

CHAPTER 1

THE NEXT STEP

The door of the cart swung open, guided by a young man's hand. He stood in wait for his master, who slowly clambered out of the vehicle. Part of the difficulty came from a silver case he carried in one hand, not giving him much mobility to exit.

Once on his feet, the man stopped to look around the street. There was a chill in the winds in the city of Steir, pushing around his silky blonde hair and the fur-lined coat he wore.

"It's astounding how far we've come." He said, violet eyes scanning the vehicle. "Only a few years ago we were still using horses to draw carriages. Now we have airships and even self-propelled autocarts. Humanity is truly amazing, don't you think?"

The other man only responded by shifting his glasses. Instead, he focused on the job at hand.

"Lewis... Sir, Aren't we running late?"

"Oh! Of course." He turned toward the large tower in front of him, before looking down at the case in his hand. "It's time to take the next step on this front as well."

The pair were greeted at the front doors by two gruff looking individuals. Though they wore tailored suits, it

could not entirely hide the heavy tattoos that peeked out from their collars. They patted down the incoming guests, looking for any potential dangerous items on their persons.

“I assure you, gentlemen,” Lewis said, pointing to the briefcase. “The only weapons we have are the ones we have to showcase. I’d really prefer you to not ruffle my coat too much.” They continued their search regardless.

Even though it proved fruitless, another problem remained. A special silver badge pinned on one of the guards gave off a violet glow. Its reaction came from a demonic presence.

“What about him?” He said, staring the spectacled man down. “A demon like this is a weapon himself.” The guard squared up to the accused, their stares matching up. He was taller than the demon, his spiked blue-white hair only making their heights equal.

Even this guard knew that despite looking scrawny, any demon was at least twice as strong as a human. But that defiant look in his eyes was setting him off. Neither one was ready to give quarter.

“Now, my wonderful Asche wouldn’t hurt a fly.” The man with the briefcase said, standing between them. “Right?” After a moment, the demon backed down.

“Of course, sir.” His eyes went to his master, ignoring the other man completely. The reasonable guard led them to the elevators, leaving them to ascend alone.

Their climb was quick, stopping at the fourth floor. On the outside the banal hallways looked plain enough.

Another bulky guard stood at the doorway, pressing on an earpiece. He greeted the approaching men with a quick nod, leading them into the office.

The room had a much different vibe than the outside. A pair of lavish leather sofas stood opposite one another in the center of the room, between a glass table. A plate was fixed onto the wall, with a diamond-shaped insignia and the name 'Jisei Family' etched in.

A handful of members stood in the room. Unlike the more front-facing guards, these men weren't afraid to bare their tattoos out in the open. A few didn't even bother with shirts.

The patriarch of the organization sat on one of the couches. His face was worn and wrinkled, and he opted for golden sunglasses indoors despite it being the evening. They partly covered a rugged scar that wrapped around a corner of his brow.

"Please, Mr. Goff. Have a seat." He said, motioning an open palm to the free chair. His guest didn't comply. Rather, he walked over to the windows.

"Such an extravagant view." Lewis said, looking down across the buildings. He drew the curtain to see further. After another second, he turned back to take his offered place at the table.

The briefcase in his hands hit the table, shaking a nearby bowl that held a handful of oranges. His hands clicked the locks to bear the contents. Once it was open, he turned it over to show the patriarch what was inside.

“Mr. Goff...” He tried to hide his disappointment, but his brows sank. “When I think of Helreck & Goff, I would’ve expected...”

“A gun? It’s true, my... Grandfather pioneered the art of war with his invention. It put Cessair on the map.” Lewis replied, expecting this. He turned the case over again and reached in. Out came the treasure, a pair of crimson-tinged daggers. They were connected by a shimmering silver chain. “But I assure you, this is a leap well beyond. May I?” He pointed to the bowl of oranges on the table.

Though confused, the man gave a short nod. Lewis took two of the fruits in one hand, with one of the blades in the other. Its counterpart dangled on the chain. He tossed an orange into the air, and once it started to descend the free dagger sprung into action.

The knife leapt into the air of its own accord, the chain now extending with a red pulse of light. It pierced its target with ease.

At the same time, he threw the second orange overhand, faster than the other. The blade followed its path, skewering the second target just as quick. The blade hung in the air for a moment before the chain retracted back, still hanging onto its quarry.

A few of the men in the room gave gasps of bewilderment to the demonstration. It was enough of a spectacle that the boss took off his glasses.

“Hot damn! I’ve heard of magic weapons, but this is something else. How did you-” His words were stopped by the rhythmic wagging of Lewis’ finger.

“Trade secret.” He smiled, pulling the oranges off of the dagger.

“Fine, fine.” He said, chuckling. “How many can you make?” Lewis flinched ever so slightly at the question.

“It’s... A bit complicated, but I have no doubt we can mass produce.” It was all the man needed to hear, as he jumped to his feet.

“Even one of these things’ll be crazy!” He said, putting out a hand. “You’ve got yourself a deal.” The man didn’t return his look, or extend his own hand. Instead, he was back to looking out the window.

“I’m sorry, but you aren’t the customer.”

“Wha-” The man tried to ask further, but the words were caught in his throat. What blocked them was one of the daggers, having embedded itself in his jugular.

“You are the demonstration.”

The knife flew out sideways, spraying a fountain of blood across the table. The other members realized what was going on, but for a few it was too late. Lewis swung the chain once more, the dagger following its path and cutting down the two men behind the couch.

“You bastard!” One of the surviving men yelled out, pulling a pistol from his waistband. His ally next to him did the same, pointing towards Lewis. Asche leapt to the side to cover his master as the shots rang out. When the

smoke cleared, the men froze up in the sight of their target.

Six points of lead lay on Asche's shirt. Though the cloth was torn, the skin remained unbroken. A different kind of smoke started to emerge from the rounds. The air itself danced around the demon's chest as a wave of heat surged from his body.

For a split-second, the attackers could notice the spent metal starting to glow. But just as soon as it did, it was fired back in their direction.

The return volley struck one of the men directly in the forehead, killing him instantly. The second shooter was struck in the leg, but his adrenaline kept him standing.

He shot once more, but his aim was maligned by the demon's own strike. It snapped the bone, enough to pierce the skin.

He screamed in pain, but only for a moment as another punch went across his jaw. His head twisted with a deafening crack, the lifeless body slumping to the floor.

The remaining four Jisei members tried to use the sacrifice made by their brother to take down the human. They too pulled their weapons, one drawing an automatic. But a crimson blade was already making its way to him first.

The chain wrapped around the man's arm. After a few loops, it tightened up, causing the man to seize.

The dagger made one final stop, the trigger guard of the gun. Even though there was already a finger occupying the space, it sliced through, bringing the gun to attention.

A cacophony of bullets sprayed out, showering the other men in lead before they could get their own shots out. Through the recoil and the pull of the chains, the gun rose up, taking out the lights and eventually its own user.

Once the machine pistol had run out, the dagger receded, uncoiling from the now-dead man's arm and returning to Lewis' side.

Within the span of half a minute, a room of ten armed thugs were put down effortlessly. Yet the man currently only held disgust that some of the spilled blood had found itself onto his coat.

"Are you okay, sir?" The demon attendant asked, as if he merely stubbed his toe.

The darkness of the room was suddenly met by a flickering of lights. They weren't coming from the room itself, but the window that was left open.

A few blocks away, a spotlight was pulsing from another tall building. Lewis started to grin as he deciphered the meaning behind the flashes.

"I am more than alright." He answered, his smile widening. "My dear Asche, this is going to be the start of a beautiful bond. And once we get her back, there's nothing that could stop us."

CHAPTER 2

LOVE RINGS TRUE

Kira had done this trick at least a hundred times before.

Bump into the richest-looking guy there, pilfer their wallet in the confusion and make a break for it. And since Zuden was a destination island in the midst of the Nemed territories, it was chock full of unsuspecting tourists.

Dragans were the last people you wanted to steal from. Nemed was their home turf after all, and their scaled exteriors gave them good awareness. The kind of thing a pickpocket should avoid. Instead he went for the human.

His mark even had a shiny metal arm. Those replacement limbs known as Mecharms. Usually only old guys like veterans had them, which meant they wouldn't give much of a chase. All these factors should have meant easy pickings.

And yet, this brigand boy found himself struggling to stay ahead of his most recent target. The wind flowed through his darkened blue hair, golden eyes straining to keep watch of the obstacles in front of him.

A quick glance back over his shoulder showed that he was still being pursued, which continued to baffle him.

The man whose wallet he took was dressed to the nines in a slate suit. And yet, he kept pace like a man possessed. His bright red hair flapped around as he made his frenzied stride.

Soon the chase would be up, one way or another. Kira knew these streets like the back of his hand. He had been scrounging around them his entire life. Well, the scant years that he had made it to the world known as Milesain.

Kira found his getaway spot. The railing ahead of him marked the end of this particular road, instead turning into a bridge. It served to allow passage between the town's waterways below. He would simply cast himself off the ledge and float away to safety. There was no way a guy looking like that would give chase.

Without breaking his stride, Kira got a foot onto the railing, pushing off to make his descent into the rushing water under him. He was already mid-flight when he heard a yell from behind him.

"Wire pluck!" A strange tugging could be felt on his back. The loose sleeveless vest that he wore suddenly became more taut, as a mysterious force dragged him right out of the air. He crashed onto the pavement, rolling backwards as the energy continued.

When he started to get up, he could see the man who gave chase in front of him... But his hand was gone.

In its place was a cord with a metallic shine to it. The boy scanned the line's origin from the spot to his own back.

"What the hell!?" He shouted, pulling on the fiber wire. With a quick tug, the hand eased its grip, reeling back into the man's forearm.

"Pretty sick, right?" He seemed more excited to talk about the special modifications made to his mecharm.

One might think mecharms were limited to arms, but they could be any limb. The full name was Mechanized Armament, a relic from its initial application during wartime.

Max didn't have any military experience, but he did lose a limb to an incident decades ago. At this point he didn't seem phased. If anything, he loved them. "My sis said it was a waste of money, but I had to splurge to get the pulley system juuust right."

Something about those words sparked it in himself to remember why they were running in the first place. "Wait, what am I saying? Give me back my wallet, you little punk!"

In a panic, Kira reached into his jacket to retrieve the stolen item. As he held out the leather wallet, the man promptly snatched it. He took out an ID card, then went for a zippered pocket in the middle.

Once opened, a quick shake delivered a small black pouch. He made a deep sigh of relief. More surprising was how he tossed the wallet back to the boy.

"Wh-what are you doing?" He asked, clearly confused. The man simply turned around.

“I got no time for it, kid!” With that, he was once again running. This time, in the opposite direction. Kira could only look in confusion as the man disappeared into the crowd.

Still, since he had the spoils, he checked the contents once more. It only had a handful of Airgead bills, and a point card to a local ice cream shop. Though the handwriting was crude, he could make out a name on the coupon.

“Max Riese...”

His words echoed someone else at the moment. The other person uttering that name was the man’s own sister, Monika Riese. She stood in a cozy building, peering through a window at a patio filled with guests.

“Maximillian Riese... Where the hell are you!?” She fumed outwardly, nervously tugging on the black tie around her neck. She was clad in a pristine white tuxedo, with a vest and matching slacks. It was a stark contrast to her dark purple hair, but didn’t quite take the attention away from her most unique feature.

The scar across her face was still plain as day. It came from the same incident that took her brother’s arm. That took her parents, and destroyed her hometown. But at this point in her life she wore it like a badge of honor. That she survived in spite of everything.

Most brides would have chosen something more traditional like a gown, but Monika had held herself to a very strict 'no skirts' rule. Even if this was partly her day.

Once more she peered out the window, surveying the area. She and her betrothed Eloise had rented out a small reception space by the beach. It had an outdoor patio, but despite only having four benches it was filled with guests. It was supposed to be a small affair!

She even thought that having it on a remote island in the Nemed territories would make it *harder* for some people to attend. Instead, the call of a tropical wedding only brought them in.

Not that these people were total strangers. Nearly everyone there had a part in preventing the end of the world. A rogue faction known as the Fir Bolgg attempted to merge the human world of Milesain and the still unknown demon world. For three minutes, they were connected. Just that scant amount of time was enough to cause a wave of demons to inadvertently make their way onto this side.

She could go through the whole party. Eloise's family was there, of course. The matriarch Doreen Monette held a spot for her husband Lee, sitting alongside Elly's older sister Beryl.

Monika's foster father David didn't have a seat... Because he was officiating the whole thing. Holland and Tali Troy were next, all the way from Cessair.

The man known as Archel sat next to Lexie, Kyle, Shion and Darlen. Those four were members of the guild

Second Fiddle. The information broker Rastarok sat on the side next to an old pipe organ.

Then, Aster Bosch and the wolf demon Ira. Two fresh faces who shared their own mutual pact. Aster was technically part of Rastarok's 'crew', but also had built a handy contraption for instant photos.

All these important figures, waiting for them to start. Which in turn, meant waiting for her brother to show up.

There was one more little caveat standing in the middle of the aisle. A little demon known as Faye. At the moment, she was entertaining the guests as a 'flower girl'. Quite literally.

Demons were the colloquial term for a race with special abilities. Those same beings that were displaced into the world of Milesain from the Maelstrom Tear.

Monika likened Faye to the legend of dryads, an ancient race who were known to manipulate the plants themselves. She didn't have quite the same level of geomancy, but that was because she was her own little terrarium.

From afar, her skin just looked strangely green, but it was actually a mass of a leafy substance covering her. Instead of flesh she had something akin to mulch, and roots for bones.

As she stood in the aisle, branches jutted out from under her skin. The branches gave way to petals, which she would toss down the aisle. Just a fraction of her

power turned into a little party trick. At least seeing her little bud being so jovial eased her spirits just a bit.

She turned her head to the woman beside her. "Ayun... If your boyfriend doesn't show up in the next five minutes, I might kill 'im." Her words were only hyperbole because of the building stress. Hopefully.

Ayun wore a maroon sleeveless dress, accentuated with a light shawl draped around her shoulders. Her long, flowing black hair nearly hit the floor, if not for the staggering heels she had in her employ.

Though they had only met a few months prior, she and Ayun had become fast friends. She would say in spite of her brother Max, although they too had become a stronger pair of siblings with the woman's influence. Ayun simply set a gloved hand on the bride's shoulder to assuage her.

"Don't worry. Max won't be long now." She didn't exactly have a way of knowing that, but still put on an air of confidence. They were partners, after all.

Ayun lifted her hand from the bride's shoulder, as dark wisps gathered around her. The fog formed around her palm, and when it dissipated, a small comb sat in her grip. She used it to push back the indigo strands that had gone astray due to Monika's worrying.

"Looks like you're really picking up on your weaving." The girl said with a tender smile.

Ayun herself was a demon. She had an innate control of a strange darkness she called shadowweaving. It

allowed her to summon weapons, and even the very clothes on her back.

“Can’t believe this is really happening...” Monika remarked. She and Eloise had been a couple for almost four years. And they had known each other even longer.

She looked at the faint reflection in the window beside her, green eyes looking intently at the scar across her face. *To think such a terrible moment would lead me to something like this...*

Before she could ponder anymore, a man burst through the doors to the building. It was Max, huffing heavily from the sheer amount of time he was on his feet.

“Sorry... Sorry I’m late!” He tried to speak between gasps. Ayun came up to greet him, adjusting the tie around his collar that had loosened.

“Seems like you’ve already had an interesting morning.” She smirked, patting his shoulders of any wrinkles. Max could only chuckle as he regained his breath.

“You don’t know the half of it.” Once his composure was back, they shared a brief but tender kiss.

By themselves, demons could not harness geis, the magical energy of the world. So instead, they used pacts between humans to make that connection.

Ayun and Max shared such a pact, but as equals. And while a transfer of energy could be made with simple physical contact, a kiss was something special to them. If anything, the geis part was just a bonus.

“So, you got them?!” Monika was laser-focused on the current gathering. Max gave a curt nod as he brought out the small black pouch once more. Inside were two slender golden bands. Each had one jewel nested in it, one in amber and the other in emerald.

This was part of Ayun’s role in the upcoming ceremony. A witness to bring up the rings, the symbol of a bond of marriage. But there was a mix-up in the delivery, prompting Max to go and sort it out. As he deposited them onto her gloved palm, one bounced off and clattered onto the floor.

“Crap... I got it.” With a small sigh, Max knelt down to grab it before it could make any more daring escapes. But as he rose to hand it off to Ayun, he stopped for a second. He realized the situation. A man on one knee, holding a ring up to his beloved. It seemed she picked up on it too, judging by the faint rose glow that formed around a soft smile.

But the moment would be cut short by Monika. She got ahold of her brother’s ear and brought his back to a standing position.

“Hey! None of that right now! This day is for me and Elly!” She said, pointing a thumb to herself as she spoke. It was a fair point. There was no time for grandstanding, accidental or otherwise. There was no time at all!

She held out her arm, so that Max could hook onto it with his own. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

A part of her excitement came from the fact that she hadn’t gotten to see her dear Eloise for a few days.

Something about seeing the bride being bad luck. So, he returned the gesture and locked his arm with hers. Ayun snuck off to her seat while they made their way to the double doors that led to the outside.

The guests had been chatting amongst themselves. Once those doors opened, they took a look at the first bride and settled down. It would be a few seconds of silence before the dragan on the organ started a few chords. The pair slowly made their way down to the melody.

“I seriously can’t believe Ras can play like that.” Max whispered. The old man was a veteran of a war from nearly thirty years prior, had sold information across the world, became a legitimate businessman and somehow had the time to learn an instrument. A soft elbow nudged into his side.

“Hey, be nice. He found the place for us.” It would be easier to list the things that he *couldn’t* sell at this rate. “Even called it a wedding gift.” Somehow, the only ‘charge’ he made to the couple was providing the music.

The walk would be a short one, considering the quaint size of the chapel. At the front, the siblings exchanged quick and quiet pleasantries with their father.

“Good to see you still have your punctual manners.” He snarked, scratching the sandy stubble on his face.

David’s entire persona was ‘unkempt beauty.’ A seemingly permanent beard, and shaggy head of light brown hair. It definitely clashed with the three-piece suit

he had on at the moment. And yet, he somehow made it work.

His comment was more of a defense, if anything. He would've loved to walk his adopted daughter down the aisle for her wedding, but someone needed to officiate the whole thing.

But seeing the two walk down nearly brought him to tears, in a good way. Hiding emotions with sarcasm was something he definitely passed down to her.

Before the handoff was completed, Monika turned to Max. She wrapped her arms around him in a tight squeeze. This direct route was quite out of character for her. So much that Max was initially frozen.

"Thanks for everything." Though her face was slightly buried in his shoulder, he could still hear her clearly. It was a rare display for her, so who was he to let it go to waste?

"Love you, sis." He returned the embrace, although with less force. She pulled away to give him a mischievous grin.

"Love you too... *Little* brother." And like that, she was back to normal. She never missed an opportunity to mention that despite them being twins, she was the older one by a measly five minutes. Since it was still hers and Eloise's day, he kept his scoffing to a minimum.

Instead he released her and stepped away to his spot next to Ayun. He didn't have time to sit, since it was time for Eloise to finally make her grand entrance.

The doors opened up once more, where two dragans stood. Eloise Monette stood side by side with her father, Lee. The second bride had a more traditional Nemedian wedding dress. It looked like a long flowing robe, with multiple layers. The overcoat was a stark white, with a subtle floral pattern throughout. It came with a hood that obscured her autumn-orange scales. Her inner gown had lines of red on the edges of the garment, carefully folded around her figure with a wide ribbon. With one of the long sleeves, she took her father's hand and started their walk down the aisle.

The father of the bride had more modern formal attire, but just barely. It was a charcoal double-breasted suit, with a patterned red cravat in lieu of the normal tie. He shared the same orange complexion as his daughter, although age had lightened it just a bit.

His age really showed around his jaw, forming tiny spikes of excess calcium. It was essentially a beard for the lizard-like folk. Though he looked stalwart, the tears forming around the wrinkled corners of his eyes said otherwise.

Monika tried to steady herself as she watched them go down the aisle. The love of her life looked brilliant as ever in the sunlight. She should've been used to the sight of her in a long white gown. Eloise had spent most of her time in a lab coat, studying the effects of geis on gaels, dragans and demons. But this heavenly being was on a whole other level.

Once they had made it to the front, Lee pushed back the veil to reveal the bride's face. For once, Eloise was not wearing her signature spectacles. That way, her dazzling hazel eyes shone brightly. Though it looked like a self-inflicted beauty mark, there was a small stud on each side of her head. Due to the position of their ears, dragans could not normally wear glasses in a traditional sense. Thus, Eloise herself came up with the notion to implant magnets that could easily hold them in place.

The father kissed Eloise on the cheek, before giving her a warm hug. As he got to his spot, his own wife wrapped her arm around him. Now that the brides were facing one another at the front, David gave a small gesture to let the witnesses be seated.

"Thank you all for taking the time to join us for this wonderful occasion. I'm sure plenty of you knew that it was just a matter of time before we ended up here." His words elicited a small chuckle from the group.

Monika and Eloise's attraction to each other was nearly immediate. And as the close-knit friendship blossomed into a love, it was inevitable that they would become inseparable. "We are here to bear witness to the love of Monika Riese and Eloise Monette, and bring them together in matrimony. In a way, love is its own kind of magic. A spell that transcends all boundaries and lasts eternally.

"Love is a beast of possibility that can bring even the most unlikely pairs together... But it only works when we come together."

Ayun's hand squeezed softly in Max's own as they sat. Max himself was more surprised at the sincerity in his foster father's words. But they did ring true for them, as well. "I believe you two have prepared your own vows?"

The officiant asked the question, and in response Eloise produced a rolled up paper from one of her sleeves. She unfurled the piece, though without her glasses she found herself squinting at the words.

"I'll never forget that day when we first met in Felds. I guess you could say since I was researching the shards of Firbolg, I wanted you for your body."

Eloise's words caused Monika to smirk, and the crowd to laugh as well. "Trying to figure things out has always been my goal. How magic worked, especially between demons like our little Faye.

"And so, I found myself trying to find out why I was so affixed with you. Was it your sardonic wit? Your boundless interest in the arts? Or how, despite never wanting to show it, how much you cared for the ones around you?"

She stopped to catch her breath, with some tears welling around her eyes. "My love for you can't be quantified. Words can't describe it justly. You're my everything, and I can't imagine my life without you. I promise that I will cherish you and be by your side as long as I live. I love you, Momo."

Now she couldn't hold it in. Monika wanted to embrace her right then and there, but instead took the

bride's hands in her own. After a shared smile, she pulled out the cloth square on her chest pocket, offering it to Eloise. She accepted it with some glee, laughing through the snuffles. Once they had calmed down, Monika had her own statement ready.

"I... I never thought I would ever be able to stand here in this place. To meet someone like you, who could accept me for all that I am. You're so delightful, full of hope and energy. Maybe a little weird sometimes, but the perfect kind of strange for me.

"You have made me feel safe and loved, and I promise to give you the same comfort. Every day with you so far has been its own wonderful adventure, and each one after this will be just as grand. I love you, Elly." Her sincerity seemed to shock the audience. This used to be the quiet one of the team, who only cut in to make a snarky remark. Now here she was, unashamedly proclaiming her love.

It would be hard to find a dry eye in the vicinity. Even the normally aloof David had to rub his eyes to continue.

"Now... To honor this ceremony, these two will now exchange rings." On that cue, Ayun rose up from her seat and made her way to the brides. Monika received the emerald one, while Eloise took the amber-crested ring. That way when the exchange was made, it was as if they were giving each other a piece of themselves.

With her duty complete, she stepped backwards and turned to return to Max's side on the bench. This time, Monika went first.

"This ring is a token of my love. I devote myself and all that I am to you." With the words, she slid the band around her beloved's finger, with the green gem shining brightly. It was her turn to do the same.

"Take this ring as a symbol of my oath to you. I will cherish you from this moment on, and forevermore." The ring slid effortlessly onto the woman's finger, even with Eloise's hands shaking slightly. Those tremors were settled as the pair put their hands together.

"They say that the ring is a symbol of eternity. A closed loop, never breaking. In that way, your bond shall be unshakeable and timeless." David raised a finger, to accentuate his next point. "But like a circle, a union like this doesn't cut corners. If anything, it's all corners. Twists and turns along the road."

"That's why you must always be faithful, honest and complete with one another. But I know by now that yours is the kind of bond that only comes around once in a lifetime."

This father shared a quick smile with his daughter, doting one last time before making the grand announcement. "I have never been more happy to say these words: I call on all gathered around us to witness Monika and Eloise Riese-Monette. You may now seal this union with a kiss."

The two wasted no time on hearing those words. As soon as the two joined their lips, the crowd erupted in jubilation.

The newlyweds stood side by side, beaming with pride. A flash of a bulb would further brighten their faces, a picture to commemorate the occasion. They interlocked fingers and made their way back down the aisle into the building. The ceremony was complete. Now, it was time for celebration!

CHAPTER 3

WARM RECEPTION

Part of the value of the venue was the building attached to the little chapel. Rather than have to rejoin everyone at a second location for the reception, this was the second location. It was just the right size for this many people, with a bar and tables for a feast. There was even enough space for a dance floor, and a stage to host a small band.

Aster and Ira had taken the new couple away for more photos. Rastarok shared a quick smoke on the porch with David. In the meantime, the rest of the guests would have to entertain themselves with conversation.

Something that Ayun had been silently dreading.

Because now, the only person in this room she knew at all was the one beside her, Max. And even then, they had only been officially a couple for half a year. While that small amount of time made their current relationship seem hasty, their circumstances were anything but normal.

She was a former servant of the Kohler household, who had somehow figured out demon summoning well before the Maelstrom Tear. While the Kohlers ended up perishing in a tragedy, Ayun herself was sealed away for almost a century.

When she came to, she had nearly no memories of her experiences and no one to rely on... Except for Max. By pure chance, they crossed paths and formed a bond.

They initially made a pact with each other out of necessity. She had lost her family, and Max had lost a limb. Technically, a limb that was already lost before. But their bond was mutual, not a one-sided deal like most demonic pacts. It was no easy journey, but they had soon forged a bond of love for one another.

Some part of her maidly instincts wanted her to silently slip away. Being out in the open was not a thing to do. Especially as a demon. But an arm wrapped around her shoulders, attached to her beloved Max. They shared a small glance at each other.

“Don’t worry.” Their conversation was private enough, being so close together. “These are good people. They’ll love you.” Her lips curled softly to his words. Either it was obvious how she was feeling, or he was capable of picking up on her nuances. Her eyes drifted towards the bar.

“Well.. Perhaps we should get something to drink first?” Though some of her nerves were eased, just a bit of liquid courage wouldn’t hurt. Max gave a small nod, taking his arm back and instead locking his fingers with hers. The two made their way around the chattering party and over to the other side of the room where drinks were served.

A man with deep blue hair stood on the opposite side of the counter. She recognized him as one of the

attendees, but could not recall his name. In his hands, he gripped a small silver cask. The ice inside rattled as it shook. After a second, the man unscrewed the container and poured its contents into a thin glass.

“Your cocktail, Miss Lexie.” A sheepish smirk went across the man’s face. A thin bangle around his wrist shimmered in the light, inlaid with azure gems as he slid the drink towards its recipient.

She was a long, cool woman in a black dress, whose slender arms took up the cocktail in hand. Judging by the way her bare shoulders tensed when the drink met her lips, it was satisfactory.

The barman’s gaze still lingered on her light blonde hair as she walked away to rejoin the crowd. Yet as his eyes panned over to meet the pair, his expression turned dour. Ayun feared it was her presence at first, but realized his look narrowed to the man next to her.

