderstandings are his whole thing. And we're betting on them working their wonders on Eve herself, Lou."

Marie's mood was rising and falling real fast, while Lloyd just looked motivated.

"Well, might be tough for her," he said. "But if we let him spin his own version of events, and do what we least expect—this just might turn out all right."

"In game terms, he's a powerful unit who never does what either side expects, and what could be stronger?"

Rinko's gaze turned back to Marie.

"I know I'm not one to talk," she whispered. "But you could try acting a bit more like a princess or even just, y'know, a woman."

The king gave his daughter a look of pity.

"I'll line up some etiquette lessons," he said.

"That might help. But he may just not even see her as a member of the opposite sex...which is dire."

Rinko was hitting her where it hurt, and Marie begged her to stop.

"Let's both do our best!" Lloyd cried, all fired up. "I'm the king's proxy! You're the princess's double!"

Each time he said that word, Marie's spirits sank.

Meanwhile, in Kunlun...

At the far end of the continent, demon lords, dragons, treants, and other high-level monsters were a part of daily life. All the villagers, adults, children, and elderly alike viewed monsters as animals, and demon lords as monsters. The threat scale was essentially calibrated a notch below normal. Not your classic boonies.

And hidden at the very back of the village—the Last Dungeon itself.

Countless demon lords were sealed within. Each time they revived, Kunlun villagers swatted them like vermin. Thus, the world remained at peace. Naturally, none of the villagers were aware of this—save their chief, Alka.

Alka was in a house in the village, explaining the origins of the demon lords.

“Demon lords are old colleagues of mine, visitors from another world. In other words, I’m also not from around here.”

Kunlun’s chief was a pint-sized child in white robes, with long black pigtails.

Listening to her lecture was a tanned, handsome boy—Lloyd’s surrogate brother, Shouma.

Next to him was a former Colonel in the Azami army, now boasting a deep tan acquired through hours working the fields. Currently, he served as an Agricultural Adviser to the army alongside his Kunlun farming duties. A regular evangelist, our Merthophan.

Last but not least, a fortysomething whose tan only drew more attention to his bulging, rippling muscles. Virtually all of them were visible now. Having realized that true muscles went hand in hand with fieldwork, he had become Merthophan’s disciple. But he was also the chief of the Ascorbic Domain’s Tiger clan—Tiger Nexamic.

Three men surrounding a little girl—someone looking askance might get the wrong idea. Especially Nexamic.

“I figured you weren’t human,” Shouma said. “But hearing it spelled out like that, I dunno what to say.”

He’d just said quite lot, really. Alka looked disgruntled.

“Shouma! Even if you were onto me, you oughtta at least say, ‘Seriously?!’ with some accompanying wild gesticulation. That’s how these scenes go! You know Lloyd would have nailed that reaction.”

“I knew you were immortal, and you’ve pulled all kinds of crazy stunts right in front of me. ‘Demon lord’ isn’t much of a stretch. I bet every villager *but* Lloyd would say the same.”

“Mm, Lloyd never disappoints.”

“That’s what’s so cute about him!”

“Agreed!”

They clasped hands. Lloyd was always on their minds—so give them this moment.

But with Alka's secret revealed, Shouma *did* have questions.

"So was Dr. Eug also one of them?"

"Mm, yup. She was the dwarf demon lord."

"So there's quite a bit of variation in strength. She mostly did brainiac stuff, making doohickeys."

"Satan's also a demon lord..." Merthophan said, speaking of another ally. "Was he a coworker, too?"

"Yes." Alka winced. "He got hired a year before me. Volunteered for the project out of concern for the future of the environment."

"Mwa-ha-ha! He had seniority? That was not the impression your treatment of him suggested."

With a huff, Alka elaborated.

"He was one of your classic well-educated, useless-on-the-job types. And despite his stated purpose, all he really wanted to do was impress girls. He was trapped in a cycle of getting scolded for poor work performance, then hitting up the nightclubs paying girls to be nice to him, and getting back so late he screwed things up again."

"Your classic disaster, huh? I can see why you and the doctor picked on him." Shouma nodded.

"He was sorely lacking in confidence," Alka added. "But not quite as bad as Lloyd, which seems to have helped him out. Like one of those light novels where you only get serious once you're in another world."

"The type who does better as a teacher. He can adapt to his students, which is why Lloyd looks up to him."

"Mwa-ha-ha! The best trainers are not always the best athletes!"

The conversation was getting off track, so Alka course-corrected.

"Eug had a theory about the power variation thing. Romantics—or airheads—

with big dreams get all the magic, while realists—sourpusses—don't really have much. This is true for demon lords and humans alike.”

Shouma nodded.

“Makes sense! Like how you still think you’ve got a shot with Lloyd in your mid-hundreds. Futile dreams make you super-strong!”

This would ordinarily have made Alka snap and pounce on Shouma, but today she just looked gloomy.

“Truth is, I’ve always had a futile dream.”

She glanced at the white-haired old man on the bed behind her.

The sinister Sou. A hero she’d made out of runes who had failed to vanish once his task was done. He’d attempted to play the villain and hand over the hero’s role to Lloyd...but Eve had exploited that.

Now he hovered between life and death. It wasn’t even clear if he was breathing or not, which saddened Alka.

“My big thing back then was bringing back the dead. Making Sou out of runes was one such attempt.”

“And a very passionate one! But all it did was make Sou suffer.”

“I regret it, and I’m not shirking the blame.”

Alka took a deep breath and began talking about her past.

“I helped Eve back in the day because I had hoped runes would let me bring my little brother back to life.”

“Oh? Can runes actually do that?” Nexamic asked. He didn’t even flex!

Alka shook her head.

“Strictly speaking, making a human being from scratch is absurd. An entirely new human, who looks exactly the same, who has all the dead human’s memories—runes *do* harbor that potential. And Eve was indeed using runes to heal her own medical condition, and to control natural events, like summoning meteors to conquer the world.”

It sounded like runes could do anything. Merthophan frowned.

"But would making a human from scratch really get you your brother back?"

Apparently, he'd hit the nail on the head. Alka spoke like one would in a confessional.

"I worked that out after making Sou. You can recreate their face, give them all the right memories, and still wind up with a completely different person."

"I figured. Two daikon might be alike in hue and shape, yet they'll taste slightly different."

"A farming metaphor, now?" she said, so appalled that she was almost impressed. She recovered quickly. "Ahem, but the way runes work, the magic is influenced by the ideas of the people around them. And those notions can easily change their nature. That instability left Sou trapped in his hero role. My own affections for him remained as well and prolonged his misfortune."

Shouma took issue with that assessment, leaning across the table to get up in Alka's face.

"Sou might have been led around by the hero thing built into his rune settings, and felt like an empty vessel shaped like a man, but as that vessel fought against his fate, it filled with all kinds of things. Meeting me and trying to turn Lloyd into a hero gave him real affection for the boy. We were friends with a common goal."

"Mwa-ha-ha! You sound like two comrades gushing over the same idol!"

It was a bold simile, but Shouma readily nodded.

"Yup, total fanboys. So I'd argue Sou wasn't wholly unfortunate."

"That certainly makes me feel a little better."

Her gloom dissipated, and Alka smiled cheerily again.

"This is between me and Eve. We messed up in our world and caused all kinds of problems in this one. So that also means it's our job to clean up the mess."

At this point, Shouma frowned.

"But given your romance theory, Eve's gotta be pretty strong."

"Mwa-ha-ha! She wants to monopolize the immortality rune and conquer

another world! She might well be more powerful than you, Alka.”

Alka nodded, clearly way ahead of them.

“That’s the thing. I’ve been puzzled over why she can’t use real magic and why her physical strength is nonexistent.”

“She tried to pull a fast one on Sou, so she could just be hiding it?” Shouma suggested. “I generally keep my own strength under wraps to avoid causing trouble.”

Alka held up a hand.

“Not a bad theory, but I’ve met Eve in person and couldn’t feel a thing. If she had power like me, she’d never have beaten around the bush like this. She does love a long-term plan, but when she sees a chance to win, she’s totally down to use brute force.”

Having worn herself out with all this talking, Alka took a breather.

“Mm...and Eug’s pride might have come up with the romantic theory just to explain why she didn’t get much power. *And* there’s always the possibility Eve is just playing us all like a secondhand fiddle.”

“Mwa-ha-ha! Never let your guard down! Or is there some reason she can’t use her full strength? Like how you can’t bench as much when you’re doing kaatsu training?”

Nexamic always started stripping when he brought in a bodybuilding reference, but Alka paid that no attention. She’d figured out how to handle this musclebrain.

“The last time I saw her in our old world, she was already dead. The key to all this might lie there.”

“Ah,” Nexamic said jovially. “Mwa-ha-ha! If she’s dead, perhaps she’s a ghost! Maybe she took over someone else’s body upon arrival in this world!”

“Good one,” Shouma chuckled. “You’re funny, Nexamic. Such passionate humor!”

“Hot jokes, and an ass that looks good in hot pants! That’s what makes me Tiger ☆ Nexamic!”

This middle-aged man was clearly getting carried away.

“A bit too far-fetched there, Nexamic. Right, Chief Alka?” Merthophan asked.

But Alka had her arms folded, deep in thought.

“.....”

“Um, Chief?”

When he called again, she blinked. She’d been *very* deep in thought.

“Oh, sorry. Kinda had to think about that one. She might well be possessing someone.”

“You have a candidate in mind?” Merthophan asked.

“Did you forget?” Alka asked. “We know a demon lord who excels at possession. The one you struggled with—Abaddon. He took over King Azami’s body and got up to all sorts of mischief.”

“How could I forget that?” Merthophan winced.

Shouma had been behind that, and he looked chagrined.

“I thought that power was exclusive to Abaddon,” Alka said. “Since only his soul revives, it takes him less time to revive than the other demon lords. In exchange, it leaves him relatively weak. I assumed that was just his thing.”

“But it wasn’t?”

“I remember how Vritra’s consciousness possessed the cursed belt after Sou destroyed his body, and I started to wonder. Maybe possession is a standard-issue power for demon lords. I haven’t tried it myself, so I can’t be sure.”

“Fascinating, but doesn’t it seem to weaken you? Would anyone choose that option?”

“It may have been by pure chance. Like I said, Eve...President Eva’s heart had stopped. If she was planning to be brain-dead right as we were forcibly transported to this world, she may have become a demon lord without a body to begin with.”

“In which case, who has she possessed?”

“Odds are high it was someone close to her at the time. And we still haven’t found... No, not now.”

Alka caught herself about to get lost in thought again.

“Let’s put Eve’s mysteries aside for now,” she said. “That’s not why I called you here.”

“Then what is it?”

“Lab Chief Rinko says they’re holding a summit in Profen with an eye to exposing Eve’s misdeeds.”

Shouma whistled.

“Right in enemy territory? What a passionate commitment!”

“The cover story is that they’re gathering leaders from across the land.”

“Mwa-ha-ha, reading the charges out in their own camp! Flaunting our intel and our hips!”

He tore his shirt open, striking the Oliva pose.

“And Azami’s sending Lloyd to Profen as the king’s proxy.”

That got Shouma on his feet.

“As the king’s proxy?! Passion!! Gotta get that on film and preserve it for future generations! Sou would be delighted!”

“Sit your ass down, Shouma!”

“But that’s why you called me! To film everything!”

“That, too,” Alka admitted.

Merthophan and Nexamic flipped from curious to impressed.

“You don’t say.”

“Mwa-ha-ha!”

Alka was not about to compromise where Lloyd was involved.

“Up against Eve on her turf... There’s no telling *what* she’ll have prepared. We can’t afford to fail, so I need a favor from you.”

Merthophan straightened up immediately.

“I’d be honored! For Azami, the world, and my beloved farming!”

This guy was now ranking farming over the world itself.

“Mwa-ha-ha! For the world and the chance to flaunt my muscles, I’ll gladly expose myself!”

Meanwhile, this guy seemed to have lost track of the goal entirely. He was already nearly naked, so further exposure would be downright criminal.

“Passion! I got the handycam ready!”

Wrong job, but at least he’s professional.

Alka was rubbing her temples.

Already doing maintenance on his camera, Shouma asked, “So, aren’t you coming, Chief? I figured you’d wanna witness this firsthand.”

“I wish I could!” Alka said, glancing at Sou. “But it’s not guaranteed that Eve won’t try something else with *him*. I’ve gotta stay here in Kunlun, protecting her ultimate goal—the Last Dungeon.”

Sou was sleeping like the dead. Merthophan looked at him and said, “I’m worried about the villagers, too, but...when will he wake up?”

Alka glanced at Sou again, like a doctor examining a patient.

“Not sure. Could be tomorrow, could be years from now. His heart will decide.”

“*Hngg*, but if the world is truly in danger, I do not see him sleeping long,” Nexamic declared.

“I’d almost rather he slept, then,” Shouma said. “I don’t want Sou worrying about that whole hero thing any longer.”

“Mm, Sou will wake not as the hero the people desire, but as a man who’s found a reason to live on his own terms. Until then, I’ll watch over him—since I made him, I owe him that.”

It was rare to see her look this forlorn, so Shouma acted extra cheery.

“Cool beans! You hold down the fort, Chief, and we’ll go savor every inch of Lloyd.”

“Are you daft?! This isn’t fun and games! You’re undercover! It’s a stealth mission! Ears this way.”

All three leaned in, and Alka launched into the details of her plan.

None of them noticed how Sou’s ears twitched each time they said the name “Lloyd.”

Chapter 1

A Moment of Panic: Like You Just Bumped into the Last Person You Wanted to See

The trade route running north of Azami, the main thoroughfare leading to Profen.

Paved to ensure smooth transit, the length of it was dotted with stables, tea stands, and places to rest, as well as shops selling local produce or the like. Similar to a very long, drawn-out shopping arcade.

Wagons laden with produce, carriages carting tourists around, border guards on patrols, exhausted mercenaries heading back to town after a hard day's work—everyone and anyone used this road.

One caravan stood out from the crowd. It was far more imposing and gaudy than any other headed to Profen. The sheer pomp and circumstance was like an inaugural parade—and that wasn't far from reality.

At the center of it—the Azami royal carriage, drawn by dapple-gray horses projecting strength and elegance.

Lloyd and Marie sat within. Lloyd sported a brand-new look. He was wearing neither his simple linen shirt nor his military uniform. Instead, his garments were fit for a king. Vividly colored cloth trimmed with gold thread, a sash that screamed nobility, a voluminous cape that would likely double as a blanket... and Lloyd was less wearing these clothes than awkwardly sitting inside them.

Across from him, Marie was being a real princess—technically, and for the sake of argument. She'd certainly been put in a princess dress, but the reason it just looked like cosplay was because she was failing to hide her true character.

As for the mood...

““.....””

They were as silent as a pair of strangers. Why the awkward silence? Did they have a fight right before they left?

No. The cause lay with the people sitting next to them.

“““.....”””

Selen. Riho. Phyllo. Their eyes were all on Marie, fending her off.

“Um, girls,” Marie whispered, and all three leaned in.

“Marie, raise your hand if you wish to speak.”

“Best to avoid idle chatter. I nearly cut you down.”

“.....*Death cometh.*”

None of this was fair.

“What’s this all about?!” Marie yelped. “Is this a jail wagon?! Phyllo, don’t just slip death threats into the conversation!”

“Given your crimes, the death penalty is guaranteed,” Selen said, with the flinty glare of a veteran police detective. “Abusing royal privilege to create the illusion of wedded bliss... That is a clear charge of Unpardonable Sin if I ever saw one.”

Selen was crying tears of blood as she announced this mystery verdict. Phyllo handed her a handkerchief, sneering at Marie.

“.....You’re lucky we haven’t slapped cuffs on ya.”

Caught in a crime she’d never heard of, Marie protested desperately.

“You volunteered for guard duty! To protect us! Why are *you* the biggest threat?!”

Yes, these girls had sniffed out that the king was trying to lay the groundwork for a future marriage and had pulled every string they could to get themselves assigned as guards.

“Consider yourself lucky you’re still alive, Marie. Once this summit’s over, we will be settling the matter of this cover story once and for all.”

Even Riho was less a guard and more like a heavy from a straight-to-video

film.

"It's not a cover story! We're *exposing* ourselves here, for the Azami Kingdom!"

".....Don't trust anyone who uses that phrase voluntarily." Phyllo shuddered.

"You mean Nexamic, right? I'm not like him!"

Tiger ☆ Nexamic was rather prone to sudden stripping, and all relevant language now made these girls jumpy.

"You've been lazing about, refusing to return to your rightful place, so don't you dare talk about the kingdom now."

"If I was on the jury, that line alone would make me convict, evidence be damned."

Marie felt guilty, and a drop of sweat trickled down her cheek.

And the self-proclaimed love evangelist Selen did not miss that. "That drop of sweat proves you're only pretending to get swept up in this. You have ulterior motives! Back me up, Vritra."

Selen turned to the cursed belt at her hip.

She'd accidentally put the belt on as a child and had spent nearly ten years with it wrapped around her head. An artifact that had given her a dubious moniker: Cursed Belt Princess.

Thanks to Lloyd, the curse had been broken. It had become Selen's trademark weapon, and then the resting place for the soul of the Holy Beast, Vritra.

But as we've already seen, Vritra/Ishikura's soul had fallen into Eve's clutches and was no longer capable of the mindless brownnosing Selen demanded.

Selen frowned down at her belt. "Mm, he's not responding."

Riho and Phyllo both took a closer look.

"What, he hasn't said a word since Hell's Lock?"

".....Is he mad at you?"

Selen scratched her cheek, clearly clueless.

"I may have used him as a handy piece of rope, but he's never been quiet this long before. Chief Alka said perhaps he's possessed the belt too long, and his consciousness is fading."

"In that case, better ask Rinko how to deal with it. She probably knows more."

".....Certainly more than Chief Alka. Marie, set it up."

"Will do. Next time I see her."

As the girls chatted about the belt, Lloyd's eyes were fixed on the window outside.

".....Master, what's wrong?" Phyllo asked.

Only then did his eyes turn toward them.

"Oh, sorry. What were we talking about?"

He clearly hadn't heard a word.

".....Are you nervous?" Phyllo asked, worried about Lloyd.

"Um, well, yeah. Ah-ha-ha."

It sounded like he was hiding something, and Phyllo looked baffled.

Selen was never one to notice social cues and started rubbing Lloyd's back.

"I'm sure he's just motion sick! This'll help you feel better."

The love evangelist would soon move her hand further down, so Riho restrained her.

"Don't go rubbing him so hard you light a fire. But seriously, what's got into you, Lloyd? That cape too hot? Better not become a full-time king then."

Subtly leading his thoughts away from that career—very crafty.

All three were being very nice to him, and Marie looked put out.

"They sure treat you different!"

"Ah-ha-ha, do they?"

Lloyd hadn't been listening, so he settled for a noncommittal chuckle. His gaze soon drifted toward the window again.

What was preying on his mind this time? The proxy thing was certainly stressful, but that was clearly not the only source of his anxiety.

Yes, the real problem was something the king had said just before they set out.

A few hours earlier...

Lloyd was in the castle changing room, getting decked out like a proper envoy.

“A perfect fit!” The girl pushed her glasses up.

The bespectacled cadet, Pamela, had grown up in a tailor shop, and had been put in charge of his outfit for the occasion. Now he was her dress-up doll.

“Wow,” Lloyd said, impressed. “You didn’t even need to make any alterations.”

Her spectacles flashed.

“I recorded your measurements at the festival, but I have outdone myself.”

She draped the cape over his shoulders. The splendor of the outfit—especially that cape—embarrassed him.

“Um, do I have to wear the cape?”

“Why not? Is it too tight? Or is the embroidery chafing?”

“Er, no... I just don’t think it’s me.”

“Hmm,” Pamela said, being very patient. “Perhaps it’ll feel uncomfortable at first. But bear with it. Clothes make the man, just as the role you find yourself in.”

That hit home.

“Okay. It’ll be an experience, at least!”

“That’s the whole joy of cosplay!” She pushed her glasses up again.

That term rather ruined things, though.

And her passionate defense of it just made him wince.

“How does it feel, Lloyd?” the king asked, stepping in. He smiled at the boy in his regal attire. “Oh! It looks grand. You’re good,” he said, turning to Pamela.

“You honor me,” she said, bowing.

With Lloyd all dressed and ready, the king urged Pamela to leave the room.

“Sorry, but I’d like a word with Lloyd in private.”

“No problem, sir. I’ll take my leave. Good luck, Lloyd.”

“Oh, thanks.”

“If you wanna cosplay more, hit me up anytime. You can trust me with anything, drag or otherwise. The Azami PR Department’s doors are always open!” she said, pushing her frames up.

“Uh-huh.”

Having said her piece, Pamela left the room.



“Ho-ho-ho! Her jokes sure are fascinating!” The king smiled.

“I wish she was joking...”

Lloyd knew only too well she’d try and put him in girls’ clothing the first chance she got, so she wasn’t his favorite cadet.

When he was sure they were alone, the king got to the point.

“Lloyd, I think this job will be hard for you, but it’s for the sake of Azami.”

He bowed, flustering Lloyd.

“N-no need for that, Your Majesty! I’ll do my duty as a soldier!”

The king was pleased to hear that. “Good answer. You can take over for me any time you’d like!”

“Any time...? You must be kidding.”

“Ho-ho-ho! I heard you wanted to be a teacher, so I meant *after* that.”

“Um...you really mean it?”

Lloyd seemed very dubious, so the king decided not to pressure him further. He changed the subject.

“You remember what I said about my daughter?”

The king had told him the princess was in love with Lloyd. Never realizing this meant Marie, Lloyd had turned her down through a closed door.

Lloyd nodded.

“Oh, yes. The *real* princess. I remember.”

Realizing Lloyd still didn’t believe Marie was royalty, the king avoided mentioning her name.

“The real princess will be with you.”

“Sh-she will!?”

“Mm,” the king said. “She’s worried about our kingdom’s future. She’s got a good heart...but her concerns sometimes lead her to be rather reckless and take unnecessary risks.”

“Oh, dear.”

“Yes. She ran herself ragged while I was possessed by a demon lord. It makes a father proud, but also scared.”

“Wow, I had no idea.”

“This Profen incident means Azami is in danger again...and I’m honestly afraid she might get carried away.”

The king’s plan here was to do everything but tell Lloyd who the princess was and hope the boy would put the pieces together. It was a distinctly indirect approach. If pushing didn’t work, he’d try pulling...but given all the hints they’d dropped, the fault was clearly half Marie’s.

The king put a hand on the boy’s shoulder, smiling.

“If it comes to that, you’re our best hope. Take care of my daughter.”

“G-got it! I’ll protect her with my life!”

Lloyd saluted and left the changing room. The king’s gaze turned to the window.

“Maria, now you need merely think of the kingdom. Let yourself get carried away. Then Lloyd will finally realize.”

