

By night, Yui still hadn't woken up.

Kain and Mildred were just now coming back from checking out the damage done to the Yowan Village. Everyone was on edge after Chika had shown up out of nowhere. She didn't leave without dropping off a present though. Demons started swarming the entire forest of Kazaar according to Breila's scouts.

Maybe to beat out her own frustration, Anya went out to bloody her fists with demons. I hadn't seen Kaoru since the morning we were supposed to leave.

We brought Yui back to the village so that she could be looked after. This way, while she stayed in a coma, the shamans could keep her stabilized.

"Much of the village was damaged from the obelisk's tremors," Kain said, taking a seat and wiping the sweat from his face. The humidity in the forest hadn't been kind to him, especially with all the armor on. Too used to the scalding sun or biting cold of Cynderace's polar climate. He poured himself and Mildred a glass of water brought to them in a waterskin by a beastling attendant. "Breila believes traveling to Mou'nan now would be dangerous, with all the demons lurking around. Though, I'm more inclined to trust your and your companion's strength if you wish to leave, Lady Micchi."

"Grishant can wait. Chika knew to find us here. Could've come at us anytime and anywhere, but here and now of all places. That sound weird to you?" I asked Mildred and Kain.

Cynderace, Taiq'ae, Ash'tar... hell, when I was with the orcs of the Rolling Plains, Chika had every opportunity to attack. Why now? What changed?

"Perhaps she doesn't want us to reach Mou'nan?" Kain suggested.

"No," Mildred said, throwing me a knowing look. "We can't know for certain, but we do know *why* she attacked."

We both knew.

My eyes flicked to the bowl of splinters that was left of Sacchan after Chika destroyed it. Something had come out of it that she took.

"By the look in your eyes, you are just as baffled. How could you not know what was contained within your club? I knew there was something odd about it. If only you allowed me to study." She sighed.

"You can taunt me all you want, I got no idea how or why that was there. If you want to take a look at it now, be my guest. Or toss it into the fire... I don't care anymore." As I got up to leave, Yui looked like she stirred. Maybe she sensed that I was about to leave. But I couldn't stay cooped up inside forever.

Fighting the guilt of leaving Yui, I exited the cabin before I could decide otherwise.

Beastlings were hoofing to get from place to place, rebuilding broken buildings and structures that collapsed during the obelisk's appearance. Finding Breila was going to be a bitch and a half.

"Hey, housecat." I stopped a beastling girl with feline features, carrying a bundle of firewood. "Where can I find your chieftain?"

"I think Chieftain Breila is over by the fighting pits, punishing Gallahorn and some of his people. They tried to run away after the obelisk disappeared, and in our culture, running away from a fight is a big no-no," she said.

Come to think of it, Gallahorn and Chika's appearance was too coincidental. I wondered if they had any connection, just how she got non-demon folks to fuck with me.

The fighting pits weren't as lively anymore. Fires that burned bright last night have since been snuffed out. Few people were around the pit, but there weren't any cheers this time around. Inside each one was a beastling chained to a post on the ground.

I walked over to the largest pit where Breila and Drox looked into. Gallahorn was in there, held down by multiple posts to accommodate his large stature. His face and body was bruised with what looked to be from a smackdown, but his spirit was still there.

"What's going on here?" I asked.

"We shame those in here who are cowards that do not stand and fight, such is our way. Enemy or ally. Chieftain or vagrant. It is the duty of the clan to beat sense back into them." Breila spat at the dirt next to Gallahorn.

Not so different from how banchos did it back home. If you were too scared to fight, what the fuck were you doing acting like you want to? They get taught a lesson from yours truly, and everyone was made to know that they were little pissheads.

"Alright, then. Count me in." I jumped into the pit to Gallahorn's terror.

The beastling tried to back away, but he couldn't from being held down by all the chains.

"Wait, wait! I've learned my lesson! I will never challenge your rule or run away from a fight again!" Gallahorn pleaded to Breila.

"You dug your grave," the chieftain said. "Now lay in it."

I grabbed a handful of Gallahorn's hair and forced him to look at me. "This is how it's gonna work: I got questions I want answers to. The beatings'll keep coming, and they'll hit harder every time you stay quiet or say something I don't wanna hear. First question— You in cahoots with Chika?"

"W-Who's Chi—"

"Wrong answer." A punch to his gut left him winded. "The demon lord that showed up. You working for her? Because both of your timings were pretty damn close to each other."