“They even got you working, Kyle?” Max asked, ignoring the callous look. Now her memory was jogged. Lexie Gardner and Kyle Vulpes, two members of Second Fiddle.

“Can it, Riese. This is just another job.” The barman said. Second Fiddle was founded after the events of the Maelstrom Tear, in the wake of the mass amount of displaced demonkind.

Though Monika and Max were the founders of the guild, these members were integral to locating lost souls and finding suitable partners to benefit both humans and

demons. And for some reason, these two couldn't quite get along.

On each side of the bar, there were two trays already filled with pre-made beverages. One side had glasses filled with a deep maroon liquid, topped with a lemonade slice floating above the ice. The other was bright orange, with green leaves poking over the edge. In the middle of each was a card explaining the cocktails.

"Blackberry whiskey lemonade... Strawberry basil paloma." Ayun read aloud, before pondering. The names were descriptive enough, perfectly encapsulating their contents. To that end, Max picked up one of the half-glasses of strawberry basil and gave it a sip. Once he got past the chilly nip, he could taste the sweetness overshadowing the alcohol. But Ayun still lingered on her choice.

"Let me guess..." He started, "You're looking for something with more of a peachy persuasion." His deduction was right on the mark judging by how she straightened up.

"Y-you're not wrong... But I can't remember the name of the drink." Those fuzzy fruits were Ayun's weakness. If it were up to her, she would subsist on nothing but peaches. She practically did when they first met, but Max had opened up her palate to a few more options.

She brought a gloved hand to her temple, contemplating. "It had quite the peculiar name." While she was lost in thought, Max took a longer drink. This was Kyle's chance to strike.

“Sex on the beach?” He snuck out the name of a popular peach-themed drink. It certainly caught Max by surprise, nearly choking on the one in his hand. It seemed that Ayun was too lost in her mind to even notice it, until she found her answer.

“Oh! It was a fuzzy navel!” She proclaimed, accenting the moment by pounding a fist down into her palm. Now that she had solved that mystery, her attention went to the bewildered man. “Is everything alright, Max?”

Her hands went to the table as she asked, producing a cloth. But he played interference to take the napkin himself, rather than have her wipe his own mouth like a child.

“Y-yeah. Caught too much basil. Like drinking a pizza...” His words were a bit muddled as he brought the napkin to his chin. Once she broke off from his sight, his eyes met the shivering steely stares of Kyle. His face had the air of victory, despite it being a childish jab.

“That’s really more orange juice, but if the lady wants it...” From under the bar he brought up a bottle with a pink hue, alongside a square carton. Within a tall glass, the contents were evenly matched alongside a few cubes of ice. But Kyle wasn’t done yet. He grabbed the glass by the bottom and started an incantation.

“O Blistering chill of the depths, lend me your rime. *Snap Frost!*” Power flowed from his words, surging through the band on his wrist to the glass. A sheet of condensation rose up over the drink, signifying the spell was a success.

For humans, magic was a contract between the spirits themselves. With the power of a magic catalyst, all one would have to do is know the magic words to harness the energy of the ancients. Still, it felt a bit odd to ask the gods for cooling a drink. At this point he was just showing off.

Kyle passed the fresh cocktail to Ayun. Since her hands were covered with gloves, the chill of the drink was no issue. Instead, it was the blast of the aforementioned orange juice that seemed to overpower the peach she so desperately craved. Though her nose shriveled when she took the first drink, she still put on a courteous face.

More patrons had started to catch on that the bar was in working order. Ayun swiftly found herself back to Max's side and away from the crowd. But tucked away in the same corner they had retreated to was one outlier in the pack. Perhaps it was because this man already had a drink in hand, even if it was a simple clear bottle. The pair sidled up to pick up the conversation, with Max leading introductions.

"Archel! So great to see you!" As Max spoke, the man gave him a sharp gaze. His teal eyes felt like they could pierce through their very being. "Have you met my wonderful girlfriend Ayun? She—"

Before Max could heap on the praises of his love, an odor caught both of their noses. The lingering stench of

nicotine and smoke, one that could only belong to one person around the party. Her suspicions were correct, as the worn hand of David pressed onto Max's shoulder.

"Sorry, little lady. Gotta borrow him for just a minute." He made his request through a roguish grin, still holding onto the waning embers of a cigarette in his mouth. Just as he appeared, he started to sink away, with Max in confused tow.

"What? Uh, hold on!" The hostage attempted a rebuttal, but couldn't escape being dragged along by his father. Ayun started to reach out to him, but the stink of secondhand smoke froze her in place.

David was nothing but gracious to her in the spare times they had met, but her heightened demon senses just couldn't get past his addiction. With his absence and the newlyweds still taking pictures, Ayun was truly on her own.

She tilted her glass to slowly sip her drink while thinking of what to say to this man she had barely been introduced to. He however, held his eyes on her. By the way they narrowed, he had come to a realization.

"...Were you in Swaile in Marta?" Swaile was a portside city in the country of Partholon. Ayun had in fact been there, at the very end of the fifth month Marta. She took another second between his question to sip again.

"That's correct... Max and I had gone for the GSC." She and Max had ventured there for the fourth Goetian Skirmish Championship. It was a tournament specifically tailored to demonkind. The trip turned out to be much

more than that, but for the moment she kept her answers compact.

“The GSC. A tournament sponsored by Baele Industries.” His response caused Ayun’s eyes to just barely flicker.

That company was the main reason for their presence. It was almost like he mentioned it on purpose to gauge her reaction.

Though she tried to hide it, she couldn’t escape his intuition. “Perhaps you’re familiar with that incident at Carmen Tower, then.” This time, his question made her want to laugh. She was very familiar with what happened at Carmen Tower. Ayun was at the very center of it.

Even before the pair had met, Max found himself searching for a man known as The Demon Collector. True to his name, he was a trafficker of demonkind, taking advantage of the demons brought to Milesia by the Maelstrom Tear to serve his own needs.

Max had initially failed to apprehend the scoundrel, but a chance meeting with Ayun gave him one more opportunity since she had become the target of The Demon Collector’s desire.

That man very nearly got his wish. He set a rift between Max and Ayun right as their affections for one another truly blossomed. The Demon Collector took possession of Ayun’s pact, and attempted to flee the country with her on the top of Carmen Tower.

But to make a long story short and cliché, Max and Ayun reconciled, and that Demon Collector was beaten by the power of love.

Ayun was intimately familiar with what happened at Carmen Tower. But she barely knew the man she was talking with, even in this calm setting.

“Is this an interrogation?” She asked. Those simple words caused that once stern look to adjust to a panic. He turned away, putting a hand to his chin.

“I... I’m sorry. Your name sounded familiar, and since you were involved with Maximillian and Rastarok...” Now that the facade had been cracked, his deep tones had turned lighter.

“You... Wouldn’t happen to be with Danann, would you?” The man gave a simple nod to her question. That was the connecting thread between Rastarok and Max. Danann was a guild, although ‘paramilitary peacekeeping organization’ fit the bill better.

To the public eye, they were the ones responsible for stopping the Maelstrom Tear from ripping the entire fabric of reality asunder. After that, their interests aligned more with Second Fiddle in helping out the demons that came in after the Tear.

Ayun’s shoulders relaxed now that the misunderstanding was cleared. Although, some questions lingered. “So, you wouldn’t happen to know about what happened *after* the incident at Carmen Tower?”

At the very end of that particular night, the man known as The Demon Collector tried to trick his way out of being captured by way of a hidden pistol. He had even managed to injure Ayun with a special bullet specifically designed for demons.

But before he could make any more demands, a certain dragan had decimated the hand that held that gun with his own rifle. It was the last she saw of him... In the moment, she was more focused on a touching reunion with her beloved.

Save for the dissolution of companies in his name, neither Max nor Ayun had heard anything concerning 'The Demon Collector' in the past few months.

"You need not worry." Archel's demeanor came back. "Danann is seeking the full consequences of those involved. Thanks to the work of some... Independent contractors, many lives have been saved." To that, he lifted an open hand extended in her direction. After a brief second, she responded with her own gloved hand and clasped gently.

"Max did most of the heavy lifting, I'm sure." She tried to downplay her role in it all. In the midst of their handshake, Max made his way back.

"The nerve of those guys... Messing around with electrical wires, so they bring the guy with the fake arm 'cause *he's* expendable..." He scowled thinking about his would-be captors, but softened up on seeing the two fraternizing. "So, what'd I miss?"

“We were just going over that night at Carmen Tower.” Archel explained, returning his hand to his side.

“Well, Ayun’s the one who deserves the credit. The most I did was climb up a lot of stairs.” He failed to mention the league of demons under that man’s employ that he had to fight to get through to the top. But to both of them, the apprehension of that man was the least important thing to happen that night.

It was where they laid their feelings of love to one another, and that was worth remembering. Archel couldn’t help but chuckle, even momentarily, at how their answers lined up. It took Max back a bit.

“It was a pleasure to meet you, Miss Ayun.” He quickly finished off the bottle of water in his hand before starting to make an exit. “If you’ll excuse me.” With a quick bow of his head, he walked off.

“You managed to make Archel laugh. That’s impressive.” Max was still a bit in shock at it. “I mean, he was always kind of stoic, but ever since he took over Danann, he got real grumpy...” Now it was Ayun’s turn to look shocked.

“He’s the head of Dannan!?” The surprise in her voice elevated just a bit over the rest of the other conversations. Due to the momentary lull in the crowd, Max could notice a rising pink hue go over her cheeks.

Once the noise started back up, she regained her composure. “He’s so young... Why didn’t you say anything?” A small pout formed over her as she balled her hand to clank against his metal arm.

“I was gonna, before I got pulled away...” And in Max’s defense, it seemed like the kind of thing that Archel would have brought up himself. “It was a fairly recent change in management. Around the same time as the Maelstrom Tear. Kind of foisted onto him, but he’s still making the best of it.”

“I nearly made a fool out of myself, there.” She said, already trying to erase her outburst mere seconds ago. But Max brought a hand to her shoulder.

“Don’t worry. It’s like I said, these are good people.” Come to think of it, there had been significantly less demon-related talk.

Be it before the wedding or after, these people talked to Ayun as Ayun. Not a monster or a beast. Not even ‘The Lady in Shadow’ as was her title in the GSC. “And hey, I’ll cover for you if you somehow do something silly.” Her pout would have gone completely away if it weren’t for one word.

“Somehow?”

“Well... I mean, you’re pretty much perfect to me.” The pair locked eyes for a moment. In some situations, Max could employ lateral thinking. But since they had made their affections known, he was much more straightforward. His gaze didn’t waver, which gave credence to his words.

This was the same man who used to get flustered at even the implication of affection. And while it was cute to tease, she much preferred this earnest approach.

Ayun leaned forward, meeting his lips with her own. Even though it was just a quick kiss, Max could taste just a hint of the peach-inspired drink as she pulled away.

“Max...” She whispered as their stares met again. She brought her body in closer to speak privately. Only their eyes made communication. An invitation reserved for a later time.

But the moment was interrupted by a subtle rumble amidst them. It was a stomach, although they couldn't tell who it came from from being so close. Max brought his free hand to his cheek, almost trying to scratch the embarrassment off his face.

“Haven't had anything to eat since this morning.” The cravings of sustenance would win out over the desires of passion. “To be continued. I promise.” After a second longing look, the temporary truce was settled. She took his hand from his cheek and locked fingers, giving a small squeeze before they moved on.

Scattered on the tables were small cups of simple finger foods. Popcorn and chips, placed deliberately. While they looked at more exquisite appetizers on trays and platters, it just didn't suit them. *We're just hanging out, it should be fun!* is what Eloise insisted.

Some of the guests had already taken seats, probably for the same reason they had ventured into the tabled area. They thought to take an empty spot for themselves, but a voice called out to them.

“Max! Plenty of space here!” It came from Tali Troy, already seated next to her husband Holland. The silver bracelets on her wrist rattled as she waved her hand to join them.

Max gave a quick glance toward Ayun, who gave her own short nod. The two settled into the chairs opposite of the couple, setting their drinks onto the draped tablecloth.

Though Tali was always privy to fashion, she had gone all out for the occasion. Her burgundy hair was immaculately curled, the length just letting it sit on her bare brown shoulders. The ruby dress had a floral mesh on top, which worked its pattern into the design on the solid areas.

Holland was no slouch, either. His brown hair had a hint of pomade in it, giving it a slight sheen as it settled slicked back. His charcoal three-piece suit came with a similarly dark red collared shirt and black tie. Although all that dark attire might have highlighted his pale skin.

As if it wasn't enough red, a crimson-tinged bottle sat between them on the table, with glasses for each.

“Ayun, have you met Tali?” Max asked. To his surprise, she nodded.

“Yes. We had a very nice conversation.” She recalled, bringing a finger to her lips in faux-pondering. “There was so much time to speak before the wedding. Especially considering we had a latecomer...” Max sat up in his chair to the provocation, recalling his morning.

“I just had to know who could keep up with you, and what a neat gal she is!” Tali chimed in, a smile forming on her lips. “But I didn’t get to introduce you to my hubby.” With that, she brought up her hands in Holland’s direction, as if presenting him.

“Ayun Riese.” She replied without hesitation. When she was a servant of the Kohler household, she was simply Ayun. Even after entering a new contract with Max, she was unsure of her identity. But the GSC required a surname, and instead of being Ayun Kohler, chose to borrow Max’s family name.

Before they would have mulled it over, but after meeting with Monika and falling in love with Max, the name stuck. She extended a gloved hand over the table, which was returned with his own.

“It is good to put a face to the name.” He spoke quite plainly, even when introducing himself. “Holland Troy.” Something about the name was familiar to her. It didn’t even click until they had settled back into their seats.

“Ah.” This utterance was the culmination of her memory. That very same trip to Swaile and the subsequent tournament involved a high-class suite. One that Max had bargained his way into under the tab of one Holland Troy. The man had held small safehouses all across Milesain.

Instead of hiding, she played a refined card. “We are grateful for your assistance in Swaile.”

“Sure hope we paid off our ‘debt’ after that last job.” A card that was wasted by Max’s quick tongue. Holland’s brow furrowed, focused on the man across the table.

“Considering how you didn’t find anything...” He grumbled.

“You sent us off on a wild goose chase!” Max struck back. “I mean, I’d figure if the ex-Order of Cy guy was looking for movements from them, he’d have a source or something!”

“Ex-Order. Excommunicated. That’s why we needed you to find anythi-”

“Boys.” All it took was one word from Tali to get them to freeze up. “This is a party. Let’s not talk business, okay?” There were daggers behind those honeyed words. Ayun found herself impressed as these two warriors sank back down in their chairs quietly.

“Of course.”

“Yes’m...” Max said, before making a different realization. “Wait, if you’re here, who’s taking care of the little guy?” Back in Swaile, they were near-100% certain that neither of the Troys would be around since they were expecting their first child. But the mother gave a soft swish of her wrist.

“No worries! My sister has Arc. She was putting him down for a nap before we got here. I got lots of pics, too!” She reached into a leather handbag wrapped around her chair, producing a number of tiny pictures. A copy was handed over the table. “This is him at five months.”

“Dang, he already looks huge!” Max said, as if he knew what he was talking about. “What do you think, Ayun?”

She was still poring over the photo. Arctus Troy certainly had his father’s amber eyes. The sandy complexion in his little cheeks leaned closer to Tali. It took a second to realize she had been called upon.

“Oh. He’s wonderful.” She said, making a glance over to her partner. *I wonder what it would look like if...*

Once again, she wandered. But this time, a clattering brought Ayun to attention. The sound of people rising from their seats.

“Brides are back.” Holland stated plainly, also standing up. The newlyweds were met with a standing ovation as they entered the reception space. Perhaps part of their absence was explained by Eloise’s new getup.

Rather than the bulky traditional robes, she had changed into a soft ivory dress. With Monika’s white suit coat over her shoulders, she resembled her usual science lab attire. After accepting an embrace from David, Monika came over to hug Ayun and Max as well.

“Good timing, sis. I think some of us were ready to riot for dinner.” He spoke close to her ear, still locked in.

“Funny you should say that.” She said, pulling back. With a thumb, she pointed towards the glass doors. “We were ready to go, but a *little* detour stopped us on our way back.” Max tilted his head to see past her shoulders.

Outside, Ira and Aster stood outside, talking to someone. Their blue hair seemed to twitch ever slightly

as they talked. Now it was Ira who started pointing fingers at Max. This person turned his head, golden eyes finding Max in the crowd. The boy from this morning had returned.

CHAPTER 4

BECAUSE IT'S MIDNIGHT

While the rest of the party continued, Max and Ayun stayed outside to talk to the boy. Though lights were strewn about the open chapel, the seats were empty save for them.

“You really didn’t have to do this, uh...” Max trailed off.

“Kira.” The boy responded. “And you’re Max, right? That’s what the card said.” Now curious, he thumbed open the folds to find the ice cream card. The money was still there, even though it wasn’t much.

“Well... Thanks, Kira. But really, I got what I needed out of it. That’s the important part.” He turned around to explain it to Ayun, but found that she was staring at the boy with a fierce glare.

It wasn’t exactly malice, more that she was straining to come to a conclusion. A shift in her eyes seemed to indicate she found her answer.

“Kira... Are you a demon?” Her words caused him to straighten up a bit. But after meeting her stare, he eased up a little. Just like he had seen before, the top of Kira’s hair rose slightly. Now that he was close enough, it was clear they weren’t errant tufts but bonafide ears. More dog-like than Ira’s wolf form.

“Beastkin, huh...” Max pondered. Demons had all kinds of powers and rarely ever had ‘duplicates’. But more recently, demons with animalistic features had been cropping up. Ears, tails, sometimes claws and fangs. Beastkin had become its own classification. The growing anxiety of being so intensely studied brought a hand to the boy’s hair, twirling the blue strands.

“And you as well?” Kira’s question was met with a nod. “Does that mean he’s your master?”

“We’re partners.” Max was quick to snap back. There was a beat before he withdrew. “Although, I guess jumping in like that doesn’t seem very equal...”

“You worry too much about these things.” Ayun nudged him softly with her shoulder. “It is as he says. We’re equals.” The words only baffled Kira. But rather than try to understand, Max stood up.

“Alright, all settled! Let’s eat already!” His mind was on food, since he didn’t have time to snack at the table as planned. Kira started to shift away on the bench, but a metal hand rested on his shoulder. “Where you going?”

“I’ll just head out now.”

“Come on, this is a party. Plenty of food to go around.” Max’s words didn’t seem to reach him, as Kira remained turned away.

“What kind of human helps out demons?” It sounded more like a thought that escaped his lips. His words had the weight of someone who had been spurned many times before. The partners took a quick glance at each other, sharing a smile before returning.

“We’re Second Fiddle, buddy. Helping demons out is kind of our thing.”

Instead of sticking with the Troys, Max and Ayun had a spot in the front amongst the rest of the wedding party. They were even able to stick Kira in on the edge of the long table, despite his protests.

“He came up to us after we had just finished shooting. Thought he was just gonna ask us for something, but then he stopped to look at Ira.” Monika explained while carefully separating sections of mashed potatoes.

“She asked if he was a demon out of the blue!” Eloise jumped in, sat next to her.

After a quick pat of her napkin, Ayun jumped into the conversation. “I had a similar feeling. A kind of resonance.” Those words perked Eloise’s ears.

“Really, you too? Interesting...” She pondered while poking a pile of green beans. “Maybe there’s some inert geis reaction. Or an unknown communication, like quorum sensing. Y’see, bacteria can actually talk to each other through-” She was ready to go off, but Monika laid a hand on her shoulder.

“Let’s skip the science stuff today, honey.” She said between bites of cubed potato mash. Eloise scratched her cheek, laughing softly.

“Alright, alright. But I’m gonna put a pin in it. Still, it’s funny that he found us just by that little link.”

Max pondered over a portion of the meal. It was a small tart, with a thin candied slice of orange sticking on top. It wasn't necessarily the food itself, but the stare he could see from his peripheral.

As he bit into it, he could feel Ayun's gaze awaiting his response.

"Hm, that's nice. The cream's light but the fruit really makes it pop..." He tried to embellish more than usual. Feeling content, Ayun gave a prideful huff.

"You know, I made those." Ayun declared, as if it wasn't obvious. Her previous maidly experience had something to do with it.

"I had a feeling. I'm surprised you made something without peaches." That brought her hubris back down to a pout.

"Well, of course I can cook more than that..."

"We asked her about it, but Yunnie said cooking peaches was a waste compared to just serving them fresh." Eloise's words prompted Ayun to flare up.

"H-hey! I mean... It's true." She said, her own cheeks turning peachy.

Kira finally spoke up to break whatever was going on. "Actually, I was going by smell." He pointed a finger between Monika and Max. "You two have a similar scent." Max found it kind of funny, until he turned to see a snide look from his sister.

"Feels gross to be called out like that." She said, Their proximity prompted her nose though, now shifting

her look from mild disgust to anger. “Wait, that’s my shampoo!”

Max scoffed. “It’s not *your* shampoo, it just happens to be the same thing. Watermelon Breeze or whatever it’s called.” It was the same brand they had used growing up.

“You’re still using that stuff? Kind of a kiddy thing.” Said the person who was also still using it.

“Better than the rest of the ‘manly’ stuff. I don’t wanna smell like tea or leaves or sandalwood...” Before he could continue this strange tangent, he was stopped by Eloise. She had left her chair and gotten between the twins, enveloping them in a quick embrace.

“Come on, guys! No quibbles!” She took her arm from Max for a second, beckoning Ayun to join in this strange group hug. After a moment, she obliged by leaning in. “We found him and that’s all that matters right now.”

While they were having their little powwow, the demon Faye had gotten up from her chair and snuck around the table towards Kira. The group didn’t even notice she had gotten up until she was already right next to him.

“Gao?” It was all she would ever utter. Though she was a demon, Faye had some quirks around her. Unlike most other demons, she did not come from the Maelstrom Tear.

She was made in a lab, the corruption of an ancient seed infused with geis. Monika had found it in the midst

of an early journey, where it eventually sprouted into this little creature.

Raising her was one of the many things that ended up bonding Monika and Eloise. Though her speech was simple, she had gained a wide range of intellect and understanding.

The two parents watched in eager silence as she stretched out her hand towards the demon boy. A sprout branched out from her wrist, slowly growing until a quadrant of yellow petals jutted out. Once the little daisy was grown enough, it snapped off, sticking in her hand.

“Uh... Thanks?” Kira said, unsure. After Fae shook her arm a bit, beckoning the boy. He took hold of the flower, prompting a smile from Fae. Now Monika and Eloise were struggling to hold themselves in, still stuck in the embrace of Max and Ayun. If anything, their intensifying emotions made the grip tighter.

Eventually they would escape their grasp and go on enjoying the night. Rastarok and David led a band to bring the venue to life. The tempo was kept steady from the start, leading even the most curmudgeonly of guests to tap their feet. The drinks flowed, and with it conversation and merriment.

After their first dance and the dances with each father, Max was first in line to dance with his sister. It didn't quite surprise her, but what did was his footwork.

“Not bad, *little* brother.” She just couldn’t help herself. “I expected some toes to be stepped on, but you’re light on your feet.”

“Well, I had a few lessons.” Max said. While he had taught her a few things about the modern world, Ayun had given pointers on waltzing and the like.

For a second, Monika looked downcast. “Sorry about yelling at you this morning. I was really ready to let you have it...”

“Hey, it is your day. And it all worked out.”

“Sure, this time. But you can’t shoulder stuff on your own anymore.” Her tone shifted. “Communication is key when it comes to stuff like this, alright? Especially between you and Ayun.”

“I hear you. Although, you do like talking big for only being married for a few hours...” His teasing only made her smirk.

“Hey, longer than you! Besides, I kinda like her.”

“Yeah,” he chuckled. “Me too.”

They would share a quick hug before the next partner came to dance with Monika. That would turn out to be Ayun herself, but if they had a conversation Max wasn’t privy to it. He was instead having a twirl with Eloise.

“Congratulations, new sis!” He said.

“Aw, thanks Maxie!” She smiled at first, but then her expression changed. To someone who didn’t know her, it might have looked like worry. But he knew she was just working through a new thought.

“Something on your mind?”

“Well, if I’m your sister-in-law, then that makes you my brother-in-law.” She said.

“Right you are... What’s your point?”

“Maybe it’s time to retire Maxie.” Eloise loved to give out nicknames. Even if it didn’t actually shorten it. It was her way of showing affection to the closest of her friends. Monika was pretty much ‘Momo’ right off the bat.

“How ‘bout I call you... Bro?” As soon as the words left her lips, they both recoiled in unison. There was a moment of silence between them, even as they continued to dance. “On second thought, Maxie’s just fine.”

“Yeah, I’m good.” Maxie concurred quickly. Now after the next stretch of silence they shared a bit of laughter.

After a few more duet dances, the floor opened up again and continued well into the night. By the time guests started to make their exits, the moon was well above them.

Ayun and Max stayed until the end, helping out with cleanup as things wound down. Ayun couldn’t help but overhear a conversation between David and Kira as she collected cutlery.

“Normally Elly and Monika handle these kinds of things, but as you can tell they’re preoccupied.” David said, talking about Second Fiddle. “So I’ll be helping you find a suitable partner for a pact.” It was part of the guild’s duties, connecting the lost demons with humans

to complete the cycle. It was about making sure both parties were happy rather than selling off a demon to be a servant.

“Do we have to do it here? In Zuden?” Kira asked. Judging by the way his eyebrows shifted, it wasn't a question he was expecting.

“No, I suppose not... But you do live here, right? You don't got any friends or family waiting for you?” It didn't mean to be a painful question. But Kira lowered his head.

“No... I've nothing to this place.” David stroked his beard pondering it.

“Ah well... I suppose if you'd like, you can come with me back to New Fabrinasch. Our office is set up there.”

“Fabrinasch? Where's that?” Kira asked.

“Smack dab in the center of Cessair.” David explained. He tried to draw out an imaginary map on the table with his finger. “If we're here in Zuden, then it's way out west on a big continent.”

Right now, they were in the waters of Nemed. While it was considered a country, it was more like a collection of islands united under one flag. “Course, we'd have to take a boat to mainland, then by train...”

“A boat?” Kira's eyes sparkled as the ears atop his head wiggled in excitement. “I've always seen them go out, but never been on one myself!”

The sudden reaction made David laugh. On realizing why, Kira sat back down, red staining his cheeks.

“Don't be too eager. You might not have sea legs to stand on. But we'll figure that out in the morning.”

Their work was finally complete. Only a scant few remained, locking the building down. There was only one thing left to discuss with the new couple.

“Here’s the key to our apartment.” Monika said, handing a keychain with a silver key and a little patch. It was an orange circle with two lines down the middle. A somewhat crude interpretation of Second Fiddle’s logo.

“Aw, cute. Are we doing merch runs now?” Max’s snark elicited a pout from his sister.

“I made that myself, thank you very much!”

“Since David’s got Faye, there really shouldn’t be too much to do.” Eloise explained. “And he should be at the office if you need anything.”

“It will be no problem.” Ayun assured. “Thank you for letting us stay.”

“No, thank you! With you guys back home, we won’t have a thing to worry about. Oh, and help yourself to anything in the fridge.” Eloise’s words came with a hearty smile.

“New Fabrinasch, huh...” Max pondered. “I don’t think I’ve been in a minute.”

“I’ve never been myself.” Ayun said. It had been much more than a minute. It had been years since he had visited, before the Maelstrom Tear.

“You’ll be surprised. A lot’s changed since the reconstruction. It’s pretty much home now.” Monika said. The ‘old’ Fabrinasch was the same place where Max lost

his arm, and Monika gained her prominent scar. But if she could be fond of the place...

“Looking forward to it, then.” Max said, before putting a hand on each of the newlyweds’ shoulders. “Now, go get some rest, you two! You’ve had a big day after all.”