※ Spoiler: Marie was getting carried away, just...not for the sake of the kingdom.

—end of flashback.

So the king had asked him to protect the princess hidden in the company, and Lloyd was worried about that, never realizing the real one was right in front of him.

It would all add up if he could just entertain the possibility, but so long as he was unable to believe a princess could also be a slob, his brain would be busy concocting wild possibilities.

Where could the princess be? On another carriage? I suppose she wouldn’t be here with her double.

There was no double!

But why would she not even say hello? Marie's risking her life for this princess! She could at least sneak in a greeting before we left. Or, wait!

He had an idea. Time for another massive misunderstanding!

The king's second wife will be Marie's mother, Rinko.

That's already wrong, but...Rinko did look young enough to fit the bill.

So the princess might see Marie as a stepsister.

We've reached *this* level of wrong.

And Lloyd was only getting started.

If that stepsister is serving as her double...maybe she feels so guilty about it, she can't even face her! I can't begin to imagine how difficult that must be.

The affairs of other households, especially royal ones, were always so dramatic. Lloyd felt sorry for her.

If Marie learned how many hints he'd failed to connect to her identity, she'd have burst into tears.

Lloyd spent the rest of his ride sympathetic to this yet unseen (lol) princess.

They traveled for several hours, stopping occasionally to rest.

At last, they reached Profen, at the center of the continent.

"So that's the Profen capital? Wow, the walls are really high."

Lloyd's first thought was hardly unusual. The towering castle walls and watchtowers certainly drew the eye. A strange sight, as if the entire country was one big building.

Profen stood at the heart of the continent, founded where two rivers merged. Most inland trade ran through its borders.

The rivers made the soil fertile, which in turn made some farmers and merchants wealthy. Profen was the first to begin calling them "local lords."

And they welcomed bandits and pirates who had returned from the sea, giving them local lord status, charging them with cultivating the lands around Profen, or guarding the kingdom. This unorthodox approach helped protect

them from invasion and sped up their expansion.

That preferential treatment and the tangible results had earned Eve the respect of the wealthy classes, who viewed her as something like a living god. Everyone knew you shouldn't say anything against her where the rich could hear you. Doing so was tantamount to sacrilege.

In recent years, they'd put effort into security, giving citizens ID cards, encouraging immigrants and tourists alike with their safe streets and peaceful people.

Abundant resources, and a knack for converting roustabouts to her side—that's how she'd built a nation. She'd used everything she'd learned as president back in her own world.

"Those are the famous iron walls of Profen. Holes in the walls both allow sunlight in and prevent strong winds from toppling them."

The setting sun dyed the walls red.

"Have you been here before, Riho?" Selen asked.

"A few times for work," Riho said, leaning out the window for a better look. "Profen's super-strict on entrances and exits. It was real hard proving who I was."

Phyllo had been a mercenary, too, and nodded.

"It takes time to print the IDs, and they expire after a set time. And if you lose them, it becomes a huge headache."

"But they offered plenty of high-paying jobs for less competition. The hassle wasn't enough to stop people taking work here. Even if they had to fake their ID."

Riho made it sound like she'd done just that, so no one pried further.

"So they're going to make IDs for each of us?"

"There's so many of us, and it's already getting late."

"Don't worry." Marie *was* a princess. "VIPs get waved right in on faith. If they fight us, it'd be an international incident...but that changes if we make trouble,

so don't."

Lloyd looked impressed.

"Wow, Marie! You've really practiced this double thing. I've gotta keep up!"

"Urgh."

She visibly deflated, and the other girls smirked.

The Azami caravan soon reached the fortress-like walls—and was promptly surrounded by smiling Profen soldiers.

"Azami guests, we do apologize but we need to take a head count."

The man at the window was grinning, but his eyes weren't. Picture a cop writing a traffic ticket.

Everyone tensed up, and Lloyd said, "That's very different from Azami."

"Yeah, we've got guards on trade posts and the castle surroundings, but it's hard to keep an eye on everything like this. They're wound up like a criminal just staged a jailbreak," Riho said. Her merc background was speaking again.

"Azami doesn't sweat entrances much as they try to maintain an image as a good place to do business. But Profen places more emphasis on the safety of their citizens."

"With guards like this, it would be quite difficult for villains to slip inside."

".....The stalker gives her seal of approval."

"Phyllo!" Selen wailed, thumping her with her fists.

Riho rolled her eyes. "Yeah, not the best place for Selen's brand of villainy. Still..."

"The country's *run* by a villain," Lloyd finished for her.

Riho snapped her fingers. "Evil was always in charge, so this strict control just lets her *deal* with anything she doesn't like, without anyone the wiser."

Marie's expression was grave.

"She sounds thorough. And all the heads of state are gathered here...to expose her crimes."

“.....She’s got nerves of steel.”

“The whole thing could be a trap! I’d certainly prepare a few.”

“Thanks for the input, Selen. But, well, nothing ventured, nothing gained. She’s built up quite a tab, Rol’s mess included, and it’s time she pays the piper.”

The atmosphere in the carriage was very much “preparing for war.”

The Profen soldiers finished their inspection, and the caravan rolled on, carrying the company to the VIP gardens.

Soon beautiful stone paths, well-maintained landscaping, and familiar faces sitting around the garden table came into sight.

“Sardin! In! Profen! A king relaxing at the heart of the continent—I must be positively dazzling.”

“.....Ugh.”

Yes, it was the king of Rokujou and his wife/bodyguard, Ubi.

As Sardin grew too boisterous, Ubi did not hesitate to dig her fist into his ribs.

“*Hraughh?!*”

“Keep your voice down,” she hissed. “Hey, it’s been a while, Phyllo—Lloyd, girls.”

Ubi came walking over, and Phyllo ran up to her.

“.....Mom, Dumb Dandy.”

“Ah-ha-ha! You call your father by the affectionate nickname the populace use! Proof of familial bonds! ...Guff!”

The king’s ruddy, middle-aged features abruptly landed on the ground. Behind him was a small-statured girl whose eyes appeared permanently closed.

“Could you quit the dumbo act when you’re abroad, at least?”

That was Phyllo’s sister, and a mage with the Azami royal guard, Mena.

“.....You’re here, too?”

“You know me, Phyllo! I never turn down an invite!”

Stepping on their defeated father, the two sisters clasped hands. Some essential organs might have been about to pop out of Sardin's mouth, but he also looked rather pleased.

"Yo, Mena, whatcha wearing here?"

"I almost didn't recognize you."

Mena was wearing neither her Azami military uniform nor her quirky newsboy cap. She was in full high-class nobility garb. Clearly not comfortable with it, she started fidgeting.

"Uh, yeah, I'm not here for Azami. I'm part of the Rokujou contingent."

Marie frequently had tea with Mena, so she chose this moment to greet her as the Azami princess.

"Quite right, Mena. You are Rokujou's... When we first met, I never imagined this happening. A pleasure."

"Oh, please. No need to act so formally with me. We know each other too well, Marie."



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Sardin had made it back on his feet and was nodding his approval at this display of female camaraderie.

“Sardin asks the same! We had our girl here come along to get some experience under her belt.”

Ubi brushed the dirt off him, then teased Lloyd.

“Well, Lloyd? Did our daughter catch your eye?” she asked, smirking.

Mena turned bright red. “Augh, Mom?!”

But Lloyd simply beamed and showered her with sincere praise.

“She looks amazing! That’s a great outfit for you, Mena!”

“Th-thanks...”

Mena was so flustered, her eyes actually opened. Selen did not miss the signs, and her own pupils flashed wildly.

“Menaaaaa! Why are you turning into a blushing beauty?! We need you to remain a loveable goofball! That’s your type of character!”

Riho was not impressed with this personality swap, either.

“Exactly, Mena. You can’t shirk your goofball duties.”

Mena was sweating profusely.

“The more you ask me to goof off, the harder it gets!”

“Suffer. That is how you atone,” Selen huffed. It had long been a mystery, but what exactly gave her the right to dictate these terms?

As the uproar continued, a new carriage approached.

The gleaming exterior had been constructed with skill; the sturdy wood had been bent with heat. A rugged design prioritizing functionality—and from it emerged the representative for the local lords, Threonine.

“You’re here early, Sardin. Long time no see, Lloyd. Not your usual look, but glad to see you doing well.”

He stroked his impressive mustache, greeting Lloyd like an old friend.

"It's been too long, Threonine. As always, your carriage is magnificent," Sardin said, clearly meaning every word.

Threonine looked pleased. "I used only the finest wood from my forests. And since today is a big moment for us, I went all-out."

"Meaning?" Lloyd asked.

Another familiar face emerged from the carriage...or rather, was thrown out.

"Gahh! Uh, aughhh, Lloyd! Wow, everyone's here."

He might have entered like a trash bag flung from a garbage truck, but he was Lloyd's classmate and Threonine's son, Allan.

"A-Allan?!"

"Why are you here?"

Riho was not exactly welcoming, and that brought tears to his eyes.

"I told you yesterday! I said we'd see each other here!" he wailed from the ground.

Selen looked down her nose at him. "I vaguely remember you wailing about something, but oh, yes. You *are* a local lord. I forgot."

"Coming from you?! The Belt Princess who smeared dirt on our reputation?! Cough cough."

He paused to get the soil out of his mouth, and Phyllo and Mena took their turn.

".....Seems like the dirt's on *your* face."

"Ah-ha-ha, so why the projectile entrance?"

Allan winced. "Uh, well... Gah!"

Someone grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, yanking him to his feet. Behind him in a crimson dress was Allan's bride, Renge Audoc.

"This is our first public appearance together, yet you are still a bundle of nerves! I was forced to resort to an elegant toss into the deep end."

Renge hailed from the Ascorbic Domain and was chief of the Audoc clan. With

arms used to dual-wielding axes, she easily pulled Allan to his feet for a scolding. Rather like an angler holding up a big catch for a commemorative photograph.

“R-Renge...”

“Salutations, all. Oh, Lloyd, what elegant attire.”

Everyone winced for Allan as she calmly greeted them. Even her father-in-law could not help but laugh.

“I’ve long thought his bride should be someone who’d give him that extra push he needed, but...I hadn’t imagined that would be so literal. She’s from good stock, holds real power back home, and gets on with my wife...so we can let these things slide.”

It sure sounded like he was trying to convince himself, but at least he was outwardly supportive.

Not to get sidetracked, but Allan’s mother liked Renge so much that she now traveled to the capital once a month just to hang out. His mother and bride bridging the gap between generations had walled in Allan’s last chance at escaping this situation.

“Allan and I will be participating in the summit as members of the Lidocaine family. We shall expose Eve of Profen’s misdeeds and carve our names into history. Right, Allan?”

“Y-yes...absolutely.”

A wife spewing bold words on enemy ground, and her husband reduced to her yes man. One path to a happy marriage?

“Love comes in all forms!”

“Selen, you’re the last person to know,” Riho said, speaking for everyone.

Yet another carriage arrived.

This one had bamboo curtains and carved wood—very Japanese in style. From it emerged the swordswoman, Anzu Kyounin, a *kiseru* pipe clutched grimly between her lips. She must have been enjoying a smoke with the view outside.

"I saw familiar faces and had the carriage swing on over. I'm the last to arrive?"

Renge curtseyed, one Ascorbian to another.

"Anzu, I am ahead of you in *several* ways."

"Girl...you hammer that point home every time we meet, and it's getting real old."

Renge had never managed to match Anzu in martial arts or rank within the domain, but she had managed to get hitched first, and it rather went to her head. Is that just how some girls fight?

Dismayed, Anzu let out a puff of smoke.

"I'll admit it. I'd love to get married. Just gotta find the right man."

At this point, her eyes happened to meet Lloyd's.

—His honor guard (snort) instantly braced for combat.

"You've got a lot of nerve looking at Lloyd there, Lady Anzu."

"I do not approve, Lady. Not one bit."

".....Mm."

Their eyes were like daggers, and even a master like Anzu reeled back.

"G-gimme a break! I ain't ready to die on that hill."

She bowed out, lacking a trace of the pride the domain's leader should have.

To save Anzu's life and calm things down, Sardin dropped character.

"We can discuss that later. Their general awaits. It's time we introduced ourselves."

"Y-yeah! Don't lose sight of our goal! Put your bloodlust away!"

"My sympathies, Anzu," Threonine whispered. "Everyone's here, so it's time we headed in."

But his words made Lloyd start glancing around frantically.

"What is it, Lloyd?" Marie asked.

“Nothing,” he said. To avoid her gaze, he turned toward the garden.

As he walked, his mind spun.

The king said the princess would be with us. So where could she be? Hmm...

She’s right in front of you, treading on the hem of her dress and about to face-plant.

“Hngahh!”

“Whoa, you okay, Marie?!”

“Er, uh... That was close.”

Once he was certain she was fine, Lloyd tried to straighten himself out.

If I see anyone who could be this princess, I’ll have to tell her the king was worried. He said she tends to take risks, so I’ve gotta keep her safe!

Princess Marie had certainly been in a risky situation just a moment before!

Lloyd already had a misunderstanding that was sure to wreak havoc as they headed in to meet the root of all evil— What miracles would he cause this time?

As they neared the center of the garden, a gentle fragrance wrapped around them.

“Oh? Is that...herbs?”

“How elegant! This must be the herb garden.”

Sardin took a deep breath. Hamming it up, Sardin shouted “Hooo! Hahhh! What a scent! Like me, getting out of the baths!”

“.....Don’t make me picture that.”

Sardin turned his smile toward his sharp-tongued daughter.

“Ha-ha-ha! I’ve heard Eve adores this herb garden...and has a standing appointment to enjoy some tea out here.”

“Maintaining that routine, with the battle tomorrow? How confident.”

“Today we’re merely greeting her—a preliminary bout, if you will. Bring your best game.”

"Mm, Eve is skilled, and tomorrow will hinge on how much we can shake her. Allan, you'll learn much about diplomacy watching King Sardin and the others."

Threonine slapped his son's broad back. The noise was quite loud, and Allan yelped.

"Ow! Dad, shouldn't I be watching you?"

"Uh...I'd love to say that," Threonine said shiftily. "But I... Well, most local lords struggle with her. I'll try to impress you, but I can't make promises."

"Oh, really?" Renge blinked. "Given the mascot costume, I was expecting she was in dire need of a lesson on elegance."

When Threonine couldn't quite bring himself to admit it, Anzu explained the reason.

"Local lords aren't your typical nobility. Most got their titles after striking it rich off the land or trade, or are descended from bandits and pirates that went straight."

"Mm, and all Lidocaines are told we were pirates once, but left that life to build the lumber industry in the mountains."

Riho and Mena both smirked at Allan.

"Ah-ha! That explains his ugly mug."

"I knew you were a criminal!"

Selen was also a local lord, and shared what her father told her.

"My ancestors were merchants and made their fortune in trade. I wonder if my father is also indebted to Lady Eve?"

"Uh, he probably is."

"Why would that be?"

"Because it was Lady Eve's family who gave rich merchants and reformed pirates their titles. They bent over backward to ensure no one turned up their nose at them, giving them opportunities to prove themselves. Even now, she regularly meets with the lords to give them financial guidance. Eve personally helped me out a ton when I was young. She was like a mentor to me."

"So not only do you owe her your status, Profen—and therefore Eve—also has the right to take your titles away. So none of you can go against her."

Threonine did not argue with Anzu there.

"Indeed. Yet, we can't stand idly by while her evil deeds shake the world. I'd rather lose my title than deprive my son and his bride of their happy ending."

"Dad..."

"My!" Touched, Renge took Threonine's hand. "Don't worry, Father! I shall support Allan with elegance!"

"G-glad to hear it. You've got a fine bride, Allan," said Threonine.

Encouraged by this reaction, Renge took it up a notch.

"Even if she strips the local lord title from you, the Domain's Audoc clan will welcome you with open arms. Y'know, that might just make him more dependent, like... If he can't afford to leave my side, he'll never be unfaithful! I'm leaning positive on this one!"

Renge's ambitions got the better of her, and Threonine's eyes went dead.

".....You've got quite a bride, Allan," Phyllo echoed, giving him a sympathetic pat.

"Shut up."

Despite his shudders, Threonine managed to put a positive spin on things.

"Well, with Renge around, Allan need not fear Eve. Arguably the Lidocaine family is safe now! Arguably."

A hard argument to dispute.

"Still, this is Eve!" Sardin said grimly. "She may be intimidating, but she's just as good at ingratiating herself. Be on your guard lest she get her hooks in you. Right, Anzu?"

That earned him a guilty wince.

"She certainly is good at buttering you up. Rationally speaking, that mascot costume should just be creepy...but somehow it only takes a short conversation to feel like you're getting along. I sure did."

“I get that! That’s how it was with me and Sir Lloyd!”

“Anzu, ignore Selen, and keep talking.”

“W-will do.”

Selen was being Selen, but Riho slipped in so fast Anzu looked rather impressed.

“It makes sense that she was just trying to pry information out of me, so I probably oughtta be mad—but I somehow can’t quite bring myself to hate her. In that sense, I might not be any better equipped for this than Threonine.”

“She sets the pace and lets no one get a hold on her. She can be cruel, but she is hard to bear a grudge against. Much like you when you were fighting for the right to succession,” Ubi murmured.

Sardin nodded. “High praise from the wife! My wife has praised me!”

Like a host bringing out a bottle of Dom Pérignon.

Phyllo and Mena both glared at him.

“.....Dumb Dandy.”

“You really are an embarrassment to any daughter.”

Anzu put her arms around their shoulders.

“But that’s how he negotiates. If he can keep that act up and spin Eve’s head around, he’ll be a real asset—and one worth learning from.”

“Learning what not to do?”

“.....I feel like there are less awful tactics available.”

As they snarked, they reached the center of the garden.

The Profen Royal Gardens.

Flowers of every color attracted tourists from all over the world. There were living trees grown to form arches, beautiful carved statues, fenced rose beds full of new colored varieties, flowers laid out in geometric patterns—the place was a wonderland for the eyes.

“Wow, it’s really pretty.”

"The new breeds help show off the country's scientific prowess. She leaves no stone unturned."

"If they're selling tickets, they must be raking it in."

Lloyd, Mena, and Riho all voiced very different takes.

"Lady Eve is in the private garden beyond this. Let's head in," Marie said, and they all followed her lead.

Not long after they passed the STAFF ONLY sign, that gentle fragrance reached their nostrils again.

This was nothing like that tourist trap—this garden's vibe was much more tranquil.

Stones and daises like altars of worship, white chamomile blossoms, purple lavender...

And in the center of it, a bunny costume, one leg raised, elegantly watering flowers. Eve.

"Grow biiig! Moe moe kyun!"

She was posing like a figure skater, watering can in hand—it must have been quite hard on the back, and no one was sure why she was even doing it.

Paying no attention to their stares, Eve busied herself with watering the plants.

"Ina Bau... Whoa! To a quadruple watering axel! Whoops, almost lost my head, too close, too close... Oh my?"

Eve spotted the assembled heads of state and called out to them cheerily.

"Hello, hello! Joy to the world! Are heaven and nature singing? I think they are!"

Classic Eve.

Sardin took the lead. "We do hate to interrupt, Lady Eve. But I am Sardin Valyl-Tyrosine!"

Even Sardin toned down his act a few notches here.

Meanwhile, Eve was acting like she didn't have a care in the world. Totally her usual vibe.

"Don't just stand there! Come on, have a seat, make yourselves at home."

"There aren't any chairs," Anzu snapped. She couldn't help herself.

"Wazzup, Anzy! By all means, sit anywhere. On the lavender, on the chamomile, any place you please. I recommend the mint! Roll over and it feels like you're bathing in toothpaste! Learn what plaque feels like! Not the kind you hang on a wall, but the kind that's on your teeth."

Trying not to get caught in Eve's distractions, Threonine stepped up to greet her.

"Today we're just saying hello before tomorrow's summit."

"So stiff, Threoniny! Come to deliver a warning shot before the declaration of war?"

"Er, not exactly..."

"Then don't worry about it. I'm delighted!"

She shoved a half-empty tea cup in her costume's mouth, gulping down the herb tea within. What a freakish way to drink.

When she was done, the cup emerged again, landing on the table, and she popped a hand out of the mouth to give them a thumbs-up.

"You're all trying to surpass your old mentor! It's my duty to rejoice in that, and then smack you all back down."

She dropped her voice a bit on that last line, and a bead of sweat ran down Threonine's brow.

"Don't you shrivel up on me! You've got your kid here, it's your job to look good. My, is that your son?! I thought there were a lot of you, but you brought a study group along?"

"B-basically."

"I'd better introduce myself, then! I'm Eve Profen. A humble little king in a silly wittle costume! Toodles!"

Having been called out, Allan was forced to step out in front of Renge and bow.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Allan Toin Lidocaine!”

No signs of nervousness, his eyes shining bright.

“I’ve heard of you!” Eve sounded impressed. “The dragon slayer, was it? You’ll be a fine man one day!”

“And this is my wife, Renge Audoc.”

“Your reputation precedes you. Anzy, have you still not found anyone? Should I matchmake?”

She hit where it hurt, even when she was about to face an inquisition the next day. Anzu was already scowling, but she was also impressed.

“Damn, you never do stop prattling. Even when it’s come to this.”

“Eh-heh-heh, you know how you’re big on always being ready for battle? This vibe is how I throw down. Sardin, are those your kids?”

“Yes, my two daughters and my darling wife, Ubi.”

“I’m Ubi.”

“.....Phyllo.”

“Mena. A pleasure to meet you.”

Mena was usually the goofy one, but here she had her eyes fully open. Eve was just that imposing.

“Such nice girls! They don’t look anxious at all. Take better care of them this time.”

“.....!”

That hinted she knew things, and Sardin tensed up. Seeing she’d successfully rattled him, Eve chuckled a little.

Then she turned her attention to the group behind him.

“And you would be Azami’s own..... Mm?”

“Hi, I’m Lloyd Belladonna!”

“.....Hng.”

Eve had assumed the king and his family would be here. Lloyd caught her totally off-guard.

“Um, no king?”

“I’m his proxy!”

Eve became quiet, then squealed inside her costume.

“Nobody told meeeeeeee! This was supposed to be only family! You don’t count! Of all the people he could send!”

She vibrated like a phone on silent. Her muffled shriek was quiet enough that nobody else heard.

Marie was busy introducing herself as “Maria Azami,” but Eve didn’t hear a word of it. And Lloyd was too busy watching her tremble to hear it, either.

“Hahh, hahh... Why in tarnation?!”

“Um, is that a Western accent?”

Eve had been startled into another dialect, which just confused Lloyd.

He not only didn’t fear her, he could unsettle her. Sardin and Threonine saw that as proof that they had a shot.

“I’m not sure how, but Lloyd’s already working miracles.”

“It’s a mystery, but for some reason, Eve’s bulwarks just crumbled.”

