

We raced up the stairs leading to the top of the palace. My chest knotted tighter and my feet ached with each step. The important-looking demon we beat up earlier spilled that the beans the demon lord resided in a throne at the peak. That could only mean Chika. Finally, it was time to put all this to an end.

Kaoru, Ririko, and Yui were by my side. Two of which I never in a million years expected to run with. Well, folks in this world like to say fate had a funny way of bringing people together. For us, it was all in the fists.

Now, I had more than just Yui to protect. The others were holding their own against hordes of demons below. It wasn't just about beating the answers out of Chika anymore. We were coming to stop you now, because I got a whole lot of people important to me to protect. Even if it meant making sure you stayed down, Chika.

The four of us stopped at the very top on the upper landing. Ahead were two metallic statues guarding an even larger set of doors. Red eyes lit up underneath each helmet. They came to life, one wielding a halberd and the other a two-handed sword.

"Enemies detected. Commencing defensive protocols to protect the demon—"

Faster than any of us could see, Yui cracked the halberd statue over the head with her nunchuck. It collapsed into a heap of junk. She whipped around and swept the legs out from underneath the other, then caved in its chest. Electricity sparked where they were hit. They twitched a little before going still.

"Yui." I put a hand on her shoulder to try and calm her nerves.

"I'm fine," Yui said.

Kaoru and Ririko came up from behind, eyes gazing up at the enormously tall doors.

"Ashura, we finally meet again." Kaoru summoned Kamigoroshi from a bolt of lightning crashing down on her hand.

"Huuu~ Anyone else getting jittery? Stress is bad for the complexion. Maybe I should sit this one out," Ririko said, trying to slink away.

"No chickening out now." I shoved the statues away from blocking the door.

Someone inside screamed like a beast. All of us froze up. Yui and I knew that voice right away. Anya.

We threw ourselves against each door. It was like pushing against the weight of a mountain. Whatever locks were in place started cracking. Soon, the doors gave way. Cold wind rushed in, and so did we.

Chika was just now putting her gakuran hat on and turning to us. I couldn't see her face from here, but I swore she was smiling. Behind her, to the right of the throne seat was Anya.

She was unconscious. A crystal floated in front of her chest, attached by weird strings of magic. I'd recognize a primordial lifecrystal anywhere.

"It's good to see you all again... *is* what I would like to say, but it doesn't look like you're here for a nice chat," Chika said as she tapped the wooden bokken against her shoulder.

"That's on you, Chika!" I growled. "You're the one who wanted us to come here. So, here we are. Now we want some answers, but you better bet I ain't gonna be asking with words."

"Anya! What did you do to Anya?" Yui cried.

"Yui, not coming for a hug this time?" Chika asked, causing Yui to wince from recalling what happened last time.

Kaoru came between them. "What you did back in Kazaar was no way to reunite with an old friend-turned enemy. Even my family wouldn't stoop so low."

With her body still facing us, Chika craned her head towards Anya.

"Anya will be fine. She's just taking a nap. It's not her that I need. It's the primordial lifecrystal. After all, that's where we draw our powers from," Chika said.

"Wait... You're saying *that* is inside all of us?" Ririko gasped.

"That's right." Chika tapped the floor at her feet with the bokken. A magic circle formed on the ground. She drove her fingers into her chest and ripped out two crystals tethered by magic. One of them I recognized back when she took it from Sacchan.

Those things were described as having a ridiculous amount of magic. It explained why we were so strong compared to other things. Two were inside Chika. One was inside each of us. In Sacchan, however—

"Anego, why are you doing all this?" Yui asked.

"Why, I wonder?" Chika turned her back to us and walked up to the throne. "I brought us to the only playground that matters. We can fight to our hearts' content. Here, we truly are queens. Back in Japan, we would have faded into obscurity or ended up in a homeless park to scrape by. Isn't this what we all want? To be someone worth something?"

Ririko clicked her tongue. "Ahhh~ All I hear is whining. Speak for yourself! You think I want this? I had all I needed back home. All the make-up kits I could ever want, fashion magazines to keep up with the latest trends, and... I had Eri. I could care less about your sad, stupid life. Hand over those damn lifecrystals, bitch!"

"Unfortunately, I'll be taking the primordial lifecrystals. I went through great pains to collect the ones I already have. Some shouldn't even outright exist. You see..." Chika shoved the two crystals back into her chest. "I didn't just bring you here to play. The only way for these crystals to exist is if they have a vessel, but at the time, I was still too weak to house them all. So I needed bodies. I needed you. When I brought you into this world, I shoved one into each of

you. For some, into your weapons. Now, I have the means to wield it all. Thank you for hanging onto them, but I'll be taking back what's mine."

An eruption of magical energy erupted outwards from Chika. Black flames cloaked her body like an armored suit. Her eyes tightened on me especially. The big sister that I used to know, cared about, cared for me back... I no longer saw that person in her eyes. I saw Ashura, the demon god.

"Then, I guess you ain't telling us why you need 'em for?" I asked.

Chika shook her head and pointed the bokken at us. "Bishamonten of Kyushu, Blizzard of Hokkai, Lion of Saitama, and Kaminari of Chiba, I'm going to remind you all why they call me Ashura."

It was always going to come down to this. Be it in Japan, this world, or in the next life. I threw a look at Yui. She nodded to me.

"Chika, ever since we met, Yui and I never stopped looking up to you. Not a day goes by that we don't thank you for saving us. From a shitty life, shitty parents... a shitty brother. But I get it. We ain't kids anymore. Crying don't win us any pity points. With Sacchan, my own fists, and all of us..." I ignited Sacchan and lifted it up to Chika. "Ashura of Kansai, you've been at the top for too long. We're dragging you back to the ground and *reminding you* what dirt tastes like!"