“Yeah...” Eloise agreed, starting to feel the weight of her eyelids. “Thanks again.” She gave both Max and Ayun a hug one at a time, before taking Monika by the hand to make their exit.

“Have a wonderful honeymoon.” Ayun said, giving a small wave.

“Thank you! Call if you need anything!”

“Or don’t!” Monika chimed in. Even tired, her sarcasm wouldn’t quit.

The reception was officially over. Max and Ayun were free to go where they pleased. And since it was right there, the beach was perfect for a nigh-midnight rendezvous.

One might not think it was so late, though. The sky was clear as ever, allowing the moon Fomor to cast everything in a pale green light.

Thanks to Ayun’s shadowweaving controlling her clothes, she could freely discard her shoes and feel the sand between her toes. Max didn’t have that luxury, but he still took the time to roll up his pant legs and hold his

shoes to his side. The pair clasped hands as they strolled along the shore.

“It’s so beautiful.” Ayun said. “Even the way the sea sinks into the sky...” They had spent so much time in big cities that little chances like this were rare.

“We should come out here sometime. Just the two of us.” He said. Ayun turned around to the notion, pulling herself right next to his body.

“Why wait?” Her voice was hushed, even against the crashing of the waves. “I think we’re alone *now*, as far as I can see. I cannot help but recall a certain *peach-flavored drink* at this moment.” It was a critical hit to Max, whose cheeks burned at the implications.

“Ah... So you did hear.” He honestly thought her peach love overpowered her senses in the moment. Ayun’s drive was about as fervent as that adoration for peaches. To be as daring to even consider some public indecency...

But when those same eyes that were inviting him before the reception came into view, he had half a mind to oblige. Max leaned in, letting their lips unite. While their kiss stopped, they leaned their foreheads against one another.

“I want you, Ma-*haa!*” The ocean didn’t seem to be a fan of what was about to transpire. A wave shot up farther than the rest, blasting their shins with cold salty water. An uncharacteristic shriek spilled out from Ayun, not expecting the change in temperature.

Max tried his hardest, but couldn't hold in his laughter.

"Sorry, sorry." He said, seeing her cheeks puff up in an embarrassed pout. "Let's just enjoy the walk for now. We've got all night." Ignoring the laws of public decency, what they had in mind would not mix well with sand and seawater.

Their trip to the hotel was a short one. Although they tried to take it easy, especially after their long day, the night was a point of anticipation for them. As soon as the door clicked, they found themselves wrapped in an embrace of passion.

Ever since the affirmation of their love on top of Carmen Tower, it had been hard to separate Ayun and Max from one another. Even though they were a human and demon in a pact, to them they were partners. And while they attempted to 'patiently travel' down a road that neither of them knew anything about... Their pleasure got the better of them.

Now in the near-darkness of their room, they were as close as two beings could be. Minus that thin layer of protection.

"I... I'm close..."

"Me too... Just a little bit...!"

Their interlocked fingers tightened up momentarily, before the rest of their bodies relaxed.

“You’re... Starting to get good at this.” Ayun said, panting softly.

After sharing a brief kiss, Max pulled back to sit on the edge of the bed.

“Tissue, tissue...” He fumbled around to clean up the aftermath. The dubious box of contraceptives next to said tissues was empty, prompting a hushed huff from the man. It did last them two weeks... But without it, the ‘main event’ would be done for now. Not that he really expected him to have much left in him.

Over his shoulder, his eyes lingered on the faint contours of Ayun’s fair skin, almost glowing in the moonlight that seeped through the blinds. He rolled onto his side, same as her to continue his appreciation. She caught his staring, but found his expression strange.

“What’s wrong?”

“You’re downright radiant. Can’t say the same for myself...” He couldn’t help but compare her immaculate complexion to Max’s own weathered body. His chest showed the bloody roadmap of his previous adventures.

Scars and scratches, including one particularly large one that stretched across his chest. The wound that severed his original arm. Ayun had her fair share of fights, but that demonic influence kept her body in pristine order.

“I don’t mind.” She brought a hand to his chest, skimming the rough tissue. Her touch brought a thought to mind.

“Y’know, I’ve been wondering...” He said, placing his real hand over hers. “If you can transfer Geis through touch, is there a chance that...” He struggled to find the words. Action was one thing, discussing it aloud was another matter. Ayun tried to hold in her laughter, but a giggle eked out.

“You think of the strangest things in these moments.” She brought her body closer to his. “No, Max, I’m pretty sure that having sex is not going to drain you like that. Why, are you trying to tell me you’re all done?”

His life essence wasn’t in any danger to their connection. The pact would make sure of that, it was the entire idea behind them. What was going to put Max in serious jeopardy was her libido, and his inability to deny her.

“I love you, Ayun.”

“You always say that right after.” She smirked. “And before, and during...”

“I can’t help myself. In moments like this, all that seem to escape me are my truest feelings.” His eyes were earnest. Her mind drifted to a snippet of her conversation with Monika, mid-dance.

You gotta take initiative, Ayun! That blockhead brother of mine will never do anything himself, so that’s why you have to take charge! Her meaning was more about romance than physical pursuits. Still, perhaps the same principles needed to be applied here.

With a hand to his shoulder, Max was pushed onto his back. Ayun rolled too, now sitting atop him. They

could feel the warmth between their bodies. He had a bit of a worried look, though.

“Ayun... Are you sure? We’re all out-” He started, but she put her hands onto his chest.

“I’m ready, Max. I love you.” Her face had a look of determination on it. Maybe it was a mix of liquid courage from the party, or the romantic vibes that followed them from seeing other couples. This was the culmination of nearly half a year.

Instead, there came a knock on the door. At first, just a small pair but then a few at a time.

Max glanced at the door, then back to Ayun. Her face was no longer in a state of longing. No, this was fury. All that courage that she had to try and bring their love to bear was dashed by a handful of knocks.

With the same hands she had on his chest, she brought herself to a standing position, stepping off the bed and stomping towards the door.

“W-wait, Ayun!” Max said, getting up himself. It wasn’t just that he hoped to temper her frustration. She was headed to meet whoever was at the door with nothing on but a scowl.

It seemed she realized that, bringing her hand up. With a quick snap, the shadows danced around her. They weaved in a black silk robe that covered her form.

That was all fine and dandy for her, but Max didn’t have that kind of luxury. He rushed to his discarded trousers by the foot of the bed, hopping along to get his feet through the holes. One jump caught him at a bad

angle, crashing him to the floor half-naked as Ayun swung the door open. If it weren't for the steel hinges, the whole thing might've come off.

“Just who in the hell-” She started, but was stopped by the sight in front of her. It was Kira once more, now shaking at her righteous indignation.

CHAPTER 5

TELL-TALE TAIL

“S-s-sorry to bother you...” Kira couldn’t get his words out under the pressure of this scorned woman. Even Max could feel that ill intent, prompting him to try and mediate.

“Kira! Bit late to be popping up like this.” He said, still making his way to the door. He placed a hand on Ayun’s shoulder. “David’s gonna be worried if you wander off.”

The demon shook his head. “He’s already out cold. Reeks of booze and cigarettes.” His nose twitched just recalling it. “If... If you had somewhere to stay...”

“You’ll just have to endure it-”

“H-hey, come on!” Max insisted. “I know how David is. He’s pretty much useless now... There’s no harm in being here, right?”

Now the ire was on Max. *Really? Right now you want to show compassion?*

“Uh... Where’s your shirt?” Kira asked Max, interrupting her thoughts. His nose once more started to twitch, prompting the couple to flare up in a rose plume.

“We... We were just about to take a bath!” he said.

“You mean... Together?”

“Well, with Max’s arm he needs assistance.” Ayun jumped in for the assist. Ten years ago that might have been true. But modern mecharms were good enough to be submerged and still be functional. The claim seemed to work on Kira anyways, giving a small nod.

“No offense, kid, but... You probably could use a shower or something yourself.” Now it was Kira’s turn to glow red. Max’s laugh cut some of the tension. “Come on, get in here. I’m getting chilly.” After a sheepish nod, he stepped into the room.

“Thank you for your hospitality.” He said, still looking at the floor. Though Ayun had softened up a little bit, there was still some lingering pressure in her presence.

“Alright, bathtime! I can wash your hair or ears or... Whatever.” Max insisted. That only set Kira off more.

“I-I’m not a kid!” His outburst didn’t help his case. Max shrugged.

“Eh, your loss.” As Max spoke, he brought up his mechanical arm. The hand slowly spun around, rotating continuously. “Just give me a loofah and I’m a scrubbin’ machine! And then you go into Power Mode-” Before he could demonstrate whatever that meant, Ayun leaned into him.

“Just give it up, Darling.” Her words gave Max pause. She only used ‘pet names’ sarcastically. She gave Kira a professional smile. “You can go first.”

“A-Alright.” That aura still followed her, despite the kind words. Once he slipped into the bathroom and the door clicked shut, she let her frustration out.

“You really don’t know how to quit, do you...” She asked, glaring at Max.

“I’m sorry...”

“We finally had a moment to ourselves, but you’re always sacrificing your happiness for others... I do love that about you.”

“I know, I’m sor-” He shook his head in confusion. “Wait, what?”

“I love how you don’t even think about it. Even though really, I know you sometimes just don’t think in general.” Her smile returned, with a mean streak. “You’d jump on a grenade, or take a bullet, or a blade...”

“Alright, alright.” He said. Ayun brought her hands onto his shoulders, sliding them to connect behind his neck.

“It wouldn’t kill you to be selfish a few times, though.” She brought her head closer to his, connecting for a kiss.

As they drew back from each other, her eyes met his. Hers drifted once more towards the bed.

“You serious...” Max said, noticing her stare. One of those hands behind his head moved to pinch his cheek.

“It’s not that. The towels.” A pile of white towels were folded on the end table next to the bed. “The cleaners brought them up, but I forgot to put them back in the bathroom.” It was the price they paid to insist on a ‘Do Not Disturb’ policy to the rest of their amenities.

She separated from Max’s side to grab one and go to the door. Max followed with some clothes of his own.

“Here, something for him to change into. Kind of a waste if he goes with the same stuff, right?” She nodded to his input, receiving the bundle on top. A few knocks weren’t enough to rouse Kira from his bathing. She gave it a few seconds of consideration.

Well, it’s nothing I haven’t seen. Her previous duties in the Kohler family involved helping the young master with bathing, and later helping Max after his mecharm was broken for a short time. So she turned the handle to the bathroom door.

“Here’s a towel for you-” She said, opening the door. The sudden entrance broke Kira’s concentration, previously entranced by the heat of the shower’s flow. For some reason, the curtain was still tucked away.

Their eyes locked. There was a split second of noticing each other’s presence, before...

“Eek!” Kira screamed, bringing arms and a raised leg to cover tanned skin. Though she flinched at the noise, Ayun kept her composure.

“Sorry, I’ll just-” Her words were halted. Though Kira did try to cover up, there wasn’t necessarily anything to cover up. Or at least, not the thing Ayun was expecting.

The only protrusion was in the back. A ragged tuft of fur stood up just behind Kira’s waist. It had the same blue of the hair, but was worn dull by poor grooming.

“I... I can explain.” Kira said, but Ayun had a different look in her eyes. With a swish of her hand, a dark gray apron bubbled into existence beneath a wave of shadows over her clothes.

“The seat, please.” She said, motioning to the stool beside the tub. After a second of confusion, Kira obliged the directions, facing away from Ayun.

The pair sat silently as Ayun took a wet rag to the tail. Kira shivered at the touch, due to the sensitive appendage, but kept silent. However, that silence would have to be broken eventually.

“I... I never meant to deceive anybody. It’s just... Living out there is hard enough.” Kira explained. “There used to be more of us, together. But the way people looked at the other girls...” the demon’s hand tensed up, pulling hair just recalling it. Ayun listened earnestly, still focused on cleaning.

“Your reasons are your own. I won’t judge you.”

“Then... Do you mind if this stays between us? For now, at least?” Kira asked, looking back. When she gave a solemn nod, he breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

“Though if I had to guess, I’m sure Max wouldn’t think less of you.” As she said it, a different doubt emerged. “He probably wouldn’t even realize it...” That mutter was only made to herself. Rather than dwell on Max’s blind spots, she focused on the task of washing.

After a gentle lather of soap and rinse, the tail had a new shine. Even Kira was stunned at his coat’s sheen.

“I never knew it could look like that. Thank you.”

“Of course. Although, it feels a waste to hide it underneath your clothes...” She looked back to the folded set that Max had provided. It was a simple, stretchy

fabric. One that, with even the simplest shadowweaved pair of scissors, could be modified.

Max turned his head to the sound of the clicking door. Kira stepped out, now adorned in the provided clothes. Ayun wasn't too far behind, though she stopped at the door frame.

"You ready?"

"Yep!" He said, jumping to his feet. His mecharm was mostly dismantled, the forearm replaced with a seal.

As he passed by Kira, he noticed how fluffed up the boy's hair was now that it was dried. It was a puppy-like look that suited his beastkin ears. But that look also revealed a curiosity that had been burning in Max's mind.

"Huh. There's really nothing there." He thought aloud.

"W-w-what?" Since Kira didn't understand the context, it sent him into a spiral of panic. *Nothing there? Are these clothes too tight? Did he figure it out already?*

"Your ears." He explained. "Kind of wondered if beastkin had regular ears as well, or..."

Of the beastkin that Max had seen, all of them had long enough hair to hide the sides of their heads. But their ears were always on top of their head, and the rest of their features were outright humanlike!

But the conversation could never come up quite organically. Although it certainly wasn't on this occasion,

this time he could clearly see a lack of human ears on the side of Kira's face.

"Come on, Max." Ayun protested, still waiting. "I want a shower." He stepped around Kira to make his way to the bathroom. In that step, he noticed a strange tuft of hair poking out of the back of the boy's borrowed pants. *Wait, was that always there?*

There were more important matters than understanding the physiology of beastkin. At least to Max, at this moment.

Though the couple was normally eager to confirm their love at each step, the bathroom was essentially a neutral zone. It wasn't just that they had an extra guest in the adjacent room.

It was an agreement made with one another. They would have plenty of other opportunities to enjoy their company sans clothes. They really did need some cleansing anyways.

"Your hair's getting long." Ayun said, sifting her fingers through Max's red locks. "Do you want me to cut it again?" He pondered for a moment with his remaining hand, before shrugging.

"I think it's fine for now. Much better than the rat's nest it was..." His hair was an outright mess when he met Ayun. One of the first things they did after forming a contract was a cleaning not unlike this.

But now that they were keeping up with it, another haircut from her wasn't necessary. While the shampoo sank in, they swapped spots in the shower.

"What about me?" She asked, putting her hands into her own black hair. "Maybe I should try for something short..."

"No way!" Even though it was his own outburst, Max seemed just as shocked. "I mean..."

"That's unexpected coming from you." She reached up, grabbing the shower's head off the wall to wet her hair. "I thought you'd say something like 'you'll always be beautiful,' or words to that effect."

"I mean... It would be cute. But..." He struggled to find the words, but she had an inkling of his process.

"Is that too close to Mo's style?" The direct hit made him recoil.

"That might be a part of it. I just think this style suits you." She turned around to face him, hands on hips.

"Really? *All* of it?" He watched a few droplets of water race their way down her body. Once they reached her stomach... The thought seemed to register.

Max's entire face erupted in red. He tried to make words, but could only produce fragments. It had been a while since she saw him so flustered...

Which made it the perfect opportunity to strike. With the shower's nozzle still in hand, she fired off a burst of water directly at his waist.

“Cold!!” He shrieked, curling up from the blast. It at least brought him back to his senses. He looked back up to see a devilish grin across Ayun’s face.

“Down, boy.” She shifted back to her original spot. “Please help me, then, with this hair that you love so much.”

Kira was fast asleep on the couch by the time they had gotten out. They too were feeling the fatigue after their monumental day. It was time to call it a day and enjoy some sleep.

The couple laid side-by-side, sharing a tender kiss before getting rest, as was tradition. But as they pulled back, Max saw a bit of worry in her eyes.

“What’s up?”

“I just... I can’t help but wonder. What if you found Kira instead of me?” She was alluding to their initial meeting. They met by happenstance on the road, an accidental passing that turned into a much grander adventure. But Max shook his head, as well as he could sideways.

“I’m no good with what-ifs. Besides, he doesn’t seem too fond of guys.” His response made her forget he wasn’t privy to Kira’s situation. A careless slip of the tongue.

“Well... What if I was a boy?” She asked.

“Uh... I mean, I guess...” His face was scrunched up as the gears turned in his head. It was more trying to picture

a male version of Ayun. Once he moved past that, he spoke without hesitation. “You are you. And I’d love Ayun. No matter what.”

“But hair’s a point of contention...”

“You know it!” Their eyes matched up for a second, before sharing one more kiss.

“I love you too, Max. Now let’s get some rest.” She smiled before turning over. Max sidled closer to her, putting his real arm over her above the blanket.

“So what if I was a demon?” He asked, trying to snark.

“Hm... I don’t know about that.”

“What?! No fair!”

“It just feels... *Familial* for demons to be with one another. At least to me.” Her implied words caused a shudder to ripple through Max.

“Message received. G’night.”

CHAPTER 6

BONE AND BLOOD

A man and woman slowly trudged through the darkened alleys of an unknown city. Every place was unfamiliar to them. This was the first time they had been in the outside world in at least a year.

Her breath was ragged, visible beneath the night's chill. The man's coarse locks blew around as the wind picked up. These alleyways felt particularly biting in how the air howled around them.

The boots on her feet were a size too large, further slowing her escape. The uneven cobblestone caused her to stumble. Thankfully, his arm wrapped around her slim frame to halt her fall.

"Just a little further, Yulia. I promise." Though really, their destination was just as unknown as where they stood. She could feel a rumble from his hand as it brought her back to balance.

Vaughn was in just as bad of shape as her, but still grit his teeth. He needed to be strong, or at least look it. His forest green eyes seemed to keep up the facade, as the girl gave a small nod.

It had been just a few days since they made their escape from that facility. He wished that he could've had the chance to do it sooner.

He thought about Winona, who they had to leave behind. Henrik and Petra, who might've lived if he had only been stronger. Even that traitor Asche crossed his mind. But now was not the time for what-ifs. All that he needed to think about was survival.

Before they could exit the alleyway, the path in front of them was blocked. A man in sunglasses stood ahead. He reached his hand to a receiver underneath his olive drab parka.

“This is Urzu 1. Contact made with the target. Rally on my coordinates.”

“Damn it... You just don't give up.” Vaughn stepped forward to stand between them. The other man wasted no words, instead reaching for a pistol attached to his waist.

“Raise velocity. Strike true, *Notched Arrow*.”

A faint light crept out of the attached barrel on the raised gun before his finger had even pulled the trigger. He fired three times, a spark of blue mixing with the spent powder. The extra piece couldn't entirely muffle its assault, as the sound bounced around the brick walls.

Vaughn dropped to the ground on his back, crimson leaking from holes in his shirt. A sharp gasp escaped Yulia's lips, but she was otherwise frozen in fear. The man kept his aim trained her way as he brought his left hand to fetch a pair of handcuffs.

The man only took one step towards her. Before he could get any further, a hand came from below to grab the gun. Even as the aim skewed, he still fired off another

round. The shot went wide, striking an errant pipe in the alley.

That was the last shot he could take, though. The force of the mysterious grip messed with the slide's cycling, leaving the casing jammed in the exit port.

The metal pistol warped further as the grip clamped down. The man looked down to follow the hand's origin, finding the one who had previously been perforated with gunfire.

"Don't you dare touch her, you bastard!" He spoke through gritted teeth, slowly rising to his feet with the weapon still held tight. Now that he was standing up straight, his immense stature overshadowed the assailant. The man's feet lifted off the ground as the gun was held up higher.

With a swift twist, he flung the man aside, sending him hurtling into the nearby wall. The bricks shifted to the impact, leaving him partially embedded between the clay.

He wanted to check on Yulia, but there was no time. A quartet of similarly dressed individuals made their way into the alley. Two of them didn't even bother with the civilian facade, donned in full helmets and wielding rifles. Vaughn grit his teeth, trying to stifle a dark chuckle.

The team raised their weapons to aim, but were hesitant to fire. The area around their target was shifting and warping in an unexpected way.

A sickly pale coating was forming over the demon's otherwise dark skin. It twisted around his face in an

instant, making the visage of a monstrous skull- Teeth well past his cheeks, and jutted horns at the top.

One of the combatants snapped out of their fear, rallying the rest of the team before it could go any further.

“Start the enchant!”

“Exhale of flame, *Dragon Breath!*” Just like their fallen comrade, the ends of their rifles responded in kind to the words.

“Fire!” The weapons followed suit, a blast of orange pouring out with every shot. They filled the area with a fully automatic hail. In just three seconds, the squad had expended their magazines.

But once the smoke cleared, they realized their effort was fruitless. Though sufficiently darkened by the flames, his new armor stopped anything from getting past him.

The beast stood up, a collection of spent rounds falling to the ground. He clenched his fist, prompting a jagged blade to extend from the calloused armor.

“Look away, Yulia. You don’t want to see this.” His voice, though calm, sounded echoed and distorted.

She stayed on the ground, curled up. Through her clasped hands, she could hear the clatter of torn steel and broken bones. Grunts of pain and a scream cut short.

After a few more moments, it went silent.

She popped her head up to find only Vaughn still standing. He was hunched over, his breathing uneven. He

craned his head in her direction, a piercing red coming from the holes on his head.

But on seeing her, the glowing subsided. His hand clenched once more, as the armor flaked off his body like dust. Eventually he was back to his old self, though his jacket was in tatters.

Now that the armor had worn off, the adrenaline was leaving as well. He brought his hand over the wounds on his chest.

Their eyes met, Yulia's soft blue eyes trembling in place. "They didn't get you, right?" She shook her head to the question. That at least put him at ease. He lifted his hand from his chest, covered in blood. "No idea what that guy was packing..." He'd laugh if it didn't hurt to breathe.

Now it was her hand that reached his front. At first, she still had the same scared look. Vaughn saw her demeanor shift, just as her cobalt eyes did. They dipped into violet before stopping at a light crimson.

As her jet black hair started to fan out, he felt something else around him. The aches in his chest started to dull. He flipped his hand over, as the flecks of blood started to slide off. Not down, but sideways, back into the holes they came from.

Most of his blood made the same path, flowing back into the wounds. They pushed out a slew of fragmented shards, clattering to the ground. "Yulia... What are you..." But as he asked the question, the process seemed to be complete.

Her hair fell back down, and her colors returned to normal. She stumbled again, prompting Vaughn to wrap his arms around and stabilize her. “Thank you. Truly.”

Now was not the time to investigate. A stunt like that surely tapped her of geis. His mistakes, he felt, had forced her hand to use those powers. She would need some way to replenish. He considered their options, until his thoughts were interrupted by a noise nearby.

“Urzu... 1... All units...” They were the haggard words of the man still stuck in the wall. Before he could get any more words out, Vaughn was once again on him, crushing the plastic receiver with ease.

He pulled the man out of the rubble and onto the ground, effortlessly holding him down with one hand. All they really needed to recharge was a living human’s energy. Though as the wind pierced the holes in his clothes, he considered one more thing to take from him.

CHAPTER 7

FANTASTIC VOYAGE

Ayun found herself walking around in an endless space of shadows. The ground around her rippled like onyx ocean waves, but when she stepped it was solid as stone.

Due to the overlapping darkness, it was hard to make out most of her surroundings. A faint light source seemed miles away, showing a field of weapons.

Spears, axes, swords, all made of pitch black material. It almost looked like a long-forgotten battlefield, if the arms themselves weren't so pristine.

There was a clearing between the arms that led her down a path. The road ascended until she found herself looking at a shortsword on a darkened anvil.

She studied the weapon, taking it into her hands and making a few swings. The noise it made cutting the air felt off somehow. She set the blade down once more on the anvil, bringing her fingers carefully across the edges.

She found slight gaps in the sword, pushing them apart slowly. A strange wire held the sword in place in the middle of the blade, about the same width as the handle. Segment by segment, she extended the blade until it snaked its way off the surface.

Once more she took the sword into her hands, still unfurled. This time, the sound was good. The blade coiled and leapt around the space in a beautiful flourish. After a few more swings, she brought the blade up. The bits followed in conjunction, piling on top of one another until it once more resembled the blade she started with.

Feeling satisfied, she set the sword back onto the stone. The light that was once faint grew briefly, casting a shadow in front of her.

She turned around, no longer seeing the road she previously walked, but a strange light. It seemed to be wrapped up in chains, though it was hard to tell just from the sheer brightness.

It proved to be too much to witness on her own. She tried to raise her hand, to glimpse through the cracks of her fingers...

But with a blink, she found herself staring up at the ceiling. Her hand did find itself to her face as it was in the dream, but the only harsh light came peeking through the nearby blinds.

Max was still asleep next to her, his arm draped over them. She turned her head to find a clock resting on the end table. According to the glowing letters, it wasn't even 10 in the morning.

While she did enjoy the warm embrace, it was going to impede her movements. She slowly wedged a hand under his arm, giving her space to wiggle out. Once stood up, she leaned over to softly plant her lips on his cheek. It

stirred him a tiny bit, but not enough to break his slumber.

“What are you doing?” A voice caused Ayun to straighten up. It was Kira, who sat up from the couch. She nearly forgot how he spent the night here.

“D-don’t you worry about it. This is something between lovers.” She said, collecting herself. “Did you sleep alright?” Her question was met with a nod.

“Yes. Thank you, again.” Being used to being on the streets, even a sofa was a luxury. Ayun walked over to the tiny kitchen area.

“Would you like some breakfast? Or coffee, if you like it.” She asked, pressing buttons on a nearby machine. The device whirred to life, preparing a fresh pot.

The boy shifted in place, wondering what happened to the scary lady from the night before. “I’ve already accepted so much...”

“It’s fine. It’s just some toast.” She said, bringing a pair of slices into the tiny oven. She bent down to reach inside the miniature fridge, revealing a pair of frosty peaches. “These, however, are not for sharing.”

The fragrance of crushed beans made its way onto Max’s nose. Though he didn’t like the taste of coffee, the smell was comforting to him. It stirred him out of his rest, Still feeling the labors of the last day.

He rose from the bed in a kind of fugue state, his eyes barely open. On sauntering over to the kitchen area,

Ayun met him with a smile. She had been slicing up a second peach with a weaved knife.

“Good morning, Max.” The knife dissolved as she got up from her chair, greeting Max with a kiss. Though he had a small grin, all he could muster was a low grunt. “Is everything alright?”

“I’m whooped.” He said, joining them at the table. Kira was there too, slowly enjoying a piece of toast slathered in jelly. “I had the strangest dream. Met a lovely guy who called himself *Ayun*.” The revelation stopped the real Ayun mid-drink, remembering their last conversation.

“Hm... So, you were cheating on me in your dreams.” That teasing response woke Max up.

“Wh-Nothing happened! And how does that count?” He said, groaning as she laughed at his reaction. Now that he was awake, he noticed the snack in front of him. “Thanks for the food.” He took the toast and slowly nibbled on it.

“You know, I also had a weird dream.” She said, trying to recall the scattered weapons.

“Was I a handsome devil, at least?”

“Not like that. It was...” She struggled to find the words. The dream itself was already becoming foggy to her.

She didn’t have much time to ponder though, as a chime interrupted their conversation. A synthetic arrangement of chords blasted from a tiny speaker nearby. It was Max’s mobile phone, sitting on the other

end table. Max swiveled from his seat to pick it up and answer the call.

“Yeah... Yup, he found his way here.” He said, looking towards Kira. It must’ve been David, checking the whereabouts of the stray demon. “No big deal. You were just... Wait, what? But that’s like, an hour from now! Crap. Fine. Bye!” He hung up, now fully awake.