When people are mystified, they generally just assume things are working in their favor.

Eve rubbed her forehead, muttering. “Of all people, the one I’m least equipped to... No, maybe this is my chance to get a handle on him. Yeah, he may have burned Euggy, but I’m made of sterner stuff.”

Jinxing yourself real bad there, Eve.

As she mumbled to herself, the rest of the group introduced themselves.

“Hello, I’m his wife, Selen.”

“Rein it in, there. We’re just his guards.”

Eve was half “Of course they’re here” and half “I know.”

“And he’s got the whole pack with him... I figured they’d tag along if Lloyd came, but you really are rather predictable. Fine, fine, the more the merrier.”

This was just adding fuel to the fire, but Eve clapped her hands and gave her guards an order.

“I’m sure they’re all tired from their journeys, so lead them to the castle guest rooms.”

She was clearly trying to get rid of them.

On his way out, Lloyd called back, “See you tomorrow!”

“Yeah, looking forward to it!”

“And I do hope you’ll be forthcoming! I know you’re in charge of a very big country, and we’ll give due consideration to mitigating circumstances!”

“R-right...that’s nice...”

Lloyd was nice, even to the villain. His sheer naiveté upset Eve. She waited till they’d left the garden before exploding.

“That blinding innocence! I can’t handle it! It’s the worst!”

Eve stomped on some blooming chamomile like a temperamental toddler, the white petals dyed orange by the setting sun. The raging rabbit costume ruined what might have been a more picturesque scene.

When her anger faded, her shoulders heaved.

“I can handle this. I said I can handle this. I can handle this. Possibly the best haiku I’ve ever written!”

Not a statement that inspires you to read her past works.

She renewed her resolve. “I’ve got my prey in my own camp, and what could be better? I can have my way with you now, Lloyd!”

She slapped the costume cheeks, both firing herself up and denting the head.

“Death threats aren’t my style...but if *your* life’s in danger, Alky will be all mine.”

Eve huffed a few times, then left the herb garden.

Chapter 2

Genre Shift: Like an Eccentric Cast Turned a Serious Drama into a Farce

“I started by studying up on ghosts.”

The Profen Royal Laboratory. Vritra was working on a project, paperwork in one hand, while Eve was more or less talking to herself.

“I’m busy doing the thing you told me to do,” Vritra said, suggesting she might not want to interrupt.

But Eve’s monologue didn’t stop. She was sitting backward in a chair, arms wrapped around it, elaborating on her actions after arriving here.

“What defines them in this world? How is that different from our old one? And as I researched that, I also analyzed what had happened to me. Possessing Asako’s body left me with so many questions, I ended up like a regular occultist.”

Vritra merely glanced at her. Eve had taken off the costume’s head, and she was wearing a self-deprecating smile on his daughter’s face.

“Some of us were like Lab Chief Cordelia... Rinko, or Alky—their new bodies were based on the original person. Others were like you, Director Ishikura—transformed into a snake named Vritra. Neither applied to Asako, and no other demon lords fit her category—she was the singular exception. And the more certain of that I got, the more nervous it made me.”

“No matter what you look like, being sent to another world alone ought to make you nervous.”

“Get turned into a snake once, and it gives you a new perspective on things!”

She was clearly not as impressed as she sounded, and soon resumed her speech.

“I soon learned that ghosts are a part of daily life here. Less a type of monster than a set of thoughts that linger on. A conjecture, but I believe the existence of magic makes it easier for grudges, traumas, and regrets to get left behind. Location matters, too—graveyards, the sea, places commonly associated with death.”

“Shared perceptions again? Runes work on the same principle.”

“Exactly!” Eve cried, clapping her paws. “My obsession with prolonging my life worked, just like the strong wills that gave you powerful magic and turned you into demon lords. I was on the brink of death, but it had not quite reached my brain—while shock had Asako’s mind closing in on itself. All these factors combined to create the unique case you see before you. Amazing, yes?”

“Hard to agree when someone is possessing your daughter.”

Eve just laughed at that, not a trace of guilt.

“Hardly my fault! And there’s a big downside. Since there are two souls in here, the mind and body don’t sync up, and I’ve got barely any magic. I’d love to get out of this body if it were only possible. And I do mean that.”

Eve was now playing with his daughter’s cheeks, stretching them out, and Vritra looked rather upset about it.

“I founded Profen to help collect the wild demon lords, salvage what runes we could, and conduct my research in peace. Rokujou excelled at magic research, so I took them in and asked them to study necromancy. But what they learned made them ban the whole discipline and abandon their research. Otherwise my new body would have been done by now!”

Feet swinging, she shook her head sorrowfully. Like a girl who failed to score concert tickets to her favorite idol group. But what she spoke of was truly dire.

“That case really was a disaster. I had to bribe my way through the upper branches of government and send in the mob to even get research resumed in secret. Thanks, Riho’s sister!”

“You’re suddenly talkative,” Vritra said. “What brought this on?”

Eve’s countenance darkened. “Lloyd Belladonna’s here.”

“Oh? Is he?”

“He’s a proxy for the king of Azami. Way to pull the rug out from under me! No subtlety— Every question was a fastball down the middle of the strike zone. It’s hard to deal with!”

Vritra finally understood her actions. All of us want someone to listen when we’re reeling from a nasty surprise.

Eve might have been a skilled politician and a dastardly villain, but Lloyd’s miracle misunderstandings and purity levels still shook her—and Vritra grinned.

“Ah-ha. And you needed to bend someone’s ear about it?”

He’d hit the nail on the head, and Eve popped her costume head back on, avoiding eye contact.

“If you get anxious, best to vent it as soon as possible. That’s one secret to my success back in the old world. No matter what happened or how famous I got, if I saw any sprouts of trouble, I dug them up and scattered weed killer everywhere. I’m working hard right now! Getting myself ready to face the fire! Huh, I sound like a protagonist.”

“Not a claim the villain often makes.”

“Fair.” Eve folded her arms, thinking. “Lloyd is the personification of everything I’m worried about. But this might be my best chance to rid myself of him...”

Exactly what she’d concluded after rolling around in her garden.

“That all sounds ominous,” Vritra said, frowning.

Eve didn’t seem to hear him. She just nodded to herself.

“I wondered if talking to someone would help me reach another conclusion... but I’m back to this. It doesn’t seem like Alky or Lab Chief Rinko are here... They’re likely busy guarding the holy sword and the Last Dungeon.”

This monologue had not been just venting—by speaking her plan aloud, it helped her organize her thoughts, and rework her plan.

“Profen is *my* territory. If this was a horror movie, today’s new arrivals would

be poor travelers who've unwittingly stepped into a haunted house."

Eve cackled, but Vritra was a B-grade horror movie fan, and immediately dismissed her metaphor.

"In that case, several of them will live through this."

The kind of movies where cars never start when you turn the key, you're guaranteed to trip as you flee the monster, and if you look in a bathroom mirror or window glass—you'll come face-to-face with a nightmare.

Eve brushed off Vritra's comments, chortling.

"That's fine! Let them run. I only need *one*. I guess that makes this more of a thriller than a horror film."

"Who's the one?"

"Lloyd, naturally."

Eve's voice grew abruptly grim, and she followed it with an even more dire proclamation.

"I'll take Lloyd Belladonna hostage. By any means necessary. If I have to break his legs or gouge out his eyeballs. As long as he lives, she'll do as I say."

".....Can you, though?"

"These things tend to work out. I had a hunch it might come to this, so I tricked—*asked* for Eugy's cooperation. And I prepared a range of options. Anti-Kunlun weaponry."

Eve hopped to her feet and went for Vritra's weak point.

"Don't breathe a word of this to anyone. If you bump into any of them around the castle, pretend you don't recognize them. And don't you dare betray me. Remember, Asako's body is in my hands."

With that last threat, Eve headed out, feet squeaking.

Once the outlandish rabbit costume was out of sight, Vritra sighed.

"Is she blabbing everything to make me feel guilty? Like I'm an accomplice? She always was manipulative."

Either way, he could do nothing as long as she had his daughter. Betraying his friends certainly hurt...

But then a thought struck him, and Vritra grinned.

“A horror movie?”

Everything about his current predicament smacked of B-movie plotting. He could just see it—as the night wore on, one person after another getting picked off, leaving only mangled bodies behind.

“But—but still, Eve. President Eva! Your horror movie cast includes one comedian.”

The moment you threw Lloyd Belladonna into a role, the horror movie was likely to turn into an absurdist comedy where sharks showed up for no reason. Imagining that, Vritra couldn’t suppress a chuckle.

“He turns tragedy into comedy. He makes the director want to turn a bad end into a happy one. That’s the sort of actor he is.”

He’d witnessed these miracles firsthand as the cursed belt, and he knew this to be true. He decided to sit back and wait, looking forward to the hijinks to come.

“There’s a classic horror movie trope, the regular dude who just happens to grow up in a temple. In this case, he just happens to have grown up in Kunlun. I used to sneer at such a convenient plot twist—but now that it affects me, it’s very reassuring.”

He’d have to write a letter of apology to whoever invented that trope. With that, he turned his attention back to the documents in hand.

The guesthouse within the Profen Palace was spacious enough to allow political and business discussions without fear of eavesdroppers—it even had a stage for plays and concerts to amuse those staying here.

The interior design was sleek, but not ostentatious. The table was covered in starched cloth.

Silver candelabras were placed at even intervals, their soft flickering lights illuminating the room. Polished wine glasses reflected that light, adding to the

magic. The silverware and napkins enhanced the effect.

And the finishing touch—a huge bay window overlooking the gardens. The sun had long since set, but there were magic light stones set around the garden, their glow delighting the eyes.

Lloyd was among the guests staying here. The concierge led them to their seats—each chair an antique. The seats were well-padded and comfortable, but also so obviously expensive it was hard to feel comfortable sitting in one. The cadets were all feeling out of their element.

“Azami has a guesthouse, too...but I’ve never seen a garden like this. Those lights really do turn it into a work of art.” Marie sighed deeply, impressed.

“So much care went into the illumination. Every shadow meticulously calculated.” Allan also sighed. He might be on a slightly different track—that film shoot in Rokujo really got him hooked on stage lighting.

They had all intended to eat a light meal, have a drink or two, chat and then retire for the night...so the formal banquet seemed a bit much.

Threonine stroked his mustache, impressed with Eve’s tactics.

“A light meal, she said. This excessive show of hospitality is meant to intimidate.”

“Eve leaves no stone unturned,” Sardin added. He glanced down the table at Lloyd’s group. “But I suspect *we’re* not her targets.”

The younger guests were all looking very nervous, like they had headed to the local pub only to find a black-tie affair. Even Mena looked unsettled.

“Likely trying to do a number on the kids, especially Lloyd,” Ubi whispered, clearly worried. “And it’s obviously working. Lloyd’s a mess.”

Those jitters were undoubtedly pleasing Eve to no end. She was in full evil rich lady mode. The way she toyed with the bow tie she’d added to her costume was particularly despicable.

They hadn’t asked, but she chose this moment to explain the reason for the banquet.

“Doesn’t everyone dream of inviting the kids over for a luxury dinner and

watch it blow their minds?"

"Lying comes as easy as breathing to her," Threonine said.

"We can't let our guard down for a second, Threonine. Anzu."

"Nope."

Anzu had her legs crossed, recovering her usual brassy attitude.

Eve had accounted for that side of her and merely chuckled at the sight. She certainly had the upper hand right now.

And soon, food started coming out. Each dish was exquisite, brimming with the bounty of the seas and mountains— Even an amateur cook could tell how good this was.

"Never been big on formality, so I had 'em ditch the courses."

But the way the servers smoothly explained the roast duck or tuna carpaccio was quite formal.

Using unfamiliar words was a classic intimidation tactic. Plenty of people found it hard to maintain their usual aplomb in the face of erudition.

But this tactic backfired in the face of Lloyd's simple love of cooking.

"Oh? I've never heard of cooking things that way! Wow, I *thought* it looked poached!"

"Ah, um. Quite. Glad I could surprise you."

He meant every word. Not a trace of flattery—just a desire to learn. It never occurred to him that he was being intimidated. He was simply impressed by the good food.

"Oh! I thought it smelled smoked. But a board soaked in salt water laid directly on the griddle...?"

Lloyd could get very intense when it came to the subject of cooking, and he soon forgot to be nervous. Eve saw her plans falling apart— You could tell even through the costume.

Once Lloyd stopped worrying, everyone around him followed suit. He was the heart of the team. Marie was never one to let a good drink pass her by and was

already clinking glasses and knocking them back.

“Oh, that’s good! Excellent vintage! This dessert pairs well with it. A watermelon rind used as a bed for spiked fruit salad? Lloyd, you’ve gotta make this!”

She’d gone straight for the sweets, a classic alcoholic move.

“W-well, glad to hear it. I’ll send a bottle to your room later... Holy moly.”

Eve was now just openly aghast at Marie’s audacity.

A chef and a drunk—two irregularities that totally threw a wrench in her schemes.

Not missing a beat, Sardin called out, “Not happy Lloyd and Marie are enjoying themselves, Eve?”

That question pulled out of her funk.

“Why would I be unhappy? Nothing more delightful than seeing the young make merry.”

“Really? Can’t tell that by looking at you. I thought you were rather annoyed! I suppose that was my mistake.”

“Glad to hear you weren’t trying to use food as an intimidation tactic!” Threonine agreed.

“Threonine, the summit is *tomorrow*,” Eve growled. “Attempting to trade barbs here will just ruin the booze.”

The temperature around them lowered noticeably, but...

“This wine’s the bomb! Hope you got a white! Ya do? Yippeee!”

“Oh? This cream sauce is made with porcini? It pairs great with this linguini.”

No matter what conversations they had, Marie’s booze would never sour, and Lloyd was far too deep in chef mode to hear a word of it.

“Um, Lady Eve, can I get the recipe for this sauce? Unless it’s a kitchen secret, of course!”

“Er, uh...go right ahead.”

She couldn't exactly intimidate someone busy prying into her recipes, and that left her flummoxed.

Not one to stand for that, she clapped her paws. A butler swooped in, bowing low.

She whispered, "It's a bit early, but call them in."

"At once, ma'am."

The butler merely made eye contact with another, whose eyes flashed—like secret agents acting as bodyguards for a VIP.

Shortly after, the magic stones in the garden went out, leaving only the flickering lights of the candles.

Anzu put her hand on her sword hilt, growling in the sudden darkness. "What's this?"

"Lights out?" Riho was equally poised for emergency action. She dropped the half-eaten shrimp, scanning her surroundings. "Ain't no time for fancy grub!"

Meanwhile Phyllo was still stuffing her face like a chipmunk.

".....Mmph."

"You! Are on guard duty!"

".....Mph."

"Don't stuff yourself too full to even communicate!"

Before Riho could launch into a full-on tongue-lashing, the other problem surfaced.

"I agree! I will guard Lloyd's privates with my life, so everyone else look the other way so no one can interrupt!"

Selen used the cover of darkness to go for the grope. At this point, it was just a running gag.

"Phyllo, Lloyd's safety is your top priority."

".....Roger that."

The group acted swiftly to save Lloyd from wanton advances. Eve thoroughly

enjoyed the commotion for a moment, then called out.

“Don’t panic, it’s just the start of a little entertainment.”

“Meaning?” Sardin crooked a brow.

“Exactly! I’ve asked the Cirque du Aldehyde to give a captivating live performance.”

That told him her intent, and he clicked his tongue.

“If her control slips, she interrupts the flow and forces it back into her hands,” Threonine growled, crossing his arms.

Like a basketball coach who knew just when to call a time-out, Eve shook up the pace. They had to respect the skill.

—*tap, tap.*

Heels clicking, a lady in a blue dress came out. Her bow was so graceful, it made everyone straighten up.

She moved to the grand piano, her fingers dancing across the keys.

An enchanting melody pulled at their heartstrings, forcing all to listen. Her heart was in the performance, and it drew them in.

“Such fragility! Such sorrow! It cleanses the heart!” Eve said. Her heart was *not* in her words at all.

Anzu glared at her.

“Mm? What is it, Anzy? You’re missing the music.”

“Fine, fine, I’ll listen. Damn... *Hngg?*”

.....*Slap.*

Anzu had turned back. But as she did, she realized the notes were punctuated by a fleshy sound that seemed wildly out of place.

.....*Ker-slap.....Ker-slap.....Ker-slap.*

It wasn’t clean enough to be a tap dance. This was a wetter sound that gradually grew more insistent and impossible to ignore.

.....*Slapitty slap slap!**Slapitty slap slap!* *Slap-ap-ap!*

What could that be? Where was it coming from? Was a faucet leaking? Everyone looked baffled, and then the performer burst in.

“Mwa-ha-ha! An impromptu performance! An impromptush performass! Get it? Or should I make that pun again?”

Slapitty slapitty slap slap! (He was drumming on his own buttocks.)

“A streakeeeeer!”

Yes, the source of the sound came from the owner of the world’s most charming hamstrings, Tiger Nexamic! He was slapping his own behind, wearing nothing up top, and sporting short tights with a hell of a wedgie. His butt was a bit sweaty—no wonder it sounded wet.

“What in the—”

The rhythm didn’t even match the melody. It even got to the host, Eve.

“What is he doing? Disgracing the domain again?”

“Put your pants on, Tiger!”

Anzu and Renge spoke at the same time, sounding disgusted. Yet the man paid that no attention and kept pounding his posterior to the sounds of the piano. His voice soared above it like a poem read mid-concert, which was extra galling.

“Mwaha! Listen, friends. For some time, I’ve been part of this circus. At first, they turned up their noses and tushes at me, but I melted their hearts a little at a time!”

“You just kept sticking your butt in, then?” Anzu scoffed.

The pianist looked ready to cry, refusing to turn her eyes his way. It was very professional of her to keep playing despite the intrusion of a peculiar posterior percussionist.

But her sheer skill meant you could read every emotion she felt in the performance—sad, shattered, longing for help. No wonder the performance had shaken them. She was extremely shaken herself!

Her quiet entrance had stemmed from a deep desire to not get involved.

As everyone came to terms with that—the second assassin entered.

Rat-tat-tat-tat.....

A callous snare drum riff, heedless of the scene. Nexamic kept his butt-banging going while calling out like he was introducing his band.

“Mwa! Ha! It’s time for a charming show from the members of our circus crew! Please ☆ enjoy!”

As he slapped his ass invitingly, a clown-like man came out, riding on a ball while juggling. The red and white pins danced deftly.

Why clown-like? Allow me to explain.

This man was wearing clown makeup...but otherwise, only a loincloth. If we were to claim that this was a clown, the rest of the world’s clowns would take issue with us. Those poor souls must keep smiling no matter what happens, so out of respect, we’ve changed our terms.

Anyway, the loincloth clown was—you guessed it, Merthophan.

“Presenting! Traditional! ☆ Clown! ☆ Style!”

For the record, no such tradition exists.

Looking closely, those pins were actually carrots and daikon. There was still dirt on them, so they were likely just harvested.

“Each is a different size and shape, yet he’s juggling them anyway... Subtle technique at work!” Lloyd gasped, always one for details. Merthophan’s juggling was just that good.

A third person entered, aimlessly tapping on a snare drum, her eyes beyond dead.

“Colonel Choline... I didn’t see her around, but I guess this explains why,” Riho said.

Selen and Phyllo reached the same conclusion.

“The Azami army’s infiltrated the circus, slipping more aid our way.”

“.....Likely the plan, but is that the proper word for it?”

This was less infiltration and more usurpation.

"If it was just Merthophan and Nexamic, I could see them getting caught up in the heat of the moment and joining a circus, but if Colonel Choline's here, odds are much higher Rinko or Chief Alka asked them to help."

".....Yes, if it was just those two, anything's possible."

In a sense, the girls had faith in the loincloth man and bodybuilder's natures.

But everyone here knew they were extra muscle in case anything went wrong in Profen.

Meanwhile, Anzu and Renge were giving Choline and her dead-eyed snare-drumming looks of pity.

"She was likely told she'd get to work with Merthophan and looked forward to it."

"But then discovered she'd be following muscles and a loincloth clown around. She's more a clown than he is, poor thing."

As they talked, the show continued. They were followed by a beast tamer—more conventionally dressed in a silk hat and tuxedo, and holding a whip.

He had dignity, girth, and a beautifully curled goatee. He was likely the actual circus ringmaster.

But his expression was less animal wrangler than soldier bound for the front lines. He was sweating profusely, and everyone could tell he believed his very life was on the line.



All gulped, wondering just what fearsome creatures might enter.

“Hi, I’m a wild thing.”

“Wuzzup! Beast mode!”

Instead, it was Satan and Surtr. Satan was in his second form, a blue lion. Arguably that did count as a fearsome creature, but lions didn’t have those pitch-black wings or speak human languages, so it was impossible to see him as anything but a demon lord.

And no matter how famous the circus, no matter how many trials he’d faced —that would unnerve the hell out of any ringmaster. He clearly wanted to run for the hills, but sheer professionalism kept him here.

“If I flee now, I can never make it up to the beasts I’ve tamed...”

Mindful of the man’s nerves, Satan tried to be nice.

“Uh, Ringmaster, no need to sweat this. We’ll follow your instructions.”

“Eep! Sorry!”

The last shred of dignity vanished.

Figuring he was too far gone, Merthophan took over.

“Time for the ring of fire! Surtr!”

“On it!”

Surtr opened his mouth and blew out a stream of flame, which formed a ring in the air. As the demon lord of that particular element, he could do that as easily as veteran smokers could blow smoke rings.

“Gonna jump through that, Ringmaster.”

“Oh. Please!”

“Hup!”

“Lovely! Nice jump!”

He sounded like someone out golfing with his boss. The ringmaster might be dressed like a beast tamer, but he was clearly feeling more like a new hire being dragged around the course far too early in the morning.

As this routine played out, Eve clapped her costume hands a bit harder than before, failing to conceal her irritation.

The butler rushed over, and Eve hissed, “Explain!” That one word contained volumes.

He seemed rather perplexed himself, but he did his best.

“I asked about the discrepancies, and they said they were trying new things.”

“New as in the emperor’s new clothes? This is practically a striptease!”

“Mwa-ha-ha! Wedgie whammy!”

“Farmer’s juggling is the best in the world!”

“I take it back,” Eve said, a stickler for precision. “A striptease would be far more dignified.”

“I feel sorry for the ringmaster,” the butler said, mopping his brow. “The regular circus staff led the way, Lady Eve. Your orders were to let them right in, so we did.”

“Hngg.”

Eve had forgotten that standing order, and she became silent.

“B-but...they’ve got a muscle guy and loincloth freak and a talking lion! Even with that order in effect, did nothing strike you as weird?”

“If they’re not part of a circus...what *are* they?”

“Point taken.”

There was no arguing with that, and Eve was forced to concede.

Eve’s plan to put Lloyd in his place with a banquet was entirely upended by the muscle-loincloth circus troupe, and ended in failure.

