

Chapter 2 - Dante's Avenue

“What!? Relinquished!?” Soma exclaimed in shock.

“Yes, relinquished of your duties.” Officer Chowa spoke monotonously.

“I don’t quite understand, Officer Chowa,” Soma asked.

“Isn’t it my divine duty given to me by Lady Amaterasu to manage the Asphodel’s flames?”

“Lady Tsuriai’s new decree was made due to the circumstances presented by technological advancements.”

“What do you mean?”

As he spoke, Soma heard the sounds of hammering steel. He turned to see several Oni and an officer, similarly dressed as Officer Chowa, installing a metal pillar that was able to reach the seemingly bottomless pit of flames, all the way to the ceiling of the cavern.

“What is that?” Cyrus pointed.

“That, young Cyrus, is the new machine that will enable Asphodel to automate its own source of power. This new machine, engineered by Oni who lived on the Surface, will allow us to live more comfortably for some time.”

“The machine is able to control the flames in Asphodel?” Soma asked, still trying to wrap his head around the whole ordeal.

“Precisely, Lord Rigel.” Officer Chowa responded.

“Well, I can’t stop innovation.” Soma shrugged.

“You’re just going to let it happen, Soma?” Cyrus said, surprised.

Soma shook his head and shrugged, “If this is Tsuriai’s choice, I can’t really do anything about it. I was just sent here to look after the flames after all.”

“What will happen to Soma now that the underworld doesn’t need a Yatagarasu anymore?” Cyrus asked, puzzled. Officer Chowa spun once again into their feminine form.

“Well, Lord Rigel must contact his superior, Lady Amaterasu, and inform her about the unprecedented event.” Officer Chowa replied to Cyrus’s dismay. Soma asked the officer: “When am I effectively out of duty, Officer?”, to which the black-white officer replied:

“The new machine will be activated within three days time. This should be sufficient time for you to pack your belongings and do what you must before you go.”

“Ah well then I must say goodbyes and such immediately then. Is there anything else that I must know about, Officer?” Soma asked.

“Lady Amaterasu will notify you of your next duty, the Great Goddess will ensure that you will have a new divine duty soon enough.” they said.

“Thank you so much for your help, Officer Chowa” Soma replied. The black-white officer took a bow and opened the gates and immediately went into the fortress. Another officer replaced their post outside, stood there and looked at the two.

The two walked away from the Crag and into a makeshift firing range. Dummies lined up made of the same material as the ones in Soma’s house. There was also junk lined near the area, full of disposable metal.

“It looks like we’ll have to say our goodbyes then?” Cyrus uttered in disappointment.

“Don’t worry young Cyrus, we will see each other again” Soma said with a wide grin. On the contrary, his thoughts were more on the lines of “hopefully..”.

“Just take what I taught you and you will be able to defend the Asphodel without me.” Soma added, nodding in confidence. “Now..” Soma said as he picked up a rusted can. “THINK FAST” he said as he threw it in the air.

Cyrus retaliated by quickly drawing out a modified revolver and shooting the can, splitting it in two down the middle.

“Good job, your reflexes are getting even better now.” Soma laughed.

After shooting pieces of debris as they took a walk and blasting training dummies as target practice, the two returned back to Soma’s forge.

“It must be late now Cyrus, make sure to get home ASAP, those vengeful spirits might come and attack, you being a high profile target” Soma said in concern.

“I’ll be fine, I got my domain anyway.” Cyrus grinned

Soma smiled and followed up with “Well, I hope you had fun today, this may or may not be the last time we do this.”

The young prince hugged Soma, like an older brother.

“I can’t believe you have to go...” he said.

“It’ll be okay Cyrus. Who knows, maybe when you’re ready, you can gain permission to enter the Sun. I’ll take you to Lady Amaterasu and I’m sure she’ll spoil you rotten” Soma laughed

As Cyrus let go, he then asked Soma:

“May I go and see you off then? On your last day?”

“Absolutely”

“Now, go on now, I have to contact Lady Amaterasu about this new event. I must let her know about what just happened.” Soma said as he waved at him as he headed for the door.

“See you Soma.” Cyrus replied as he also waved and left.

Once the door closed, Soma approached the middle of his home where a glowing orange orb sat on a stand.

“Lady Amaterasu, it’s me, are you there?” Soma said.