“Everything alright?”

“David just said our boat’s leaving at noon.” He explained. The clock showed them they were about ten minutes away from 11.

“That shouldn’t be a problem. All our things are here.” In fact, most of their stuff was still packed up. Since Ayun had her shadowweaving to change her clothing, only Max really had things to pack. But Max shook his head as he went to collect his still-detached arm.

“Well, I kind of have a thing I need to get. It shouldn’t take that long. Hopefully.” He said, sticking the forearm into the socket. His hand splayed out for a second, the system integrating with the rest of the arm.

“What kind of thing?” She asked, with a bit of suspicion. Whatever it was, he failed to mention it before.

“Ah, it’s...” He started to remove his sleeping pants, only just realizing that Kira was still here. He grabbed some clothes and jumped into the bathroom. After a minute, he was out, dressed in tan pants and a sleeveless white shirt. But before he could continue, he was met with Ayun at the door.

“Max.” She said, holding back indignation. “No secrets, right?” It was a tenet they held themselves to. Secrets and lies were one of the big foibles that nearly cost them everything back at the incident in Swaile. To that end, his eyes turned downcast.

“I promise, nothing serious. But I want it to be a surprise. That’s different.” Those words caught Ayun off-guard.

“How long do you think you’ll be?”

“It’s a shop on the other side of town. You might want to just go to the docks and I’ll meet you there.” This time, his eyes weren’t wavering. She sighed, a mixture of relief and pouting.

“Well... Alright.” She said, giving him one more kiss. “Love you, Max.” Her tone was more stern than the words seemed. If anything, it was a kind of ‘I’m trusting you’ rather than anything romantic.

“Love you too. This’ll be worth it! I promise!” With that, he was out the door like a whirlwind.

“Seriously...” She sighed once more, with more frustration than the last one. Her love was genuine, but it didn’t stop her from being annoyed. She at least was happy enough that she didn’t have to run around in the island heat. After all, she still had one more peach to finish off for breakfast.

The sun nearly found its way to the very top of the sky. As Ayun and Kira made their way to the docks, she pulled on her white collar just to get some air moving.

She opted for a sleeveless shirt and a flowing gray skirt. There was a slight slit in the dress, but it did little in the warmth of the sun.

“How did you survive in this heat...” She said, thoughts escaping. True enough, despite the extra fur Kira didn’t seem at all bothered.

“This is the high point of the season.” He shrugged. “So usually you just stick to the shadows. Or loiter long enough in a shop before you get chased out...” Thankfully for them, the ticket stand had a small awning to rest underneath.

“Two tickets for Cessair, please.” Her words passed through the slits between the glass. The attendant leaned her head to the side, looking at the boy behind Ayun.

“So, one for you and your son?” The question caused Ayun to straighten up.

“W-what?” To be perfectly honest, she was still on a bit of autopilot. ‘Two tickets’ in her mind were her and Max.

“One adult and one child.” The attendant clarified. It was just for their pricing.

“Ah... Yes.” Ayun rebounded, pulling some notes from her pocket. The bills were exchanged for a pair of tickets. Once the transaction was complete, Ayun promptly made her way towards the boats.

“Wh-hey!” Kira followed behind, oblivious to the entire exchange. He had no idea why she was in such a hurry. Ayun herself wasn’t quite sure why it got a rise out of her.

She looked back to Kira, who had to quicken his pace just to catch up. A part of her struggled to see any physical semblance between each other. *I would hope my son would be a little less abrasive...*

A familiar pang bounced around her head. The same sensation from the night before. Back when they were talking to the Troys. She was starting to come to terms with where these feelings were going, even if she didn’t want to say it aloud.

Thankfully for her, there wasn’t much time to ruminate. A familiar arm waved to them amongst the crowd of waiting passengers. It was attached to David, who spotted the pair coming in. As they approached, they noticed Faye nearby, basking in the sunlight they were desperately trying to avoid.

Faye seemed to be having the time of her life. She bounced around in a slow circle, soaking up the rays in her green skin. Perhaps it was a part of her plant-based demonic nature. It was a pleasant sight, even in the midst of the searing heat.

“What’s with that *thing*?” The words of another passenger caught Ayun’s ears.

“Another one of those damn demons.” A different kind of chill swept through her system. *That’s right. This*

is the kind of reaction you'd expect. Demons had a stigma amongst most gael, the original residents of Milesain.

They were the ones that came up with the name 'demon' in the first place. A malevolent entity with abnormal feats.

Their first public experience was the Maelstrom Tear, which brought about a multitude of different beings into this world. More of a nuisance than anything to them.

A feeling of dread loomed over her as the murmurs continued.

"Get over here, little bud. You're gonna dry up at this rate." David gave a beckoning motion to Faye. He held up a clear bottle in his hand that brought her over.

As she drank, his own head swung around to the direction of the commenters. Though he didn't see the ones clearly talking, a few looking their way couldn't meet his gaze.

The little girl herself seemed oblivious to it all. At least she still had her innocence. He gave a small huff before leaning back once more.

Now that they were quelled, he looked towards Ayun.. "Thanks for taking care of the kid." He said, putting a hand to Kira's head. As he started to ruffle his hair, the boy raised his own arms in protest.

"I'm not a kid! And you were the one who passed out..." His words were meant to be pointed, but it only made David laugh.

"Yeah, sorry. It was a big day, y'know? Not every day I get to see my own daughter off." Now he looked

towards Ayun. “Although, there might be a time where I have to do it for my son.”

“We... Haven’t really discussed anything like that.” She replied. At this moment, if Max didn’t appear before the boat left he’d be lucky to be alive. David brought his hands up in a surrender.

“Oops, not trying to push anything. You guys go your own pace. Speaking of...” He turned to spot a man with red hair rushing towards them. In his right hand he held a serious-looking silver case. Once he was close enough, he stopped to find his breath.

“Did I... Make it?” He asked between gasps. As if to answer him, the boat’s horn sounded off, signaling their intent to board passengers. Kira brought his hands to his head to mask the blaring noise.

“Photo finish, boy.” David said, smirking as he stood. The other three made their way to the line while Ayun walked towards Max. Though he was still recovering, he stopped her approach with his free hand.

“Wait...” For just a moment, that chilling anxiety came creeping back. “I’m all grody...” She shook her head, before stepping forward.

“That’s fine. I’ll still hold you.” She said, smiling. He rested his forehead against hers for a moment, finally getting his rhythm back. “Shall we?”

Calling the boat a simple ferry would have been selling it short. This was a ship designed to bridge the

border between the islands of Nemed and the continent of Cessair. A trip like that would take at least half a day. As such, rooms were provided for passengers.

Max and Ayun found themselves in one such room, having brought their luggage to stow away. The bed took a majority of the space, though it somehow provided a desk and mirror as well.

“Well, this is... Cozy.” Max said, trying to find nice words. Cramped would’ve been the more correct choice. “Are you ready for that surprise?” He set the case onto the bed.

“I have to admit, I’m curious as to what would make you so excited.” Her words gave him a big grin. He brought his hands to the locks on the side, clicking them open to show off the contents.

Inside were two mechanical forearms. Each one had a different design, even compared to the one already attached to Max’s arm. Now that it was open, she should’ve known better... Those limbs were never far from his mind.

The top one had a circular shape, a series of gold plates that were stacked on top of one another. From her angle, it looked like a folded rose.

“So when I got his new mecharm, I went with Mazin’s modular design. After all, ‘if it’s not a Mazin, it’s not amazin’!” A peculiar catchphrase for a mecharm company. “Instead of hydraulics, it uses electricity to manipulate the arms. It also means that I can do this!” He

pressed his fingers on his upper left arm. Just as before, his mechanical fingers stretched out before falling limp.

He pulled on the forearm, where it detached with ease. Sure enough, the remaining stub looked like an electrical socket. Setting that one aside, he picked up the gray and golden arm, slotting it in with minimal effort.

It seized to life in the same way, allowing Max to put up a V-sign with his fingers to show they were working properly. “I can swap out parts with no problem. But that’s not all!” He said, brimming with joy.

He stepped back as best he could in the space, and brought up the new arm. When he pressed down his middle and ring fingers, those same petals rose up from the forearm. They folded outwards, providing a decent buckler.

Although Max seemed to be having the time of his life, Ayun was less impressed. She at least enjoyed how fired up he got, but the arms didn’t really do much for her. Even so, she picked up the second one in the box.

This one had a much different design. Unlike the springy nature of the hookshot, it was curved like a real arm. Even the fingertips were made with some kind of silicon, giving it a soft touch.

As she turned it around, she noticed a dial in the recessed wrist. Curiosity got the better of her, turning the switch. The arm made a slight hum as it rumbled.

“Oh!” Vibrations like this were the last thing she expected. Though Max still had his air of confidence from

showing off his new system, his cheeks had a bit of rose to them.

“Well, that one’s a part of the surprise too.” He said, scratching his cheek. His other hand went for his pocket, bringing out a suspicious box. “I also swung by the store before I got here.” She looked at the box, then back to the arm in her hand. A sultry smile swept across her face.

“Maybe you should’ve led with this one.” She said, handing it over. “Don’t we need to do some testing, to make sure it works?”

“That was quite the stunt you pulled off.” A voice spoke through the telephone line to a blonde-haired man. He sat in the back of an autocart, being driven around by his demonic servant.

“I appreciate the kind words. How do you feel about the weapon’s performance?”

“It’s just as you said it would be. The next evolution of warfare. My superiors were pleased as well. You’ll be hearing from us soon.” Once the call disconnected, the man’s confident facade slowly wore down.

A tremor started to rise up in the man’s gloved hand. He brought forth the silver case onto his lap, procuring a thin metal tube. The small glass window showed a kind of crimson fluid in the middle.

With his thumb, he pressed on a switch at the top of the device. A thin needle came out the other end. Pushing back his sleeve, he forced the syringe into his

wrist. The contents drained out quickly, and his hand halted in its trembling.

Lewis sighed as the injection worked his way through his system. He glanced at the spot he took it from.

Six identical devices remained, but the gap in the case had room for many more. But he knew that these were the only ones left thus far. shutting the case, he leaned forward to speak to his attendant.

“Have you heard anything from the facility?” He asked. The demon simply shook his head.

“Only Urzu 7 was reachable. The rest of the team appeared to be... Wiped out.” Lewis’ head sunk down, laying over clasped hands to think thoroughly.

“Do you at least know where this happened?”

“I believe they were on the outskirts of Motte. 7 had to clean up the mess, so they couldn’t pursue.” Those words caused Lewis to pop his head up.

“So they’re going east... That girl is the lynchpin to this entire project.” He said, sighing. “I guess there’s no choice but to go look ourselves. We’ll move faster by train.... Take us to the station.” Asche nodded, taking the next turn.

Only a few carriages behind, a similar autocart with darkened windows took the same route. Once Lewis had stopped at the train station, they parked on a curb to survey.

“That him?” One of the men inside asked. The person in question rolled his window down to confirm. The

biting wind flapped through the opening, ruffling his coat and showing the top markings of a larger tattoo underneath. Once he spotted Asche, his eyes furrowed.

“Hell yeah. That’s the spiky-haired demon I sized up. Him and his master were the bastards that killed our boss.” A third man in the car sat up at the confirmation, going for the pistol in his waistband. But the driver grabbed it by the slide, pushing it down.

“Not here, you idiot! There’s too many witnesses.” Once he ensured that his trigger-happy partner cooled off, he studied the scene again. “I think we’ve got a train to catch, boys.”

CHAPTER 8

ROCK THE BOAT

Fire spewed from the Kaijin's mouth, prompting Shanbara to roll out of the flame's path. She drew in to make a running slash, cutting into the monster's side. But upon spinning around, she saw that it did little to stop him. If anything, more heat erupted from the wound.

"Foolish woman!" The beast spat out. "Not even that Tontei twerp could hurt me! What could your puny weapons do?" That so-called Tontei twerp struggled on the pavement, trying to stand up.

He was right, though. Trigger had used his Barrel Buster to no avail. And now he was out of power. But Shanbara showed no fear.

"Well then, I guess I'll just have to step things up." She brought her blade to her front, putting a hand close to the tip. "O Ancient blade, line between life and death. Deliver to me your judgement. Tachi Technique No.3!"

The Hanatetsu's blade started to glow with her words, a dazzling rouge tint. Once

more she leapt towards the fiery Kaijin, and with each strike a phantom image of the sword remained in the air. As she leapt up, the remaining mirages pierced the beast, revealing the core inside.

“Thousand-Blade Heavenly Strike!” Her own blade made the final blow, coming down onto the core with tremendous force. She landed, returning the weapon to the scabbard on her back.

By the staggered movements, the Kaijin was done for. But Trigger could sense it had one more trick up its sleeve.

“Look out!” He yelled, jumping up to grab Shanbara. The beast exploded, sending both fighters back with a shockwave. Though they rolled around a bit, the last-minute leap saved them from becoming cinders.

Somehow, Shanbara ended up being the one on top of him. Their bodies were close enough to hear one another’s heartbeats. She stared through his mask to see the timid eyes underneath.

Up close, he’s actually kind of cute...

She leaned closer to his face... Only to use the momentum to push herself to her feet. Once up, she gave a quick salute with her fingers to the Tontei.

“Thanks for the save, Tiger. I’ll be looking forward to our next meeting.” With

that, she jumped away into the darkness of the night.

Still stunned, he could only eke a few words out into the wind.

“I-it’s Trigger, not Tiger...”

Ayun sat beside Max in the bed, with only the sheet to cover them. She flipped through the pages of a novel as Max had a brief nap. After their little ‘experiment’ with the new mecharm, they both realized they were still wiped from the previous day. But instead of sleeping, Ayun found herself engrossed in a novel.

An errant wave jostled the boat just enough to stir Max. He rolled over only to find his face meeting her hip. The warmth was welcome, though.

As his eyes adjusted, he realized the writing on the book in her hands. *Tontei Trigger, Vol.2 - Her Name Is Shanbara!* That brought him to attention.

“Woah, that’s a classic. Where’d you get that?”

“I saw it in a shop while we were on our way to the dock.” She replied, looking the cover over. It showed the titular Shanbara, holding a serious ninja pose. “I have to admit, it has some merit.”

“I don’t think I could love you more than I do right now.” Being a diehard TT fan, Max couldn’t help but be pleased by the words.

“You’re not just saying that because I’m naked?”

“Well... That certainly doesn’t hurt.” Now that he was awake, he sat up beside her. “So, where you at?”

“They finally beat that flame Kaijin thing. It was a very sweet moment.” Max nodded in agreement.

“Yeah, that was sweet! We got to see the Hanatetsu in action for the first time! So cool!” His version of ‘sweet’ had a different meaning to it.

“Actually... It was just after that.” She pushed him back down, rolling over to be on top of him. “Ryo and Fiona were right on each other, close enough to hear their heartbeats.”

She leaned in, mimicking the scene as she described it. Sure enough, Max could feel the steady beat within her bosom. The warmth of their bare skin together. But this tale wasn’t going to end with the heroine leaping away.

A rumble from under the sheets caused her to shudder. Except, this wasn’t the arm’s doing. His phone had found its way out of his previously-worn pockets and into the bed. Instinctively, he picked it up to see what was going on. It was a message from David.

“I guess we’re close enough to get signal.” Max said, eyeing the contents. Ayun checked a pout that this little device held his attention more. But her expression dropped as Max’s went to worry.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s David. The signal to come here for something.” Small messages were still rudimentary, only allowing for

a word or two. "I'll take care of it." As he sat up, he could see the pout on full display.

"Do you have to?" She asked.

"I'll only be gone five minutes. Promise." He slid off the bed onto his feet, gathering the discarded clothes on the floor.

"It's fine." She lied, looking out the tiny rounded window. "We're nearly there, so I'll stay here for now." Though she tried to hide it, he could see the pout fully forming. Once he clicked in the shielding arm, he leaned onto the bed to get closer to her.

"Hey. I love you." It didn't assuage her much, though she did lean in for a short kiss. Once he donned a shirt, his outfit was complete and he was out the door.

After some navigation errors, Max found his way onto the upper section of the vessel. The salty sea breeze drifted through the deck, filled with other passengers and a host of overlapping conversations.

Finding the trio was a much easier endeavor than finding the right stairs, considering the company. Faye in particular stood out amongst the regular denizens, with David and Kira not that far behind. David gave a quick wave of two fingers as he approached.

"Sorry to bother you." He said. Max shook his head in protest. Instead, he looked towards Kira. Even though he was sitting back in a lounge chair, he hardly looked

relaxed. “One second he was wagging his tail all over the place about being on a boat, and then... Well, this.”

Max sat down on the edge of the chair, looking the boy over. His breath was hard and staggered, and a mess of sweat gathered around his forehead. These kinds of symptoms were common for demons low on energy.

Perhaps because they came from another world, demon bodies were not accustomed to processing geis themselves. They would need to get (or take) it from a human. Without a pact, there was some potential risk in a demon ‘devouring’ a human’s life force.

It was still a fuzzy science, since it had only been three years since demons had come to Milesain in such a wide fashion via the Maelstrom Tear. Even so, it wasn’t the time to be greedy.

“Give me your hand.” Max said, bringing his own living hand up. Even pained, Kira held some hesitation. He’d have to take a different route. “Would you rather get a smooch, then?”

“Ugh... Shut up!” The boy fired back, putting his hand onto Max’s. The surge of energy quickly transferred over. He let go after a few seconds, color returning to his face. There was a bit of a tingling sensation in Max’s fingertips, but otherwise he felt no worse for wear.

“How about you, Faye? All good?” He said, directing his question towards the little demon.

“Gao!” She gave her usual utterance, with a little thumbs up. If demons and geis were still ‘fuzzy’, Faye

was a wall of fog. Her entire anatomy had rules all their own. Max gave a shrug and turned back to the boy.

“How’d you make it this long without a pact?” He wondered aloud. Kira sat up, already feeling a bit better.

“It’s just like picking a pocket. Bump into somebody, get a little charge and walk away.” He explained, almost too casually. “Draining them is a risk, but it usually stopped some people from chasing me down.”

“I guess I can see it...” Max nodded, thinking it over. “Wait a second, did you try to pull that with me?”

“Sure. Tried.” He said, bringing a knuckle to Max’s left arm. There was no chance for geis to get transferred through a fake arm. Max gave a short huff, planting that same arm onto Kira’s head.

From there he stood up, purposefully putting some pressure to ruffle his hair on the way to his feet. “C-Cut that out!” It was enough to get a rise out of the boy, even giving off a small growl. David seemed to enjoy the display, giving a little chuckle. “Why couldn’t you have done it, anyways?”

“I don’t exactly have anything to give, thanks to this thing.” He started rolling up his right sleeve. A mass of black ink encompassed most of his arm, going even further than he could show off. As Kira leaned closer, he noticed the intricate featherlike pattern that made up the tattoo.

“I... I don’t really get it.”

“I don’t have time to get into a history lesson. Short version is there’s nothing I can give you.” He readjusted

his sleeve while Max took a spot next to him. After a second, he gave a small sigh. “You okay?”

“Huh? Yeah, I’m good. It wasn’t a lot of geis.”

“That’s not what I meant.” He said, leaning forward. “Are you alright?”

“Well... It’s kind of a personal deal.” Max said, mulling it over.

“Come on, pour out your heart to your old man!” It was a fair point. Max leaned in, trying to keep his words between them despite the wind and waves.

“It’s... About Ayun.” He finally conceded. “I mean, she’s wonderful. I feel like we’re in sync, and I try to do everything to satisfy her, but... I’m not sure I’m doing enough.” His face reddened as he realized what he was saying. But David looked less impressed.

“Nevermind. I don’t wanna hear it.” He said, standing up from his relaxed position.

“I-I’m not trying to brag! I’m serious!”

“So am I.” David said, bringing up a finger. “I’m not the one you should be having this conversation with.” Now he understood his words. If anything, they matched up with what Monika told him at their dance.

“Yeah... Thanks, David.” He said, straightening up. “Guess I’ll meet you guys when we dock?” David gave a quick nod, prompting Max to turn on his heel and make his way back to his beloved. David felt a bit of pride seeing his kid show some resolve... But once he was out of sight, he had a sigh of his own.

“Not trying to brag, he says... Maybe once I get rid of these little brats...”

“What was that?” His mumbling couldn’t escape Kira’s hearing.

“Oh, look.” David replied, intentionally flat. “Land in sight. Looks like we’re nearly there.”

Looking in the cabin’s mirror, Ayun dragged gloved fingers across her shirt’s collar. Even though she could weave in her clothes from the shadows themselves, it still occasionally needed some straightening.

She had already packed up what they had taken out during the tiny trip. The only thing that remained on the countertop next to her was the little purple box of contraceptives.

She picked it up, examining the words. ‘Her Pleasure’, the box advertised. A little huff escaped her nose as she sat down on the bed, a memory springing to mind. But the nostalgia trip was temporarily halted by the twisting of the doorknob.

Max stepped into the room, a pair of plastic bottles clutched in his side. His eyes went to her own, down to the box in her hand, then back to her face.

“Hey... Ayun.” Even after the talk with David, he felt a little apprehensive on how to broach the subject. Though he tried to hide it, she could feel a bit of tension.

“Thought you might be thirsty, so I got some water.”

“Thank you.” She set the box onto the bed, taking one of the drinks. “I’ve just collected our things. We’re almost there, right?”

“Yeah. Shouldn’t be too long.” He took a seat next to her. A silence filled the air. Enough to hear the crashing waves outside the window.

“You must know a lot about demons, thanks to Second Fiddle.” Ayun broke the ice, but not with anything he was expecting.

“Well... More than most, I’d wager.” He said, unscrewing the cap to get a drink of his own.

“So have you ever heard of a demon getting pregnant from a human?” Her words nearly caused him to do a spit take. Thankfully, the water remained between him and the bottle.

“C-can’t say that I have.” He looked over to her, expecting this to be another kind of tease. But instead her eyes were downcast at the little box between them.

“And yet... You’re still going out and getting these.”

“Yeah, well... That’s just the way I was taught.” Neither of them had any sexual experience, but they at least knew some amount of safe practices. “And if I remember correctly, you were the one who insisted on it.” Her head shifted up to match his.

“Really?” She pondered it over, genuinely straining.

“Yeah... Remember the first time we bought them? I was shaking all over. That poor clerk must’ve thought I was crazy.” But now wasn’t the time for reminiscing. He

shifted forward. “Are you asking what I think you’re asking?”

“I’ve been thinking about it for a while now.” She nodded without hesitation. “I want to have your child.” Now that the words were out, there was no taking it back. Even though he knew they were coming, there was still some kind of worry on his face.

“Ayun... Believe me when I say that I would want nothing more than to give you that.” She could feel another word coming.

“But...”

“But like I said before, this is pretty much uncharted territory for anyone. As far as I know, anyways.”

“We said the same thing about pacts.”

Ayun’s original contract was with the Kohler family, and making new pacts was unheard of until then. That was more the work of a then-unknown substance called Fomorium, but it wouldn’t have been utilized without their circumstances.

There was another silence from him. Some kind of serious hesitation. But with a deep breath, he pulled himself together.

“When you put it like that... We’ll just have to do our best.” After a quick glance towards each other, they shared a tender kiss. It was much more charged than any transfer of geis could contain, even if it held no magic.

The two sat back to lay on the bed, hands still intertwined. “Y’know, we definitely don’t do things the normal way.”

“How do you mean?”

“You kissed me on the second day we ever met, we saw each other naked well before we actually became a couple. This kind of talk usually comes *after* marriage.” A thought crossed his mind. “Now that I say that, there might be something I need to do once we get into town.”

“You’re not going to propose to me or something, are you?”

“W-what? I...” He stuttered, before taking a pause. “Would you say yes?” One of her hands slipped away to ponder it .

“Hm... Maybe.” At first it seemed like she was teasing, but there was genuine consideration. “We are already partners, aren’t we?”

“Can’t argue with that.” He chuckled. A muffled horn breached the conversation, the boat signaling its arrival. “Looks like that’s our call.” After another quick kiss, they made their way off the bed, a hand still intertwined.

Their first stop was the port town of Ruuga. The sun was low in the distance, a mellow orange touching the treetops. Its absence made the winds that much harsher as they stepped onto the docks. Their current clothes were not up to snuff, as Max crossed his barren arms.

Ayun recoiled as well, but at least she was in a position to do something about it. She brought an arm up, as small clouds of fog danced around her. As they

coiled around her wrist, a sleeve started to manifest behind them.

The white cloth unfurled, quickly revealing a long overcoat. The pleats on her shirt shifted wider, merging down into her skirt. Her collar wings flipped up and melded into a singular band. What was once a noble dress shirt was now a snug maroon turtleneck dress.

“Come here.” She said, pulling the coat open. Max wasted no time in sidling up to her, his living arm wrapped around her. He was surprised to find her back was completely open underneath the outerwear.

“What are you...” He tried to ask, rosy-cheeked, but a gloved finger was brought to his mouth.

“Not too loud.” Her words were soft, only audible to him in their proximity. “Skin-to-skin contact is important for hypothermia.” He clearly wasn’t that cold, but they took any excuse to snuggle up.

Faye ran in front of them, turning around to the cuddling couple. With her arms outstretched, a wave of a straw-like material rippled over her cloth dress. The fibers twisted together until it became a tiny coat of her own.

“Gao!” She gave her usual utterance, shining eyes fixed on Ayun.

“I think she wants your opinion.” Max tried to translate. Her parents were the most experienced at deciphering her ‘language’, but even for them it was just a guessing game of charades and nonverbal cues.

“Your form is solid. Good job.” She leaned over to place a hand on Faye’s head. Even with the glove she could feel a strange softness in the leaves that simulated hair.

The little demon’s face lit up with a wide smile. Along the shoulders of her makeshift coat, a few bright pink flowers sprouted up to accent her mood. Now a warmth was building up in Ayun. A bit familiar to the pang she felt at the docks, but just a bit brighter. She gave her own little smile back.

Kira’s reaction was the strongest, having been so used to the tropics of Nemed. But before he could say anything a coat was thrown over his shoulders. David’s coat was a few sizes too big for him, but the cracked leather provided substantial warmth.

For once, he didn’t want to immediately gripe about his treatment... Until his nose caught the deeply-ingrained stench of cigarettes in the fabric.

“Stinks...” He muttered out of habit.

“Don’t worry, the walk to the train station’s pretty short.” As David said it, Kira’s ears perked up. It slipped his mind between the trip and his geis shortage. His excitement got the better of him, as he started to rush down the street.

He got to the corner of the street, but as he started to cross the street-

“Get off the road, assh-!” An autocart blared its horn in the midst of the driver’s tirade.

A sudden grip tightened around Kira's arm as he was pulled back onto the curb. He turned to find his savior, David, standing behind him.

"Come on, kid..." He said, a bit out of breath. "Let's not get you squashed after all this trouble." He meant it as a joke, but started to see a quivering in the boy's golden eyes. It seemed the gravity of the situation caught up to him. He attached himself to David's side, head buried in his shirt.

For once, the man was staggered. He was used to more prickly and sardonic characters. Years of raising Monika had steeled him. Open affection like this... "Th-there, there..."

He tried to gingerly pat the boy's head. Maybe get a rise out of him. But instead he just quivered. With a quick sigh, David grabbed the boy under his arms.

"H-Hey! What are you-" It startled him enough to be detached and lifted up. "Put me down!" Despite his wishes, he was foisted on top of David's shoulders.

"Relax..." He said, settling back into their normal groove. "Like I said, it's a short walk. Just enjoy the view for now."

As if the city was listening in, the streetlights slowly started to flicker around them. The sun had gone down enough for the sensors to put their work in. Kira sat stunned as he observed the hustle of the street.