And the buttocks cadence left everyone present—not just Eve—with psychological damage and turned the delicious meal to sand in their mouths.

After the banquet, everyone gathered in the guesthouse lounge for tea. Possibly to rinse the tush-tainted meal out of their mouths.

“Hmm! Lloyd does make a *fine* cup of tea!” Sardin cried, totally in the

moment.

Threonine, however, was still on high alert.

“You’re confident, Sardin. I can’t help but squirm... Where has my fool of a son gone?”

“Allan?” Anzu had an idea. She looked up from her cup, wincing. “Renge dragged him off for a palace date. Like this isn’t enemy ground at all.”

“Ah...well, if Renge’s with him, there’s not much danger.”

Next to Sardin, Ubi looked rather taken aback.

“We can’t explore the palace with total freedom, but I didn’t expect that to begin with. I mean, this is Profen.”

“Like the ID card and inspections. If they say a section’s off-limits, we ain’t getting in,” Riho said.

“It shows confidence in her security,” Marie added. “She knows they won’t slip up.”

“That’s all true,” Mena said. “But I bet she’s letting us roam to see what’ll we do.”

“Well put, Mena! My daughter!”

“Get off me, Dumb Dandy.”

Lloyd was watching with a smile, and Phyllo whispered, “.....Take a seat, Master.”

“Oh, right. I should.”

“.....Why are you so fidgety?”

He scratched at his cheek.

“Oh, um. I mean, this is enemy territory. Should I not be nervous?”

Marie sympathized. “I get that! You’re fine as long as you’re busy, but it catches up when you try to relax.”

Marie had been relaxing and sipping tea for quite some time, so she was not practicing what she preached.

“I was absolutely convinced Marie’s butt had fused with that chair.”

“Yup. So what happened to the circus and their clowns?” Riho inquired.

“I asked,” Anzu said. “Since they had wild animals with ‘em, the circus is staying elsewhere. Not that far off— If anything goes down, they’ll come running.”

“Unlikely as it is, should anything untoward happen to us, it’s reassuring to have another team present.”

Threonine’s mind was always on worst-case scenarios, so their entrance had really taken a weight off his shoulders. Likely a major reason for their infiltration.

Lloyd sat down, but he was still clearly antsy.

“What else are we doing today?” he asked.

Sardin started massaging Lloyd’s shoulders, trying to help him relax.

“Mm-hmm, you know... Get plenty of rest, prepare for tomorrow.”

“Yes, that’ll be the main event,” Threonine said, trying not to pressure the boy. He was just as devoted to the lad, and always gentle. “We’ll settle everything at the summit. At best, read over your notes one more time before you sleep.”

“Yup. Let these old farts handle the tough questions,” Anzu added. “You just speak from the heart, tell them what you think. That’s the best way to reach people.”

Ubi nodded. “People who are used to playing mind games tend to struggle with candor and honest questions.”

“They do?”

“.....They do.”

“You excel at that, Lloyd.”

The Quinone sisters made him blush.

At this point, Allan and Renge returned.

“Pardon our absence, all. We have returned.”

“Ah-ha, keeping them fires burning?” Anzu teased. “How’d it go?”

Renge looked disappointed. “They would not let us be alone together. A most inelegant escort was watching our every move.”

“I figured. We gotta watch ourselves whenever we step outside the guest house.”

Anzu had encouraged their date as a means to scout the lay of the land. Renge had probably just wanted to enjoy the date.

“Whew... I’m noticeably thinner...”

Between the guards and Renge, Allan’s last nerve was fraying. He *had* visibly lost weight.

“Have some tea, Allan. Renge, it’s your favorite kind.”

“Oh, thank you, Lloyd.”

“Elegantly brewed. You never disappoint.”

Allan must have been thirsty, because he knocked it back. Then he started reporting what they’d seen.

“We were able to see just about every part of the castle, surprisingly. They had very friendly guides leading us through each area, the real VIP treatment. In a very different sense than I’m used to.”

“Your guides were there to watch what you did, then.”

Allan nodded.

“Anzu,” Renge said, looking grave. “They’re *good*. The guides, the guards behind pillars, in shadows, behind bushes, underground—they were watching from every angle. There was no chance to make out at all. Inelegant!”

“Your father-in-law is right here!” Allan shivered as if he’d narrowly escaped danger.

Anzu looked appalled, but Selen offered encouragement.

“You can do better, Renge. Sometimes watchful eyes merely add to the thrill.

Show off to them—make it a fait accompli.”

“S-Selen...ya speak the god’s truth!”

Even coming from a god, we reject that advice.

Anzu abandoned the idea of arguing, and just rested her cheek on her palm. Marie did her best to get everyone back on topic.

“W-well, point is, dangerous people are everywhere.”

She meant that last word. Even on their side—but she didn’t spell that out. It was unclear if she was being nice or had just given up.

“Yeah, probably advisable we stay on our best behavior. Selen, be still.”

“.....Be still.”

“I am *well* aware! Sir Lloyd, let us be still together. At least, the parts visible above the covers.”

“Ah-ha-ha, seconds after we warned her, too. How many filters does her brain have?”

They had to laugh.

Except for Lloyd, who was diligently circling the room, occasionally glancing out the windows.

“What’s wrong, Lloyd? Looking for someone?”

“N-no...but where could she be?”

Yes, Lloyd was still concerned about the yet-to-be-seen princess. If their movements were being watched, all the more so. The king *had* said she was reckless and prone to getting carried away.

The king asked me to look after her, so I can’t just leave her at the mercy of these dangerous guards. Should I go look for her? I hope she’s not doing anything too risky.

Naturally, the king had been applying those adjectives to the real princess (if you could actually call her one), Marie.

“Right on! Let’s go to our rooms, pull up the covers, and get drunk!”

Marie, who was inexplicably enthusiastic about her imbibement.

“Don’t drink too much, or you’ll regret it tomorrow. But...enough to help relax should be fine.”

“I doubt it’ll be poisoned, but just in case, the elegant solution would be to have Anzu taste-test it.”

“Yo, what, Renge? If she poisons her guests, we won’t need to make accusations, it’ll be an instant incident. Which might help us, really.”

“Agreed! Let’s drink.”

The grown-ups seemed to be all-in on that.

“I can’t keep up with these lunches. I’m going back to my room.”

“Good idea. Let’s have a pajama party.”

“.....Mm.”

The company began to scatter, finding their own ways to prepare for tomorrow.

Late that night, Lloyd took action to search for the absent princess to tell her of the king’s concern.

No one could have predicted he would first encounter Eve, attempting to capture him.

Or that this would be the start of Eve’s downfall—Lloyd bringing disaster she could never have predicted.

Strap in, for Eve’s villainy is about to go off the rails.

Eve’s costume kept *secrets*.

There were many reasons for it, but a major one involved ruling a country without anyone realizing she was immortal.

To justify this, she established a precedent where each king wore a similar costume, and the royal family, fearing assassination, never showed themselves in public.

It was a very bizarre, unnatural lie to spin, but Eve had held onto power. Her

support was so strong no one thought better of it. In fact, they thought it rather strange that other kings didn't wear costumes. Did they not realize the risks? She had redefined normality and won the war.

But the other reason for the costume—and the more important one—was to conceal the fact that President Eva was possessing Asako Ishikura's body from Alka and the other lab scientists.

This body was borrowed through unscientific means, and she wasn't sure what would cause Asako to awaken. As she investigated the ins and outs of her current state, she wanted to eliminate as many external factors as she could, and that led her to hide her identity.

Once she had a degree of control on Asako's mind and could keep her comatose, she then kept hiding things just in case they proved useful later. Also, the mascot thing had caught on, and she couldn't take it off if even she wanted—like a comedian whose signature joke involved a distinctive outfit.

She said, "If things get this weird, you just gotta have fun with it!" Eve Profen was all about excess and hedonism.

Before founding a country in her old world, she had been the latest in a long line of successful fortune-tellers. The bigwigs of every big country trusted her, and they often consulted her on what paths their nations should follow.

She practiced everything from astrology to palm reading, and the knowledge she'd accumulated would put the average politician to shame. She knew the statistics underlying those fields, the psychology required to reassure your clients, the political science needed to adequately advise a government.

She said what they wanted to hear, encouraged them when they needed it, left the big decisions up to them, staying well clear of blame—Eva herself once bluntly called herself a blue-blooded cabaret girl.

That work persisted after she became head of the household...and she grew increasingly bored with it.

Then one day, she decided to change her approach.

At first, it was just a game. How much of the world could she make dance in her palm by manipulating her clients?

Fueled by curiosity, Eva's natural hedonistic streak and innate immorality quickly got her fingers in deep in world affairs. She'd force politicians to act, drive them to their downfalls, cause wars and stop them, then use the "favor" to call in more.

Eva was soon a central figure in the world's economy, surrounded by those who wanted to tap into that vein, and use her for their own gain.

They were like ants on a sugar spill—and that was Eva's goal. Like an anteater luring her prey in with sugar.

What she wanted wasn't money or men, but information.

As she played at making the world dance for her, she used her position to gather all manner of intel, playing those cards as needed.

And one day, that led her to hear about an island with a mysterious power.

Most would have raised an eyebrow at this, but Eva had long made her living in the supernatural arts. Smelling potential, she launched an investigation.

The results were a huge success. She found a place radiating unnatural, inexplicable frequencies, which gave her an idea.

"I'm going to found a new country here on this island, with myself as president. If we can get to the bottom of this power, I can monopolize everything it leads to."

At that point, there was no one capable of stopping her. Everything fell into place, and that's how a simple fortune-teller became president.

And as ruler, she used her connections, gathering talented personnel to research the mysterious power.

Rien Cordelia had proven a bit of an outcast—too talented, too unpredictable—but with her in charge, Eva founded the Cordelia Research Institute.

When their research showed this power was what the ancients had called *magic*, Eva's heart danced. "Such a fascinating way to make the world mine!"

If things went well, she might even gain immortality. Eva was positively giddy.

But her smooth sailing wouldn't last.

No one could stop her—except her own body. She was getting on in years but no less energetic. And just as she hoped to make herself young again, she found her body ravaged by a serious illness.

An illness modern medicine could not cure.

It was depressing, but she soon shook it off, and took action.

“If god sent me a trial, then by getting through it, I shall become this world’s new god! Challenge accepted! Come on, immortality!”

She changed the focus of their magic research from world conquest to overcoming death.

She found a girl with the same condition—Asako Ishikura—and a father desperately searching for a cure—Jin Ishikura—and invited them to the lab. Claiming she wanted to solve the world’s environmental problems, she launched a big new project and gathered the best of the best—which included Alka, Eug, and Seta.

Outwardly, they were securing rare metals to slow global warming, prevent famines, control natural disasters, and heal tricky illnesses. Yet, the results were weaponized meteors, self-sufficiency in case of economic sanctions, at-will rainfall to secure drinking water and flood enemies, and a means by which she could heal herself. All endeavors that suited President Eva’s personal goals.

And in the new world, she became Eve. But her goals never changed. All she ever wanted was to play her game to the bitter end.

Late that night, outside the Profen guesthouse.

An unadorned exterior, like the average luxury apartment complex. Eve was outside, thinking about the past.

“Ultimately, we never completed the rune to cure illness, but getting sent to another world saved my neck. I’m grateful to both Eugy and Asako for that.”

She wasn’t wearing her usual rabbit costume and was strolling the gardens as Asako. In her hands, she held a mysterious hypodermic needle. The green liquid within it was glowing—obviously bad news.

“Alky did finish creating the healing rune once she got here...but after I turned

into a demon lord, not only was my illness cured, I became immortal. I didn't even need it! It's all good."

Eve was talking to herself a lot. She was clearly worked up. That sinister grin on that young girl's face was quite disturbing.

"Still, I've been stuck in Asako's body this whole time, unable to let my guard down. Fantasy, *pfft*. I'd much rather lord it over everyone back home. I can't abide not achieving my original goal!"

She had convinced Eug and Alka this *was* their world, just transformed. It was part of her plan to make them put down roots.

"But I'm not liking this new motivated Rinko thing. My plans with her went great at first. I figured if she had a kid, it would make her lose all interest in going home, but she might have bought into this mom thing a bit too much."

Eve intended to leave this world in such upheaval it would be a millennium before anyone could chase after her. But Rinko's beloved daughter and husband lived here, which made her want to protect it, and given what Eve had already done to them, she was preparing for a proper war.

That was bad news—yet Eve just looked delighted. In a highly evil way that hardly fit Asako's adorable features.

"Gets me so excited! No one really gave me a challenge back home. At this point I definitely want to see Rinko humiliated before I skedaddle. I'll be able to drink to that for weeks!"

Eve was totally counting her chickens, playing with the syringe as she strolled the empty gardens.

"Anti-Kunlun weaponry...made from a special rune that counters the Kunlun villagers' absurd strength, my ultimate weapon—hannyatou."

A drug developed to fight Kunlun villagers.

The name referred to water from the spring of knowledge. It forced Kunlun villagers to realize how unusual they were by this world's standards, and deprived them of their strength—one of Eug's inventions.

Kunlun villagers were all living legends, and Eug had been desperate to find a

way to counter that power. She'd boiled down dubious herbs the villagers despised, mixed them with powdered silver (for its anti-magic properties), then dissolved that in alcohol and applied the rune. Eug insisted it was the one thing that could stop a Kunlun villager.

"With this, I can easily capture Lloyd. He has no way of knowing I've got this up my sleeve!"

She slipped the glowing syringe in her pocket, moving swiftly toward the guesthouse.

Eve had ordered the guards to stand down, so she walked right in. She was a lone girl, blending with the dark like a ghost.

Near the bedrooms, she slipped behind a pillar.

"Better put on Eugy's optical camouflage hoodie."

Eug had been wearing this quite a while back, when she first met Lloyd. It made Eve practically invisible.

"Heh-heh... If I'm this stealthy, even Lloyd won't spot me."

If Selen heard that, what would she do? Likely sneer and say, "*Snoorrrt*, you don't know Lloyd."

Yes, Eve had heard about Lloyd's miracles secondhand, but...well, normalcy bias reared its ugly head again. She was sure she'd be fine, even if no one else was. Her eyes were clouded by all her successes as president and king.

She was about to taste defeat for the first time. A miracle beyond anything in either of her lives, a boy so artless it could only inspire awe.

The invisibility cloak made her bold, and she skipped across the interior garden until she reached the guest rooms.

"Which one is Lloyd's... Hmm?"

Seeing lights still on in one, Eve wondered.

"Are they still up? They can't still be drinking. Going over plans for the summit tomorrow? How diligent."

Curious how they planned to corner her, Eve peered inside.

“Both red wine and white! Whoa! I’m doing the Wars of the Roses solo!”

Marie was plastered.

What is she doing?!

Knocking booze back the night before facing her? Eve was disgusted. It wasn’t just her; Sardin and Threonine had gotten dragged into this, and were looking horrified.

“Um...Princess Maria... Tomorrow’s a big day...right, Ubi?”

Sardin turned to his wife for help, but...

“This amber wine’s *gooood*.”

“Darling wife?!”

Ubi could drink. She was the kind of drunk who would quietly sip away, never looking worse for wear, until you discovered how far gone they were.

Meanwhile Anzu was knocking back shochu on the rocks.

“Why... Why can’t I find anyone?!”

“You know, these things happen. In due time.”

Threonine was on the receiving end of her harangue and was looking clearly very tired.

“The only person who ever chats me up is Renge when she wants to gloat. I thought Eve was my friend! But she just wanted to use me.”

Eve’s betrayal had been more of a shock than she let on.

Hmm. If we’d been born in the same world, we might have been good friends...but...we literally live in different worlds. Sorry, Anzy.

In Eve’s mind, she had never seen herself as more than a visitor. But she did feel a little guilty.

Still, they’re dumber than I thought...or arguably just that sure of themselves? Marie’s looped right back round to rather adorable.

With that, Eve left the room full of darling drunks.

But to Lloyd... Wait, another one?

She'd barely resumed her search before she found another light on.

Another drinking party?! Most of the rest are underage!

Eve peeked through the window, curious.

She found the cadet girls with Renge and Mena. They were all in pajamas, sipping tea before bed.

Renge alone was not like the others. She was guzzling tea like it was liquor.

"I feel like Allan and I ain't getting' nowhere. Stagnating? Retrograding?!"

Apparently, the sleepover subject was dating. It may have been spur-of-the-moment, but Allan and Renge *had* already gone through the wedding ceremony, so perhaps "dating" wasn't the right word.

"I know! You skipped right past the courtship and can't quite process your new relationship, which makes you nervous."

Selen's sympathy was usually misplaced, but not this time, and Renge was nodding.

"So where's Allan at?"

"In bed already. Can't handle the stress of tomorrow's summit."

".....He's just a wuss. But given who we're up against..."

A row of rulers all accusing Eve of evil— Allan's reaction was totally normal.

"You've had the wedding," Mena said. "Panicking now will just make it worse. Especially with a basket case like him."

Renge acted like she was listening, but she wasn't actually calming down at all.

"You've got a point; I oughtta keep my head on straight. We've started cohabitation—I've got this in the bag! Gotta remain calm and lay the groundwork with Threonine."

"That's what I mean by panicking," Mena muttered, but Renge was so intense about it she didn't argue further.

Listening to all this, Eve looked deeply sorrowful.

Huh? Are my sins a secondary consideration?

If they weren't leveling accusations, that was a good thing—but it also made her feel left out. Like influencers who loathe online harassment but agree not getting mentioned is worse.

Renge set her empty teacup down on the saucer, noisily, and changed the subject.

"So you getting anywhere with Lloyd?"

"""Hah?!"""

That brought a smirk to Renge's face that was utterly devoid of elegance.

"I might have been a bit curious. Anzu does bring him up rather often. And this is a pajama party... Honestly, I'd much rather gossip about that than Eve's so-called crimes."

I'm not even secondary?!

Eve was reeling now. Can you blame her? Wedding blues > Romantic gossip > The greatest villain of our times.

"Fess up! I know there's plenty of cadets with their eye on him."

Renge was serving as a guest instructor at the academy. In that position, it was hard for her to really pry like she wanted, and she was seizing the chance.

"T-talk about a bolt from the blue, Renge!"

".....You are far too eager."

Renge sighed dramatically, shaking her head.

"You should be eager! Your teens will be over before you know it. And if you two don't put yourselves forward, Selen's gonna lock him down. I know Lloyd doesn't have a romantic bone in his body and freaks out when the topic comes up, but waiting for him to be ready will leave you eating dust."

"All true!" Selen said, confidently. "Truer words were never spoken. I always put myself forward! It's the path to victory."

Riho and Phyllo both glared at her.

“You do tend to lean in...”

“.....Like a sumo wrestler.”

A classic sumo blunder involved pushing so hard your foot went outside the ring before your opponent’s.

Although in Selen’s case, it was more like she was doing a solo ringside battle nowhere near the actual stage.

Is this how girls talk in private? A bunch of meaningless flimflam? I envy it! ... Mm?

Eve had never been one for fraternizing and was quick to dismiss these topics.



Yet deep inside, she found feelings that could only be described as jealousy.

I'm jealous? Why? Maybe I'm just feeling a bit sensitive since everything's coming to a close?

Puzzled though she was, Eve had no business here, and soon left.

“.....Mm?” Phyllo was the only one who sensed something...

“Thus, Lloyd and I are bound by fate!”

“.....You are not.”

But Selen’s ravings soon distracted her.

Eve resumed her search for Lloyd.

“Hmm, is he taking a leak? That would work for me...”

She could stick that hypodermic needle in him as he was shaking off...but what if it was number two? Hit him as he stepped out of the stall? Eve had to consider these eventualities.

“Sigh...”

Then she spotted Lloyd out in the center garden, on his own.

“There he is!”

With catlike steps, Eve tried to sneak around behind him.

If he's alone, that's perfect! But why is he here? He's not the kind of guy who'd piss on the flower beds. Haha, no way.

Locating her target had made her a tad giddy. In the sleeve of her hoodie, her hand was clenched around the syringe.

She certainly was curious about why he was here, but she was not going to let this chance slip away.

—Yes, she was deeply underestimating Lloyd. She knew he was from Kunlun, but figured he was just a child, and he seemed rather out of it, so she assumed her invisibility cloak would make it easy to get the drop on him.

“Hmm? Who are you?”

“Hnggaah?!”

But Lloyd sensed her coming like it was nothing and turned to face her.

He'd been staring into space, then whipped right round—and Eve yelped despite herself.

Huh? He spotted me? Was he not totally in a world of his own?

As she reeled, Lloyd gently reached out.

“Oh, so that's how you're staying hidden! I thought I hadn't seen you anywhere.”

He smiled, but Eve was swearing internally.

Christ almighty! He was here looking for someone?! Not staring at nothing, but honing his senses for the slightest sound?

He'd caught her, and her brain went into overdrive, searching for a way out. He had all the advantages physically, so she swiftly concluded there was no way she'd get that syringe in him now.

I hate to, but I've gotta show myself and talk my way out of it. Say I'm a special guard or whatever.

Eve pulled back the optical hood, revealing her face.

From darkness emerged the face of a well-bred young girl.

Lloyd looked her over intently.

Why is he staring at me like that? Wait... Does he know I'm Eve?! He knows what's in the costume? Did he identify me by scent?!

Eve wasn't about to underestimate Lloyd twice, but that left her overthinking his every word and gesture, as if common sense could not possibly apply here.

Lloyd saw she was flustered, so he maintained his smile—but his eyes remained very serious.

“I already know,” he said, softly. As if urging her to confess.

He does?!

“So there's no need to keep hiding the truth. We can skip past the

questioning.”

Questioning?! He looks way too cute to be so ready to interrogate me!

“You’re...”

He knows! This boy’s figured out the secret I kept for a hundred years, save those I intentionally revealed myself to!

“...The Azami princess!”

I shower daily, there’s no scent to catch— Wait, what?

Her wildest dreams could not have prepared her for that sentence, and she was left staring blankly at him.

“Uh...princess? What? I’m Profen security...”

“You are far too adorable to be a security guard, your Highness.”

“I’m...confused.”

Eve was at a loss for words, but Lloyd just nodded confidently.

“You don’t need to lie to me. I already know the truth. You’re the princess!”

You don’t know shit! What is wrong with him?! There’s nothing worse than a clueless imbecile who’s this sure of themselves!

Blithely ignoring her horrified look, Lloyd continued confidently.

“That invisibility cloak is so you can investigate Profen’s misdeeds, right? Just like the king said! I know you’re trying to do the right things, your Highness, but this plan is far too reckless.”

Is he serious about this princess thing? Has he seriously failed to work out that Marie’s the real princess?! How dumb is he?! And how unconvincing is Marie?!

Meanwhile, Marie was quaffing spirits.

“Red wine! White wine! All you need in life!”