The flames from the orb emerged and gradually formed an image. It was a woman with jet black hair tied to a ponytail. Her pupils were yellow with a red outline in her iris. She wore a black suit and tie, with black slacks and wore a sun necklace.

“Yes yes, who is it now? I am a busy Goddess, you know?”

She showed a rather cold expression some might mistake as naturally angry. She sat at a desk with a giant window. The room around her looked like that of an office building. As she saw the young God, her eyes widened and turned to look around her surroundings. After seeing that nobody was around, her demeanor changed.

“Soma? My child? How are you doing? How’s the Asphodel?” Amaterasu said in a rather cheerful tone.

Soma scratched his head in embarrassment.

“Well, Mother..Amaterasu, it appears that Lady Tsuriai’s envoy notified me that my divine duty has been relinquished.” Soma said, who tried hard to be formal.

“RELINQUISHED?!” she said as some workers opened the door, where she coughed and changed back to her seemingly cold demeanor.

“I believe it had to do with a machine that was able to manage it automatically?” Soma said in wonder.

“Ah yes, the machine. It was a new advanced piece of technology found on the Surface World. Those Oni scholars did a rather amazing job analyzing human tech.” She replied in a rather analytical tone.

“Those came from the surface, Mother?” Soma asked in curiosity.

“Indeed, due to the recent war, Humans, Gods and now Youkai live in select areas on the Surface to gain protection from the Asmo, Clockwork City being the central city of it all.” Amaterasu said as she wrote a memo.

“The Asmo?” Soma asked who scratched his head once more.

“The Asmo had been opening lately due to its seals wearing off. People see rift tears in remote areas causing monsters to arrive from it.” She replied as she saw a shadow outside her door, pointing her finger towards the table”

“In that case, what should I do now?”

“Well, due to these unusual circumstances, there is nothing I can think of. Even in the Sun we have no work for you.” Amaterasu thought aloud.

“Hmm, well how about the Surface? This technology that humans have replaced a God out of all beings.” Soma cluelessly asked, trying to come up with a solution.

“The Surface, eh? -Ah thank you so much Hiu-” Amaterasu said as she looked at a folder given by a girl dressed in a white kimono and whispered to her ear.

“Just a moment Soma, I need to look over this.” she solemnly said as Soma nodded.

Amaterasu’s eyes widened and she looked over at Hiu. The face Amaterasu made was of pure alarm. Soma tilted his head in curiosity and Amaterasu turned back at him.

“Yes, you may go to the Surface my child” She said as Hiu left the room.

“Wait, really?!” Soma said in anticipation, which the Great Goddess took by surprise.

“You showed interest in the Surface since you read pamphlets and stories about it while down in the Asphodel, it’s about time you experienced it.” She said as she took a nod. “However, due to the laws that bound Yhteys’, you have to rely on faith to stay on the Surface.”

“Oh right, faith, I need to maintain my existence after all.” Soma replied

“Precisely, that is why I shall give you a portion of my faith to keep you ‘afloat’ on the surface, take it as your budget if you will.” Amaterasu said as she closed her eyes. Soma felt an energy surge within him. “This should let you pass the torii gate that acts as the checkpoint between the river Styx and the Surface.”

“Thank you so much Mother.” Soma grinned.

“Once you get there, visit my shrine, my mikos that manage it will be there to greet you and you can communicate with me through there! I will try to send you on small divine duties, missions if you will, as you will be my Acolyte God representing me.” Amaterasu said.

“Missions”? Soma asked

“Since we in the higher ups are not able to directly intervene in affairs on the Surface, we send Acolytes on missions in order to help protect the world. My mikos will fill you in on what an Acolyte will do.” Amaterasu replied as Soma nodded his head.

“Oh one more thing my son.” Amaterasu asked

“Try not to fall for either miko, they’re both cute but they are only human~”

“I’ll...take note of that.” Soma replied as he rolled his eyes.

“Now, I have to get going, be sure to let me know when you make it there, alright?” Amaterasu said like a mother would.

“I’ll see you then, goodbye Mother.” Soma said as he waved at her.

As the flames dissipated, Amaterasu turned to a bearded man who was in the room for quite some time.

“So you’ve sent him to the surface then?” the bearded man said as he adjusted his obsidian shaded goggles.

“It had to be done, despite the fact that he lost his job to a machine of all things. there is also the matter of-” She said as she pointed at the folder handed to her earlier.

“No need to talk about it. I understand, Amaterasu” he said as he gave a gentle chuckle.