True to his word, the train station was only a few blocks away. It was hard to miss, easily being the largest building in the city.

Ruuga was also the start of the Bulay, the main river that ran through the top of the country. However, now that the tracks were laid out the river only saw use by merchant ships.

David was even kind enough to pay for everyone this time around. He observed the details on a ticket before passing them out.

“Track 29. Just came from Steir, so it should be...” He traced his finger in the air until it found its mark. “That-a-way.” The station was almost as chaotic as the streets they just came from, but at least there were no autocarts to contend with. This time, Kira stayed by Faye’s side as they found their train. But as they approached the tram, his ears wilted slightly.

“Where’s the big engine?” He asked, looking around. Max shot him a strange look.

“What, like a steam train? That’s... Heck, well before my time.” Their eyes turned to David, who gave a shrug.

“Don’t look at me. I’m not that old.” He huffed.

“Hm...” A gloved hand went to Ayun’s jaw as she thought it over. “I don’t even think I saw one.” Even almost a century back with her time at the Kohler Family, steam engines were obsolete in the advent of Geis technology. Since Kira didn’t know her circumstances, it only left him more confused.

“Don’t worry, this thing is even cooler than that.” Max said, pointing to the back of the train. “Old trains used to pull the whole cart, but this thing pushes it with magic!”

“Magic.” Kira said, a little annoyed. He figured Max was just treating him like a kid again. But he nodded without hesitation.

“Literally magic. There’s geis conduits to propel the carts across the track. It lifts the whole thing just enough that it glides away.” He was just going off of an explanation that Eloise gave him, but it was mostly on-point. It was enough for Kira to get out of his little funk.

Attendants in matching velvet coats greeted them at the appointed track. Max brought the silver case in his hand over, where an employee promptly stuck a ‘52’ sticker on the side. Ayun’s head tilted slightly- a motion that Max took notice of immediately. It had been a while since that particular tic of hers had shown up.

“Come here, Ayun. They’ll take the suitcase.”

“We’re not taking it to the cabin?” She asked as she stepped forward.

“This’ll be a shorter trip than the last one.” Even though it was a sound explanation, he could see some disappointment in her eyes. Once she handed it over, a revelation came over Max. “Wait gimme a second!” He knelt over to open up the luggage, pulling out a blue jacket from within. The cotton would do more good alongside the sleeveless shirt he already wore.

“Is my warmth not good enough for you?” She asked in a teasing tone.

“I’ll take as much as you’ll let me have.” Max said, drawing back to her side. “But now we can share it!”

“Do you two ever stop flirting?” Kira asked, standing behind them. Though they both straightened up to being called out like that, a look at one another sealed their answers.

“Nope.”

“Fraid not!” The two shared some laughter on how much they lined up.

While one of the staff handed them tags to get their bags after departure, another hauled the items onto one of the carriages. A multitude of cabinets lined the space, each corresponding to a specific number. Sat across the aisle from Max’s box of extra arms was a near-identical silver case.

CHAPTER 9

TURBULENT TRACKS

It wasn't long before the rest of the passengers were boarded and the train was on its way to New Fabrinasch. Trees blurred in the frame of the windows as they passed by. The lights of civilization started to trickle out as they reached further away from the city. Eventually it was just a mass of shadow with scant trails of roads far in the distance.

Instead of heading to their seats, they opted to look for the dining car. Judging by the guiding signs, it was located in the back of the train right next to the luggage. Kira looked around at the tiny amount of other passengers as they went along. It seemed that the evening train wasn't very popular.

His people-watching got the better of him, causing him to bump into a man in the aisle.

"Ah! Sorr-" He tried to apologize, but found himself frozen by the man's harsh gaze.

"Watch where you're going, y'brat!" His voice was coarse. He wore an open suit, but didn't look like your regular businessman. His outburst turned the heads of his similar-looking compatriots who were already sat down.

“Our apologies.” Ayun stepped forward, giving a curt bow as she spoke. The man looked at her, the boy, then away with a scoff.

“Whatever...” He took his seat, letting the group pass by without incident. Though he wanted to be out of there as fast as possible, something lingered around Kira. More specifically, his nose. A kind of smoky smell, but not exactly like the ash he smelled from David’s coat. But he shook off the conflicting feelings.

Once the coast was clear, he spoke in a hushed tone to the men seated next to him. “You were right. That guy was there. Eating his meal like nothing happened. The spiky guy was there too.”

“Anyone else?” The man’s question was met with a shake. He leaned forward, mulling it over.

“Come on, we doing this or what?”

“I’m thinking!” He saw firsthand the destruction that just one demon could do. But if they could get to the human master first... “We need a plan.”

The dining car was grand for the limited space it had. The normally symmetrical path split the room for two and four-person tables to be seated, and even a counter in the middle.

Seating five almost seemed to prove a challenge. But as soon as Max sat down, he lifted Faye to perch on his lap.

“We could just pull a chair from another table.” David said, looking around. “Not like there’s much going on.” Currently, there was only one other table in use.

“Where are you gonna put it?” The only spot to place another chair would block the path, something that a nearby sign said explicitly not to do. He picked up a menu and browsed its contents over the demon’s verdant head. “Anything look good to you?”

“Gao!” She brought a finger to the laminated paper, pointing at a picture of a club sandwich. Ayun sat beside them, but instead of grabbing her own menu simply leaned over to look.

“No peaches...” Though Max couldn’t see her face, he could tell she was holding a pout. “The crepes come with some fruit... And bacon.” She was much less enthused with the last part.

“Don’t worry, we can take care of that!” Max said, giving a thumbs up alongside Faye. Though she was sure of his claim, the little demon’s zeal gave her pause.

“Can you even have meat?” She felt a bit of disappointment, hoping that she had a vegetarian ally. Once more, David gave a shrug.

“As far as we know it doesn’t affect her.” He said as Kira sat down. He realized that since everyone else was seated, he was probably going to be the gofer.

Still, he accepted the role with some grace. “And for the gentleman?”

“Uh...” He hesitated, looking carefully at the menu. He seemed to understand some of the words, but the pressure of being waited on was getting to him.

Another distraction came in the form of the clatter of the door behind them. The four men from before stepped into the car. What confused Kira is how they didn't sit with one another. Instead, they split off, two sitting near the door as the other pair walked by.

Once more his hand found itself twirling his hair, trying to push back the unease. Eventually he snapped out of his people watching, flustered. “I'll... Just get what they're getting.”

“Excellent choice, sir.” David continued his theatrics for a moment before dropping the act. “Guess I'll jump on the sandwich bandwagon too.” After tallying it up with his fingers, he turned to make his way to the counter.

“Let me help you out.” Ayun said, scooting out of her seat to join him. As the two got to the counter, she looked over the rest of the car.

A different pair of men sat at one of the smaller tables. The one with his back to her had long blonde hair, further obscuring his features. Even so, she could tell he was enjoying his steak by how he made a show of.

“Simply delectable.” He declared to the man sitting across. His conversation partner didn't have much to say, his glasses reflecting the overhead lights.

“Scuse me.” The bartender spoke, breaking her concentration. He tapped a sign sitting on the countertop.

The silver metal gave off a faint violet glow, further emphasizing the words etched in.

DEMONS NOT ALLOWED AT THE COUNTER

“Are you serious?” David chimed in before she could even react. “She’s not doing anything. There’s barely anyone else here as is.”

“Rules are rules.” He said, trying to sound neutral. She stepped back, not willing to look the man in the face. There was a small clatter at the other occupied table, causing Ayun to look their way.

The white-haired man had dropped his fork onto his plate. Rather than poke at the pasta, he looked up, right into Ayun’s view.

Then, a sensation. A feeling of realization shared between them. The same kind of gut feeling she had meeting Kira.

Another demon.

He seemed to share the feeling, judging by his stare. It lingered for an uncomfortable length. He was the first to break, which gave her a moment of relief. But for some reason, the man signaled to his dining partner, causing him to turn. The man’s violet eyes went her way, then around to the rest of the room.

She looked back to David, who was in a conversation with the barman about their specials. If she had kept her eyes on the men, she would’ve realized that they had gotten out of their seats and made their way towards her.

“What a surprise seeing you here... Yulia.” The blonde man said, expecting some kind of response. But Ayun was only more confused.

“Excuse me?” There was a strange look in the man’s eyes. As if he was trying to gauge her response. But after a few seconds, he relaxed.

“My mistake. I thought you were someone else.” He flashed a smile, though Ayun remained unconvinced.

“...Is this some kind of pickup line?” She asked, unamused. This prompted the man to bring his hands up.

“Nothing like that, I promise. It was an honest mistake. Where are my manners...” He reached into his coat to pull out a small card, handing it over to her. “Lewis Goff.” The name didn’t register to Ayun, but it did for David.

“Like Helreck and Goff?” He asked, sidling in. He gave a quick look to Ayun, to check on her. She noticed the move, and gave a quick nod of thanks. “My service rifle was an LRR-98.”

The Cessairian army adopted HG’s rifle in 1598, giving it the overly apt name of Long Range Rifle 98. Yet Lewis couldn’t help but find what he said strange.

That rifle found great use in the Cessair-Nemed Conflict in 1602, but was shuffled out right after the war. Nigh-thirty years later, any veteran should be pushing 50 at the earliest. But David looked barely thirty.

“Quite the relic.” Though he was clearly more focused on Ayun, the man tried to remain cordial.

“What can I say, I’m a bit old-fashioned.” David smirked. It seemed his own words sparked a thought. “Old-fashioned...”

The same man that Kira had bumped into made his way to the bar. The boy, still feeling conscious about it, tried to watch the man through his peripheries. He faked reading the menu once more as the man leaned into the counter.

That smell had come back as well. A sharp, sulfur odor lingered on him, stinging the boy’s sensitive nose. Bitter, but familiar. It was right on the tip of his tongue...

“Gunpowder.” The word fell out on its own. Max caught it first, but it was loud enough that the man across from them heard it as well. Their eyes fixed on one another as he realized its meaning.

But he was in no place to react, with Faye on his lap.

The man came to attention, brandishing a pistol from underneath his jacket. The cylinder rolled as he thumbed back the hammer.

“Nobody move! Hands up!” He shouted as he kept the gun pointed at the table. The other three men followed suit, bringing out their own small arms. With a short look to each other, Lewis and his companion slowly raised their hands in surrender.

Ayun nearly did the same thing, until David stepped forward.

“Which one?” He asked.

“What?” His flippant nature stunned the assailant. David took another step forward.

Ayun racked her mind for a solution. She could weave in a weapon... But most of them would be too large. Her usual starter weapon was a massive battleaxe. There would be no way to get that in discreetly.

“You said don’t move. Then you said to get down.”
One more step.

With one arm under the bar’s lip, shadows silently formed around Ayun’s hand. Though the armed men didn’t notice it, it caught the eye of Lewis. An insatiable curiosity sprung from within. He couldn’t help but smile in admiration.

“I *said*, hands up!” The man aimed towards David. “Do you want to die?” A huff left David’s nose.

“I’d like to see you try.” His hands came up swiftly, grabbing the revolver by the barrel. While the two struggled, the weapon in Ayun’s hand came out fully formed.

An unassuming onyx sword rested between her fingers. A strange pattern donned the blade, giving it a scaly look. The memories of her dream returned to her. It was the same segmented blade that she cobbled together. And if that were the case...

She jumped to the side, making a swipe with the sword. Its pieces reached out, the whip-like core extending across the room. The pinpointed slice cleaved the first man’s gun, separating frame from grip.

The swing continued, this time hitting the second one in the forearm. There was a splash of blood, though only the pistol reached the ground. The cut wasn’t deep

enough to sever his limb, but he still clutched the gaping wound all the same.

Asche gave a side-eye to Lewis. He nodded in response, with a little caveat.

“Gently.” On his command, the demon rushed forward, moving in on the unarmed men. He made a swift shot to the gut of one, enough to knock the wind right out of him.

In the same motion, Asche pushed forward, bringing the man off his feet. He swung through, sending the man flying into the other assailant. Both attackers flew back into a table, snapping the legs as they fell. Two down, two to go.

A deafening blast would bring her to attention.

The man who was struggling with David stepped back, shaking. A trail of smoke exited his gun. David stood still for a second, clutching his throat.

A trail of blood seeped through his fingers, running down his shirt. His knees buckled as he slumped to the floor. The wind trailed through the broken window behind him.

“DAVID!”

An intense fury washed over Ayun as she called out. A boiling rage that seemed to make her hair stand on end. Everyone in the room could feel the pressure. The sign on the bar that signaled demonic presence seemed aflame with the surrounding energy.

Max knew exactly what was transpiring. There was some great power hidden inside Ayun. A kind of

berserker state. The only thing they could liken it to were the legends of past heroes who entered something known as a 'Warp-Spasm.' A defense mechanism to great trauma.

The first time she experienced it as a servant of the Kohler family, it caused her to kill her mentor. It nearly killed Max when he rewrote her pact. If it were unleashed here...

"Ayun!" He yelled out, trying to reach out to her before she was consumed.

The only person who seemed to be enthused by it was Lewis. A strange smile made its way onto him.

"A Devil Drive..."

There came a sudden throb in her chest. Like a chain tightening around her heart. With each pulse, it brought her frenzy down. By the look on her face, even she wasn't sure what was going on.

The man with the smoking gun started to come back to his senses. But only for a moment.

A mass of jungly tendrils suddenly enveloped him. While the gun clattered to the floor, he went crashing into the wall. It was such a force that the car itself rattled. Max and Kira were forced out of their chairs as tables flipped and glasses shattered to the floor.

Ayun's eyes followed the clump of vines back to its source. It came from the arm of Faye. Suffice to say, it was the little demon's arm. She had leapt to her feet to deliver the blow.

“Gao!” Though she only spoke one word, she gave a serious amount of venom to it. Now it was Max who was up.

“Faye! Settle down!” He said, trying to calm her. By the grinding metal sounds that rippled throughout the carriage, he was worried her outburst would derail the entire train.

Following his words, the vines withdrew as quickly as they came. They shrunk down until they once again formed her simple appendage.

Only one man was left, teeming with rage.

“I’ve had it with you damn demons!” He spat, aiming his sights towards Kira. Max lunged forward towards the boy, grabbing him by the shoulder.

As he brought up his metal hand, the golden flaps jutted out. It proved useful, as the first round bounced off the shield. Due to the recoil, the next shot went high.

Before he could make a third shot, something struck him. A revolver flew his way, the handle smashing him in the temple.

The force was strong enough to render him unconscious, crashing to the floor. The same figure who made the throw ran forward, kicking the pistol out of the fallen man’s hands. Kira took a second to realize who it was.

“D-David!?” He couldn’t believe it. But sure enough, he was standing in front of them. Ayun was just as confused. The blood was still fresh on his clothes. He was still clutching his neck with his arm! But the next

thing she noticed was the strange glow that emanated from that same arm.

The tattoo that was once a mass of black inked feathers sprung to life. It had a kind of light that jumped between red, green and yellow.

“Hck...” He tried to speak, but could only let out a cough. He let go of his neck as his arm faded back to its dim look. Though the blood remained, his skin was unbroken. “My bad. I’m getting rusty in my old age.”

“How is this possible?” Ayun asked, moving in. Max realized that he never fully explained his condition.

“It’s kind of a long-”

“Taboo Ink.” His usual phrase was interrupted by Lewis. “A forbidden script made for use by humans. Utilized by the Fir Bolgg...” His intuition was right on the money.

The Fir Bolgg, the group who nearly destroyed the world, utilized a unique kind of geis manipulation. Through a special formula, they were able to graft demonic qualities onto human hosts. “But the knowledge was lost after the Maelstrom Tear, when all of the members were wiped out.”

“That statement’s still true.” David said, waving his hand to brush off the allegations. “I’m just a failed experiment.”

As much as he wanted to inquire more, a ruckus came from the opposite doors as attendants made their way in to apprehend the subjects. The bartender slipped

out from under the counter, a wired phone still in hand. His backup finally arrived.

Thankfully, despite the jostling the train was still in working order. It did move around a lot of luggage, though. Since the next stop wasn't until New Fabrinasch, they continued in spite of the incident.

Due to the blood on his clothes, David was escorted to the infirmary. It was a pointless trip to him, but he had a feeling they were going to do more than just attempt to patch wounds that weren't there.

"What the hell were you thinking?" A grizzled conductor raised his voice in the tiny room. "You could've endangered the entire line!"

"Shouldn't you be saying that to the asshats with guns?" The grievances were piling up for David. He didn't get to enjoy his dinner. The thin shirt they provided 'so as not to disturb the other guests' was a size too small. And now, this pointless grilling. Somehow, getting shot was low on the list.

He figured that being the senior member of their travel party, he had to take responsibility here. But it seemed like the conductor just wanted an excuse to vent.

"Those criminals are being taken care of. Right now, I'm talking about the demons who almost crashed the entire train! You need to keep your *servants* in check." That was the last straw. David rose up from the medical table.

“They are their own people. Ayun and Faye stopped anyone from getting seriously hurt. You should be thanking them.” He locked his eyes with the cantankerous conductor. “Can I go now?” There were a few moments of uneasy silence. The old man’s look started to waver.

The door to the office slid open. Lewis stood in the frame, He gave an interested look to the scene inside.

“Am I interrupting something?” He asked with an amused grin. “I just want to give my statement about the incident.”

“And you are?” Almost expecting the answer, he produced another little card between his fingers. The old man’s eyes went wide as he scanned the name. “M-my apologies, Mr. Goff. What were you going to say?” The previously livid conductor shrank in this man’s presence.

“The girls who apprehended those men were exemplary. This man as well.” The last part seemed to stun him. He looked towards David. “I will handle the authorities when we arrive.” David had a few friends on the force in New Fabrinach, but he was in no mood to be stuck in a police station for the night.

“Much obliged.” He said, giving a nod. He gave a quick pointed glance to the conductor before making his way out of the room. But Lewis still remained in the doorway.

“If you would... Could I exchange information? Just in case.” The man made his request with a polite smile.

He didn't have business cards of his own, but he was able to scribble 2nd Fiddle's office address and number on a scrap of paper. With that, he was out and on his way to finally get some grub.

"Sir?" Asche stood in the hall, trying to figure out his master's plan. The man carefully folded the piece of paper before placing it into his pocket.

"I know, we have more important matters to attend to. One thing at a time." Once again, that strange smile appeared on his face. "Even still... I can't let such a tantalizing opportunity slip by, you know?"

CHAPTER 10

NO ONE LEFT BEHIND

Since David insisted on it, the remaining party stayed to dine. The place was much more lively this time around, filled with employees trying to clean up. Sweep the broken glass, patch the busted window.

Kira sat still, despite the food in front of him. He looked at Ayun, nonchalantly cutting up her crepe. His stomach was starting to win, as he picked up the sandwich... But across from him, Faye took a huge bite out of her own club. Some chopped tomatoes oozed out the back. It made the demon pup feel queasy.

“How can you eat after all that!?” He asked. The question was posed in the middle of a bite, so it took a moment for Ayun to respond.

“When else are we going to?” She spoke with a gloved hand to her mouth, ever proper. “Meals are an important part of living. Right, Max?”

“Hm? Oh, yeah. Eat up.” Though she looked to him for support, he only took a single bite himself. He seemed lost in thought after the fight. Though now that he was called out, he took another one for solidarity.

This time, it felt different. He couldn't taste the meat or veggies inside. Just a hollow mush in his mouth. He

reached for his water, giving a quick chug to force the piece down.

Something stopped him as he brought his metal arm back with the glass. A scrape in the armored plating. It was the spot that the bullet bounced off of.

His mind wandered again to the beginning. That gruff man's face when he was ready to do harm. The malice in his eyes.

A tremor started to sweep through him. Small at first, but eventually it caused the glass in his hand to shake as well. He set it down before any of the liquid could leap out, though the shocks still remained.

How was this any different? It's not like he had never been in a serious situation like that before.

"Ah, you're back." Ayun said as David approached the table. Max didn't even hear him come in. "...What is *that* thing?"

David's brow furrowed in confusion to her question, until he looked down at himself. The shirt had a kind of cartoon bear on it, a mascot for the train line. Yet due to the small size, the poor guy was uncomfortably stretched across the fabric.

A laugh almost escaped Max's lips, but he caught it with a balled hand. A nice distraction from his previous problem. But it wasn't appreciated by the guy still standing. David took the opportunity to snatch the half-eaten sandwich from his plate.

"Hey!" Max protested.

“Give me a break, man. I just got chewed out for all this crap. Like we were the ones robbing the place.”

“Here, Max.” Ayun offered her crepes. “There’s plenty for both of us.”

“Th-Thanks.” A part of him was unsure if it would have the same lack of taste as the sandwich. And now he realized that his plate didn’t come with any silverware.

Without missing a beat, she took her own fork to a piece of the thin cake, and brought it to his face. It felt a bit odd to be fed like this... But it felt stranger to do nothing while everyone else stared at him. So he quickly took the bite.

Bracing for the nothingness, he instead found a sweet sensation. The lightness of the whipped cream, and a hint of syrup. “Not bad.” She gave a warm smile to his comment. The rumble in his hand started to give way just looking at her.

“Uh, Faye. Mind if you sit with me?” David asked, tired of being the only one standing. Her plate was mostly empty, having quickly devoured her own sandwich.

“A.. Ao.” It was technically the same noise she always made, just a bit shortened. While she did get up, she instead ran around the table to Ayun’s side. “Gao!”

“Looks like you’ve got a new favorite.” David said, enjoying the sight just as much as them. She scooted back enough for the girl to take a spot on her lap.

Normally, Ayun tried to keep a straight face. Perhaps some of her conditioning from her previous maid duties.

But Faye's joy while sitting there was downright infectious.

"Well.. I quite like her myself." Though a part of her couldn't help but think she was after her food. She pierced a few blueberries on the fork, offering them to the dryad.

"What the hell were those guys doing, anyways?" David asked, taking the free seat.

"What do you mean?"

"If you were robbing a train, wouldn't you start at the front? Y'know, take the crew by surprise. Maybe stop the train. Rob the passengers. Then the luggage. Why start at the ass-end of things?"

"You sure seem to know your stuff." Kira's comment had a hint of accusation to it. David shrugged in response.

"Eh, mostly from novels. But instead they were here. For what?" He crossed his arms trying to think it through. But Ayun had something different to inquire about.

"If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to hear more about... Your condition." It surprised him.

"You mean Max hasn't told you?" His question jolted the accused to attention. A bead of sweat formed, knowing that he was in trouble.

"Not really." She said, giving a warranted side-eye to her partner. "It's usually a *long story*." A little chuckle escaped David's mouth watching the little skit in front of him.

“Well, for once, he’s right. But if you really want to know... It started back in 1602. Right when the land-grab between Cessair and Nemed really kicked off.”

Nemed originally had territory on the Cessairian continent. But the leaders in the city of Shinken attempted to declare themselves a sovereign entity. It might’ve gone well enough if they didn’t try to then claim the space west of them in Cessair. “I was *lucky* enough to still qualify for the draft at the ripe old age of 27. That’s actually how I ended up meeting Max and Mo’s dad.”

It had already been a year and a half of fighting. No one expected things to drag out in this manner. Cessair had the technology. Firearms, vehicles, even some newfangled thing called Mecharms... Outside of magic, anything that the enemy had was stolen or a poor imitation. And yet... Here they were.

David took a long drag of his cigarette. The last in his pack, judging by the empty box in his hand. Though he had seen his fair share of conflict, it was from the far distance of a rifle’s scope.

Right now, his platoon was stationed on the west side of Zenkai, just a few miles from the ‘new capital’ of Shinken. Once a teeming marketplace for fruits and goods were being used to haul ammunition and soldiers. The fighting intensified the further they went into the center.

One such soldier approached him.

“Corporal Hayes?” He asked. David didn’t recognize the man. But considering how his dirty blonde hair was cut and the neatness of his uniform, he must have been a recent addition.

“That’s me.” He answered, putting the cigarette between his fingers.

“Officer Luin Riese.” He introduced himself, bringing up a hand. “I’m part of Troop 6. I’ve been assigned as your spotter.” David looked down at the offered hand, before returning his eyes to the man.

“Do you smoke?”

“Uh... No. My wife’s got a sensitive nose, and...”

“So you won’t need the one in your pack.” He didn’t care about the why. Luin hastily searched inside his satchel to retrieve the fresh package. Now he finally accepted the handshake, with the box between them. “Welcome aboard, Riese.”

To be honest, that man was a pain to be around. No matter what it was, he had some way to rope his beloved ‘Simone’ into the picture. Even the smallest things reminded him of her. The campfire’s blaze looked like her orange hair. A clear sky brought her eyes to memory. How her cooking compared to the field rations... Hell, even how he packed his kit somehow got him talking about her...

“Uh...” Max interrupted the talk. “Not that I don’t mind hearing about my parents, but what does this have to do with anything?”

“I’m gettin’ to it. Geez.” David huffed before continuing.

But when it came down to it, his instincts were sharp. He had an eye for tactics, and a better mind for trajectory.

“Adjust six feet to the left.” He spoke while peering through his own unmounted scope. After attuning to his suggestion, David fired once more. “Target down.”

“I would’ve had him if it weren’t so windy.” The man complained, racking the bolt of his rifle.

“Sure, sure.” He said, half-assuredly. “Though now that you say it, it does feel weird.” For the whole time he was here, it never stormed. This felt like something else entirely.

Both men returned to their scopes to scout the area. A few of their men were still engaged with another force, but the angle wasn’t right. David rose up from his prone position.

“We should find anoth-”

“Wait, what’s that?!” Luin asked, still looking through his scope. “3 o’clock, the one with the sloped roof!” David scrambled to get a look through his rifle. Sure enough, an eerie red light poured from the windows of the building. If it was magic, he had never seen it before. And looking

at the sky, he could've sworn the storm itself was centered on that one location.

“There was something freaky going on in Zenkai. We had never seen so much as rain, so it had to be some kind of strange magic. Our squad was assigned to investigate, and...”

Everything about the mission felt off.

Reconnaissance was one of the things David did best, but usually from a rooftop or building window. Instead, he found himself on the streets alongside four other soldiers.

Because of this close range affair, he was handed a short rifle instead of his usual kit. The last time he even bothered with one was basic training.

Besides the rippling winds, the streets were dead. Not a person in sight, ally or foe. If anything, not seeing the enemy made it all the more worrying.

With one man in the front, the squad went two-by-two. And since he opted for the mission, Luin ended up paired up with David once more.

“Dang. I’ve never seen winds like this, not even in Motte.” The officer said, a hand covering his mouth.

“This is nothing compared to Barrett.” David walked next to him, rifle at the ready. “Come Aibren, the ocean brings us all kinds of fun stuff.”

“Really? I’ve only been in the autumn. Simone and I spent our honeymoon there.” Once again, it always came back to her. “Always wanted to come back. I’ll bring her after we’re done here.” For some reason, this was the last straw for David. He turned around to face Luin.

“Are you serious right now?” He asked, fuming.

“W-what? I just meant...”

“Have you read a book in your life? You are asking for trouble. The guy that bites it first is always the one who ‘has a girl back home’, or is ‘two days from leave’. That’s the kind of shit that gets people killed.” Luin looked stunned. More that this man he’d been stationed with for months now finally spoke more than two sentences at a time. But despite the dressing-down, a smile appeared on his face.

“If you ask me, it’s the opposite. She makes me...” He stopped in his tracks. An odd glint flickered near the scout in front. He wouldn’t have time to finish what he said. “Get down!”

There was an explosion, before the bullets started flying. While the officer’s quick intuition stopped the four from serious injury, he scrambled to check on the one in front.

The initial burst caught him in the arm and leg. He laid out on his back, straining from the wounds. Luckily, he had enough strength to roll into concealment near a wrecked lamppost. But he wasn’t going to hold out for long.