“Chug, Princess!” Ubi was applauding her performance.

She was certainly reckless. Her liver was screaming.

Eve had caught a glimpse of how she drank and was quickly starting to think,

Why would he notice?

Okay, so he heard the princess was attending this summit, but didn't see her anywhere. And he never worked out that Marie was the real princess...

She was calming down quick, coming to terms with this—and then she picked her best option.

He may have spotted me, but he doesn't realize I'm his enemy. Perfect. Guess I'll just have to play along.

It was best to let Lloyd's misunderstanding guide her. If that made him let his guard down so she could stab that syringe into him, then revealing her true face would have been worth it.

“Right you are,” she said.

When trying to deceive someone, the best way to avoid blunders was to say very little. Eve was an old hand at this and respected the modus operandi.

But Lloyd was very much the sort of boy who'd go, “Modus operandi, what's that? A kind of cheese? If you mix it with that wine, it might make a nice fondue!” So what he did next was, again, completely incomprehensible.

“Don't just nod! I'm pretty mad at you.”

“Har?!”

Lloyd was out here lecturing a princess.

“You are a member of the royal family, so you can't just do whatever you personally feel is right! Think of the king... Do you know how much your father worries about you?”

About what, her liver?

Eve's rejoinders were getting a bit off track. She could imagine why a dad would worry, though.

“Even if you are invisible, there are people like me who'll notice you coming. You've got to stay safe!”

Yeah, ain't nobody but you gonna do that. I mean...I'm invisible?!

Lloyd's perceptions weren't even in the same solar system as the truth.

"Let me and Marie handle the dangerous tasks. The princess shouldn't be taking risks!"

But Marie is the princess! You can't let her do anything!

Eve's internal screams grew louder, and she was starting to sweat. She was entirely at Lloyd's mercy.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

"I-I'm sorry?"

"I'm glad you understand."

He flashed a dazzling grin. Frustrated as hell, the best Eve could manage was a fake smile.

"It's a big day tomorrow, so let's turn in."

"W-wait, Lloyd. Let's talk a little longer. It's a nice garden."

If she backed down here, this whole thing would be a disaster. Eve was not about to waste this opportunity.

Lloyd couldn't exactly refuse the princess, so he said, "Just a little, then," and sat down on the edge of the flower bed.

Eve plopped down next to him, and things were instantly awkward.

Now what?

Eve's head spun. Making small talk might lower his guard—but she soon rejected that idea.

He was an oblivious boy. In mere minutes, he had made her positively dizzy. Any false move on her part, and she'd be tripped up again. Her usual tactics wouldn't work.

Bring up a subject he excels in, and let him chatter... No, better to fluster him with a topic he's bad at. And I just heard about the perfect thing.

The girls had said, "Lloyd doesn't have a romantic bone in his body and freaks out when the topic comes up." She figured that would give her an opening.

"Lloyd, are you in love with anyone?"

“Huh? Huh?”

This subject rattled him hard.

Eve was pumping a fist inside her head. Her intel was right on the money.

“Princesses want to know these things. We can keep it just between the two of us.”

Eve was getting rather into it now. But little did she know...Marie had once spoken as the princess, telling him how she felt behind a door—and been rejected.

“Er, uh...I’m glad you’re interested, but I believe I’ve already given you my answer.”

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

This new information put a quick halt to Eve’s approach.

Her mind filled with noise. *Change the subject! Tell me that first! Poor Marie!* She was getting swallowed in an emotional maelstrom.

How did Marie manage to ask him out and get turned down? Is she dragging around some bad karma from a past life? I’ve done way worse, and nothing that bad has come of it!

Given her own history, Eve could only assume Marie’s previous incarnation had been even worse than hers.

Flustered, Lloyd was trying to carefully choose his next words while remaining mindful of the princess’s feelings.

“Saying this face-to-face is awkward, but...I’m still sorting myself out. I’m not ready for love.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But I am a soldier, and no one wants to protect you more than I do. That’s why I want you to be less reckless, and look after yourself. I would gladly give my life for you.”

“.....”

“I promise, I will keep you safe.”

The “coming-of-age” vibes were going strong now.

Lloyd blushed and was scratching his cheek, not quite meeting her eye. That left his neck exposed, a fact not lost on Eve.

Is this my best shot?!

She may have taken the long route, but if she could jab the needle in him, this farce was done. Lloyd had spun her round so many times she was past caring and just wanted to pack up and go home. Her fingers tightened on the syringe.

You've stirred your last pot! You're done, Lloyd!

Eve pulled out her hand holding the syringe, but—

“Mm?”

Her hand started shaking. She couldn't even aim.

What the—? A fit, here, now?!

Asako's favorite chamomile and herbs should have kept the girl sound asleep inside of her body. Eve had no idea what had brought this fit on.

Sensing confusion, Lloyd turned toward her. “Um, what's wrong?”

That's what she wanted to know. The syringe was still in her hand. Lloyd calmly took it from her.

“Ah...!”

Lloyd took a deep breath, like he was about to scold a wayward child.

“You think a weapon like this will be enough to let you investigate evil? That's even more dangerous than I thought! I'll be taking this with me.”

“H-har?!”

Unable to stop him from stealing her last resort, Eve soon found his hands clasped tight on her shoulders.

“I'll handle all the dangerous work! There's no need for you to hold on to this!”

“Yeah, but that's my...”

“I’ll keep you safe and sound! Let me protect you!”

At this point, Lloyd realized he was getting a bit carried away, and turned bright red.

“S-sorry... I’m getting a bit worked up.”

“Uh-huh.”

“It’s awfully late. You should really go to bed. See you later.”

As if trying to hide from his embarrassment, Lloyd hopped to his feet and quickly walked away.

Eve was left sitting on her own in the garden. Without that weapon, she had no way to capture him...but that wasn’t the problem.

—*ba-dump*.

Surprise? Shock? The way her heart raced was neither, nor had Eve ever experienced anything like it.

“What *is* this...? No, not...”

The moment the word *love* crossed her mind, Eve stifled a laugh.

“Love? Me, in loooooove? You’ve gotta be kidding! That’s like, in the top five jokes ever!”

After a long fit of laughter, she glanced around, and pulled the camouflage hood up again.

“Took a big swing, but I whiffed hard. I’ll get another chance, though.”

Trying to be optimistic, Eve got to her feet and headed back to her chambers...never realizing the emotions running through her were entirely *genuine*.



Chapter 3

Blinded by Love: So Far Gone She'll Share Her Bank Balance and PIN Number

I was sitting up in bed. Ruka Akizuki—Alka—was sitting next to the bed, gleefully showing me photos on her tablet.

“Isn’t he cute?”

“Yes, he is.”

“Oh, and this one—”

Alka was normally pretty quiet, almost indifferent. But the moment she started talking about her little brother, her face came to life.

I enjoyed going through these photos myself, and that helped bring us together.

Every now and then, she’d swing by my room, and we’d talk about dates we wanted to go on, or our ideal boyfriends.

I’d always wanted to be part of these girl talks, so a part of me was like “I have to enjoy them!” and we’d talk so much that dinner crept up on us. My throat would hurt from all the chatting, and I’d laugh at myself for it the next day.

Chamomile tea always helped me relax, and we’d sip on that while talking about the kind of boys we liked, and it *was* fun. The only problem—Alka was so hung up on her brother that I had to watch what I said, or I’d unleash the kraken.

Alka’s research had worn her out, and she’d come over to let off some steam.

“So cute!” I whispered, looking down at the picture of her brother in my hands. “Good looks, a good personality— What more could you want?”

"He's even nicer than you think! If I left toys lying around, he'd be all, 'Don't make a mess!' and put them away for me."

"So sweet! I wish he was my boyfriend."

Instantly, Alka's gaze turned icy.

"Never. Roy's mine! And it would never work out, Asako, you're too old for him."

"You're even older than I am, Alka! And you're *siblings*!"

Her face fell. "Our ages grow farther and farther apart. He'll be eight years old forever."

I felt instantly guilty. I shouldn't have said that.

"S-sorry."

"Oh, don't worry about it."

Alka did her best to smile.

"Once we find a cure and you can lead a normal life, I'm sure the boys will come after you, Asako."

"I'm not into pick-up artists..."

"True...but I bet Director Ishikura—your dad will brush the flies away."

"With his serpent stare?"

"Exactly! Good thing you take after your mother, Asako."

My father could leave a very stern impression. I laughed awkwardly.

"I don't want anyone hitting on me, but...I do dream about a prince on a white horse coming to rescue me."

I paused for a moment, looking out the window. A little bird pecked at a budding leaf, then fluttered off toward the blue sky above.

"Someone who'll cure everything that's wrong with me and take me in his arms."

"I'm sure that'll happen. As long as you keep fighting. But..."

“But?”

“You can’t have Roy.”

She was so dedicated to him, I had to laugh.

“I can’t make any promises,” I said. “He’s a leading candidate for my prince!”

“Ha, then I’d better rustle up some other princes and pair you up with them. Oof, but they’re gonna have to pass Director Ishikura’s inspections first. What a headache! He’s likely to grab a horse-killer and chop up all suitors and their horses, prince or not.”

Our laughter echoed through the hospital room—

“Eeep!”

Eve vaulted out of bed with a strangled cry.

She always slept in her costume to avoid anyone catching a glimpse of her sleeping face, but she’d been sweating so hard that the inside had become a swamp.

It felt gross, so she reached out of the costume’s mouth, grabbed a towel, and wiped herself off.

She was badly out of breath, and even from outside the costume, you could tell that she was clearly upset. Unable to contain her frustration, she grabbed the costume head and threw it.

Her bangs were plastered to her forehead, her skin the kind of pale that precedes a fainting spell.

Eve staggered to her feet and moved to the sink so she could wash her face. Leaving the water running, she stared at herself—at Asako, in disbelief.

“What was that dream?”

She dreamed often. Things that bothered her, things that happened just before she slept, old memories, subliminal desires—the usual. And this dream was clearly an old memory.

But it wasn’t *hers*. It felt more like she’d been peering into someone else’s mind—and in a highly vivid fashion, too. That was deeply unsettling, and it had

shaken her so much that it had woken her from her slumber. It was far too early to be up and about; the sky was still dark.

“Was that...Asako’s memory? I’ve been here over a century! Nothing like that has ever happened!”

Asako had been in shock, which kept her sealed away for over a hundred years. And that had allowed Eve/President Eva to largely do whatever she wanted.

To prevent Asako from inadvertently waking up, she’d regularly steadied her nerves with the girl’s favorite chamomile tea—and occasionally fought her off by slamming her own head into things. But if the seal was rapidly unraveling on her, that was genuinely terrifying.

“Is this a sign she’s about to awaken? Why? That dream... Did something yesterday stimulate her unconscious desires?”

Eve had no clue what would have produced this flashback, so she concluded it was just a coincidence. There were plenty of obvious causes, but Eve was prone to immediately forgetting anything that didn’t interest her.

“Um, guess I’ll have to wait and see. It could just be a hundred years or so was always a hard time limit on this possession? I do hope you’ll hang in there and sleep a little longer. Hokay!”

Bam! Bam! Bam!

Eve banged her head on the desk corner a few times as she laughed and scolded herself. Her forehead was dripping blood.

“No clue what riled you up, but you’ve gotta stay asleep! That’s the price for killing me!”

She wiped the blood off with a towel, then cleaned it out of the carpet like a murderer disguising a crime scene.

“All done! The bleeding has stopped, so better buckle down and work!”

She put the head on her rabbit costume like a businessman doing up his tie and struck a pose. Then she did a few basic calisthenics and left the room.

“Hang in there, Eve! You’ve gotta face the music! These poor kids think they

can hoist you by your own petard! Show them who's boss!"

Eve slapped her belly like a sumo wrestler about to strut their stuff and marched on out.

The Profen Grand Conference Hall.

Gray carpeting with a matte black table at the center, decorated with beautiful pale blue vases and abstract paintings in austere frames. Less a castle in a fantasy world than a venue in a luxury hotel—a very modern business place. If they had a computer, the vibe would totally be “waiting for the remote party to dial into the video conference.”

And assembled around that table, leaders from various countries.

Anzu and Threonine looked more like they were here to do crime, or at the least were well-versed in the lingo—cooked books, laundered money.

“This could mean war? I’m always ready to throw down.”

“Let’s see how she plays it first. I’m packing heat, so I’ll pop off at her if I have to. Not sure it’ll do much, though.”

Okay, they were actually a tad *more* violent.

Meanwhile, Sardin was maintaining his dazzling smile...but with Anzu and Threonine around, he looked more like the kind of mafia ringleader who treated wetwork as another business deal. Which made Ubi look like an emotionless aide.

Next, Renge and Allan... He was so stressed he was openly rubbing his sore stomach, so he must be the boss’s useless son. Renge was threatening...ahem, *encouraging* him softly. “Get a grip!”

Between them, Lloyd and Marie were here representing the Azami Kingdom. No one would mistake either of them for criminals, but...

“Urp... I drank too much... My head hurts...”

Marie wasn’t in great shape—she embodied the feminine concept of “disaster.” She was suffering from a hangover, oblivious to the frosty looks this earned her.

Lloyd was trying to nurse her through it. He'd brought her water and was rubbing her back, completely forgetting he was representing the king, here. He looked much more like a nurse.

"Arguably impressive."

"Once Selen gets sarcastic, you're done."

".....Mm."

The usual trio were on standby in the back, ready to pounce in the event of an emergency—primarily Marie doing anything weird to Lloyd.

"Fah, are you in any shape to face her? Some princess," Anzu growled.

"Sh-she'll be fine!" Lloyd insisted. "Marie shines when the chips are down! She's already saved Azami time and—"

"L-Lloyd! Keep your voice down... I'm about to throw up here..."

"You can't do that!"

Next to Sardin, Mena stifled a laugh.

"*Snerk!* She's definitely the court jester here. Let's hope this makes Eve lower her guard a bit."

"Ugh, if I lower my guard, everything's gonna come back up!"

".....I wish she was joking."

Mena strived to provide comic relief, but Marie was so far gone that even she was looking serious.

And then the lady of the hour arrived.

"Yoo-hoo! Joy to the world, for I am here! Welcome to my little home!"

The door slammed open, and a veritable electrical parade of maids sailed in.

"Huh? What?"

The maids marched in perfect step, and at their center was a very suspicious bunny mascot, waving her hands at the assembly.

Ordinarily, this would have seemed like a dimwitted ruler wasting money on pomp, but everyone here knew the truth—and smelled a rat.

The servants were either used to this or just that well-trained; they paid no attention to their guests' consternation, merely bustling around providing tea and crumpets.

"Okay, okay! Thank you very much!"

A hand shot out of the costume's mouth, and Eve snapped her fingers. The majority of the maids swooped right back out.

Eve waved good-bye, as everyone looked on, stunned.

This was a display of power, designed to shock and shift the reins to Eve's hand. It created two powerful impressions designed to make her visitors quiver and convinced them they couldn't afford a false move: "This place is *mine*." "Everyone working for me is just that good."

And the looks on their faces proved it had worked. Eve grinned.

But our boy was still doing his thing.

"Wow, such orderly lines! Very impressive!"

Lloyd was offering earnest compliments. Schemes and insinuations were entirely lost on him; his eyes just sparkled like a child's.

"You must have practiced a lot!" he said, turning to one of the maids still here.

"Er, uh... Yes," she stammered, having not expected anyone to speak to her.

"I knew it! It's very hard to pour tea from that height. Do you train every day?"

"Um...twice a week."

She couldn't quite stop herself from answering. Half the intimidation factor was already gone, and Eve was cringing.

"I thought I was in control, too... That boy's a thorn in my side."

She glared balefully at him from inside the costume.

Eve Profen. Her name in the old world—Eva.

Born into a successful fortune-telling empire, she'd grown up wanting for

nothing.

Her family gifted her connections and wealth, and taught her psychology and the means to control the minds of others.

But those techniques worked best on the corrupted minds of grown-ups. She had always struggled with the pure, the innocent, and the guileless.

Politicians and mobsters alike danced in the palm of her hand. But the one thing Eve could not handle was—a sweet kid.

Makes sense, right? When up against a child, how would you use your bag of mentalist mind tricks? The best you can do is divine their romantic prospects. It was safe to say she had absolutely no experience points earned from fighting *children*.

Thus, Lloyd Belladonna was Eve Profen's natural enemy.

She was glaring pointedly at him through the costume's mouth.

My plans, my sarcasm, my insinuations—none of that will work on him. He'll take it all at face value. And top that off with a misunderstanding cherry. He's always the one who sets the pace.

Like a vizier struggling with a child king who knows nothing of politics, Eve had a lot more sympathy for all Eug's grumbling now.

Sorry, Eugy. You were right! This kid's bad news.

President Eva had founded a new country while preventing the United States from objecting. She'd dropped a meteor with rune magic and kept that from becoming an international incident. Her kit of techniques had made both easy.

But here she was, about to engage in the greatest battle of wits she'd faced since getting teleported to another world—and that just had her worked up.

Bring it on! I'm going back to my world with a monopoly on the immortality rune, ready to make them all dance in the palm of my hand. And the final enemy in the way of that plan—a sweet, innocent boy. Well worth conquering!

Eve grinned, gazing at Lloyd like you would a final boss. Technically, that would be *her*.

Recovering, she moved to launch her own accusation summit.

To avoid anyone from realizing how Lloyd frustrated her, she folded her arms, doing her goofy act.

“So...what was this summit about, again? Best ingredients for miso soup?”

Her flippant joke just earned Anzu’s ire.

“Hah? What the hell is wrong with you, Lady Eve?!”

Gotcha, Anzy. You’re already scared!

For Eve, jokes and how people took them were a form of examination, digging into each individual’s state of mind. Did they play along? Bluff? Rage? Or shake their heads?

Classic mentalism. Naturally, only the nefarious would need to rely on tricks like this—I prove that on the daily.

But knowing where your foes were at helped you maintain the advantage. Eve glanced at each face, like a doctor doing rounds.

“Lady Eve, today is not an occasion for frivolity.”

Threoniny dismisses it. His role is to keep things moving. Odds are he’s the one who decides when to present evidence of my misdeeds.

Sardin—to no one’s surprise—played along.

“Ha-ha-ha! I’ll down any miso soup, as long as my wife makes it! Even if it’s missing the miso!”

“That would be just water, dear,” Ubi pointed out, and Sardin just guffawed again.

“Bwa-ha-ha! I’d forgive my wife for it, but I’m not partial to cleaning up anyone else’s hot water. If you catch my drift?”

“I doooo!”

The man was laughing, but his eyes were not, and Eve was secretly quite impressed.

King Sardin is legit. Confident enough to keep his sense of humor. But Rokujou

was at the heart of a lot of my schemes, and his family fell prey to them... He may be a bit too emotionally invested.

The deeper the emotions—or the more eager someone was to look good in front of their children—the easier it was for Eve to knock them over.

Easiest to hardest, I'd say Anzy, King Sardin, then Threoniny. King Sardin would normally be the toughest, so if he's a bit overeager, that works for me.

Putting her plans together, Eve glanced at Lloyd.

But how will he take that joke? Let's see what you got.

Would he play along? Get mad? If she handled his reaction appropriately, even a sweet kid—but then his hand shot up.

“Excuse me!”

“Mm? What is it, Lloyd? No need for formality, we’re just talking about soup.”

“Um, Marie...the princess is at her limit, so we’re gonna step out for a minute. And if you could direct us to the nearest restroom...”

“The smell of these crumpets! Urghhh!”

“What’s going on there?”

She thought Marie had been awfully quiet...but hadn’t expected it to be due to a hangover.

This is a critical summit! Did she really keep drinking all night?! Lloyd’s not the only one I can’t handle here! Reckless drunks are just as bad!

Calming down, Eve pointed to the door.

“Uh...out that door, end of the hall, left.”

Marie clapped a hand to her mouth, and Selen and Riho each took a shoulder.

“You are such a mess.”

“Once Selen... Oh, you know.”

“I’m...I’m so sorry... Urppp...”

Barely managing an apology, Marie stumbled out of the room, a pitiable sight.

Once he saw her out, Lloyd turned back to Eve, wincing.

“Basket clams might be the best choice this morning.”

“Classic hangover cure.” Eve nodded. Her mind was on how to control this meeting.

Then this pure boy threw out an honest question.

“But why are we talking about miso soup? That’s unrelated!”

Eve flinched. A straight shot right down the center.

There he goes again! He doesn’t get subterfuge, banter, or jokes!

Eve took a deep breath and subjected herself to the ultimate humiliation—explaining your own joke.

“I was trying to lighten the mood before this grim summit. That can help everyone put their opinions out there. It’s always best to start with a joke!”

Lloyd gave her a look of deep respect.

“I had no idea! I can see why you’re in charge of a whole country! But why did you go with miso soup?”

This is insufferable!

It was bad enough that she had to admit she was joking, but now he wanted to know the reasoning behind the specifics! And his praise was echoing back around the room and making her feel mocked. She was entirely off her game, rocking on the boy’s obliviousness ripples.

Threonine was just as flummoxed by this and decided he’d better step in.

“Perhaps we should get down to business?”

“Ohh, please do, Threoniny. I owe ya!”

Threonine had not been trying to bail Eve out, but she felt like a basketball player who’d been badly winded right before the other team called a time-out. She was genuinely grateful.

The game had yet to actually begin, but she felt worn out, as if they’d just finished the third quarter. She waved him on, trying to get back to the main

topic.

“Today’s summit— I’m sure you’re aware, Lady Eve, but the evil schemes you’ve carried out beneath the surface have grown too great for us to let pass unchallenged.”

“I have no memory of these thiiings.”

Anzu leaned across the table, smacking it so hard it nearly flipped.

“We haven’t even leveled a charge yet!”

“Anzy, I’ve never done anything bad in all my life! Whatever I’ve done or intended to do, I have always done what I believed to be *right*.”

She was acting like she’d never consciously done anything wrong or harbored any ill intentions, and that just pissed Anzu off more.

“Get real! You were funding experiments on prisoners in Hell’s Lock! We’ve got hard evidence, a manual on how to modify prisoners! You can’t worm your way out of this!”

“Uh, Lady Anzu...!” Sardin hissed. She was getting ahead of them...and not slowing down.

“What? That evidence stands! Show that and she’s done!”

“Urgh, sit down, Lady Anzu!” Mena said, getting up and pushing her into her seat. She leaned in and whispered. “You can’t show your best card *first*.”

“Why not, beady eyes? This ain’t *daifugo*! You ought to play your piece when you can!”

Anzu still didn’t realize how bad she’d blown it, and Sardin and Threonine were both rubbing their foreheads.

Eve was smirking in her suit.

I was right to go after Anzy first. Ah-ha, the manual for the inmate modification machine was their key evidence. That’s pretty weak. If they’d played it late, it might have hurt, but if I see it coming, I can deal with it.