She took a sigh, smiled and gave him a warm embrace.

“It’s good to see you, Hephaestus, old friend” she said as she took a grin.

“Are you sure this was the right choice?” he then asked, in a stern tone.

Amaterasu’s face turned serious once again and replied with “I’m sure.”

“Due to his faith being low like other lower class deities, he is as good as a mortal down there.” Hephaestus said, who shook his head.

“Since he is my Acolyte, he will be fine.” Amaterasu replied, with confidence.

“I suppose. I’ve treated young Soma like a nephew since he was a hatchling. He even inherited my love for smithing.” Hephaestus replied as he chuckled.

“He inherited your love for smithing so much that he’d rather do that than do his actual job.” Amaterasu said, stroking her own head.

“Well he sure inherited your short temper” He replied.

Both looked at each other in silence and laughed soon after.

Amaterasu then glared at the folder once again and shook her head.

Meanwhile, Officer Chowa walked into a hallway lined with pillars to the side with sentient suits of armor lined up. The left side was full of black metal suits and the right were lined with white metal suits. At the end of the hall, a lady with black hair and snow white bangs awaited. She had a long scroll laid out on the desk in front of her. She held a war fan on her right hand and her left hand was on the scroll. A peculiar bow was seen on her back, it was lined with gold but the body was divided into two, the top limb being black while the bottom limb was white.

“Has the Yatagarasu been notified of his ejection from the Asphodel?” The lady spoke with a cold and stern tone.

“Yes, Lady Tsuriai.” Officer Chowa replied with utmost respect.

“Perfect, good work Chowa. Now everything that needs to be done today is finished.” She smiled.

“That machine is quite marvelous, being able to make the divine duty of a God obsolete. The Oni had been on the surface for a long time, Lady Tsuriai?” the black-white officer asked.

“Correct, the Onis did work hard in building the giant regulator after all.” Tsuriai replied in a more friendly tone.

“Why was it that they wanted to replace Lord Soma anyway?” Chowa said, puzzled..

“Well it is quite simple really, it is because-”

Before she can reply, Tsuriai was met with a red serpent who took a leap and took on the look of an individual with a similar attire to that of Officer Chowa.

“Lady Tsuriai, I have submitted the portfolio to Lady Amaterasu.”

The officer spoke, with diligence, obedience and class.

“Perfect, good work Xiuh. You may take a rest.” she replied

“Both of you may take a break or even go back to your posts if you so wish. Today’s tasks are finished~”

A bone serpent suddenly broke itself through the gates towards Tsuriai in which the guards struggled to repel it with their bare hands, but with one flick of her fan fully closed, the one light

source in the room, a singular candle was snuffed out and after lighting it, the bone serpent was gone, only leaving behind a small chunk of bone that shortly after, dissipated into black ash.

“I wish conflict did not have to end in bloodshed or death all the time.” Tsuriai said with a sigh.

The third day came and Soma’s forge was but a barren shell of its former glory. He sat at his desk, delicately pieced together his final gun and took off those obsidian goggles.

“Alright, the last gun is finally finished.” Soma sighed in relief.

However, this particular firearm appeared more delicate than the others. An ornate hand cannon, ebony in color with the words “Portae Mortis est scriptor”. The gun had a dial that was located on the handle with different icons. Soma then held the gun and shot a training dummy on one end of his now empty forge. The shot was a dark purple energy that blew a hole in the dummy which then engulfed in a purple flame.

“Perfect,” Soma admired his own craftsmanship.

“Hey Soma, you ready?” Cyrus called from outside. “Yeah, I’m just about done.” Soma replied as he holstered the gun to his hip.

As Soma took one last look at his now emptied forge, he grabbed the orange orb, which promptly shrunk to the size of a small ball and stuffed it into his left pants pocket.

The two set off to a pathway leading upwards to leave The Crag, where they were met with a sign that read “Dante’s Avenue”. As the two ascended the avenue, vengeful spirits roamed around minding their own business, Oni merchants along the way in this long road upwards had set up stalls for food, beverages and other things.

“I’ll miss these streets,” Soma said, as he waved to some of the merchants who knew him.

“Hell has become a bit more lively since you moved here.” Cyrus said as he had his hands behind his neck, elbows up.

“Really?” Soma asked.

“Due to the flames being unregulated, vengeful spirits always went and controlled a piece of it, causing havoc wherever they went.” Cyrus replied as he took a deep sigh. “Added to that, you defeated ‘Atman, the Anguished’ and made order even in the Underworld. You’re a hero, Soma!”