Luin readied his rifle, then turned to David. "Cover me!" He didn't have time to argue. He popped out for a second, shooting into the buildings along the street.

There wasn't time to fully find the targets. He just needed to suppress them long enough for Luin to advance forward. Once he found safety behind an abandoned dumpster, he waved his hand. "Move up!"

Now it was David's turn to change cover. Luin held his rifle over the rim, firing blindly as his partner moved forward. Bullets whizzed by despite the covering fire.

A piece of metal clipped him as he made his way. His right side blurred red, but he kept going. Luin's eyes went wide as he hunkered down beside him. But before he could say anything, David shook his head.

"I'm fine. Just a ricochet." Right now the adrenaline was dulling his senses. He wiped the blood out of his eye and checked his magazine. Halfway gone. But it would have to do for now. "Move up!" He yelled as he readied for another burst.

Instead of leap-frogging again, the two leapt up at the same time. They moved up to the injured soldier while firing. Each one grabbed an arm, dragging the man along. David let go to give them a little more suppression once they reached the dumpster.

Now in better cover, Luin put the man's uninjured arm around his neck. David swapped out his used magazine, ready to move.

A noise shot out over the sky. It sounded like artillery, but the glow it gave off was something entirely

different. "Find some cover!" He pushed the two men back behind the dumpster. Unfortunately, there wasn't any time for him to duck down. The fireball touched down, and everything went black.

When he came to, the street looked completely different. The spot where the fallen lamppost stood was a crater, wreathed in flame. He tried to look around to find his comrades, but his vision was still rocked from the blast.

"Just the one?" An unfamiliar voice rang out. A pair of silhouettes emerged from the fire.

"It will have to do. Take him." Now they were closer, taking hold of David's torn uniform. He tried to raise his arms, but they wouldn't answer. Instead, his world went dark once again.

"Those guys turned out to be the Fir Bolgg. Capturing soldiers on both sides for their freaky experiments with the Taboo ink. That's what was causing those winds in the first place."

That brewing storm that they witnessed was the effects of the Taboo Ink process. It was a kind of miniature Maelstrom Tear, how the inscriptions drew demonic power onto their hosts.

"You... Never told me that he was there." Max said. David sunk down a bit in his chair.

“Well... Wasn’t sure how you’d take it. I didn’t want you or Mo blaming what happened to me on your old man. He did the right thing.”

“But why were they kidnapping people?” Ayun asked.

“Apparently, the whole Taboo business wasn’t a surefire thing. Guess they needed the bodies to fine tune the recipe. A lot of people didn’t survive the operation. I’d say the luckier ones simply perished. The others... Well, let’s just say it wasn’t pretty.”

The full extent of the Maelstrom Tear distorted the fabric of reality, twisting the earth and plantlife. To apply the same magic to the human body would produce horrific results in the wrong hands.

He sat back, mulling it over. “Even though I managed to avoid all that, they still called me a failure. Don’t ask me why, they certainly didn’t. When it came time to up and leave, they left me there. All nice and wrapped up like a present.”

Darkness.

That’s all he could see for infinity. At this point, he didn’t even have the strength for hallucinations. He didn’t have the strength for anything.

His muscles strained, bound to the metal links around his arms. He hadn’t eaten or drank in... Time was a lost concept in the darkness. But even so, he couldn’t remember the last time he had sustenance.

Why was he still alive, then? Was this some kind of mentally induced nightmare? Was he already dead? This kind of empty nothingness certainly seemed like The Void. The place where souls went to be judged. Maybe a hell, maybe just another step.

He couldn't scream for help. His throat was dried up. He couldn't move from his spot. Unable to die, unable to live. A limbo of agonizing stillness.

But then, a ray of light. Perhaps he was lucid enough to descend into madness. But it seemed accompanied by a voice. It bounced around the barren halls of the facility. A rhythm of boots, growing louder, until...

"In here!" The voice called out to more behind him. He swung a flashlight in his hand. The beam went around his body until it hit his face. His eyelids stung at the bright light in his face. "...David!?"

He didn't have the capacity to wonder who it was. Nor did he have any ability to hold himself up once the chains were let loose. His body crumpled as he was lowered onto a stretcher. But as they made their way towards the entrance, more light made it apparent who it was. That pain-in-the-ass of an officer.

"Took you... Long enough..." A weary smile wore over his cracked lips.

"Who else do I see, but Luin. I heard that after our botched operation, he spent the last six months trying to piece together my whereabouts." He looked to Ayun.

“You know, those Riese’s can be pretty stubborn about some things.”

“Yes. Quite the handful. But I don’t mind.” She gave a quick smile to Max, who returned the gesture.

“I didn’t really tell the brass about what happened there. If anything, they didn’t care. War was over when I got out. But I did notice how this thing was growing on my arm.” He pointed to the tattoo. Though his new shirt was uncomfortably small, it made it easier to point at things. “When it first showed up, it was only my shoulder. By the time I got out, it met my elbow.” Yet now in 1630, it had only reached the middle of his forearm and a bit of his clavicle.

He wondered what would happen if it managed to spread over his whole body. Maybe that would be the actual end for him. It seemed he had plenty of time to find out.

“So that’s why you couldn’t give anything?” Kira asked.

“Yeah. I’m tapped out, essentially. If anything, we’re closer than we seem.” David smirked at it, before putting his hands onto the table. “Alright, enough rambling. We got more important things to do than jaw about the past. Like maybe... Dessert?”

Before he could even make an order, the bartender was at their table. He set down a small tray with four scoops of soft-serve and a small glass. An orange slice and cherry poked out from the top, as an orange liquid sat inside.

“Compliments from the kitchen.” He explained, moving each one off the tray. “It’s not much, but... Thank you.” His comments seemed directed towards Ayun.

Perhaps some lingering guilt from his discrimination, even if it was just ‘following orders’. If only it didn’t take a life-threatening situation to persuade some people. She gave a little bow with her head all the same.

“We help people out, no matter who. Isn’t that what Second Fiddle is all about?”

“Don’t ask me.” David shrugged, taking the drink. “We don’t even have business cards.”

The rest of the journey was graciously less exciting. They enjoyed their dessert, and relaxed with the rest of the passengers in peace. By the time they had arrived at the station, both Kira and Faye had dozed off to the rattle of the train.

Even Ayun started to get a little drowsy, since the little demon was leaning against her. Ever since dinner, she had been attached. But since it was time to disembark, they had to get moving.

“Faye... Faye...” She nudged the cheeks of the sleeping girl. It stirred her enough to open her eyes. “We’re here.”

“Gao.. Ao?” She mumbled, blinking a bit before registering the words. She sat up, looking through the window at the lights of the station. “Gao!” Her commotion was enough to get Kira up as well.

“Welcome back to the land of the living.” David said as he rose. The boy’s eyes lit up in the same way Faye’s did, but he kept his composure at bay.

The group got off, getting their luggage in order. They got their suitcase and the silver box with the ‘25’ sticker before making their way onto the main street. Now that he could see the entirety of the city, he couldn’t hold it in.

“What... What is this place?” It was a rhetorical question, but David stepped in to answer anyway.

“The New part of New Fabrinasch is that it’s not even five years old.” He turned to Faye. “Kind of like you, now that I think of it.”

“Gao!” She gave a thumbs up to the comment. A little before the Fir Bolgg’s official reappearance and the Maelstrom Tear itself, an effort was made to rebuild the lost city of Fabrinasch.

There was a lot more reconstruction than renovation. There were even some parts so bad that it was easier to build right over the old city than attempt to build around it. But because of its recency, it was the most modern city in Cessair.

After hailing a taxi autocart, they made their way into the residential area. The surrounding buildings grew in height as they distanced themselves from the train station. The passing streetlights reflected a realization over David’s face as they swept along. He reached into his bag to retrieve a pair of tiny boxes.

“Almost forgot. A present for the wedding party.” He handed them over to Max and Ayun. “Apparently something Elly and that glasses guy cooked up.” He must have been referring to Aster. He was a genius with small electronics. Ayun lifted the box top, noting the strange shape of the device within.

“Oh. It’s like a hands-free dealie. For calls and stuff.” Max said. Though once his explanation was done, he had his own realization. “Guess that means you need a phone of your own.” The only reason they didn’t bother with it was because they were rarely ever apart. Pact or otherwise.

Once at their stop, the pair exited the vehicle right outside the newlywed’s apartment complex. But one more person came out with them.

“Come back, Faye!” David beckoned. But the little demon clung to Ayun’s leg.

“Gao...” She said, tears welling up. Could her body even produce tears? Even so, a kind of instinct rose up inside Ayun. She bent down to put herself level with the girl.

“It’s alright.” She said, taking her hands in hers. “We’ll be by tomorrow, okay?” Though still a little downtrodden, she understood. With a nod, she clambered back into the cart. As they rode down the street, she could see a little green arm waving through the window.

“Stellar work there, Ayun.” Max said, bringing a hand to her shoulder. “You’re a natural with kids.”

“Max...” There was a certain look in her eyes. A switch had been flipped. “Let’s go inside already.”

As soon as the door clicked shut, they were locked in an intense embrace. The passions were flared. A part of him thought it strange to be so intimate in the home of his sister and in-law... But his desire beat back that particular thought.

Their bodies hit the table, causing a stack of papers to spread over the floor. That did cause them to pause.

“Hang on, Ayun.” He said, trying to catch his breath. “Let’s at least take this to the guest room.” Though she looked a bit sullen to stop for even a moment, she conceded.

“Fine... Do you think you’ll be using *that* thing again?” She pointed to the box. Max had nearly forgotten all about it.

“Of course!” He said, slapping the case onto the now cleared table. Thumbing the locks open, he lifted the case with glee... Only to look in confusion at the contents. “What the hell...” Ayun leaned over to see what he was worried about.

There were no extra arms to be found. Instead, a pair of eerie daggers sat inside, connected by a chain. Their handles had an intricate silver lining to them, while the blades themselves had a deep crimson tinge. Just looking at them felt like one might cut themselves.

A wave of pressure enveloped her. The same kind of sensation when she first met Kira.

“What the *hell* is this.” Someone was having a very similar reaction in the penthouse of a nearby *Golden Glass* hotel. He held a strange contraption, one half of a Mecharm.

His mind wandered back to the train, witnessing the man with the shielded arm. The one in his grasp whirred in place, bringing his rage to a boil.

Even so, he kept his composure. He dropped the arm and turned to his assistant. “Find out Urzu 7’s location. *Now.*”

CHAPTER 11

INTERSECTION

Ayun seemed frozen by the aura that the weapon gave off. She looked to Max for support, but his face was slightly contorted.

“My arms...” He seemed more broken up about his missing limbs. She scoffed.

“Focus.” Though she felt some aggravation too in missing that tender touch, priorities had to be made. The luster of the crimson blades were tantalizing, despite the immense pressure. It brought her fingers to meet with the hilt.

But just as she touched it, a sharp burning pain rippled through her hand. She jumped back, causing Max to jump as well.

“Y-you alright!?” He asked, bringing arms up to attempt any assistance. “You didn’t get nicked or anything?” His question was met with a shake of her head. But still, a pain lingered in her that compounded with the ill intent of the weapons.

Max shut the box once more. The pressure was gone, though its effects could still be felt in the room. Ayun stepped towards Max, reuniting in his arms. But this was different from their initial embrace. Not one of passion, but comfort.

“Maybe... It would be best if we just got some rest.” If Ayun was suggesting this, it must’ve been serious. Max wanted to snark, try to lighten the mood just a bit. But he could tell she was in no mood for it. So they set about to the guest room.

It had already been such a long day of traveling, and even some fighting. It wouldn’t hurt to bunker down. With a little more cuddling, the couple left their plans for the morning, opting instead for a good night’s sleep.

When the next day came, the daggers were still on both their minds. After their morning Geis-kiss, the two laid in bed, still thinking it over.

“Have you ever seen a weapon like that?” Ayun asked. Max shook his head.

“Nope. I’ve seen some freaky things, but they give me a bad vibe.”

“You felt it too?”

“Huh? Felt what?” He rose to a sitting position. Instead of matching him, she rolled over.

“It felt... Like when I saw Kira. But suffocating.” He tried to connect the dots until he remembered what Eloise said.

“Oh! That Quarles thing.”

“Quorum.” She turned back to correct him. “Something like that feeling.”

“But... Didn’t she say that was only between demons?” He thought it over before a bit more. “We should probably ask David.”

“Agreed.” She nodded, now finally joining him in sitting. “Besides, I promised I would go see Faye.” She gave a soft smile, which was returned. They shared another kiss, for them, before making their way out of bed.

Their day started with some hygiene. Unfortunately for them, the bathroom only offered a single standing shower. They would have to take turns. Max took the first shift while Ayun had a quick glance around the space.

Now that there was daylight pouring in, she had a clearer picture. For an apartment, it was decently spaced. The entrance was right next to the kitchen, which had enough space for a cozy dining table. Though a little window past the counter separated it, it connected to a living room. Then, two bedrooms and a simple bathroom.

Technically the ‘guest’ room was Faye’s, but more often than not she opted to sleep alongside her parents. There might’ve been more in the master bedroom, but she didn’t wish to intrude on the couple’s private space.

While on a surface level it was roomy, a big factor led to it looking busy. Books, papers, folders. The place was filled with research notes and logs. The main culprit was a desk in the corner of the living room, a little electric typewriter that seemed to get a lot of use from both tenants.

While Eloise had a handle on magic and the minute language of spellcasting, Monika devoted herself to

demons and their biology. Their dedication to their work was admirable, but... It still made a mess. A maidly compulsion within her wanted to take the place to task.

Instead, she took the time to examine the wedding gifts given right at the end of the night. Reading the instructions, it was much clearer to see the intent. The whole thing was shaped like the outline of an ear, with a clip on the bottom to connect to the lobe and a malleable piece on top to wrap around the top. A second pin was on the top of the metal piece to further secure it.

A nearby mirror helped her in putting on the device. The silver sheen matched the usual jewelry that came with her shadowweaving.

“Phew... Careful with the water pressure.” Max said, stepping out of the bathroom. A wave of steam followed his presence. His expression changed seeing the piece glimmer in the light. “Looks great on you!” He said, brandishing a thumbs-up.

“Thank you. But...” She picked up the second box, then started to move towards him. “Shouldn’t you be the one to try it out?” He couldn’t argue with her logic, at least until they went shopping for her own phone. But his will wavered as he spotted the sheen of the spike to attach it.

“I-It’s fine, I can just use the phone normally.” He started to sidestep, but that only made her move closer in interest.

“Really? I assume the occasionally one-armed man would enjoy a hands-free device.” Her eyes went down

to the pins, then back to him. She started to connect the dots.

“I... I’m just not a fan of needles. I think I’ve had my share...” He recalled the many injections and procedures growing up just to get his body used to the mecharm and its housing. But there was no more space to retreat. She was right on him.

“Don’t worry.” She whispered. “I’ll be gentle.” Something about the words and her proximity... He gripped the towel around his waist tightly, afraid that any sudden movement might lead the whole thing to unfurl.

But that left him vulnerable to an attack. She seized the moment, attaching the device with deft hands.

“Yeowch!” He yelped, bringing his hands back up to his head. A pulsing beat came forth from his ear as he dragged his fingers across the piece.

“See? Simple as that.” She said with a mischievous smirk, standing back. “Though I do have to wonder what *that’s* all about...” Her words only confused him, until he followed her pointing finger downwards.

Just as he had feared, the towel had become undone. But it didn’t exactly fall to the floor, either. Max scrambled to fix himself.

“Th-this is just...”

“I didn’t know you were into that kind of thing...”

“Where are you even learning this stuff?! Get your own shower, already!”

Food was the next item to start the day. The owners did say they were welcome to what was already in the kitchen.

But as he stepped out into the dining space, Max saw the scattered papers on the ground from the night before. A green folder was the origin of the documents, so it was probably Monika's.

Calcification of Demonic Bodies... It sounded like some heavy material. Ayun walked past him to check the contents of the fridge. As she swung the door open, a small gasp escaped her.

"W-What is it?" Max popped up, expecting another bombshell.

"There's... Peaches!" She said, in jubilation. Sure enough, she took out a plate with the plastic-wrapped fruit within. "There's even a little note!"

"They definitely know you." He said, chuckling softly. Now that the 'danger' was no more, he got back to picking up his mess. He skimmed the contents as he went, stopping at the last one on the ground.

Due to the rapid decomposition of deceased demonic individuals [See Add. "Calcification of Demonic Bodies"], it's hard to truly classify demons. That said, they are almost biologically identical to Gaels. On a surface level, most fit easily into the mammal class. Warm blood, hair,

mammary glands and a progression of hormonal production. [See Add. "Demon Patient Ami Evaluation"]. They even possess navel spots that indicate some kind of umbilical function.

Some, such as the beastkin, exhibit slightly altered anatomies such as animal ears, horns or hind appendages...

Now his interest was piqued. He took the gathered pile and placed it on the table while searching through the others for the listed addendum. It wouldn't be long before he found it.

After giving it a quick perusal, he made his way into the kitchen proper. "Hey, check this out." He placed it down so that they could read it at the same time:

-Demon Patient Ami Evaluation-

Ami exhibits hormone behavior similar to Gaels. We now know that unlike Dragans, who go through an 'estrous cycle', demons have a menstrual cycle and ovulation period. The only difference observed so far is that the stages appear to be set further apart from Gaels' average cycle length of 28 days. Perhaps it matches their extended lifespan compared to humans.

"Hmph." Max looked a little uneasy reading through.

“Women have periods. Even me. It’s a simple fact.”

“I know that! Come on, I grew up with a sister. It’s just weird for it to be all... Science-y.” With that out of the way, they continued:

Ami and her partner Rudy have agreed to partake in attempting to conceive a child from demon and human parents through natural insemination.

Once again, science-y words hiding things. He held in his urge to laugh at the ‘natural’ part, but stopped at the next page. There was a large gap in the text. It seemed to be printed at a different time. Only a single line.

Subject revealed no signs of pregnancy.

A hollow feeling sat in his body. More pages followed this same, singular line. It didn’t surprise him that they weren’t the first to consider childbirth, but seeing the outcome in such a serious state hurt all the more.

The last one had an extra addition. This time, it looked to be scrawled in pen. A bit tough to comprehend, but unmistakably Monika’s handwriting.

It's been four months now. I can tell they're starting to get worn down by the news every time we have to tell

them. Maybe these eggs are just as tough as the rest of a demon's body. I can't say it's conclusive, though. Not at this sample size.

But how does that help them?

The feeling only deepened. He could feel the hurt in his sister's words. The hard part would be seeing how Ayun would react. But instead of despair, her face showed a hint of interest.

"So we didn't need the condoms after all..." She thought aloud.

"That's what you're getting from it?!" He shook his head at her priorities. "Aren't you a little worried?"

"She said it herself. This is only one case." She leaned in, speaking softly. "That just means we'll have to try our best, right?" Between the proximity and her breath on his ear, it was certainly working. But he held his ground.

"Let's... Let's eat first. I can't do anything on an empty stomach. Not to mention we still have to deal with... That thing." He pointed a thumb towards the closed case.

"Fine." She huffed at his deference, but he had a point. As they checked the fridge for ingredients, a thought crossed her mind. "Maybe there's food to improve fertility. I bet Monika knows... Should I call her?"

"W-no!" He protested. "Please don't call my sister. Seriously. Just... Let them enjoy their honeymoon in peace." That was his excuse.

If anything, he could hear the call from her side. *'You called to tell me that you're going at it like rabbits? Having non-stop sex while you're STAYING IN OUR HOME?!*' He would never hear the end of it. For now, it was better to keep this plan between them.

After the pain of having his sandwich stolen last night, Max did have a little bit of Ayun's crepe. It was nice, but a little too sweet for his tastes. Still, flapjacks lingered on his mind.

The batter hissed as it hit the pan. He stood at the ready, with a serious look. Ayun noticed his expression turn contemplative when he looked at the spatula in his left hand.

"What's wrong?" The question broke his concentration, turning to her.

"Huh? Nothing, I..." He seemed embarrassed. "I was thinking about some new arms. Maybe like a built-in fork or something..."

"That sounds hardly useful." She was not amused. "You should be focused on what's in front of you."

"What's that..." She meant the pancake. The searing noise intensified. "Oh, crap!" He hastily flipped it over, showing a lumpy darkness. Such was always the fate of the first pancake. Not that it would stop him from eating it with the rest.

The Second Fiddle office was only about a five minute walk from the apartment. Though the sun was

out, there was a chill in the air. Max zipped up his coat, keeping close to Ayun as they walked. It gave them an opportunity to have a look around the city.

“So, you grew up around here?”

“Yeah, but... That was fifteen years ago. A lot’s changed.” Despite it being the intersection between rivers, Fabrinasch was still fledgling at the time. Not that he really thought about the layout as a kid. “That one’s new.”

He pointed to a shop across the street- *Branstein Mechanical Services*. The sign indicated a bend towards autocarts, but it also claimed to sell and maintain mecharms as well.

“Of course that’s the one you notice.”

“Y’know, I actually wanted to be a mechanic when I was growing up here. Back then I thought it was just like the comics.” He brought up a fist to put into his open palm. “Take a big wrench and smack the thing until it works again!” The joke landed, judging by her smile.

“So you took up adventuring instead?”

“The same principle got me pretty far for a while. But people are way more complicated than machines.”

There was a pause as he looked back to the shop.

“Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to have a *quuick* pe-” Before he could stray from the path, he felt a pull on his collar.

“Hang on.” She was the one holding him back.

“We’ve got more important things to do.” Her eyes went to the case in his hands. He was torn between his duty and the want for more fancy mecharms.

“Fine...” He sulked for a moment before rebounding back. Their walk continued further into the city. The lampposts changed, adorned with green ribbons and what looked to be tufts of wheat.

“What’s that?” Ayun asked, pointing at the decorations. It took him a second to realize what she meant.

“Oh. Looks like they’re already putting up the stuff for Harvest’s End. That’s for the last month of the year, Deirdre and to welcome the winter. Way back in the day, farmers in Cessair would celebrate the last few days of the harvest season with a feast amongst friends and family.”

It also served to honor those no longer with them, asking that their spirits give them protection until the next spring in Marta. Max’s thoughts lingered on the latter point. “Hey, Ayun... Do you think we could take a little detour? After we take care of this.”

“To the Mecharm shop?”

“No. Well, maybe later. Actually... I was gonna go visit my parents.”

“Oh.” It surprised her. Other than the recollection with David, he barely brought them up. It was probably the same reason she didn’t talk about the Kohlers all that much. If he was talking about them now, it must have been important.

“There’s a cemetery right on the outskirts.” He noticed her serious expression. “If you don’t want to come-”

“I’ll go.” She replied immediately. “Of course.” She reached over to grab his hand, intertwining their fingers.

“Thanks. But first things first...” He raised the briefcase in his metal hand, pointing to a building up ahead. It stood out amongst the rest of the newer ones surrounding it. A hanging sign fluttered in the light wind of the morning. An orange circle with two lines forming a numeral. The logo of Second Fiddle.

They pushed into the double doors of the office. Though the lights were off, the windows gave enough sun to see the old wooden floors properly.

Their first sight was a familiar face. Kira, sitting on a wheeled chair. For once he wore sleeves, a tidy woolen shirt underneath a yellow hooded vest. He gave a little nod of welcome to the pair.

Before they could respond, a strange noise bounced around the room. Like a person struggling to breathe. Both fighters readied up, looking around the space. The less amused boy simply pointed a thumb towards a desk.

They could see a person hunched over, his arms wrapped around his hooded head.

“Lexie... You traitor!” Now they realized what the sound was. Sniffling. The man lifted his head, not realizing they had guests. His sapphire hair peaked out of the hood, puffy eyes meeting the pair. After a moment, Ayun made a realization.

“You’re the sexy beach guy!”

“What?! No!” Though he tried to deny it, it was in fact the bartender from Monika and Eloise’s wedding.

Kyle Vulpes leapt to his feet in defense, but it had already hit Max. “Oh, cram it, Riese!” He tried to bring a hand to his mouth to hide the laughter, but it wasn’t enough.

“Oh, my deepest apologies, *Sexy Beach Guy*.” He wiped his face from laughing too much. “How’d you get back here so quick anyways?”

“We left right after the party, Shion and I. But... Miss Lexie and Darlen went off on a cruise instead!” His face turned dour again as he sank down onto the desk. “They didn’t even think about telling us until we were on the way to the docks... Damn traitors.” Rather than fuel his strange pity party, they focused on the other blue-haired boy in the room.

“Good morning, Kira. Did you sleep well?”

“Yeah. The upstairs here is actually pretty big.”

Though in his defense, a lot of places seemed big to him.

Ayun looked around the office space. The main room was fairly open, a small collection of desks arranged around. The only strange thing was a strange jail cell off to the side.

“What is *that* for?” She asked, looking to Max.

“Oh. Right. This used to be the old sheriff’s office before reconstruction. David managed to snag it for a really good price before the build. That was the drunk tank, but for some reason he’s made it his own room.”

Now that she got a better look, she noticed the desk and carpet laid out in the tiny space. A peculiar gilded

cage. “Did you think that we locked up demons or something?”

“N-no...” She pouted, giving a little push to his shoulder. “Where is David, anyway?”

“He and Faye went out to get breakfast. Donuts, I think.” After giving his explanation, Kira pushed against the nearby desk to spin in the chair.

“Hmm... Donuts.” Max pondered the thought.

“Didn’t you just have breakfast?” Her words called him to recoil.

“Y-Yeah, but... I always have room for donuts.” He explained. “They’re like... They’re like my peaches!” As odd as it sounded, it made some sense to her.

Another person emerged from a nearby doorway, a woman with short maroon hair holding two mugs. The aforementioned Shion. She heard the noise of the door opening, but her excitement left when she realized it wasn’t food.

“Oh.” She tried not to sound so upset, but it still wore through. Behind her followed another being, though this one was much smaller. A rotund cat sauntered along, black and white fur split horizontally.

“Boss!” Max said, kneeling down to attempt an interaction. Though his eyes went towards the man, he simply continued his trot, instead sticking to Kira’s side. As he rose up, he noticed Shion’s annoyed look.

“You’ll go crazy for the cat, but give me the brush.” Somewhat hypocritical considering her reaction. But her interest was piqued in seeing this new girl. “And you

must be... Ayun? I'm Shion Uramasa. I saw you at the wedding!"

"Yes, I remember. A pleasure to meet you." After Shion set the cups down on the desk, the pair exchanged a gloved handshake.

A new sensation crawling around her leg broke her usual demeanor. She flinched, only to find the aforementioned cat shifting around her feet. "Nice to meet you too... Boss?"

"He came with the place." Max explained, kneeling once more to try and sneak a pet. But other than a little side-eye, he was ignored. "They found him cleaning up. He was here first, so he's the boss." Now it was Ayun who bent down. But instead of running away, Boss continued to rub its fluffy cheeks around Ayun's covered thighs.

Jealousy simmered in Max's veins... Though he couldn't tell if it was from the lack of attention from Boss, or his repeated stroking of Ayun's legs.

"So, what brings you here at this hour?" Despite all the pleasantries, they forgot they had come for important matters.

"Well, it's..." He looked to Ayun. "Actually, it might not hurt to let her see. Shion's like a walking armory."

"What's that supposed to mean?!" She didn't have much room to complain, going by the saber attached to her belt. Not a lot of people in this modern age openly carried swords. Despite her grumblings, she was curious as they put the case onto the desk.

Kira swiped one of the mugs instead, enjoying the rising steam. He couldn't care less about some dumb box... Until it was opened. The same pressure that hit Ayun last night sent Kira's hairs standing on all ends.

"So you felt it too." Ayun said, looking towards the demon boy. She was waiting for his reaction. He jumped out of the chair to huddle around the box with everyone else. Even Boss had his hackles up.