Sardin and Threonine had likely planned to advance things slowly, only bringing out that evidence when it would prove a contradiction—Eve knew that

trick all too well.

But I can wriggle right out of an accusation like this, boys.

If she knew their story, she could line her excuses up with it.

Speaking calmly, she began with an apology. “Sorry for concealing my investments in Hell’s Lock. That did seem to have resulted in problems for everyone.”

“Problems? Understatement of the year! Why would you even need to hide that?”

“Well, I was concerned about the growing threat of international crime, so I invested heavily in the prison specializing in criminals committing international crimes,” Eve said, sounding deeply concerned. “I mean, I’m usually such a goof! Bragging about my altruism would be rather embarrassing.”

“Ha?!”

This was such a bald-faced lie that nobody knew how to react.

“Lady Eve, Hell’s Lock’s research into human modification has clear ties to the string of bizarre incidents in recent years. Were you unaware?”

Without a trace of guilt, Eve nodded.

“Yes! I thought it would help! Finding out all that money was going to human experimentation... I suppose I do bear responsibility for not keeping proper tabs on things.”

“Gonna play dumb, huh?” Anzu growled.

“Hell’s Lock was run by Warden Urgd. There were ugly rumors about him, but he was doing an excellent job keeping the prisoners in line. I mean, he even handled those mobsters that were such a thorn in your side, King Sardin. If he can do what you can’t, then I’m inclined to overlook a few nasty tales.”

“Gah...”

A logically consistent excuse that also hit him where it hurt.

“I figured you needed a lot of money to keep that type of crook in line,” Eve added. “We can’t let the mob escape, can we? When they asked for more

funding, I never doubted it. I'm as shocked as you are to discover what they did with it!"

Eve was now claiming to be the real victim here.

"You said something about a manual? I'm sure they were trying to turn prisoners into weapons and start their own organized crime syndicate. Good thing you stopped it before that happened! Gotta count our blessings."

"You bitch—"

Phyllo and Mena were forced to physically restrain Anzu.

".....Down, girl."

"*Hngggg!*"

Eve was winning, but then Lloyd's hand shot into the air.

"Um, Lady Eve."

".....Yes?"

Her hackles went up. She'd played this perfectly. What else could he say here?

"I gather you're denying any involvement with that duplicitous training camp?"

"Huh? Duplicitous training camp?"

Where did that come from? The phrase was a hook shot curving in from out of sight. She'd never once heard those words in that order—how could it not shake her?

"Huh? We're talking about prison. What's a training camp got to do with it?"

Lloyd took a deep breath and launched into an explanation.

"Let me start from the beginning. I responded to an invite to a self-help training camp to improve my mental fortitude. But the people running it were unscrupulous, and I found myself incarcerated."

Uh-huh. Well, that makes no sense.

"As their investor, I'm sure you know that average citizens are not normally

sent to jail. I thought it was a training camp, but it was actually prison! And they disguised it so well that I didn't even figure it out until someone told me. Can you really insist you weren't involved? That it wasn't an investment designed to line your own pockets?"

No, what? How do you not notice you're in a prison? You're the weird one!

Eve was now in the dubious position of needing to explain that there had never been a training camp. She clutched her head inside the costume, sighing. Totally thrown off pace again.

I gotta think of excuses for nonsense, too?

And worst of all was the fact that Lloyd was clearly very serious about this.

Are they trying to use Lloyd's confusion to corner me? Not a bad plan!

She glanced at Threonine, impressed. However—

"Uh, Lloyd..."

"What's this about a training camp?"

You didn't know, either?!

They were on his side, but every bit as flummoxed.

Lloyd kept pressing the point, looking very serious.

"Lady Eve, I can't believe Profen knew nothing about this scam. It's time you told the truth."

Eve had no clue what he even meant by that, so she just spoke her mind.

"Maybe you won't believe this, but I genuinely had no idea. Sorry I can't help."

She sounded convincing enough that Lloyd just said, "Oh, really?" and backed off.

Sardin and Threonine both frowned here.

"If she sounds that sincere...it's hard for a boy as nice as Lloyd to keep after her."

"A straight shot for a straight shot. Lady Eve's been in this game a while, and

easily shook off Lloyd's attack."

The heads of state praised Eve's skills.

But the lady herself was utterly baffled.

Er? What? Did I just apologize?

Lloyd made his next move before she could recover.

"But giving Warden Urgd free reign to continue his abuses was a failure of oversight on your part, yes?"

"Yes, I'll do anything, forgive me, it's all true."

Eve sat bolt upright, and bowed low like she was running an apology press conference... astonishing herself.

"What's going on?!"

"Um, don't ask us...?"

Puzzled, Mena whispered to Phyllo, "Something's off, here. A minute ago, she was half slimy lawyer, half murderous mastermind."

".....Yeah..... Something's wrong."

As they whispered, Renge gave Eve a long, hard look.

"I-I've heard of this!" she cried.

"What's up, Renge?"

Renge folded her hands in front of her face, eyes gleaming.

"This is a love frequency. It's making Eve honest!"

".....You've lost it," Phyllo scoffed.

But Renge maintained her exaggerated pose and expression.

"Selen told me all about it! A gentle ripple, like a sweet, forlorn breeze brushing across the surface of a pond. That's the love frequency."

"You gotta start with the source, here, Renge. You're making me regret listening to a single word of it."

"Naw, look closely and you can sense it plain as daylight. The aura's bleeding

out of the costume!"

A source like this rated lower than your average gossip magazine, and this frankly bizarre demand to perform a visual inspection of her aura just gave Mena a headache.

But Phyllo diligently attempted to see Eve's aura.

".....*Hngg.*"

Making observations. Please stand by.

After a long, careful look—Phyllo's eyes snapped wide open.

".....*It's love!*" she declared.

"Er, what? Phyllo?"

".....A comforting sound like the wind blowing the leaves of a bamboo thicket. So this is what Selen spoke of—the world beyond!"

"Don't you dare cross over, Phyllo!"

His sister was taking a very wrong turn. Mena did not approve of any foot set into Selen's domain. Few sisters would.

But while some perceived love in the air—Eve herself would not, could not, did not admit that.

What? What?!

In all her life, she had never once apologized from the heart *or* made an unconditional promise. Eve's own actions terrified her.

I've lied and said I'd do anything, but I can tell! I meant that! What's up with this body?!

But while she reeled from this, Lloyd suspected she was lying to get off the hook.

"Then it's time you tell us everything! Were you the one in charge of the experiments on prisoners?"

"Yup! I was! I told Warden Urgd what to do!"

"""*Huh?"*"

Lloyd merely asked the question, and Eve admitted to everything. All jaws dropped.

Eve herself was just as flabbergasted.

She hadn't been working an angle. That was just an admission of guilt! Way beyond putting her foot in her mouth. It was a full-on confession!

Feeling more and more like her body was not her own, she failed to hold back a little sob.

This was a real "killer driven to the edge of a cliff in a suspense drama" move.

Anzu had taken a beating earlier, so she came back into the fight swinging.

"So wait, you've been lying to us this whole time? Everything that went down at the prison was all your doing?"

"Of course not. I mean, how would I benefit from any of that?" Eve scrambled, trying to take it all back.

"Tell the truth!" Lloyd said. "Why did you order that?"

"Short version, I needed powerful soldiers to plunge the world into chaos."

An inexcusably evil reason, and everyone just gaped at her.

"Or...not that, but..."

Unable to think of an excuse, Eve shifted uncomfortably.

If her goal had been to use necromancy to create mechanical soldiers, Sardin was not about to stay quiet.

"Ah-ha! Rokujou Kingdom banned research into necromancy, but you needed it to make these soldiers. That's why you had the mafia infiltrate my government and spread corruption! You were the real mastermind all along! Even taking my wife Ubi hostage!"

".....Dad."

"Dad."

Both his daughters were shocked to see him this furious.

Eve would have ordinarily used his fury to pull the rug from under him, but

she was way off her game.

“N-necromancy...? What’s that again? Can you eat it?”

Hardly the time for that old chestnut.

“Is what King Sardin said true?” Lloyd cut in. “Were you the true culprit forcing Amadine’s hand?”

“Um, that was someone else working for a cause I don’t share, but I did talk them into it for purposes of my own. Corpse-control tech has uses way beyond weaponry, ya see. You know that firsthand, right, King Sardin... Aughhhh!”

Eve clapped her hands over her mouth, but it was too late. Sardin was ready to punch her.

“It *was* effective. No doubt about it. What I *am* doubting is whether you possess a single shred of humanity—”

“Sardin, my man, you can cut her in half later, ’kay? I’m not quite sure why, but she seems ready to spill all the beans.”

Anzu was usually the first to draw her sword, so this helped Sardin calm down.

“Hngg... Heh-heh... Fair enough.”

He smirked, which infuriated Eve.

“Ack... Dammit... I *hate* when people sneer at me!”

She gnashed her teeth, but Lloyd’s onslaught wasn’t over yet.

“Tell us about the Jiou Empire! We thought Eug led the usurpation, but was that you, too?!”

“I sent Eugy in there to try and turn them into the world’s common foe. She turned that Sou fellow into their false emperor... Well, I talked her into the whole thing. Eugy, Sou, and your brother figure Shouma were all dancing in the palm of my hand. Such good work—aughhhh! Why can’t I shut up?!”

“A common foe?!”

“If everyone was focused on Jiou, Profen could sneak around doing the real dirty work. We could experiment with weapons all we liked! If only that had

upended the world like I wanted. Unfortunately, the Azami army took care of things before it became an international incident. All my plans, gone up in smoke! But I didn't let it get me down! I have tons of ways to plunge the— Argh, blabbing all this is just humiliating!"

Eve collapsed in a heap on the table, quivering.

"Is she..."

"Compelled?"

"To answer..."

"Lloyd's questions?"

"Huh? Are you?" Lloyd asked, shocked.

"Yes!Wait, really?" Eve was now asking herself. Hopelessly lost, she wound up blaming Lloyd.

What did he do to me? This isn't what I want! Did he slip me a truth serum? Is this a Kunlun secret technique? A new kind of rune?!

Certain he'd done something, she glared at him.

And the moment he entered her vision...

—————*ba-dump, ba-bump, ba-dump! Ba-dump!*

"Hahh?!"

Her heart was *racing*. Like when you jump into a cold pool without warm-up exercises and feel like you're about to die. But her body was overheating like she'd just left the sauna. Her cheeks were flushed, like she had an internal dryer. Even Eve was starting to figure it out.

What the... No, no... Is this love?!

She looked at Lloyd again, and it was like he was surrounded by a sparkling glow. Brighter than an SSR pull in a mobile game *gacha*.

This gleaming vision just struck her as gross.

But...whatever her mind said, her body was twitterpated.

Wha?! Like my body and mind are fighting—?!

Only then did Eve figure it out—only then did she remember. This was not *her* body. It belonged to Asako Ishikura.

No way! No! Asako, have you fallen for Lloyd?!

In hindsight, Eve should've noticed several warning signs.

After meeting Lloyd, she'd had a vivid dream of the past, envied the girls talking about love, plus the prince-on-a-white-horse thing...

All spurred by this boy. Asako's love for Lloyd had started to awaken her mind.

—And since Eve was inside her, that meant her time limit was coming up fast.

“T-to hell with that! I’m so close!”

“Quiet down!”

“Right, sorry! ❤”

Even as she raged, the other mind quickly apologized—with heart symbols!

She couldn't control this body, and that left her sweating profusely.

Everyone around her was now convinced—she could not dodge Lloyd's questions.

“What’s going on?” Mena said, squinting hard at these proceedings. “That love frequency thing— Did Lloyd seriously claim another girl?”

“Natie, what do you mean by *another*?” Ubi smirked.

“Don’t tease me now, Mom!”

Ubi was clearly comfortable enough to banter.

“But...like, *is* she a girl? I mean, whoever’s in there should be pretty up in years... Ow!”

“Once a girl, always a girl, Allan. Still...”

This was clearly far beyond what love usually wrought.

“Eve seems genuinely flummoxed by her own answers,” Sardin said. “It’s like two personalities are fighting for control.”

"Then..." Allan mused, "is one personality in love with Lloyd, and the other fighting her on it?"

"Even the cheapest mystery novels don't use that kinda twist anymore!" Renge argued. "Is that even what this is?"

They were edging steadily closer to the truth, and Eve was panicking.

"Th-that's not true at all!"

"We've got her spooked!" Anzu's grin broadened.

Sardin and Threonine joined her. "Whatever the cause, let's follow this thread. We have her hooked."

"It's time we land this fish and have ourselves a meal."

"Wh-what's with those grins?!" Eve was now genuinely frightened.

"Let me ask you this, Lady Eve," Threonine said. "Recently a local lord named Tramadol mixed curses into wine, causing an upheaval. Were you behind that, too?"

Eve did her best to avoid answering.

"I-I've never heard—"

"Lloyd."

Threonine slapped the boy's back. Not really getting it, Lloyd asked, "What do you say, Eve?"

"I lit a fire under that Sou fellow, encouraging him to undermine Azami! I wasn't directly behind it, but I was the indirect cause. Argh, this again! No more!"

"During the incident, Tramadol transformed into an unnatural creature. Was that your doing? Lloyd."

"Well?"

"I used him as a guinea pig for my human experimentation! I wanted to learn about the effects of the demon lords I'd captured! Stimulating the subject's guilt bestowed a huge power-up, a real good one, but the man himself was an unhygienic mess, and he was easily defeated! Urgh."

Watching Eve confess to everything was really starting to entertain Anzu.

“Lady Eve. Did you *just* make friends with me so you could use me?”

“Thaaaat’s not true at all! I just enjoyed your company! I mean that!”

Eve was very firm on this, and Anzu just grinned.

“Right, Lloyd. Peel away this villain’s mask.”

“Um, so what’s the truth?” Lloyd asked.

“She’s so plain-spoken and relatable, so we naturally connected!” Eve said. “Eventually, I did start using her to gather intel on rare demon lords and the stuff we needed to seal them away. In the end, I totally deceived her. But if that need hadn’t arisen, we could have been pretty good friends, so I do feel bad about it. Aww.”

“O-oh...” Anzu said, caught somewhat off-guard. Eve looked just as awkward.

“.....Why are you blushing?” Phyllo growled.

“Uh, sorry,” Anzu said, fairly deflated. “Not great with these things.”

She may have accidentally been in a heartwarming mood, but Eve was past caring. Her inability to fight Lloyd was clearly a grave threat.

Crap, crap! Super crap! I’m in deep shit!

If Lloyd said “Confess to all your sins” Eve would likely obey that without question. A shiver ran down her spine.

Listen to me, you lovelorn fool of a body!

The pride of the possessor.

Anzu’s question had broken off the stream of questions, and Eve seized her chance.

“Time-out! Bye!”

“Ack! Wait, where are you going?!”

“Bathroom! Or not! Picking flowers! Gonna take time to pick ‘em all!”

With that, Eve skedaddled, out the door in the blink of an eye.

"She ran for it! Should we give chase?" Mena yelped, on her feet.

Threonine and Sardin waved her down.

"No need. This is her home base. There's nowhere for her to run."

"And she's admitted to most of it. Lloyd, you never cease to amaze. A miracle! How'd you do it?"

Lloyd had no idea what he'd done, and just looked baffled.

"Huh? Miracle? She was acting kinda weird, but..."

He never even suspected she might have fallen for him. Mena noted that and was impressed for very different reasons than her father.

Anzu was largely feeling better about everything, so she thumped her sword on the floor, grinning merrily.

"Okay, Lady Eve may have blown this joint...but what if she snaps and starts causing chaos?"

"The elegant approach would be to merely pulverize her beyond argument and take control."

"I dunno what's elegant about that, but if it comes back to hurt her, she'll quiet down a while."

The domain duo were as hotheaded as ever.

Phyllo sighed, then grinned. ".....Simple. I like it."

Cornering a villain with brute force was totally her style.

"Okay, Lady Eve! Last stand!" Anzu crowed.

Lloyd had other concerns.

"I'm curious about Eve, but how's Marie doing?"

He was worried she'd made a mess in a foreign palace— He really was like a mom. Marie really should reflect on her actions.

Meanwhile, Marie had expunged the alcohol from her system, and Selen and Riho were helping her out of the restroom.

"This is why he won't believe you're a princess."

“Urgh...”

“Don’t cry, geez. Uh, which way is it?”

They’d hustled here pretty quickly, and Riho had lost her bearings.

At this point, a man in white passed by, and they called out to him.

“You there, got a sec?”

“Can you give us directions?”

The tall man turned around, revealing snake-like eyes— Yup, it was Vritra.

He seemed rather exhausted to begin with, and when he saw Selen, his eyes nearly popped out of his head. Like he’d just run into the last person he wanted to see.

“Mm? Wait...”

“Huh?”

When Vritra acted shifty, they assumed they knew why.

“Sorry to startle you. I’d act the same if I saw anyone looking like a wreck inside a castle.”

“She’s just drunk! She’s puked it all up now, don’t you worry.”

“Yarsss...”

Marie’s agreement was more a gurgle. Not terribly reassuring.

Vritra had not expected to see them here and was still reeling.

Riho was not in a state to pick up on that. Rubbing Marie’s back, she just tried to get directions.

“Uh, so lab coat man, we kinda rushed here and lost our way. Where were we, the meeting room? Where is it?”

Still rattled, Vritra pointed down the hall, his hand shaking.

“Go straight, turn right at the second corner.”

“Oh, right! I thought so! Thanks, white coat man!”

Riho bobbed her head, and Vritra nodded back.

But Selen was staring fixedly at his face.

“Selen? What’s up?” Riho asked.

Selen didn’t budge.

“Wh-what?”

“Um, have we met before?”

Riho sighed and slapped her shoulder.

“Don’t be silly, this is Profen. You’ve never even been here before.”

“Sorry. He just seemed familiar.”

Vritra looked very uncomfortable. He would have loved to tell the truth, but with his daughter held hostage...

“.....”

“See, he doesn’t know how to respond.”

That finally made Selen back down.

“Ah...I do beg your pardon. Just a strange idea that popped into in my head.”

“N-not at all.”

There was an awkward silence...and then they heard footsteps come racing down the hall.

“Wh-what now?”

“Urgh...it’s swaying! I feel sick...”

Coming fast at them—Eve in the bunny costume.

“Aughh! Ruuuuun!”

Squeak squeak. Tromp tromp. That mascot was burning rubber.

“Is that Eve?”

“She’s clearly running for her life... She even said as much.”

“What happened?! We’d better get back!”

Riho and Selen quickly dragged Marie with them down the hall toward the

conference room.

“Wahhh! What’s going on! My feet are burning! Augh!”

Even friction was too much for Marie right now. Vritra was every bit as confused.

“I suppose Selen *would* recognize me...but what happened to Eve?”

He sounded impressed but that soon gave way to concern. He followed after Eve.

“Did Lloyd work a miracle? She’s headed for the lab... Oh, dear!”

That might not be good news after all. He picked up his pace.

Eve fled Lloyd’s interrogation and made a beeline for the lab, drifting round every corner, clearing every staircase in a single bound.

“And I’m! Here!”

The second she was inside, she tore off the costume’s head, flung it at the floor, and punched herself in the face.

“Take that! Ow! Argh! And that!”

Like a thing possessed, she furiously beat herself—banishing the fears, enduring the pain, blow after blow—until Asako’s borrowed face was bruised.

She caught a glimpse of that in the glass, then started banging her head into the ground as if that would finish this.

Thunk thunk thunk thunk...

Over and over and over, slamming her forehead into the floor, blood pooling until each strike made a splashing noise.

“Oof...”

This only stopped when she passed out. The lab was like a murder scene—definitely more blood than most would survive.

But Eve was like Alka—immortal. She was only out for a few seconds, and she just got right back up on her feet. She was still bleeding, but the bruises had already begun to fade.

“Hahh...hahh... I’m okay now, right? It died down?”

Eve examined herself in the mirror, trying to reassure herself.

“You’ve got a lot of nerve falling for a boy and tripping me up! Wait till I’m out of your body to do that crap! I’ll happily let you have Lloyd then.”

But the moment she said his name, Eve’s cheeks turned red—she was a total blushing beauty. Eve’s malicious aura was replaced with Asako’s gentle sweetness.

“I’m in *heat*!”

Eve slapped her own flushed cheeks. Such dramatic self-harm— It would look very alarming to anyone not in the know.

“Argh! Owww! You’ve already killed someone! How dare you go falling in love now!”

“_____”

“Huh? I’ve indirectly killed far more people? It was for grown-up reasons. Wait, we’re talking now?!”

If she was responding, then Asako really was on the verge of awakening.

Eve shuddered, staggering toward the back of the lab.

“Damn you, Llo—boy I shall not name!”

It was only a matter of time before Asako stole her body back, and it was all Lloyd’s fault. She had to get out of this body as soon as possible. Eve dragged herself across the lab.

Dripping blood, she reached a room with a large pod at its center, thick cables running outward in all directions.

Behind pale blue glass slept a woman’s form, suspended in some sort of culture fluid. There was a soft sound, like air bubbles in a tank. Even if this were avant-garde art it would be tasteless, instinctively revolting.

Eve collapsed against the side of the pod, smearing bloody cheeks against the glass, a sinister cackle rising. Her adorable face made this sight all the more unnerving.

Like someone trying to stop an alarm clock that had woken them, her hands felt for the controls, slamming buttons to retract the outer shell, revealing the entirety of the woman's form.

Long white hair, lithe limbs... It exuded class to a degree that made one reluctant to even compare the figure to a model's body.

Eve cackled again.

"Lovely... This will be *my* body. I always wanted to be slender and regal... Eh-heh-heh..."

This was the body she'd had Vritra make for her. A form made to her specifications, so that she could carry out all her most wicked desires. She didn't seem like the type to obsess over her appearance, but there you go.

As Eve basked in the sight of it, Vritra caught up with her. He freaked out at the horrifying quantity of blood on her costume.

"Eve...what's the meaning of this? What's got you this worked up?"

"The time has coooooooooooome, Jin Ishikura!" Eve roared, pupils dilating. "Asako's body! Take it back right now!"

"At least explain—"

"I don't need a useless body! Move! Start the process, put my soul in this new body! You know what'll happen if you refuse!"

"But adjustments aren't yet—"

Eve grabbed him by his shirt.

"We can adjust it on the test drive! Or are you buying time? Trying to mess with me? Do it now! Unless you no longer care about your daughter?!"

In her fury, Eve grabbed a screwdriver off the floor, holding it to her own head.

"Wh-what?! Stop that!"

"Wounds to an immortal body heal fast, but what if it punctures the brain?! You're aware what happens, yes? We have evidence that brain damage makes them turn violent! What'll Asako do then? Wanna find out?!"

This threat was terrifying, and he knew Eve would go through with it.

“Don’t!” Vritra cried, not wanting any harm to come to daughter’s body. “I can’t bear to see you abuse her any further!”