Chika raised her head and looked down at me with a smirk. "Come on, Micchi! Yui! Show Anego how much you've grown!"

Yui and I leaped into battle first. I went left, and she went right. Soon as we were on her, we brought the bat and the nunchuck down. Explosive magic rippled from us. Chika stayed standing, her bokken parrying my Sacchan and other hand gripping the nunchuck's metal baton. She lifted and slammed the two of us together, then kicked us away.

Kamigoroshi flew over our heads. Chika downward slashed the spear into the ground. She spun around and blocked a dynamite kick from Kaoru. The floor at her feet cracked from impact.

A cold wind blew past me and Yui. Ririko picked us back onto our feet first and charged ahead in a suit of icy armor. Her nails extended into long claws, taking swipes at Chika. Kaoru and Ririko bore down on her like a violent storm. Their flurry of attacks kept Chika on the defensive, but...

Chika caught Kaoru's legs and cratered her into the ground. Ririko landed a blow to the back of her head, but Chika was unfazed. Before Yui and I could rejoin them, Chika struck Ririko once and completely shattered her armor, grabbed her by the throat, and threw her into an open seat next to the throne. Bindings immobilized her to the seat. She screamed in agony as a primordial lifecrystal was ripped from her chest.

"Chika, wake the fuck up!" I smashed Sacchan over her head with the same devastating blow that defeated Anya. However, all I succeeded in doing was nudge her an inch away.

"You can thank Anya for the enhancements," Chika said, clenching her other hand and creating a second sword, this one made of ice. "And you can thank Ririko for *this*."

I drew Sacchan back in time to block Chika's double-slash. A deep cold bit into my hands. Sacchan's flames had become weaker as ice crystals formed along the shaft.

"The fuck?" I shook them off, but they kept coming back.

"Anya and Ririko... Chika must be drawing power from their lifecrystals," Kaoru warned as she climbed back up to her feet.

If Chika got any more of us on those stupid chairs, then she grows stronger. Right now, she had the power of four fucking primordial lifecrystals?

"So, Chika's getting buffed. What kinda powers do you think the two inside her are?" I asked.

"I can't be sure," Kaoru began cautiously. "One she already possessed. Its powers are unknown to us. The other previously came from your bat."

"Elemental magic, big on the fire though. Now she's got Ririko's stronger ice magic and Anya's annoying ass enhancements..."

"You've gotta be kidding me. So, she's getting stronger? How the hell are we supposed to fight her?" Yui groaned.

Maybe we could get them off. Separate Chika from those lifecrystals.

"Yui, you're the fastest. Get to Ririko and Anya. Try and wake 'em up. Kaoru and I will keep Chika busy," I said.

"Sounds wild. I like it!" Yui bounced up and down on her feet, getting ready to sprint. "Leave it to me!"

We split into different directions. Yui reached Anya when we were only half-way to Chika, who knew but didn't care to stop her. Instead, she chose to fight me and Kaoru.

"It's hopeless. The only way to free them is if you kill me, and you're too weak. You're all too weak!" Chika sneered.

Icicles the size of javelins showered the two of us. I created a barrier around Kaoru and myself, but it was quickly cracking.

"This isn't working," Kaoru said calmly.

"You think I don't fucking see that?!" I shouted.

Kaoru pushed me away as the barrier shattered. Chika came through and clutched Kaoru by the head, lifting her off the ground. I got up in time to see Chika throw her into the

other chair. It happened just like with Ririko. As soon as she landed, magic bound her to the seat and the primordial lifecrystal emerged from her chest.

"Spellslinger empowered by a primordial lifecrystal? I rather like Bishamonten's power." Chika threw kicks and swung the swords in front of her with explosive might. If her hits weren't strong enough already, they were mountain-breaking now.

Meanwhile, Yui was trying in vain to pull Anya out of the chair. When that wouldn't work, she began slapping her.

"Come on, you big dummy! Anego needs you... / need you! Anya!" Yui cried.

Anya didn't stir, but her eyes flicked around underneath their lids like she was having a nightmare. There were two more empty chairs. Probably for me and Yui.

I held Sacchan by the grip and barrel. Healing magic washed over me for a second, but I cut it short.

"Had a change of heart?" Chika asked.

"Yeah." I sighed. "fuck healing. It's the pain that makes us strong. Always has. My shitty old man's abuse, your punches across my face on those cold winters, and all the time you pinched mine and Yui's cheeks until they went red. I mean, what are we? Just a bunch of bruised up bags of meat, scarred all over from the shit thrown at us when we were kids."

Yui returned to my side in a split second, wiping the wetness from her eyes. She took the deepest breath of her life to regain composure.

"Ora, ora, ora, ora! Ashura or whatever, this Lion of Saitama is going to rip you to shreds!" Yui roared.

"You think you're stronger than us, Chika? We're two halves of you. Got the ink on our backs to prove it. Got the firepower to fucking prove it, too. We'll come at you with everything we've got, so quit holding back!" I shouted, empowering Sacchan with my Elemental subclass. Volatile magical energy coursed along the length of the bat and melted the Chika's ice crystals off.

Still, Chika was unfazed. But she did smile.

"Good." Chika threw the bokken and ice sword away to smash both fists together.

An earthquake shook the entire palace. Fissures ran up the side of the walls. Everything started crumbling. Rubble crashed down all around us.

"Show me how much I've hurt you then! Because there's a lot more pain where that came from if you don't want me holding back!" Chika's lips curved into a thrilled smirk.

It was a lust for battle I hadn't seen in ages.