"Hm... Interesting." Shion brought a hand to her chin, examining the blades. "I've never seen something like this. Like, it's *real* close to other stuff, but not quite."

"What do you mean?"

"The handles remind me of eastern arms, Like, thousands-era Partholon stuff. But their pommels are usually flat." She pointed to the first dagger. The bottom of the handle had a crescent shape to it. Following the chain to the next dagger, it took a diamond shape.

She leaned over to examine the crimson edges. "See how this one is pointed? Symmetrical, kind of like a rope dart." The other one had a curved edge, looking closer to a saber. "You slash with one and stab with the other. What I don't understand is what the chain is supposed to be for. It's too dang short to be thrown."

"See? I told you she was perfect for the job." Though annoyed at Max's comment, she couldn't deny it. She reached forward, taking hold of the curved dagger.

Ayun looked worried, remembering her attempt to grab them. But Max called out first. "H-hey! Be careful!"

“Come on, it’s fine. I’m the expert, right?”

Surprisingly, Shion had no reaction to it. Maybe it was the gloves? Even so, the rest backed away from the lady with the sharp objects. Now she had one in each hand. “It’s kind of like a flail, but why put edges on both sides? You’re asking to get cut. I mean, at this length-” She tried to throw the straight knife at the floor below, to demonstrate. At it stood, the tiny chain that connected them would’ve caused it to dangle helplessly in the air.

But instead, it flew straight and true. A spark of red flared out from the weapon as it embedded itself well within the wooden boards. The noise caused everyone to jump, the wielder included.

“Seriously! I told you!”

“How was I supposed to know?!” She looked again at the chain. It definitely wasn’t this length before. But there was no way that it was hidden in the handles or something like that. As she tugged to let loose the dagger, the same flash brought the chain to its original length. “Okay. That’s definitely new.”

“Well, if you don’t know it...” Max was trying to make light of the situation, but a wary glare from Shion saw that it wasn’t the time. Though his memory was sparked. “Wait, you had something like this, right? Back at the train.” He looked to Ayun.

“It’s slightly similar, I suppose.” She brought her hand out, wisps of black dancing around her arm. They coalesced into one singular piece, bringing forth the segmented sword.

“Amazing!” Shion stepped over to examine.

“Huh. I don’t remember this one.” Max had a decent handle on Ayun’s choice of weapons. Whether it be training together or fighting alongside one another. Ayun thought it over on how to explain that she somehow forged it within a dream. On the other hand, she knew exactly what to say.

“It’s kind of a... Long story.” Her words gave Max pause.

“...Okay, I’m starting to see the problem.” She found some wicked enjoyment in sending his words back at him.

“This... I can’t really get a handle on this either.” Shion said, still looking over the blade in Ayun’s hand. She looked back at the daggers she still held. “They’re not exactly like these, but...”

Her deduction would be put on hold, as the double doors opened once more. It was once more a man and a girl. But it still wasn’t David and Faye bringing breakfast. The man bent his head down, his hulking figure too large for the door frame.

His hair had an interesting texture, not exactly like braids, but rather rougher locks. Its dark hue matched his rich brown complexion. The girl next to him was considerably paler, with raven black hair that frayed all over.

A familiar sensation riled Ayun and Kira up again. More demons. But before they could say anything, the

girl brought her hand up. The black sleeve pointed towards Shion.

“You’re sure?” The man looked to his companion, who gave a small nod. He started to move forward. “Hand over those knives.”

“Hey, wait a second!” Max put his arms up, stepping in front of Shion. “This thing is really dangerous, we don’t even know who yo-” his explanation was stopped by the man’s hand. He grabbed Max by the collar, effortlessly tossing him aside.

“Max!” Ayun called out, watching him fly to the side. He had enough space in the open room to land, though he still rolled a bit on impact.

There would be no need to hold back, since her opponent was a demon as well. She tossed the segmented blade towards him, dissipating while the shadows formed around her arms for another weapon. The smokescreen served to disguise her strike, an overhead slash.

The impact caused the remaining smoke to blow away, revealing the outcome. She weaved in a two-handed battleaxe, something of a signature starter for her.

She could already tell it wasn’t enough.

The man had made a split-second decision to block, crossing his hands. In any normal case, the strike would’ve cleaved right through him. But a pale yellow armor had formed around his arms, holding it back. Not

enough, going by the small cut trickling blood down his forehead.

He looked towards Ayun as he started to push the axe away. A fierce look at first, but as he studied her, it turned into confusion. He shoved her back, breaking out of the lock, but he didn't retaliate immediately.

Black hair, blue eyes, fair skin.

"Yulia?" That was impossible. She was standing right behind him. "Who *are* you?"

"Oh, now you want to talk." She got her footing back while still having time to snark. Perhaps it wasn't the right thing to say, since the man shook his head.

"No... I can't back down now." He brought his arms up, ready to start the next round. Ayun sighed, but did the same. The two stared each other down, waiting for a gap to move first.

"Rocket Punch!" A scream came from the side. With it, a fist flying in the air. It sailed true, colliding with the man's shoulder.

But that's about all it did.

After making the connection, it bounced off, clattering harmlessly to the floor. He gave an aggravated look towards the instigator. Max stood tall, though half an arm less than he previously did. Even though the 'attack' failed, he still had a smile on his face. "Made ya look."

It took a second to process what he meant. But that was all the time Ayun needed. She brought in a different weapon once more, a hammer, to swing from

underneath. Catching the man off-guard, the force was enough to lift him right off his feet.

The girl had little time to get out of the way. The doors burst open as her companion sailed into the street from the strike. She followed in a less dramatic fashion, kneeling down to help him back to his feet.

Ayun and Max ran out as well, unsure if this fight was going to spill into the street. Max hoped not, since he didn't even have time to grab his precious 'rocket arm'.

The girl glanced back to anticipate their next move, but the same confused look washed over her face. And now seeing her in the daylight...

"Who..." A single word exited from Ayun's mouth as they stared each other down. They examined each other, noting the similarities between them. It wasn't a perfect match, but enough to leave them stunned.

Max might've noticed as well, but his attention was cut short by the appearance of another woman at his side.

"Are we doing this or not?" Shion asked, readying up.

"What do you mean? He's after you!"

"Huh?" She didn't even realize she was still holding the daggers. "Oh. Right."

"Drop the weapon!" A new voice belted out an order. The man who made it wore a jacket that labeled him as part of the 'Guardia', the local law enforcement. Yet he was already escalating the situation, brandishing a pistol at them.

“All right, officer.” She said, placing the daggers onto the pavement. Ayun kept her eyes fixed on the two. A strange look swept across their faces on seeing the officer. Despite the order, the pair of demons took this opportunity to turn tail and flee.

“H-hey!” Max called out, reaching with his only hand towards the two. It did little to persuade them, though the girl took a split second to get one more look at Ayun. He turned back to the officer. “Those are the ones you should be chasing.” The man didn’t budge. His aim was still trained on them.

“Kick the weapon over.” His words only confused them. Max and Shion gave each other a side glance, as if to make sure they were hearing him correctly.

“Uh... I’m not sure that’s a good idea.” After the way it flew out with a simple toss, he didn’t want to risk any danger. But the officer had little patience. Instead, he racked the slide of the gun, readying a round.

“I will not ask again!”

A chill ran down Max’s spine. The same kind of malice he felt with the thug on the train. But this time, something new. A rising fear from the pit of his stomach. He felt his breath start to shake.

“Binding frost. Preserved in time immemorial. Frigid Stasis!!” A different kind of chill roused the air. A bolt of blue that blasted out from the office, hitting the man. Instantly, he was encased in a kind of rippling rime.

Kyle stepped out, still sniffing. This time however, it was from the spell he just cast. The blue gemstone on

his bracelet still twinkled with a bit of the leftover energy. “Oh dear Danu, I hope I got that right...”

That part he kept to himself. Once that was out of his system, his vain attitude returned. “Once again I have to come to your rescue, Riese!” As he put a hand on his shoulder, his expression changed. He could feel the tremors springing forth.

“Max?” Ayun stepped forward, filled with concern. It became warranted as he collapsed onto the pavement.

CHAPTER 12

LEAN ON ME

The room was still spinning when Max regained consciousness. Though as his focus returned, it only brought more confusion. He was on his back on a brown floral couch, covered by a woolen blanket.

There were no wooden floors, though the vertical faux-wood panels of the wall made up the difference. The floor was carpeted, with some kind of garishly green fabric. An eerie retro style with zero taste.

A deep weight kept him in place. Something bearing down on him, unable to stand up. He could only lift his neck to comprehend it.

His eyes met with a pair of green orbs. The beast that shackled him.

“Boss...” Despite being called, the cat kept his spot.

“Max? You’re awake!” Ayun was next to him, in a matching chair. She jumped to her feet when he started to stir. That brought Boss to leap off and finally give him some levity.

“How long was I out?”

“About ten minutes. Take your time...”

As he rose to a sitting position, the blanket slipped to his waist, revealing his barren chest. The sudden breeze went right through him, bringing his

arm-and-a-half to cover himself. The rest of his mecharm was still missing after he tossed it.

“Uh... What happened to my shirt?”

“We didn’t know if you got hit.” It was David’s voice, though he didn’t see him at first. He stood in the doorway, with Kira and Faye peeking in behind. “Brought you upstairs to check.”

“What... What happened to the officer?”

“He’s fine, relatively speaking... Er...” David struggled to come up with a concise explanation. There were more pressing things at the moment. “We can discuss it downstairs. For now, get your bearings back.” With that, he shoed the onlookers and made his way out. The remaining two sat in silence for a few seconds.

“Max...” Ayun took a seat next to him. “Is everything all right?” He thought about putting on a brave face. But now that it was just them, there was no sense hiding things.

“I... I don’t really know. It started back in the train. I saw that guy, before he went for his gun. But I just froze.” Ayun shook her head.

“Faye was on your lap. Moving would’ve put you and her in danger. And after that, you protected Kira.” Her words, if true, did little to assuage him.

“The same thing happened just now. That guy... He was going to shoot us no matter what we did. That’s the feeling I got. But something in me just...” The trembling got worse. “What if I got shot on the train? Or by that guy?” She took her hand into his, giving a gentle squeeze.

“You were the one that told me what-ifs aren’t his thing.” She had an inkling of what brought this sudden change. “Is this because of the talk we had? About having children?” His blue eyes went wide. A direct hit.

“N-no! I swear!” He scrambled to come up with some other reasoning. But instead of indignation, she brought another hand to rest on his cheek. It brought his eyes, tearing up, to meet hers.

“It’s okay. I’m not going anywhere.” He made a hard blink to clear his eyes.

“I know. I know how strong you are. And I love you, truly. Ever since you said it, I haven’t stopped thinking about it. I want a family. I want to be with you. But... I think it just reminded me of how weak I am.”

“Max...” Her hand dropped from his face. A part of him still feared some retribution. Maybe she thought he was blaming her for bringing these thoughts in. It didn’t help that the hand immediately yanked the blanket off of him, baring his chest once again.

“Wh-what are-”

“Do you see this?” She pointed at his chest, close enough to feel her gloved finger. It moved down, tracing the huge scar across his chest. “This is not the body of someone who is weak. A weaker person would not be able to withstand all that you’ve gone through.”

She continued her movements, going across claw marks, sword cuts, even a bullet wound. “You’ve survived so much already. Maybe it’s luck. But if I’ve learned

anything about Maximillian Riese, it's that he doesn't stay down."

"Ayun..." Her head slumped, the black hair covering her face.

"I'm scared too, you know. I had forgotten all about the Warp-Spasm until the train."

"Yeah... I guess we hadn't seen it in a while. Not since the tournament." The last appearance of that violent episode was in the middle of a battle between demons. A crafty mime nearly suffocated Ayun, causing her to transform.

"But you brought me back to my senses. And you said that you wouldn't let anything happen to me." That oath was made on top of Carmen Tower. They had to remake the pact, which had the chance of bringing out the beast. But for one reason or another, the process went smoothly.

"I remember." He said, recalling the moment. His hand gripped hers tightly. "I don't intend on breaking that promise." His words brought a tranquil smile to her lips.

"I know. I believe in you. So have faith in me, okay? I will take care of you." She looked down, letting their foreheads connect. "We'll all take care of each other." It wasn't going to be 'just them' from now on.

"Of course. I trust you, Ayun." They pulled back to look at one another. Though still a little teary, he was once more filled with determination. The stares led to a tender kiss. "I think... I'd really like my shirt back."

“Oh, would you?” Her smile turned coy. “I guess you do look a bit cold, right here...” Her gloves wisped away, allowing her to directly touch his chest. Although due to the cradle that supported his Mecharm, he only had the one nipple to tease.

“H-hey! That tickles!” His instinct was to retaliate in the exact same fashion. Though instead of a ticklish feeling, the attack on her bosom gave a little yelp. “Oh. Sorry...” She shook her head. It wasn’t a sound of pain...

“If you keep this up... I might not be able to help myself. And we already have some prying eyes...” Boss had taken her spot on the other chair, watching their display with a hint of annoyance. Then again, that was just his default expression.

She leaned in, her words caressing his ear. “Let’s save this for later, okay? We have a long road ahead of us.” The implications set both their cheeks aflame, but they didn’t falter. Instead a temporary truce was settled, sealed by another kiss.

Max finally donned his gray shirt once more, descending the staircase alone. Ayun stayed behind to use the facilities. At the bottom David leaned against the wall, holding an extra-half arm.

“Everything good?” He asked, handing it over. The limb sprung to life once it was reconnected.

“I don’t really know. But... We’ll work through it together.” While it was nice to hear their reliance on one

another, David still looked a little dour. “What about you?”

“I had a whole thing planned. Trust your partner, all that.”

“Another one of your stories...” If it was going to be as meandering as the one on the train, he felt fine to skip it.

“Come on, it’ll be fun! A little tale about meeting your parents in the hospital.” That did sound interesting, but...

“As much as I’d like to hear it, don’t we have more pressing issues?” The voice of reason came from above. Rather, the stairway. Ayun made her way down. “You can save the anecdotes for later.” He scoffed at the idea.

“Fine, whatever. Damn brats...” *Might make a decent wedding bit. Better than the circle metaphor...* He shook the thoughts away and shoved off the wall to his feet. “Since you’re both so ready.” With that, the damn brats followed him to the main room.

Here Max got his answer about where the officer went. He was frozen in place... Literally, in the exact same posture. They at least managed to wrangle the pistol from his fingers and move him to the cell that David called his office.

“He’s not dead... Right?” Max asked, looking at the strange aura that outlined the still man.

“Nope. Just in stasis. Like a pause button on a cassette.” Kyle explained, not taking the time to make eye

contact. He was busy going through a tome in front of him.

“Why can’t you just cast a fireball or something?” Shion leaned against a desk that the spellcaster was sitting at. The mage looked up from his reading to answer.

“I already told you, I don’t have that kind of power. Ice spells are the only thing I’m trained on.” It wasn’t a personal choice. Some mages were just more attuned to specific elements. Then you had the exceptions to the rule like Monika, who could cast anything she could recite... Though a part of that came from the magic shard embedded in her skull.

“So get a flamethrower. A blowtorch. A... Hair dryer.” A grumble came from Kyle as he shut the book.

“I already told you, it doesn’t work like that. This is a stasis spell. It’s not really ice. It’s... Time stuff.” His explanation came with a similarly half-willed hand wave. It was a thoroughly advanced spell. Though he knew how to cast it, he wasn’t sure how to undo it.

“So who is this man?” Ayun looked to David to ask the question. He shook his head.

“Not familiar to me. I called a friend in the precinct if anyone was missing, but apparently everyone’s accounted for.” That didn’t rule it out entirely. The burgeoning city of New Fabrinash now had multiple sectors with their own stations. “But how many officers are packing suppressors like this?”

He held up the pistol in his hand, the slide locked back in an empty position. The massive attachment was almost as long as the gun itself. He handed it over to Max to study.

“This is... Military-grade. Like, Danann levels of serious.” As he twisted it in his hand, a glint showed from within. The answer was on the tip of his tongue. He struggled until he caught a similar glint in the corner of his eye. He reached with his free hand to pull it towards him.

“Hey! Cut that out, idiot!” Said piece was attached to Kyle. The same gleaming gem attached to his bracelet.

“This thing is a catalyst? But how?” While Max asked his question, the other man struggled free from his grasp.

“What’s so special about it?” Ayun asked.

“There’s never really been a successful mix between magic and firearms.” He explained, still looking the piece over.

“Most metal won’t conduct geis well enough to make a difference. Carminite does work for blades, but it’s too brittle for the recoil of a rifle.” David recalled other studies. “They even tried tying it to the bullets, but... That blew up in their face. Literally.”

“It seems a bit excessive.” Ayun said. “Bullets do enough damage on their own to other humans.”

“So what if your target happens to be sturdier than a human?” David’s reasoned. Ayun caught on.

“Do you think he’s from the Order of Cy?” She asked with some warranted concern. They were the loudest anti-demon group known across Milesain.

Prior to the Maelstrom Tear, they were responsible for felling great beasts, to the point of outright extinction. Fighting ‘malifestations’ against the supposed natural order. So of course, when the demons started making their home in this world they didn’t take it well.

“I don’t think this is Cy.” David said. “They can be a bit cloak and dagger, but... Literally. No way they’d be packing heat like this.”

“Great.” Max slouched. “*Another* anti-demon group.” It felt like Second Fiddle was trying to push back the ocean with a broom.

“But... Even that wouldn’t kill a demon.” She knew firsthand, the only thing that could quickly was a metal known as Fomorium. It could sever the ties of geis and essentially starve them in an instant.

“Definitely wouldn’t tickle. Maybe killing isn’t the intent...” David tried to consider all avenues here, but there were too many unknowns.

“Whatever happened to that big chunk? The one I sent to Mo and Elly?” Max had retrieved the metal in a mission from Rastarok, who sent it off for safekeeping to Second Fiddle.

“I think it’s still at their apartment. Under lock and key... Shouldn’t be a problem.” The bullets that weren’t used in Swaile were confiscated by Danann. Nearly everything was accounted for.

Its use in overwriting pre-established pacts was helpful, but considering the current disposition towards demons, that kind of power would be easily corrupted in the wrong hands.

David walked over to the silver case, the daggers back in their spot. “There’s one more thing.” He reached inside, but instead of the weapon his hand held up a tiny cylinder. The two studied it for a second, but Max was first to make the connection.

“Is that a syringe?”

“Seems like it. Though... Nothing I’ve seen before.” He turned the device around to show the red liquid inside the clear window. His thumb pressed on top of the device, prompting a needle to pop out the bottom.

“Hey! Don’t do anything crazy! Seriously...” Max backed away, taking shelter behind Ayun.

“Oh, right. I forgot how you feel about needles.” His response didn’t feel genuine. He started to step forward, but that only made Max more agitated. A sigh escaped David’s lips. “Ayun, could you pass me a napkin?”

His free hand pointed towards another desk. It had an open box of half-destroyed donuts alongside a small pile of napkins. She stepped to the side, with Max still attached, picking one up to hand to the man.

He set the napkin down, pressing the tip against it. The contents slowly started to escape, a smear of dark red blossoming on the paper. Though the color should’ve given it away, the seemingly imperceptible smell was caught by Kira’s sharp nose.

“Blood.” It was starting to become a habit how his words escaped his mouth. But as usual, he was right on the mark.

“This definitely isn’t your regular blood bag. A small amount like this would be useless for a transfusion.” David paused. “At least... For human blood.”

“No way.” Max shook his head in disbelief. “Demon blood wouldn’t last long enough to be... Bottled up or whatever.” Even so, he held up the bloodied napkin to Ayun.

“You getting any vibes from it?” After a moment of concentration, she shook her head.

“I can’t really tell...” It didn’t rule it out, but the sample was just too small. Even Kira gave a shrug. “But there’s someone who might.”

“Oh, right. You were telling me about those demons.” David didn’t have a chance to see them, so he only got the report.

“They asked for those knives directly. And it seemed like they knew who this man was.” Ayun recalled the expressions they had before fleeing.

“You think they’ll come back here if we just wait it out?” Shion asked. David put a hand to his chin to think about it, but could only come up with a shrug.

“Doubt it. Might think we’re working with them.”

“But they’re the closest thing we have to a lead.” Ayun was right. “Maybe it’s time to call Monika.”

“No!” Both David and Max synced up in their objection. It startled her to hear it in stereo. “We can handle this.” Max argued.

“She deserves a break, especially after her wedding.” David tried to reason. “If this thing somehow bumps up to... World-ending, let’s say, then we’ll get her on the horn.”

“Very well... But that still leaves us with a problem.” Everyone went silent, mulling over how to find those two. A big guy like that would stand out, but New Fabrinash was bustling. They needed to find them before someone like their frozen friend would.

“They found us once, right?” Max thought aloud. “So if they won’t come here, we’ll just have to cast a line.” The fishing metaphor was lost on Ayun, causing her head to tilt. But David caught on.

“If the daggers start moving again, they might move as well.”

“Exactly. Me and Ayun’ll run around town for a bit, and we’ll see if we get any bites.” As he moved around to the case, David crossed his arms.

“This is no Boann Carp we’re talking about here. You really want to be bait for that?” His words gave Max pause. But after a moment, he faced Ayun.

“It’s risky, but... You’ll have my back, right?”

“Of course.” She nodded, as they shared a soft smile. Max took the daggers in his hands once more, coming to a realization.

“Don’t really want to cut myself, though. Might need a sheath of some kind...” As he said it, his head turned to Shion. It prompted everyone else to gaze in her direction.

“Seriously? You really think I just...” She tried to argue it, but gave up almost immediately. With a sigh, she pointed at the desk. “Second drawer should have something that’ll work...”

CHAPTER 13

DUE TO THE DEAD

The door of the shop rattled as the pair made their exit. Within Ayun's hands, she held her very first phone. Though it was a new model, there wasn't much to speak of. It could only make calls and store a handful of numbers within its little silver carapace.

"Here. That should be me, Mo, David and Elly..." He held out his own device for her to copy numbers, two lines at a time. That was all the display had space for.

"Got it. As for the earpiece..."

"I think it's... Hit this button and it'll start looking for stuff to couple with. Then you just press this..." He reached up to her ear, pushing in a button near the lobe. A small chime called out, signifying the connection. She handed his phone back to him, looking quite pleased with herself.

Suddenly, his own ear started buzzing. He looked down at his phone to see the origin. It was the woman standing next to him. "Uh... Ayun?"

"Come on." She said, with a smile. "Shouldn't we test them out first?" A familiar line after that special mecharm, but a lot more innocent.

“I don’t think...” He started to argue, but gave a sigh instead. “Alright, but you asked for it.” He brought his hand up to press the button, accepting the call.

“Hi-hi-Max-ma-” She tried to talk, but the proximity of their call caused her voice to echo back into her. It was just staggered enough to disrupt her speech. He clicked the button again to end the call.

“I tried to tell ya. This close is gonna be a problem for a phone.” For once, Max was the one with the devilish grin. His enjoyment was even worth the little kick he received in the shin from the offended party.

“You’re cruel.” Even though she said it, she stepped in to stand right beside him. “No signs of our friends from this morning.” This was the fourth stop they had made since the morning, counting lunch. In those hours, no one had tripped her senses.

“Not yet. Guess we’ll have to keep going.” Though they stepped away from one another, a hand kept them connected. They continued along the street.

“Perhaps our next destination, the people won’t be so pushy.”

“That’s a salesperson for you.” The onboarding process for the phone was a lengthy one, especially since they were asked for a new option every step of the way.

Their route managed to take them back to the residential district. Just a few blocks away from the apartment.

“It would be nice to just go back home and rest.” The thought crossed her mind, but passed through her lips.

“Rest, she says...” He thought she was just hiding something else under her words. But a pull from the connected hand argued otherwise.

“I mean it. Although, I don’t exactly mean the apartment.”

“Huh?”

“This phone, my toothbrush, is all I own. All you have is in that little suitcase.” Her stare went down to her marching feet, contemplating. “The road is hardly a place to raise a child, don’t you think?” He pondered it for a second, putting his unlocked hand to his head.

“You wanna find a place here? Be right next to Mo and Elly. Free babysitting.”

“Maybe not this second.” She had enough of the pressure of sales. “I don’t know how much I really love city life.”

“What’s your ideal home, then?” Now it was her turn to think it over. The closest thing she knew to it was living in the Kohler mansion. And that was hardly ‘living it up’ in the servant’s chambers. Still...

“A mansion might not be so bad...” She mostly wanted to gauge his reaction.

“Unless you’ve got a few million Airgead stashed somewhere... You liked Dekar, right? We could go back there.” It was a northern island of Nemed. Her affection came from its main export, fruits. Namely, peaches. But even so, she shook her head.

“I admit, that’s tempting... But it’s quite far away. And quite hot.” The tropical climate made for a consistent harvest schedule, but it wasn’t her cup of tea.

“Hm... Could always go back to Motte back west. It’s small enough. And it’s close enough that we can still report back to base.” She leaned her head into his shoulder as they walked to mull it over. Her eyes drifted towards the decorations around them.

“We could grow some peaches in the summer, and really celebrate Harvest’s End properly.” To be honest, farming had never really crossed his mind. But hearing her say it put a kind of warmth in his chest.

“Guess I’ll have to start saving, then...” As the words left him, his eyes meandered over. He realized that they were now on the same side of the road that the previous store, *Branstein Mechanical Services*, was located. He stopped, His stare fixated on their hollow neon sign. It would take a second before he noticed the hand tugging him along.

“Max. Do we really need to?” Even though it brought him back to reality, he wavered.

“Maybe just a peek. We’ve got the time now, right?” A soft sigh escaped her as she relented.

A bell attached to the door announced their entrance into the shop. Since no one was currently at the counter, it was needed. The sound of machinery leaked out of the

open frame to their right. It looked to lead to a larger garage area.

The majority of pieces on display were more related to autocarts and other vehicular endeavors. Even the scant prostheses on display were simple, standardized units.

“Hm? Oh, sorry. Barely heard you with all the racket in the back.” A bearded man leaned out from the entrance to the garage. His gait was uneven, a metallic rattle following every other step. “What can I do you for?”

“I was wondering if you had anything compatible with the Mazin module.” Though the pieces on display were good, they wouldn’t fit Max’s special elbow.

“Mazin, huh?”

“Yup! After all, ‘if it’s not a Mazin, it’s not amazin!’” He really liked that slogan. Ayun and the old man weren’t as amused.

“Not really a fan myself. They can get finicky.” He reached over his forehead to pull down a special set of glasses. “Can I take a look?” Max obliged, removing his jacket and rolling up the yellow short sleeve beneath. “Gotta say, you gotta be the youngest Mecharm-haver I’ve seen.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment...” Max brought his free to this cheek, trying to scratch away the self-consciousness. Though the more the 28-year-old thought about it, that wasn’t a bad thing.

Mecharm installation was only legally prescribed, in the case of an extreme medical emergency. The Nemed-Cessair Conflict was the first time that they had been adopted, assisting returning veterans. No ethical doctor would willingly replace flesh with metal.

“MZ-74...” The mechanic checked the serial number before lifting his spectacles. “I’ll go see what we’ve got.” Once more, he clanked his way to the back. Ayun leaned into Max’s side.

“Do you think they have... Anything like the last one?” Her quieted words jolted Max upright. A bit of red glowed on his cheeks.

“That one... It was a custom build.” It cost him a pretty crownpiece, too. All the more reason to get his case back! Though downtrodden, she accepted the answer with a bit of a scowl. Before long, the old man returned with a pair of arms.

“Here’s all we got for the left side. Standard five-digit piece, and this one...” He looked at the report that came with it. “It was supposed to be a kind of riveter, but we never got their invoice.”