Eve saw the tears in his eyes and sneered.

She waved the screwdriver like a conductor’s baton, barking orders. Drops of blood flew from the end of it with each wave.

“I’ve got the steps down! The first leg is an application of the process for sealing demon lords in those mangosteen-looking Mastema Fruits...”

“I know! But let’s stop the bleeding first.”

Vritra held a handkerchief to her brow.

“How sweet. But that won’t get you anywhere.”

“It’ll get you out of her!”

Another fit was upon her, and Eve started smacking herself.

“Even your father’s love?! Move, Ishikura! Do this now!”

“Like I said, final adjustments aren’t done. Don’t blame me if anything goes wrong!”

Eve took a seat on what looked like an electric chair, covered in dials and toggles. She put on a cap studded with electrodes and closed her eyes.

“If this fails, I’ll destroy Asako’s mind for good. Don’t screw up.”

Fearing for his daughter, Vritra started flipping switches.

“Hang in there, Asako. It won’t be much longer, and then you’ll be free of this devil.”

With a prayer, he turned a dial, and a pale glow covered Eve—Asako’s body.

“Starting...transfer... Heh-heh... Heh-heh-heh...”

Eve’s fading laughter echoed through the lab.

Back in the Profen Castle Conference Room, sans Eve.

Selen’s group had returned, joined by Merthophan’s circus contingent—an

all-hands-on-deck effort.

But with Eve herself still absent, they were left trying to figure out their next move. If this was court, they'd be holding a recess after the defendant fled.

Everyone around was gravely discussing the future, but only Selen was frowning and muttering to herself. What was that about?

“I see. That *is* love.”

“I reckon it is.”

“Then she must die. Let us have a constructive conversation on how we could execute the King of Profen.”

There were certainly *more* constructive topics around...but as everyone else talked, Marie just sat there, deflated.

Selen was always the type of horrifying person who would threaten death to royalty unbidden, but Sardin was rather aghast.

“Um, Selen...we are in *her* country, best to mind what you say...,” he suggested.

Selen didn’t even let him finish.

“Whatever are you saying, King Sardin? Love knows no borders.”

But Selen’s classmates knew how to handle her.

“.....Send her to Hell’s Lock.”

“She’s unfit for politics, for better or for worse.”

If Selen did enter politics, she wouldn’t even need illegal donations to make her sprout extreme beliefs and court controversy.

Lloyd quietly shifted to the point, either not minding Selen’s outburst or way too used to it.

“What happened to Lady Eve? I thought she was reforming at the end, there!”

In his mind, she’d folded before their questioning, finally seeing the light. In reality, this was not true.

“From what you’ve said, it was more like...”

Love had made an honest woman out of her. But falling for someone today or yesterday did not really seem to warrant exposing a hundred years of treachery, so nobody knew what to make of it.

Since Riho hadn't seen it firsthand, she had no real grasp on things.

Merthophan's group were every bit as lost, wondering why she had run.

"Nothing I've heard denies the possibility honest produce awakened her to the joys of farming."

"Mwa-ha-ha! Her love of muscles could have gotten her so worked up she happily confessed!"

They may have had no clue, but that didn't stop them from their shticks.

"Forget those theories, please," Choline said, sighing. "I'm voting for the love thing, myself... Hmm?"

Her eyes had found Satan, his brow creased. The turtle on his head—Surtr—leaned in and asked, "Yo, what's on your mind, Satan?"

"Oh...just remembering a discussion on why Eve's not that strong. Maybe we've just seen why."

That caught Anzu's interest, and she leaned in.

"Is this related to the love thing? Tell us more."

"Speculating here, but Eve might be—"

As Satan made to explain his take on these deepening mysteries, a new voice cut in, sounding convinced.

"Love? Ah, that explains her panic."

All turned toward this deep voice, and they found a tall, thin man holding a young girl.

His white coat was spattered with blood, and the girl had suffered head injuries.

"Who the— I can smell blood on him! Look out!"

Anzu's hand went to the hilt of her blade, ready to draw at the drop of a hat.

But before she could make any threats, Satan and Surtr let out squeaks that totally dispelled all ominous vibes.

““Urrrrghhh?!””

“Hah? What’s wrong?” Anzu shouted.

Anzu reeled back, but they paid her no attention, and the two bolted toward the man.

“Director Ishikura!”

“Oh my god! It’s Ishikura!”

Vritra smiled like he was meeting old friends.

The rest of the room gasped.

“Ishikura... Wait, you’re Vritra?! Why are you human?! When did you leave the belt?! And you point-blank ignored me a few minutes ago!”

Selen came in hard, and Vritra looked suitably chagrined.

“It’s only been a few days, but I almost missed this...but no time to explain the details. I’ll submit the full report in writing on a later date.”

“Hmm, time’s pressing— And who is this girl?”

At this point, Lloyd saw who Vritra was carrying.

“Th-the princess!”

“““““Huh?!”””””

“This girl’s the Azami princess!” Lloyd cried.

Marie sprayed snot and spit in equal measure.

“Bleghhh?!”

“Ugh, gross!”

This was the least princessy response possible, and Riho backed away as if she’d smelled garbage. Poor Marie.

Naturally, only Lloyd was oblivious to Marie’s identity, so everyone, Vritra included, looked confused.

"No, this is not the Azami princess," Vritra said.

"Huh?" Lloyd responded, blinking. "But she said so herself last night!"

"And you believed that instantly?!" Marie wailed, tears streaming down her face. "She just said so with no evidence?! That makes no sense!"

She was chewing her handkerchief, letting the tears and snot flow.

".....Blow your nose."

"Clearly the reason why, ah-ha-ha," Mena snorted.

At last, Marie managed to clean herself up.

"So what happened with her?" Threonine asked.

"Um, she came up to me in the garden last night. I asked if she was the princess and she said she was!"

"Ah...that explains it," Vritra said, nodding.

"Don't just nod, share with the rest of us!" Selen said. "Who is she?"

"She's my daughter, Selen. I've been searching for her this whole time and found her...like this."

Satan and Surtr both let out cries of joy.

"Oh! That *is* Asako! She was in Profen?!"

"I can still see her smile when she ate the gummies I brought her."

(Side note: Surtr's real name was Tony, an American who kept bringing Asako brightly colored, oversweet treats that would make her nurses chew him out. An occasional treat isn't a bad thing, but the sick maybe shouldn't indulge too much.) "So you snuck into Profen solo to save Asako?"

"That's just mean, Vritra! And why are you human...? Is this body real?" Selen started patting him down. Vritra looked awfully accustomed to being treated like an object.

"Not entirely off-base...and this connects to Eve's odd behavior."

"Meaning? You've got our attention."

Vritra took a deep breath, glanced down at her, and revealed the truth.

“You’re aware that in our old world, Eve was known as President Eva?”

“More or less, though it is hard to believe.”

“Um...?” Lloyd’s group had not heard this story.

“I’ll fill you in later,” Satan said, not wanting to get off track.

“On our arrival here, Eva was on the brink of death. Her obsession with staying alive allowed her to take possession of my daughter’s body—and she began calling herself Eve. She maintained that deception throughout the years...”

Merthophan figured it out.

“That explains why she was so weak, despite being so driven. A disconnect between mind and body prevented her from showing her true power.”

“Most likely, yes. As for why Eve started acting so strange— Lloyd, that’s your fault.”

“Huh?”

Vritra looked rather uncomfortable with this, himself.

“Lloyd, I believe my daughter has fallen in love with you.”

“She has?!” Lloyd yelped.

This was quite a reveal, but pretty much in line with his usual obliviousness.

“As her father, I can’t take issue with her choice— Your only real shortcoming is your lack of real-life experience.”

“Vritra! Saying that, in front of me? How tactless,” Selen said.

Coming from the girl who’d threatened to execute a monarch in their own country. Selen had never once possessed tact.

Her pupils had dilated, and she looked quite dangerous, which made Vritra flinch. His time as her belt, serving and fighting alongside her, had certainly humbled him.

“You’re worse than Eve, but that aside, Lloyd’s arrival meant my daughter’s mind began to awaken.”

"In other words, her love for Lloyd began to free her from Lady Eve's control?" Threonine asked.

Sardin looked convinced. "That explains why she enthusiastically answered all his questions!"

"I was not there myself, but given Eve's blind panic, it must have been quite a disaster."

Vritra turned to Selen.

"Eve was holding my daughter's body hostage and forcing me to obey her. I had no choice but to take leave without a word, for which I—"

"Will apologize in writing on a later date?" Selen cut in, grinning indomitably.

They certainly knew each other well. Satan and Surtr exchanged smiles.

But at this point Marie asked, "So what's up with Eve now? Your daughter's no longer possessed, but has yet to awaken?"

"Right, that's the thing. We don't have much time."

"What's this about time? Oh!"

Vritra handed Asako to Lloyd, looking desperate, which worried his old subordinates.

"Yo, yo, Ishikura!"

"What's the plan, Director? Is the news that bad?"

"You figured it out, then, Satan... Or should I say Seta?"

Upon hearing his old name, Satan rubbed his nose.

"You've scolded me more than enough times to pick up on these things."

"Not something to boast about."

Vritra got to the point.

"Eve is in the process of moving to her new body. It's a custom-made super body combining the prisoner modifications, necromancy, and the tech behind the demon lord-sealing Mastema Fruits."

"Necromancy and demon lords?!"

“The Mastema Fruits?! She tore up the domain for those!”

“She may have held my daughter’s body hostage, but I finished the new vessel for her. I lent my hands to her evil. I’ve got to take responsibility for that.”

Vritra bowed low to Selen once more.

“I ask one last favor, Mistress. Look after my daughter.”

“Vritra...”

“We’ve got to defeat this woman before she takes full possession of her new body. She’ll fight back, but our best shot is before she fully acclimatizes to it. I’ll stop her if it costs me my life—”

“We’ll see about *that*, Ishikury.”

“Th-that nickname—?!”

“Eve?! She’s echoing inside my mind!”

The voice had an echo, like a PA announcement—but it was projecting right inside their brains. Everyone looked ill.

“My mind’s fiiiinally clear again! Oh, my voice? I’m speaking directly to your minds, yes. That’s baseline functionality, part of the standard body package.”

This distressed everyone but Vritra, who simply went, “Well done, Eug.”

You gotta respect her work.

“But if she’s got to psychically project, her soul hasn’t adapted to the new body yet! It took me a solid hour or two to get used to *this* body! If you hurry—”

“You can stop me? Puh-leez, Ishikury. I knew full well you would betray me the second I was out of your daughter’s body. Did you really think I wouldn’t have a plan for that?”

There was a popping sound.

“Hngg? Oh no!”

Vritra’s body began to tremble.

“Naturally, I placed a trap in your body, traitor. If I have a spare moment, I

always make sure I leave a failsafe.”

Vritra was writhing, and Selen ran to him.

“Vritra?!”

“—stay back!”

Sensing the desperation in his voice, Eve’s laughter echoed through their minds. Like a megaphone they couldn’t silence, even by closing their ears.

“Exactly, don’t go near him! I prepared for this. Ishikury’s new body contains a berserker core. An extra-strong version of the thing Tramadol spread through Azami.”

“The same curse he used... Wahh!”

“H-he became a giant?!”

Allan had stepped in to try and save Vritra, but seeing his body expand made him reel back.

Eve was all too happy to explain her villainy. Triumph left her prone to gloating.

“Technically, it’s slightly different. More like a release? I mean, Ishikury *is* Vritra, the snake demon lord. He was *always* a giant. In the old lore, he was said to scrape the very heavens! With no limiters on him, he’ll naturally get this big.”

“So he’s gonna be like how he was in that dungeon?” Riho asked, remembering the first time they met.

“.....He batted Master aside like he was nothing. If he loses control...that’s bad.”

Snake scales were starting to emerge on Vritra’s skin.

“Sorry,” he gasped, trying to leave one last message for Selen. “I can’t stop myself... Get my daughter to safety...and—”

“V-Vritra?! Hang in there!”

But he’d already turned to Lloyd and Satan.

“Go on and kill me. If my daughter lives, I do not matter. My one desire—”

“But...we can’t just...”

He glanced once more at Selen, smiling.

“It’s been fun, my Mis— Hisssssss!”

With a screech, Vritra’s snake form burst through the conference hall ceiling.

Sunlight streamed through, gleaming on his black scales.

The sudden appearance of a snake monster caused panic even among Profen’s highly trained maids.

“Gah! Gahhhh!”

His mind no longer there, he turned toward the screams, rearing back to attack.

Merthophan sprang into action, barking orders.

“Choline! Get King Sardin and Threonine out of here! Cadets, evacuate the palace! Average fighters *will* die!”

Eve was clearly keeping an eye on things and yelling delightedly inside their minds like a grating radio personality. She was clearly relishing in her opportunity for payback on her earlier humiliation.

“Come! He was your boss, your friend in this world! Director Ishikura! Vritra himself! Now he’s your enemy! Can you crawl over your friend’s dead body to get to me?! Try it if you can!”

“Damn, she won’t shut up.”

“But we can’t kill Vritra...!”

Satan patted Lloyd’s shoulder.

“Stand down, Lloyd. Leave the dirty work to the grown-ups.”

“You can’t kill him!” Selen objected. “He’s our friend! Your boss!”

“But if we have to... He wouldn’t want anyone here falling to his rampage.”

Eve jumped in on this discussion, too. Like a crappy live commentary.

“Aren’t they sweet? An incompetent underling, desperate to fulfil his boss’s demand! You need gallons of tears for this one!”

The screaming grew louder. Waves of chaos spreading beyond the palace walls.

“If pandemonium reigns in town, it’ll be just what she wants! Selen Hemein! Prepare to rescue!”

“Ex-Colonel Merthophan... Very well.”

Selen forced herself to accept the order.

Then Anzu spoke up.

“Evacuation is vital, but we can’t exactly let Lady Eve get away. We’ve gotta send someone after her.”

Nexamic flaunted his muscles.

“Mwa-ha-ha! Well put, Anzu! Even a brain made of muscles is right sometimes!”

“Har?! You’re the last person... But I guess you thought that was a compliment.”

Merthophan shot her a thumbs-up.

“Don’t worry, we’ve already got the perfect man on the job.”

“Huh?”

Satan grinned.

“Yup, one last card up our sleeve if she resorted to force.”

“You’ve got someone else here? Who?” Lloyd asked.

Merthophan flashed a smile his way. “You know him very well.”

“How rude.”

A cheery voice echoed through the lab.

“I’ve mocked them enough— How I do hate to rush. My hair’s not even dry! Hardly becoming.”

This voice—as alluring as a top-tier sex worker—belonged to a woman in her late twenties.

Heedless of the mayhem in the castle above, she was applying lipstick like she was getting ready to hit the town. She even did the lip-smacking thing.

“Oof, moving before I’ve adjusted to this body, everything feels wrong. You get that? That tingle you get in your extremities when you come inside from the winter cold and go straight into a hot bath. But only everywhere!”

She spoke like she was addressing a boyfriend—to someone stepping slowly out from behind a pillar.

“Then you really oughtta take your time. Let me kill you before you suffer!”

Tanned skin, broad smile, fearsome words—Shouma.

Folding his arms, he leaned against the wall and looked toward her voice. He was smiling, but his eyes were not, like a bird that’s spotted its next meal.

“My! Attacking me in my sleep? Kunlun villagers all take after that chief of theirs now. That should do it.”

Picking up on the threat he posed, she nonetheless strolled right out to face him, like a sales agent walking into a client’s shop.

She had a supermodel figure with clean features—tall and slender. Her long white hair contained dark highlights—quite an eye-catching look.

She radiated class, possibly because of the sheer confidence in her body language. Like royalty making a public appearance.

She wore a black dress with an orange accent, and a headband with crown-like flair. Both stylish anachronisms, a futuristic vibe that totally worked for her. With her confidence, she could pull off any look.

The mysterious beauty slinking out of the lab’s depths shot Shouma a seductive look over the top of her sunglasses.

As he looked back, his eyes narrowed.

“Hngg, you don’t exactly match Dr. Eug’s description.”

“Well, no. When I met her, I was an ancient crone. And the rest of the time, I was wearing a rabbit suit!”

She offered up a graceful curtsey.

“Greetings! A pleasure. I am Eve Profen, ruler of this land. My real name is Eva, but feel free to keep calling me Eve, Shouma.”

“I figured you knew about me.”

Her smile was positively jubilant.

“Of course I do! You were one of my best pawns.”

That phrase made him grit his teeth.

“Call me what you like, but—you always meant to sacrifice Sou and Dr. Eug, didn’t you?”

Eve’s response was hardly a justification at all. Her arrogance rose a notch to “haughty.”

“In a world full of riffraff, being deemed useful to me at all is genuinely impressive. Out of respect for that, I deigned to show myself. You’re the first to bask in my glory! Be honored.”

“Listen to yourself.”

He wasn’t having it, but Eve just kept on cozying up to him.

“Honestly, I do have some sympathy for you, Shouma.”

“How so?”

“I heard being far stronger than those around you left you dejected and apathetic.”

Shouma had left Kunlun once, but everyone had been so weak and buttered him up. He’d returned with a low opinion of humanity and hadn’t wanted Lloyd to go through the same thing. That’s why he’d tried to use the demon lords to make the world strong enough to be interesting.

“Dr. Eug filled you in?”

“Why, yes,” Eve said, smiling warmly.

The way she was trying to worm her way into his graces got Shouma’s hackles up. Eug had fallen prey to her manipulations and paid the price for it. She was like a lawyer who pretends to be an ally so they can charge for more time, or a financial planner baiting people into an unwise investment.

Well aware he was on guard, Eve kept pursuing this angle, trying to get on his wavelength.

"I used to live a life of total freedom, ordering everyone around. But once you get everything you want, the world gets dreadfully dull."

"Yup."

"And you seek new challenges—but they end up the same. The only difference between our actions is that you're devoting your life to that hapless brother of yours, and I'm acting in my own self-interest."

Eve was behaving like an influencer doing a *World Conquest Challenge!* stream. This side of her had certainly gotten worse once she discovered magic. Like an immature fool given a credit card without a limit. Shouma looked repulsed.

"You had me at first, but I really can't relate. Not to anyone who'd badmouth Lloyd."

"Oh, don't give me that," Eve said, waving him down. "I've been forced to acknowledge the boy's power. Perhaps he doesn't compare to the best the world offers, but that ceases to matter when you consider the miracles he can pull off."

Shouma's scowl was instantly replaced with a beaming smile. His love for Lloyd was undiminished in the face of evil.

"You noticed? That's right! Lloyd's greatness ain't about stats! That's the whole appeal!"

Eve matched his sudden shift in attitude, explaining what had just happened to her.

"I know! Just a minute ago, he had me cornered worse than I've ever been before. Or at least as bad as the time someone shot me to death."

"Lloyd's charms come right at you like a gunshot to the heart."

This conversation was going wildly off the rails, but Shouma noticed Eve flexing her hands, getting used to the new body.

And his whole demeanor changed, switching to battle mode.

“Trying to stall with chatter till you adjust? Best I kill you first.”

Eve didn’t bat an eye.

“Too obvious? Well, I’m hardly in peak condition.”

Eve stretched, then put a hand on her hip, smirking at him.

“That sounds like a good warm-up. I’ll play along, boy.”

“Ha ha! I’m just part of your exercise routine? Passion! Let’s make it a fun one.”

Shouma vaulted forward, fists swinging toward her.

“Kunlun villagers can’t beat *me*,” Eve said.

Her smile was confident, and her declaration was purposeful.

When Mena heard Shouma was here, she regained enough confidence to crack jokes.

“Man, he’s gonna hog all the glory.”

“Then we’d better focus on saving Vritra!”

Anzu had been waiting for this—at last, she drew her blade.

“Demon lord or not, my blade will cut it! I rule the damn domain!”

Anzu flung herself at her massive opponent, swinging her sword. Her secret art, Scattered Blossoms, allowed her to fly high up above into a mighty downwards swing—*Clang!*

But thick skin covered in hard scales was more than a match for her attack. The shock numbed her hands on the hilt, and her eyes widened.

“Damn, that’s hard!”

“Talk about tough. Let’s see if magic works. *Water Arrow!*”

Mena tried her specialty but to no avail.

“*Hngg!* It feels like punching a bag of muscle! Clearly a defensive special—Augh!”

Nexamic was in mid-sentence when Vritra’s tail attack struck home.

“Look out, Nexamic!”

“Gahhhh! *Tiger Guard!*”

Nexamic used a secret art of his own and hardened his body. But the sheer bulk of the tail sent him flying anyway.

“*Hngggggg?!*”

Lloyd and Phyllo briefly stopped helping evacuate to catch him as he fell.

“Nexamic!”

“.....Making things worse.”

Their quick footwork barely kept him from falling entirely out of the building, and he looked unusually sorrowful.

“Th-thank you, both. By way of gratitude, I’ll tell you my secret hip exercises!”

“.....Do not need.”

If even Nexamic couldn’t hold his ground against this foe... Well, Riho was swearing.

“Damn, this Vritra’s even stronger! I guess he knew Lloyd and was pulling his punches. This is what he’s really capable of?”

Allan remembered Vritra’s prior attack.

“I thought we were done for, then. Sou wound up hitting a missing scale and vaporizing his body; if we aim for that—”

“I thought the same thing, but I can’t see any missing scales. This snake demon is fully healed.”

As they avoided his attacks, Vritra lashed out, roaring.

“Voohhhhhh!”

“He’s being tormented. Eve said something about guilt making people violent, but what does he feel guilty about?” Mena asked.

“I’m assuming Asako,” Satan suggested. “He threw himself into finding a cure for her and was barely home. It put a strain on their relationship. Plus, she’s been possessed this whole time, and he wasn’t there to save her— It’s a lot to

carry."

"But he worked so hard!" Selen looked up at him, sadness in her eyes.

A demon lord so strong he'd gone toe-to-toe with Alka at her most invulnerable. There was nothing they could do about his rampage. That thought was on everyone's mind.

"But should we really call in my mom or the kid grandma?" Marie asked.

Satan shook his head. "That's Eve's goal here. She needs to buy time till she adjusts to her body, and if we look for help, that'll leave the holy sword or Kunlun undefended."

"And she knows we can't hurt a friend... President Eva's a nasty—argh!"

Surtr had let his guard down for a second, and Vritra's tail snap sent the turtle flying. Lloyd dashed off to catch him over his shoulder.

"Close one!"

"Thanks, Lloyd! You were like a wide receiver!"

Satan was relieved to see Surtr safe, but Vritra's might was making him sweat.

"I knew the director was a force to be reckoned with... He came to this world with a huge dream—to save his daughter's life. How could he not be strong?"

The bigger the individual's goal, the more powerful they became in this new world. Satan believed that theory. Meanwhile, he'd just studied up on environmental problems out of a desire to score with the ladies which couldn't compare, and made him insecure, here.