"I am! I am! I was told by a demon to attack Yowan Village. It's true, I swear!" Gallahorn confessed.

Behind me, Breila and Drox gasped in surprise upon hearing it.

I threw another punch, this one across his face which knocked out a tooth. "Why?"

"They threatened... to destroy my village if I didn't..."

"Champion, wait—" Breila's words reached my ears, but I didn't hear it.

"I meant *why* were you told to attack?" A third punch cracked his chest so hard it must have broken a rib, seeing as the post became dislodged from the ground.

"Didn't... say..." Gallahorn was barely able to keep conscious while answering now. "Just that... she wanted to see you... fight—"

A fourth punch tore the wooden anchors from the dirt and sent him crashing into the side of the pit. I was about to go grab Gallahorn for another beating when Breila and Drox jumped to put themselves between us, seemingly ready to defend him.

"You gain nothing from hurting Gallahorn any further. He acted in defense of his people's home, surely you can understand that?" Breila reasoned.

"You know if I want to get to him, there ain't nothing you two or your entire village can do about it, right?" I clenched my fists.

"Then it will be a fight we aren't willing to back down from," she snarled, showing no willingness to step aside even knowing how much stronger I was.

The hardest thing for me to do was to step away, but seeing them face me even if I was sure to win, was just as hard not to hand it to them. They had the guts to stick to their guns. I wasn't about to take a shit on that and walked away.

However, I didn't leave having learned nothing. Now I knew for sure Chika was getting people to mess with me. Owyn, the assassins with azure venom, Emperor Yonnu's kidnapers...

What about Sacchan? Was that crystal inside this entire time ever since Japan? All this thinking was getting me nowhere. Chika wanted to see how Yui and I have grown, but what she was really after was the crystal.

Then the real question should be... for what?

"Maybe I'm not cut out for this either, Yui." Sighing, I took a look at my hands, body still aching from the beating Chika laid into me, and realized just how weak I really was.

"What did you just say?"

When I looked up, Anya nailed me with a right hook. A sharp pain ran up my body from the cheap shot that left me dazed.

"What kind of little bitch shit am I hearing? You ain't cut out for what? All that posturing was just for show, huh. Get up. Get up and fight back," Anya demanded, her fists were already bruised from all the fighting she did today.

"You think I'm not pissed off?" I struggled to get back to my feet. "Seeing Yui get hurt, watching Chika leave, and I couldn't do a damn—"

A powerful kick sent me crashing into a stack of lumber.

People were beginning to gather to see what the fuss was about. Meanwhile, I was lying on my back in a pile of broken wood and bark. Anya stood above me, casting a shadow and peering down with anger.

"I know you're pissed. So am I. Get up," Anya repeated.

"Make me." There was no strength in my body to fight back anymore.

Anya picked me up and slammed me back into the ground. Punch after punch, she laid into me, each hit harder than the next. I became numb to the pain. They were nothing compared to what Chika dealt me.

"I loved Chika once," she began, still raining punches and holding back tears as her voice cracked. "I love you and Yui, too. But we can't go back to when we were kids. Stop thinking back to those memories as 'good times' because they weren't! Remember what you told me in the Lannarkis Ring? What about now, Micchi? Are you going to stay down just because you lost once? Lost your little toy?"

Me, lose?

Another punch, this one enhanced with enough magic to put me down for the count, came crashing down on my face. But I raised my hand to block it. Anya had wailed into me so much that a cratered formed behind me.

"As if..." I moved her fist away to meet her gaze.

"Then get up," Anya said, stepping away as though daring me to.

I did, and she didn't hesitate to throw another punch. Strength filled me once I got to my feet and blocked what should have been a devastating enough attack to send me crashing away again.

"I'm pissed the fuck off!" I drove a fist into Anya's stomach so hard she dropped to her knees.

Everything behind her was blown away in a gust and people were sent flying.

"I watched my best friend get wasted and couldn't do a damn thing!"

An uppercut threw Anya into a pile of debris. She dragged herself out of the mess, the two punches having done more damage than either of us expected. But her lips formed a weak smile. A sigh escaped her as she realized she couldn't stay standing, and so sat on her knees to look up at me.

I grabbed Anya by the head and clenched my other fist.

"Chika was wrong," Anya, hardly able to open one bruised eye, flashed an even bigger and goofy smile. "You have grown up."

My eyes started to sting. I knelt down next to Anya and... laid my head on her shoulder.

"I can't face her alone," I muttered.

Anya put her arms around me and patted my back. "You never had to."