He thought of the day he fought a large dark suit of armor in a deeper sector of Hell. It had a dark purple aura, and emitted lightning sparks. It lay waste on any demon or life for that matter that approached its vicinity. A small child approached its border and was about to be slashed by a sword twice Atman size. Soma carried the child to safety, although it had some cuts and bruises from it.

“Well I mean I wouldn’t call myself a hero, I’m just doing my job.” Soma said.

“Besides, doesn’t the Royal Family have power down here?”

“The royal guards only keep the palace in check, and well..Dad never leaves the palace.” Cyrus replied, who looked in the other direction.

“Well there’s Monty, right?” Soma asked, scratching his head

“Well, ever since Lady Tsuriai came down here one hundred years ago, the Council of the Seven started running the place with their decrees, remember? We’re more like figureheads, the only real governing left in our family are my siblings' respective circles under Dante’s Avenue...” Cyrus began to look a little sorrowful.

A small female Oni child approached Soma and gave him a small gemstone.

“Lord Soma, I hope you remember us when you move to the surface.” The small child said.

“Don’t worry, I will always remember you all down here.” Soma said with a grin.

Cyrus let out a small smile, where he waited for Soma to walk once again. As the two walked, several more Oni approached Soma, gave him gifts and small trinkets. They cheered and embraced him.

A muscular oni approached Soma with a table, accompanied by Hitori.

“Lord Soma, let’s do one last arm wrestling match” the muscular oni said, determined to win.

“You’re on!” Soma replied as the two immediately went at it.

Soma struggled at first, with the Oni having more muscular strength. However, Soma managed to just barely win, much to the Oni’s dismay. The two did a handshake and the God along with the young prince moved along the road.

As the two approached the end of Dante’s Avenue, Soma waved at the villagers goodbye. The layout of the cavern changed as they strayed farther from the Avenue. From red rocks and sand, to the normal gray stalagmites found in any cave fill the ceiling. The two were now away from the Nine Circles, the stone pathway now led them to their destination in the distance.

It was a giant torii gate that stood on a pond that separated Soma and Cyrus’ side and outside. The only thing that connected the two was a red Oriental style wooden bridge that went through the torii gate.

“-and so this bone serpent opened its ribcage like this wide to try and trap me” Cyrus said as he extended his arms really wide.

Soma smiled as the two walked but immediately stopped dead in his tracks, with a fierce glare in his eyes.

“GET BACK” Soma said as he grabbed Cyrus’ arm and dragged the boy behind him. It wasn’t long before a giant metallic automaton smashed through the nearest wall with its chainsaw-like left arm. It then promptly attempted to lunge at the young boy. The right arm of this mechanical menace was more veiny, organic and slender. A dark purple energy that appeared like electricity connected each joint together, the head took the shape of a knight’s helmet with tubes that connected to it that appeared like a gas mask.

Soma’s expression turned serious, with a rather dark look in his eyes.

“Cyrus, take this!” Soma said as he passed the gun he made to the young man. His voice immediately turned monotone, stern and with murderous intent. Cyrus, surprised at Soma’s new demeanor, complied.

“I was going to give this to you by the time we reached the torii gate and say our goodbyes. But it appears that has changed so let’s use this opportunity as a test run. Keep your distance and make sure you shoot your shots.”

“I can help using my domain too! I can use my blade with you-” Cyrus tried to say, only to be stopped by Soma’s cold glare.

The automaton emitted a dark purple aura, something that Soma had a relative familiarity of. “This automaton had a similar energy signature to Atman the Anguished.” Soma thought.

“What is your business here, automaton?” Soma shouted, only to receive a lunge swiftly with the left arm, which Soma evaded. The rotating blades cut a couple strands of Soma’s hair.

“Cyrus Capsaicin! You have been requested either dead or alive by Doctor Avogadro!” The automaton spoke in a distorted tone, ignoring Soma.

Soma’s eyes widened by that statement, where he spoke the words: “Divine Armory - Vulcanus, Level 1!” which summoned three guns that he forged, floating behind him.

“Your boss will be quite disappointed. He not only will fail to retrieve the head of the Prince, but he will also receive a box of scraps at his doorstep.” Soma said as small segments of his right arm opened, which released flames that took the shape of a sword.

“You will be fighting me, machine!”