"Do I have to take my second form and fight him for real? But that means one of us is gonna die."

He knew he couldn't hold back. Anzu flitted over to him.

"Whoa, don't put yourself down, Satan. I thought your boss's order had you motivated!"

"Anzu, the director's requests are never easy. If we at least had a plan to diminish his guilt...like Asako waking up..."

While everyone hesitated to attack, Selen stepped forward. "Vritra! Wake

up!"

"Gahhhh!"

But the snake did not respond and merely thrashed his tail around. Selen blocked the incoming rubble with her belt, trying again.

"Look out, Selen! Back down!" Riho cried, but Selen wasn't listening.

"I will not! Vritra has been at my side for ages! My voice will reach him!"

"But you're up against a demon lord..."

The snake demon lord was out of control, lashing out at everything. Even in the face of that—Selen was determined to talk him down.

"Vritra is Vritra! My voice will reach him! I must remind him how hard he's worked—that he has nothing to feel guilty about!"

Riho didn't know how to argue that—which made Phyllo shake her head.

".....When she gets like this, Selen won't hear anyone else."

"Yeah...I've known her long enough to figure that much out. Heh."

Riho chuckled, sighed, then called out to Satan and Merthophan.

"Merthophan! Killing Vritra might well be our only other option, so I'm betting on Selen's lecture!"

Merthophan nodded.

"As a former instructor, I don't condone gambling! But I'll make an exception here!"

"You heard him, Selen. Chew his ass out! We'll fend off his attacks!"

".....On it."

Selen folded her arms, grinning.

"It never hurts to have good friends!" she declared.

"Selen!" Lloyd seemed highly motivated to back her up. "I'm your friend, too! Let me help!"

But his extremely confident use of the word *friend* immediately took the wind

out of her sails.

“Y-you’re just saying ‘friend’ because I said that word, and you thought you had to play along! It’s basically peer pressure! Right? Tell me that’s right!”

Wasn’t that demand the real peer pressure?

As she wailed, Allan stepped up next to Lloyd.

“Don’t lose your head, Belt Princess! Friendship is power! Don’t waste it!”

“You are *not* my friend. Stay out of this.”

“Augh! That’s discrimination!”

“At best, you’re a local lord I keep running into. Azami Cadet Team! Our mission: Talking sense into Vritra!”

Everyone roared back. Their faces beaming with faith in each other.

“Come on! Allan, Riho!”

“On it, Lloyd!”

“Let’s do this, Vritra! Rahhh!”

Allan came in swinging with a wild axe spin that got Vritra’s attention.

“Grr?!”

As the snake turned, Riho fired a mithril arm-boosted ice spell at its face.

“Ha! Even you’ve gotta be annoyed by that snowball!”

She was right—Vritra had flinched. And Phyllo didn’t miss that.

“.....Shh!”

Her patented hand blades sent shockwaves after him. Vritra’s head went crashing into the floor, shaking the building.

“.....Master, Selen.....go.”

Lloyd and Selen glanced at each other, nodding.

“Let’s go, Selen!”

“Yes! Take me away, Sir Lloyd!”

Lloyd picked her up and ran up Vritra's back toward the snake's head.

Selen was being princess-carried by the man she loved. That would normally go right to her head and have her blushing up to her ears.

"Vritra..."

But despite the allure of the moment, she stayed on task. Feelings for Vritra? She tightened the belt on her hips, and she stared down at the writhing snake's face.

"Gahh!"

Feeling them on its back, Vritra tried to flip over, but...

"Ready, Selen?"

"Of course, Sir Lloyd!"

Lloyd used the momentum of the writhing torso to jump and fling Selen through the air.

Their teamwork paid off, and Selen landed neatly on top of Vritra's head.

"Extend, cursed belt!"

Vritra was flailing on instinct, not heeding a word they said.

But Selen did not give up, piling on the words.

"I've figured it out! The cursed belt bears your power—so why is it that I can control it at will?!"

".....Like when you fought me?" Phyllo muttered.

At that point in time, the belt's defenses had been entirely automatic. But during their battle, Selen had gained the ability to manipulate it herself.

"It was due to the fruits of my training and romantic awakening, but I've recently realized it was not *just* those factors!"

"Gahhhh!"

None of this was getting through to Vritra. He was still thrashing, and Selen lowered her center of gravity, holding on for dear life.

"Namely! You and I were in similar predicaments! Our common ground

allowed me to take control! Specifically, you and your daughter are just like me and *my* father!"

At the word "daughter," there was a faint hiccup in Vritra's struggles.

"Because of the belt's curse, I spent years cooped up in my room. Rinko told me your daughter was equally lonely, trapped in a bed with her illness!"

Slowly...very slowly... Vritra's rampage was losing steam. Everyone was shouting, "It's working!"

"You buried yourself in your work and weren't there for her when she needed you, and you feel guilty about that. Things also grew strained between myself and my father."

"When I first met you and Robin, you looked likely to cut off his hand if he touched you," Threonine said. He'd been acutely conscious of how tense things had been between Selen and her father, Robin.

"My father grew distant, but the whole time he was trying to free me from the belt. He was never physically strong, but he trained hard, trying to gain the power to remove the belt with his own hands. Your relationship with your daughter may have been strained, but you never stopped trying to save her, right?"

Selen grit her teeth, riding the bucking snake.

"You're in pain now because of your daughter, and that guilt! But I was in her place, and I can say this for sure— What guilt?! You're a stupid father!"

"Gahhh?!"

"You were working yourself to the bone for her! How could any daughter hold that against you?! Deep down, we both want things to return to how they used to be, but just don't know how! I say so, so it must be true!"

Selen punctuated her speech by stomping on Vritra's head. Like a toddler throwing a tantrum in front of their father.

"Actually! I should be the one going on and on about how grateful I am! Point is! Don't make your stupid guilt an excuse to turn into a giant snake and go berserk!"

Selen's speech came from the soul and overlapped with her own feelings toward Robin Hemein.

The intensity of it affected not just Vritra, but everyone around. They were all rushing in, saying their own piece.

"I'm grateful for my surrogate sister Rol," Riho said. "She got herself brainwashed, and spent a while being the villain, but that's water under the bridge now. Any baggage you got will vanish in a jiff if you just talk it out a few times. Don't let that shit stop you."

"My father may be called the Dumb Dandy, but he was working overtime for us and our mother the whole time," Mena shouted. "I'm still too ashamed to tell him, but I *know* us kids are grateful!"

".....Yeah," Phyllo added. "I might kick his ass sometimes, but that's us being affectionate."

"I'm a hopeless trainwreck!" Allan roared. "But my father hasn't given up on me. He's constantly trying to figure out a better future for me, and I'm grateful for that! You got no need to feel guilty, Vritra!"

"My mother's something else!" Marie cried. "But I remember knowing she loved me. Kids remember more than you think! Your love got through to her, Vritra!"

"I never had a father," Lloyd said, his hand on the snake's belly. "But Grandpa Pyrid raised me, and I'll never forget that. I'm grateful to him, Shouma, Chief Alka—and you, Vritra. How many times have you encouraged me to have faith in myself? It's time I return the favor. Vritra! You're a good father! Believe in yourself!"

Lloyd was often pretty bad at this last thing, so for those words to leave his lips— Well, Vritra had often been frustrated with Lloyd's refusal to believe his own strength. And this made him realize that he was making the same mistake. At last, his rampage stopped.

"Vritra?! Whoa!"

The snake's body was steadily shrinking back to Jin Ishikura's human form.

"That's right. I've always told people to believe in themselves. You're right. I should be proud of what I *did* do, as a father. Otherwise, I'm turning my back on my daughter and who I used to be."

When he was fully back in his human form—he collapsed to the ground.

They ran up to him, peering at his face. He was utterly worn out, but his eyes were still open. He apologized, his voice raspy. He was conscientious like that.

"Sorry about the rampage, Selen. I'll apologize in writing on a later date."

"Before you do that, say a word to your daughter. Doesn't matter what—She's waiting to hear from you."

Vritra smiled.

"I will. Not in writing, but with my own voice."

"Excellent. Then go on, and rest, Vritra."

And thus, Selen's speech brought Vritra's rampage to an end. But even as their fight wound down—well, they had no way of knowing what was going on elsewhere.

Shouma was lying crumpled against a heap of rubble in the remains of the Profen palace. He was in bad shape, bleeding everywhere. He wasn't dead yet, but he was in a lot of pain.

Eve stood over him, a satisfied smile on her lips; it seemed her preparations were finally complete. And she gave him an earful of her hardships.

"It was rough going! I had to collect all the records of Kunlun villagers from the world and add a line to each saying that silver was their weakness."

".....What would that do?" Shouma's voice was listless, his eyes staring into space.

Eve knelt down, like she was nudging a child toward comprehension.

"Are you aware of how runes work? Simply put, they infuse the world's perceptions with magic and make it real. Turning conception into fact— Totally wild, right? But if the world can't accept it or if it's just plain crazy, the effects aren't that great, or it requires a tremendous amount of magic."

“.....You don’t mean...?”

“Yes, I do! If the world at large thinks Kunlun villagers are weak to silver, then all I have to do is take three nines fine silver powder, brew it with convincingly expensive herbs, fuse that potion with runes, then use the power of the liquor demon lord, Dionysos, to turn it into alcohol. That’s the anti-Kunlun villager weapon—hannyatou.”

“It sure worked!” Shouma said, unable to even raise a finger.

“As long as I have hannyatou, no one from Kunlun can defeat me,” Eve smirked. “Not Alka, or your favorite, Lloyd.”

Eve straightened up and glanced toward Azami.

“The only real threat is Lab Chief Rinko. She has the holy sword, so we’re going to have to duke it out...but she’s shackled by her family and stands no chance against me.”

She no longer had eyes for Shouma.

But that didn’t get him down; instead he just started laughing.

“Kunlun villagers... Kunlun villagers! Ha-ha-ha! We’ve come all this way, and it all hinges on that? What a passionate twist!”

“Stop that; it’s creepy.”

He was half-dead, covered in blood—and laughing. Eve looked appalled.

Shouma turned his bleary eyes her way.

“Listen, it ain’t gonna be Lab Chief Rinko nor Chief Alka in your way. It’s gonna be my beloved little brother, Lloyd.”

“Aww, you’re so devoted! It makes me want to puke.”

She flashed him a look of contempt, but that just got him worked up.

“You’ll eat those words! And find out just why I can’t get enough of him!”

With that, his last reserve of energy was expended, and he slumped over.

Eve frowned.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Is he just trying to scare me? I’ve faced that

music countless times as President. It won't work."

Losing interest, Eve spread Abaddon wings and took to the air. Turning toward Azami, she grinned.

"Time for the final fight, Lab Chief Rien Cordelia. You've got so many things to protect, but I only need to protect myself. You're smart enough to know which of us has the upper hand!"



She flapped her camo wings and flew across the midday sky. Vritra's rampage had plunged her country into chaos, but she abandoned it without a second thought. She was conceit personified, pursuing only what she took pleasure in.

"There are imbeciles out there who claim having things to protect makes them stronger, but nothing in the world could possibly be of more value than yourself. The urge to protect is a ball and chain—and I'll prove that today!"

On she flew.

Left behind and half-unconscious, Shouma muttered, "My one regret...is that I can't see it happen in person. Someone, please be there to film it!"

And with that, he lost consciousness.

They sensed Eve's evil all the way in Kunlun.

Alka and Rinko both felt her palpable malfeasance and turned to the sky above.

"What the hell is...? Is Shouma okay?"

One after another, the Kunlun villagers caught wind of it and turned, looking anxiously upward.

Grandpa Pyrid, the voice of the villagers—and the man who had raised Lloyd—climbed to the top of a roof and folded his arms, scowling in the direction of Profen.

"It's far off, but that's one humdinger of a monster."

"Pyrid..."

He was grinning, his eyes gleaming.

"This used to happen all the time. I'm getting excited!"

Alka rubbed her forehead.

"The only thing you still remember is the fighting..."

What a total battle junkie. She had to laugh.

Pyrid had fought alongside Alka and Eug a hundred years ago, staving off an incurable disease to help seal the demon lords.

Having accomplished that, he'd gone into cryogenic sleep until the cure-all rune was completed. He lost the bulk of his memories as a side effect, but he hadn't forgotten how much he loved to brawl.

"What're you laughing at, Alka?"

"Ha-ha-ha, sorry. Still...if it's strong enough to take *you* back..."

Then it must be every bit as bad as that horde of demon lords. Alka knew only one possible cause.

"That'll be Eva. She's unleashed her shackles, poured out all her evil. This is gonna be brutal."

She sighed and straightened up, doing a few stretches to ready herself.

"If she was just crossing back over on her own, I wouldn't have bothered, but for her own peace of mind, she's trying to wreck this world to the point that me and the lab chief get stuck cleaning up her mess. Bad move. I don't appreciate her getting my friend and Lloyd mixed up in this. She's gonna pay for her insatiable arrogance."

With that, she paused and scratched her cheek.

"But if Eug was involved, she's gonna have something ready to deal with Kunlun villagers. Guess we'll see."

As she thought on that, someone stepped up behind her.

As he approached, he whispered something—and he sounded very tired.

"Oh, dear. This takes me back. Like when I was a hero."

"*Hngg? Ah! S-Sou! You're up?!*"

The old man next to her managed a feeble smile and a shrug.

"Don't act so shocked, Alka. It's bad for the heart."

The sinister Sou.

Alka had crafted a hero out of runes, and he had fought at the side of Eug and Pyrid. But once he'd lost his reason for living, he'd tried to become the villain instead—a sad fate. Until quite recently, he'd acted as Lloyd's nemesis.

Or rather, in an attempt to end his nebulous existence, he'd conspired with Shouma and attempted to turn Lloyd into a new hero. But he wound up liking Lloyd so much that he'd decided he'd rather stick around and cheer him on. Now he was more a friendly old codger. Bit of a generalization, but not widely off the mark.

Pyrid saw Sou and cheerily jumped down off the roof, thumping his shoulders.

"Oh, old-timer! I was starting to think you'd never wake up!"

Sou endured the thumps and looked at Pyrid, his expression hard to read.

"Deary me. That brave soul, reduced to this senile old man. You don't even remember fighting alongside me? How sad."

"Course not," Alka muttered. "We froze him at death's door. If he's only lost his memories, that just proves he has the devil's luck. And you're in this old man form, so how could he remember?"

"Fair." Sou smiled. "Hmm... When my existence was fading and nebulous, I could have easily returned to that boy-hero form, but I'm afraid that's no longer an option."

"Oh? Fascinating. What's stopping you?"

"I'm no longer the hero the world desires. I'm no longer receiving that mana. I am here of my own free will, no longer a rune man. I'm merely an elderly man named Sou, a friend of Shouma's."

His impression no longer changed in the eye of the beholder. Sou was now an ordinary human, and Alka found that cause for celebration.

"It's like my son finally grew up!"

"Stop. If you were my mother, I'd have been dealt a rough hand at birth."

But here Pyrid interrupted their banter.

"Yo, I ain't following a word of this. Use language a layman can follow!"

"Your comprehensive failings are alive and well."

"Mm. But even with this vile aura, I figured you'd be asleep a while longer. Did the threat to the world waken your hero blood?"

Alka was just teasing, but Sou shook his head.

“No, I merely heard a friend’s voice.”

“Shouma?”

Sou nodded and pulled something from his pocket.

“Heh-heh-heh... See this?”

It was a well-used handycam.

“I sensed my friend Shouma’s powerful desire to have someone film Lloyd’s heroism!”

With that jubilant cry, he held the viewfinder to his eye. Alka rolled her eyes.

“All that worrying, and this is what gets you up?”

“You know it. You’d do the same, Alka!”

“I’ll admit it. But did something happen to him?”

“One assumes,” Sou said, nodding. “His passion came through, so I think it’s safe to say he’s not able to hold the camera himself.”

“If he’s only worried about filming things, he ain’t dead yet. Still, filming the hero... Does he think Lloyd can beat someone he couldn’t?”

“At the least, that was my friend Shouma’s impression. After all—”

Sou smiled.

“It is high time Lloyd saved the world and became a true hero.”

Right then, the hero Sou was like a grandfather here to film his grandson’s sports festival.

The conference room ceiling was gone, and the floor was strewn with rubble and broken glass. The beautiful table and decor were in shambles. It was like a tornado had ripped through the room.

They had turned it into a makeshift field hospital, and Riho and Choline were running around using healing spells on the injured servants. Anzu was doing first aid on minor wounds. Those with broken bones were moaning aloud; those with scrapes and bruises were merely forcing themselves not to.

Vritra and Asako were lying side by side, both unconscious.

Anzu was tearing up curtains to use as makeshift bandages, looking worried.

"If unleashing the demon lords means things like Vritra appearing everywhere...we won't hold out long."

"Nope."

Renge would normally pounce on any weakness Anzu showed, but for once, she was in full agreement.

Merthophan came back from a search for more wounded.

"I think we've got everyone out of the rubble."

He was using a hoe and a spade like dowsing rods to locate buried victims. Most people would question this, but he'd found a lot of people this way, so no one pressed the point. The proof was in the pudding.

"But that is a big hole. Let's hope this doesn't become an international incident."

A very royal concern, Sardin.

"It's her fault! They can send us a bill, but not one coin is coming out of the national treasury."

Ubi mimed pulling a purse drawstring. She'd been through a lot and didn't let this get to her.

Selen had been looking after Vritra and Asako, but now she joined them.

"Eve's the one who triggered Vritra's rampage. We should be billing her...or at least, making her pay for this."

"Right, what happened to her? I heard someone named Shouma was on her, but is he okay?" Threonine asked.

"No need to worry about him, Dad," Allan said. "He's from Kunlun, and stronger than Lloyd. No demon lord will get him."

He seemed confident—and totally jinxed himself.

"____?!"

The words had barely left his mouth when Phyllo's eyes widened. And Allan jumped.

"Wh-what's wrong, Phyllo? Did I say something wrong?"

Satan, Surtr, and Lloyd all sensed the same thing and scrambled up through the hole in the roof, scanning the sky.

"Wh-what is it, Lloyd? Phyllo?" Mena called.

Looking grim, Lloyd kept his eyes on the sky.

He was shivering, and not from the cold breeze against cheeks.

"I feel something...very strange."

Everyone looked baffled, and Satan shifted uneasily. Surtr looked ill.

"What is it? It's even nastier than a demon lord."

"Feels like all sorts of emotions mixed up—like a scrambled egg. I don't feel so good."

Lloyd squinted and pointed at a figure in the sky above, where Eve's new form hovered.

".....Something's up there." Phyllo spotted it, too, and Satan and Surtr followed suit.

"Who...? Seems like a cute lady, but that's freaky in its own right."

"Totally the type you'd drop a dime on at the cabaret."

"I know!"

Whether this was an accurate comparison or not, it sure proved that Satan and Surtr were equally hopeless people.

"Is that what Vritra was talking about? Eve's new body?"

"She went all-in on the glow-up. Does she have no shame?"

".....Too perfect... Uncanny."

The girls did not approve. The design reeked of vanity.

Everyone agreed it was gross.

“She’s clearly a bad person!”

It was rare to hear Lloyd talk like that.

An instant later, Eve went flying off somewhere. And if she was safe—Lloyd became worried about what had happened to Shouma.

“Shouma?!”

“L-Lloyd?!”

Shouma would be where Eve had come from.

Hopefully he was safe and sound.

Lloyd plunged into the Profen Palace basement, scrambling like he was descending a cliff face. He leaped from perch to perch, heedless of the damage his clothes took.

When he reached the bottom of the pit, he searched everywhere for his brother.

“.....Shouma.”

But his hopes were in vain. Lloyd found him lying in a heap, badly hurt.

His limbs were bent the wrong way—which a Kunlun villager would ordinarily heal like nothing, but clearly, he was too tired to manage it.

Lloyd sensed right away that Eve had gone to such lengths purely to adjust to her new body. She’d gone too far, for the fun of it—hurting him as much as she could without killing him.



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Something boiled within him.

Emotions roiled inside Lloyd.

He clenched his fists so hard, his veins bulged.

"I don't know what she did...but you'll pay for this, Eve Profen!" he howled, cradling Shouma.

Once, he had thought, *If Shouma can't win, there's no use in me even trying.*

But somewhere along the line, his heart had climbed out of that way of thinking. Strong? Weak? That didn't matter. It had to be done. And driven by that emotion— "I'll protect everyone. That's the sort of soldier I want to be. A true hero!"

Yes, if this were an American comic, this volume would have *Origin* as its subtitle.

The moment when a story's protagonist realizes who they truly are, and what they have to do.

This was the birth of the hero the world had been waiting for. And the final battle—would be close at hand.

Afterword

This story took place when I, Toshio Satou, was in my twenties.

When you're drinking at that age, you often find yourself talking about the dumbest things. What type of girl you like, your doomed crushes, who you're gonna ask out next, how you'll wait and wait, and text a bit to see if she's interested... You know the drill.

These topics are especially guaranteed to come up when everyone there is permanently single.

At one of those occasions, alcohol got the better of me, and I blurted out, "I'm not eating crepes until I have a girlfriend!"

I loved crepes. But by refusing to eat them, perhaps I could turn my luck around. We talked for ages about the relationship between self-denial and attracting potential partners.

Ten-plus years later...

I've forgotten what cream, chocolate, and banana together even taste like. I've eaten each individually, but I can't even imagine that delicious harmony anymore.

Not only have I forgotten—in my mind, crepes have been elevated to the food of the divine. Like a system message in the mind, warning me that I'm not worthy of eating them.

...If they'd had rental girlfriends back then, I'd definitely have rented one just to go pig out on crepes. Good thing the times didn't catch up to me.

Point is, I've had a habit of making up rules for myself and then sticking to them. And I think that actually helped me win the novel contest. The fact that I'm still working as a writer is thanks to those rules—and to you, my dear readers. You're the only reason a sad man who's so unpopular he's still unable

to eat crepes can keep going.

This may be the most natural transition to the thank-you section I've ever managed.

Maizou. I always make things difficult. I will send you provisions later.

Watanuki. Thank you for your marvelous illustrations. Asako's expression on the cover made my heart skip a beat.

Fusemachi. I look forward to the manga storyboards every time. Shouma's flashback scenes really got me; my editor and I were floored by them.

Souchu. Thank you for your work on the spin-off. I never expected CEO Johns to become such a vital character. I'm in love.

But most of all, my readers. Thank you for accompanying me on this journey. You've kept this series going, and I owe you a lot for that.

Next volume will be the last. I can't thank you enough. I'll do everything I can to make their heroics memorable.

Weird, I meant to kill off Satan to make Lloyd more motivated for the final battle, but somehow missed that opportunity. Volume 14 ended without it coming round! Satan's one lucky man.

Maybe I'm just not suited for this whole murder thing.

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