The tag hanging off called it ‘BIG1’. It certainly looked like a piece of heavy machinery. A silver piston jutted out just under the elbow. A trio of small holes lined both sides of the arm. Perhaps a kind of pressure release. The man flipped it over to show a hexagonal indent in the palm. “You stick a nail here, and it’ll slam that sucker in no problem.”

“The Big O... The Big One!” Max was caught on his words on how excited he was.

“Didn’t you just say you should start saving up?” Ayun argued. “Just what kind of construction do you need to handle with this?”

“It’s not construction. I was thinking about that guy with the armor. It looked sturdy, but... Maybe something like this can crack it.” His explanation didn’t sway her.

“Assuming you can get close enough... ” All that confidence went to waste as he turned the price tag over.

“Six thousand Airgead?!”

“It’s a specialty piece. ‘Course, those guys were supposed to pick it up years ago, around the reconstruction.” The old man sighed.

“It’s a very niche augment. Would be hard to find another buyer.”

“You’ve got a point, Misses.” He scratched his beard in agreement.

“Especially one that uses this exact connector. How many more years until it’s just scrap?” There was some more silence as he mulled her words over.

“You know what? I like it. I’ll go down to 4.” He turned his head to Max. “Your wife’s a real sharp one, buddy!” His statement caused them both to flare rosy for a second.

“She’s-” He thought about explaining it, but... “She’s a keeper, alright.” He stretched out his metal arm to the owner, and they shook on the deal.

The pair exited another store with a new item in hand. Technically for Max, it was a new item hand. He had already swapped out the shield for the new apparatus, still grinning ear-to-ear.

“So much for that new house dream...” Ayun said, bringing him back to attention.

“It’s not that much! This is like an investment, anyways.”

“How do you mean?” Her tone didn’t sound like she misunderstood.

“Well. All of my arms so far have been pretty defensive, but this one really packs a punch.” A part of him realized the trap laid out. But he was already in its jaws.

“Such a chauvinist outlook...” She said, crossing her arms in a grand display. “Do you really need to prove yourself that way?”

“Y-well, you see... I just- Uh...” He stammered trying to backpedal from the accusation. As much fun as it was to watch it, she put her own hand on his shoulder.

“I’m just kidding. I know you don’t think about that kind of thing.”

“Next you’re going to say that I just don’t think...” He pouted. “But when it comes to you, I can’t stop thinking about anything else.” A surprise attack. She leaned in to connect to his side.

“That almost sounds like a proposal. Or a confession.” As much as they wanted to enjoy the

moment, it wasn't time for fun and games. She scanned the surrounding streets, waiting for a kind of instinctual feeling to rise up.

But once again... "No sign of them." She said, huffing.

"Seriously? I really thought they'd show up by now." His face soured as well. "Should take some more alleyways or hard to reach places. Really serve us up..."

"Can we leave it for another day, perhaps?" She was at her wit's end. The day was starting to end as well, going by how orange the surroundings started to become.

"Well... One more spot. Not a shop this time." Those words gave her a little hope, but also confused.

"Remember, this morning?" His hint jogged her memory.

"Right. Your parents..." By the look on his face, it might have been on his mind all day. She gave a nod. "I have one more stop in me."

"Thanks." He gave a smile to her words, but it faded when he looked away. "Knowing our luck, that'll be the time we find 'em. But right now... We have more important things to do."

This journey required more than a simple walk. Instead they welcomed the advent of public transportation, a track-guided tram around the city. They needed to get farther west if they had any hopes of getting to the cemetery before sundown.

“Max... Did you notice anything weird about those two demons?” She asked, seated beside him on the tram.

“Not really. Never seen them before. Though that guy’s power reminded me of Cass.” His face showed some disgust thinking about it.

Cass was a vitriolic demon who could cover his skin with a sharp scaled armor. Nearly no weapon could pierce it. Only the combination of a Fomorium bullet and the heavenly treasure known as Solais could finish the job. Both of which things they sorely lacked today. “Hopefully it won’t come to blows.”

“What about her? Did she seem... Strange to you?”

“Uh... I didn’t really get a good look. Kind of busy being thrown across the room.” She looked upset at his answer. So it was his turn to ask questions. “Did you sense something?”

“I don’t know.” She said, shaking her head. “I’ve never seen her before either, but... She looked familiar.” Demons who were brought to Milesain had to cross worlds through a boundary known as The Void.

True to its name, it stripped the demons of everything tying them to their past life. Their clothes, their memories. A totally blank slate. Perhaps it was nothing but a strange instinct. Or maybe...

“When we see them, maybe we can ask them ourselves...” He really hoped they were willing to talk now.

Because of its distance from the cityscape proper, the buildings were much lower and further apart. There was even room for greenery between blocks. A welcome change from the busy streets.

A chain of staircases would bring them down into the park. As they descended, Ayun noted the square pillars that dotted the hills below.

“I... I wasn’t expecting so many...”

“4,079... Though these markers are really just symbolic.” The number was drilled into his head during his schooling. As if he needed to be told. He was there half a lifetime ago.

Ayun and Max found a central hub at the bottom of the stairs. A little wall surmising the Fabrinasch incident to visitors, and a small stall set up. Max walked towards it, picking up a wooden bucket from a stack. A pale white rag draped over the side.

“What’s that for?”

“Oh, just a little Cessair tradition.” He explained, gathering water from a nearby spout. “It’ll make sense once we get there.”

The smooth pavement led them down the rows of family gravestones, etched with the names of the departed.

“They’re stacked so close together.” Ayun remarked.

“Well... It’s all ceremonial. This was built well after the fact, so... Nothing much to lay to rest.” Only the

cemetery for the recently departed had plots. And even then, most opted for cremation.

Thanks to the circular nature of the site, they wouldn't have to go down the entire way just to get to the 'R' section. Eventually, they would stop at their destination. Two large marble pillars.

Luin Riese. Simone Riese.

"This is it." Max spoke briefly, letting the stillness of the space seep in. Though part of it was reverence, she could see on his face some doubts were brewing. "I don't really know what to do, after all this. Like, talk to them, or..."

"You don't have to say anything. Just... meditate on it." He took her words to heart.

For all of ten seconds.

"What would I say, anyways? It's not like the spirits are here. I don't even know if they're in the Void or something."

"Max."

"Sorry." He shut up again, really pondering it over. "If... If they were here, I would want them to meet you."

"What?" Ayun asked, her head tilting slightly.

"Meeting the parents is a big step for a relationship." To that end, he got closer to her side, seeming to present her with her hands. "Mom, Dad. This is Ayun. Well... You're already Ayun Riese, huh?"

"It's fine." She said, with a smile. "Go on."

"She's amazing. Probably the strongest person I know." A snide look his way made him elaborate. "I don't

just mean fighting. This world is rarely kind to demons... But she still stands tall despite everything. And now... We're gonna bring some more life into this world. So you better be ready for some of the most adorable grandkids!"

"You know, Max. I'm only strong because of you."

"Right, the pact." She shook her head to his words.

"Not necessarily. I rely on you as much as I want you to rely on me. That's the whole point of a partnership. And a family."

"Right. Well, then... Time to get to work." He took the cloth in his hand, dipping it into the clear water. "Just a bit of touching up. Supposed to be a spiritual kind of thing." As he explained, he went on one knee to start at the base of his mother's gravestone.

Though the marble looked fairly clean, the white rag would soon show the bits of dust that lined the piece. Underneath that was a shimmering coat of stone, which slowly shined through as he continued.

"Let me help you." Ayun bent down as well, weaving in a black cotton square. She did the same for the stone on Luin's side, gently wiping away the grime.

"You don't have to-" His instincts were to be polite and say no... "But you are a Riese. Thanks." The two sat and scrubbed away in solemn silence.

But once again, that stillness wouldn't last for long. "I remember that day. Me and Mo just got into our first year of real schooling. It definitely wasn't like the

fundamental education. So we... Kind of snuck out around lunch time.”

“You only told me you were coming home from school.” She said, pointing out some flaws in an earlier recalling. “Quite the mischievous pair.”

“Hey, it was her idea!” He grinned, enjoying the brief levity. “Normally Mom would be working at home, or at the library. Writing up research papers. And Dad was a forensics investigator or something. Fancy accountant who worked in the city.

“But the night before, they were getting really excited for a lunch date at a nice place in the middle of town. So we knew at least neither of them would be back. But then...” Then, the incident started.

In 1616, a man known as Sreng led a one-man assault on the town. Because of their shortcut, they were caught up in the first of the attacks.

Though perhaps by that measure, they were mostly spared from the heavier casualties. The body count went much higher as he cut a path through the town. The sword he used, Firbolgg, had a malevolent power that harnessed the geis of its victims.

The more blood was spilt, the more unstable it became. When he had gotten to the center of Fabrinasch, it left a destructive wave, killing so many instantly and leaving the area contaminated for many years.

“Did your parents...” Ayun struggled to ask the question.

“As far as I know, they were caught up in the blast. That’s where they would’ve been.” A quake had surfaced in his hand once more, but more subdued. “I hope... I hope they were together, at least.” Ayun brought a hand to rest on his shoulder, before leaning into him. Just like that, his body calmed.

Before long, they had finished wiping the markers. They caught the last vestiges of the dipping sun, shining brilliantly. With one more little bow, the pair made their way back to the entrance. “I used to have a lot of what-ifs, actually.” Max said, his face dropping. “What if we hadn’t skipped class? What if my dad was on a job? Or Mom was at a lecture?”

“What stopped you?”

“I don’t really know.” Max shrugged. “Maybe I just ran out of them while sitting in the hospital.” Weeks spent staring at the ceiling, recuperating. Getting a mecharm wasn’t even a consideration until David entered the picture.

“I... Have had similar thoughts. About Marianne and Eliot. What if I hadn’t gone berserk. If Eliot had made it out of the manor...” Her original ‘master’ had perished, trying to pull Ayun from the burning Kohler mansion. “But if I had never been sealed, I would’ve never met you. Or Monika, or any of these people.”

“We can’t change what’s already happened. That’s what Mo told me once.” Max said, looking around. “And since she’s not within earshot, I have to admit she has a point.”

“Right. We have to think about what’s now and what’s to come rather than dwell in the past.” As she said it, Max stopped. His stare was cast ahead of them.

“Speaking of the now...” He said, trying to point his head to get her to look. Sure enough, the pair from this morning had found them. The tall man stepped forward off the staircase, with the young woman in tow. He looked around, nearly high enough to match a few of the larger stone pillars.

“What is this place?” He asked aloud. The girl clung to his side, sneaking peeks of the scenery as well.

“This is a gravesite. It’s to honor the deceased.” Max answered, slowly stepping forward. He raised his hands up, palms out to show his intentions. Even still, the man slouched defensively.

“I won’t listen to another human.” He said, staring him down. But his gaze softened with confusion as Ayun moved up instead.

“This is a peaceful place. We have no intention of changing that.” She said, “Perhaps we could ask you the same?”

“Who are you?” He asked, still a little pensive. The girl moved away from his side to get a better look at her as well.

“My name is Ayun. Ayun Riese.” She responded. “And Max is my partner.” That last part made him scoff.

“Is that what you call it? As if a human could really stand equal to a demon in this world.” Max wanted to chime in, but it probably would do more harm than good.

He was more focused on the other demon. The girl with black hair, pale skin and blue eyes. Other than being a bit smaller and much scruffier...

“She looks just like you.” He said, his thoughts escaping him. Now he understood what she was feeling during their conversation here.

“Took you long enough.” She couldn’t help but snark. “But I’d really love to know just why that is. Just a few minutes of conversation. Of who you are and why you’re after those blades.”

There were a tense few moments of silent deliberation. The man looked toward them, then back to the girl. After a bit of thinking, she gave a shallow nod. With that, his shoulders relaxed.

“Fine...” He sighed. “I am Vaughn, and this is Yulia. We’re from-”

“Stop right there, demon scum!” An unfamiliar voice called out past the staircase. The fading sun only showed their silhouette until they stepped down. Six figures stomped down the stairs in unison.

All but one wore metal helmets obscuring their faces. The metal armor on their hands and feet clanked alongside their march to the bottom. A small cape covered one side of their body, showing a forked emblem. Max knew exactly what it was.

“Damn it.” He said. “Of all the times...” Ayun wasn’t quite sure until she recalled the words of David. She tried to hold back a laugh, but some of it escaped.

“The Order of Cy. So that’s what he meant by cloak and dagger.”

CHAPTER 14

CHASE

“You accursed demons are an affront to humanity.” The woman leading the charge spoke. She definitely seemed the type to lead given her unique apparel.

Instead of the helmet and clunky armor, she let her brown hair flow in the wind in a low ponytail. While she had some of the pieces of protection, she wore a coat instead of the cape that held the same three-pronged insignia.

“Are they with you?” Vaughn turned his head, looking fiercely towards Max. But he simply shook his head.

“Please. I hate everything about these racist bastards.” This felt just as wrong as that fake officer. Vaughn and Yulia weren’t beastkin. They didn’t have any outstanding features. Only the reaction of silver would’ve shown their nature...

He slowly brought his hand to the edge of his coat, pulling it back to reveal the daggers sitting in their sheaths. It was faint, but there was a flicker in the woman’s eyes.

A hint of familiarity.

Got you. A grin swept his face. His arrogance only further frustrated her.

“Seize that man. Kill the rest!” On her order, the five knights drew the swords on their hip. Their forward march didn’t last but a few steps. Vaughn stood in front, blocking them.

His towering figure gave them pause. He grabbed the nearest knight by the helmet, his hand easily eclipsing the top half of their head. As the grip tightened, the metal warped underneath. Just a little more, and...

“Don’t kill them!” Max called out. It didn’t do much to stop him. “They’re here for a reason. And it’ll only be more hassle for us.”

“I don’t take orders!” Vaughn objected, looking back. As he did, he caught the fierce glare from Ayun. That gave him pause.

“There’s enough dead on these grounds.” She said. To be honest, she didn’t like it. The Order of Cy wouldn’t give them the same quarter. It’d be easier to stand their ground and kill them outright. But this time she’d trust her partner.

With a brief sigh, he tossed the man over his shoulder, effortlessly flying behind the group further onto the cemetery grounds.

Before the rest could react, the pair of fighters sprung into action. Their advance had two purposes- get in front of Yulia to get her away from the fighting, and stop the other knights from swarming Vaughn.

They fulfilled it easily by taking up the space of the previously tossed assailant. The demon man would still

have one knight to contend with, but it seemed like that wouldn't be a problem for him.

Ayun wasted no time in weaving in a weapon, the same hammer that she used to push him out of the Second Fiddle's office,

With a horizontal swing, she connected with one of the soldiers. Her strike pushed forward, smashing her first target into another. The two rolled back from the impact onto the pavement.

"Nice!" Max couldn't help himself. Even though they both staggered to their feet, it got them separated from the rest of their squad. She moved towards them, looking to finish her plate and leaving Max to take care of the remaining knight.

"Die!" This one was ready to fight, though. He brought his sword in a downward slash towards Max.

The strike connected. But instead of meeting flesh and bone, it was wrapped in a palm of polymer. Max braced himself to catch the blade with his left hand. He used the motion of the piston within the elbow to cushion the blow ever slightly. In that downward position, it was primed and ready.

"Big One Impact!" The piston flung upwards again, the force transferring into the blade he held. It shattered, sending the knight back with a broken blade as steam surged from the ports in the mecharm's side.

Max had a look of pure jubilee. This arm was even better than he could've imagined. And to think of such a

cool attack name in the heat of battle! He was about to toss the shard still in his hand, until he studied it closer.

The folds of the steel had a strange pattern from this angle. An eerie tinge, green as the Fomor moon. But this metal was manufactured in a lab, not in the stars. “Ayun, these guys are-” He turned to warn her, seeing her locked in a struggle with one of the men.

“I had a feeling.” She weaved in another weapon, a smaller mace, to tangle with her opponents. But the onyx metal was degrading as they clashed. “Fomorium, right?”

“There’s just no way!” A swift kick to the side of the downed knight gave a metallic ring. The man lay dormant. He had no time for more grand flourishes, his mind was still stuck on how they got the special metal.

“Should that mean something?” Vaughn asked, holding a knight by the scruff of his armor. Though the body was limp, he was still intent on bringing a few hits to the dented steel.

Fomorium was manufactured by Star Ops, by a scientist named Arthur Gauche. But he fled the company and destroyed the records before any mass production could start. Max was sent by Rastarok to help him dispose of his research. The only pieces left were two dozen Fomorium-tipped bullets, and a slab that currently resided in Eloise and Monika’s home.

Maybe it’s the bullets? But there were barely any left. Besides the ones that Max had used himself, the rest were stolen by The Demon Collector, and even used to

temporarily kill Ayun and transfer her pact over to the wicked man.

But he didn't have much time to ponder. The leader now made her move, brandishing her own sword to face him down. Her moves were much quicker than her subordinates, so the same trick wouldn't work twice.

In the midst of the fighting, Yulia could only stand back and watch. She didn't have the strength of her brother, or the bravery of Max and Ayun. It was frustrating to be so helpless.

Someone else had that same thought in their head. They dragged themselves to their feet, looking to make a difference in the battle. Their vision, blurred by the gnarled metal helm, spotted a target. A frail young woman, unprotected from the flank. He rose up, clutching his sword, with the intent to make a running stab.

"Yulia!" The man's intentions were spotted by her partner. Vaughn tossed aside the heap of a knight to dash to her side. He was able to pull her to safety, but his momentum was too much to dodge for himself.

The blade found its purpose, piercing the man's side. It ran through, blood adorned on the end of the blade. The wound itself was painful enough, but it came with a strange burning sensation. Slowly rising from the blade itself.

The air around the cemetery changed. A deep pressure poured out of the man. It stopped everyone else in their tracks. A familiar wave hit Ayun and Max. They stopped to look at each other, confirming the feeling.

A distortion of pale-white bone began to form over Vaughn. Before it traveled to his wound, the demon grabbed onto the blade, pulling it from his side. Armor took over the open sore. The horned skull that covered his face stared deeply at his attacker. As a pair of red-hot orbs glinted towards the knight, his armor clattered in terror.

“There’s no way...” It was the first time that Ayun had witnessed another Warp-Spasm. The times that it affected her, she had lost all control. Her hopes of ending this without bloodshed were starting to become slim.

Despite his boisterous nature before, the knight standing before this beast had lost his nerve. He dropped the bloodied blade, only able to muster a step back.

The demon took his own step. He raised his leg up, before bringing it down hard on his opponent’s collarbone. The rest of his body followed through the strike, slamming onto the pavement.

Once the shock wore off, the rest of the fighters started moving again. The woman in charge brought a hand to her mouth to make a sharp whistle.

More Order of Cy agents stepped out from the paths through the cemetery. Their swords already drawn, closing in. They were going to be overwhelmed on all sides if they didn’t do something soon.

“Go...” The sharp teeth covering the skull opened, letting out a shrill voice.

“What!?” Ayun looked shocked. The demon man turned around to face her.

“Take her... Now!” He flicked his arm, as spurs grew out of the pale armor. His sockets went to his partner, staring back. He gave a soft nod to her, which she returned.

“It’s our best shot!” Max said, before shoving the Justicar away with his shoulder. “Think they want this more than anything.” He moved his coat to flash the daggers to Ayun.

“Very well...” Once she knocked down her closest opponent, she rushed to Yulia’s side. “Hold on tightly, now.” She reached out a gloved hand to the girl. There was a moment of hesitation, but she still took it within her own. With that, they strode towards Max and the stone staircase that led out of the cemetery.

“We’ll be at that same place from this morning!” He yelled out to the one staying behind. “You’d better not die on us!” A strange smirk came from the twisted teeth on the demon’s visage.

Though Max had a head-start, Ayun and Yulia were by his side when he reached the top. They looked back for just a second to check for any pursuers. A few knights tried to run up the stairs... Only to be caught by the claws of Vaughn’s transformed state.

One person managed to break the line, though. That same Justicar who started this whole mess. They spent no more time looking back, instead attempting to put some space between them.

“What’s the plan, Max?” Ayun asked, between breaths.

“They want... The daggers, right?” *They’ll be glued to me, then.* He looked at the streets surrounding them. Simpler blocks, smaller buildings... Between the beat of his pounding feet, he could hear the faint whistling of a train. A plan was hatching in his head. “How about a pincer?”

“A pincer?” It took a second for her to recognize it. “Like Rastarok?” They had experience with this method.

“Exactly!” He pointed to the side. “Split up and find the train tracks!”

“What about you?” Her question made him want to laugh. But since he had to keep his breath steady, he only grinned.

“I’m the bait! I’ll signal when I get there! Go!” As they made their approach to the next intersection, Ayun and Yulia broke off to the other street. A quick glance over his shoulder showed that the Cy woman was still in hot pursuit.

Perfect. Now I just need to find out what my signal’s supposed to be. Business as usual for a plan from Max. As the steps continued, he could feel his breaths getting heavier.

He wasn’t made for endurance. Between the heavy machinery bolted to his side that made his gait lopsided or the partial bit of his lung removed from his injury, the odds were stacked against him. Only a mad dash like the one he used against Kira was his strength.

But just as he was ready to give up, he spotted it. A dip in the road, marked by signs. A little overpass, containing the railway below. Once he got up to the stone guardrail, he had a moment of hesitation.

The path below was a good twenty feet below. Much deeper than he had anticipated. The ground surrounding the tracks was covered in gravel... But it still wouldn't be a pleasant drop.

He leaned over, trying to see if there was a way to use his metal hand to slow his descent. Maybe if he still had the hand with a wire pulley, he could rappel down. The gleam of the daggers' handles caught his eye. It took him back to the morning's accidental demonstration, where Shion brought the chained blade into the floor.

He grabbed the weapon by the chains, bringing out the slim straight knife. Now all he needed was a spot to hook it with. A lamppost or nearby sign. He wouldn't have the time.

"Stop, fiend!" His pursuer wasn't far behind. But in her effort to stop him, she hadn't noticed the gap he was currently teetering over. And no time to stop.

She collided with Max in full force, sending them both over the edge. There were only a few scant seconds to do anything before they would crash into the ground below.

He swung his arm out, bringing the dagger to attention. Just as before, the chain extended with a red pulse. It shot up past a street light... And continued to climb.

“Turn around, damn it!” Yelling at the weapon was the only thing that Max could think of. It sometimes worked when his mecharms would malfunction.

Surprisingly, it heeded his words.

The blade swooped in an arc, crossing over the light. The chains scraped against the metal as it plunged downwards. Though it started to bend, the sheer force of the blade almost matched their own descent to stabilize them.

He thought that all he had to worry about now was the woman clinging to him, ready to kill him. But a distant klaxon was growing louder. Their forms were being lit from the side. The source being an oncoming train, blaring down on its horn.

Max looked up to attempt another conversation with the weapon. “Retract! Come back! Withdraw! Please!” He wasn’t sure which one worked. But in an instant, they were whisked upwards just enough to escape the oncoming train. Their momentum carried them forward, slamming into the wall on the other side of the embankment.

The line went slack, as the pair fell onto the gravel path below. He gave a quick check to himself to make sure nothing was broken. But other than some scratches and a severe soreness, he was otherwise intact. The Justicar had taken the brunt of the force colliding with the side of the embankment.

“There you are!” A familiar voice called out. A few blocks down, Ayun and Yulia made a quick descent on a

set of service stairs. He wanted to chuckle at his luck, but it hurt to do so. Had he just ran a few more meters, he wouldn't have had to make such a grand gesture.

There wouldn't be time to laugh about it, anyways. The Justicar pushed back against Max, both parties scrambling to their feet. She drew her sword, though only a fraction of the blade laid intact on the end. Their scuffle seemed to shatter the rest of it in its sheath.

"Guess your copy is flimsy compared to the real thing." Max scoffed. The woman's eyes shakily switched between him and the approaching demons. "Come on, it's over."

He was right. For her, there was only one thing to do.

She spun the broken blade around on her fingers, switching to a reverse grip. There, she pressed the jagged edge to her neck.

"Glory to the Emperor." There was a split-second before he realized what her words meant.

"No!" He reached out to try and stop her, but it was too late. The blade plunged into her skin, blood seeping from the wound. Max gripped his hand around her forearm, struggling to stop her from going any further. Eventually her grip lost power, but the damage had been done. Max struggled to keep any more blood from flowing.

What threw him off was her stare. Despite the pain, she kept an intense gaze towards him.

"What's going on!?" Ayun looked in shock as the two demons got closer.

“She just...” He didn’t have time to explain. They needed a plan. “We need to apply pressure. Get her to a hospital. A healer... A-a...” There was no time. The color was already draining from her face. Though her eyelids were sinking, she still kept that harsh look...

But then, she looked up. Away from Max. Instead, she saw Yulia, who had stepped forward herself. She brought up a hand, hovering it over the woman’s wound.

Ayun noticed a flicker in her eyes. They shifted from the deep cobalt into a glimmering red. Max was too busy noticing a strange sensation on his soaked hands.

The blood seemed to rumble, lifting itself from his fingers back into the Justicar.

“A-Aahhh!” Her body seized up, a startled shriek coming from her mouth as the wound started to close. After the brief terror, she slumped back. The pain had become too much to bear, but even in this state she was breathing.

Yulia herself looked worse for wear. She stumbled backwards, only stopped by Ayun’s intervention. The partners looked at each other, both holding onto an unconscious woman. And only more questions than answers.

THE ART PLACE

We've already got some art for the characters here rolling in. The portraits will go here, once the key artwork comes in I'll just insert them into the story proper. Anyways, onto the page break!



Max Riese

Art by 5ish



Ayun Riese

Art by 5ish



Yulia

Art by 5ish



Vaughn

Art by 5ish



Asche

Art by 5ish



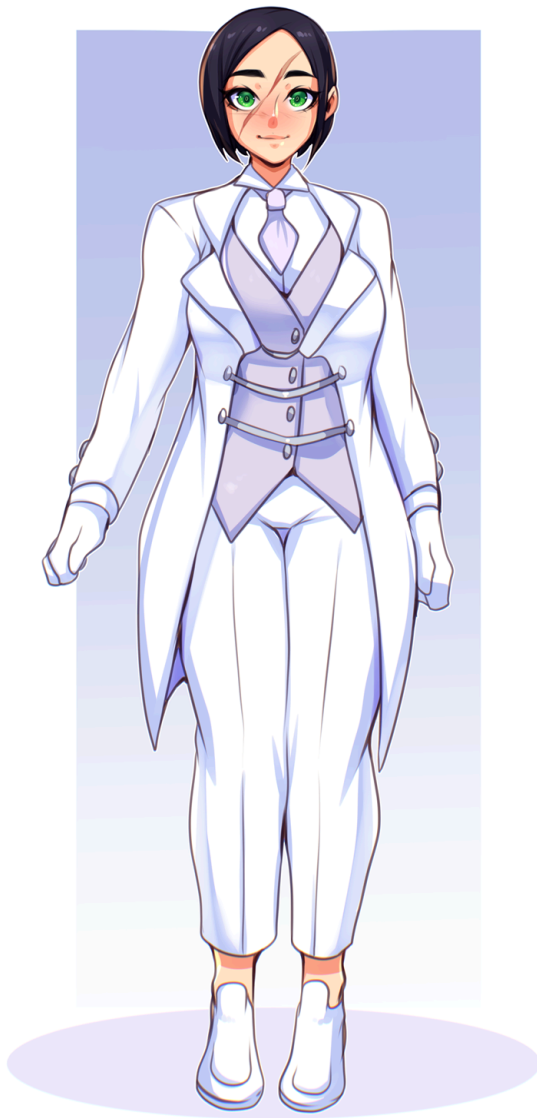
Lewis Goff

Art by 5ish



Kira

Art by 5ish



Monika Riese-Monette

Art by 5ish



David Hayes

Art by 5ish