

SCHAN'S ODYSSEY



WRITTEN BY REYADH RAHAMAN

ART BY EZRE

The bold adventurer and his companions approached the base of the volcano amidst a sea of maelstroms. They reached the shore with a soft squelching as the blobfish, that was both ally and vessel, made landfall.

“We’re here,” she announced, which prompted the two on her back to leap off, onto the dark volcanic soil of the small, yet deadly, island.

“Thanks Essi, I’ll send you the signal when it’s done. If... it gets done,” Schan replied, nervous of the task ahead of him.

“You’ll be fine, just remember who you are. And don’t die! If you do, I’ll taint your entire Red Vine treasury with ambergris. Fresh ambergris!” the blobfish replied sinisterly. Without waiting for a response, she began cackling maniacally before descending beneath the waves of the whirlpool-crowded sea, her mirth rising as a stream of bubbles as she faded from sight.

“Will she be alright?” Schan’s other companion asked, who was a curvaceous massage chair of sensual origin. “I know we rode here on her back and all, but this sea is plagued with threats...”

“Fret not, Hengde. Essi is not only a Greater Blobfish, but a master of spatial magic: one capable of summoning black holes at will. I fear more for these maelstroms!” Schan chuckled confidently while patting the chair on the back. She smiled in response with her simple, yet lovely face that consisted solely of a luscious pair of red lips upon the area one would rest their neck, if seated upon her.

After banishing his battle-buddy’s concern, he turned his attention to the steeply sloping incline that was leading up the volcano and grimaced. Somewhere upon this active volcanic island was a demon who had robbed Schan of something he treasured dearly. Something the bold adventurer had vowed to retrieve, regardless of the threat or cost.

“Come, Hengde, let us ascend. Idling here is probably a bad idea, for that hideous fiend who stole part of my soul is likely already aware of our presence.” Without complaint, Hengde the massage chair was hoisted upon Schan’s strong back and broad shoulders with little effort. He held her by her arms securely, yet comfortably. Without delay they began their rise up the treacherous side of the burning mountain.

About a third of the way up, which took close to three hours of hiking to reach, came the first great threat of their ascent. As Schan and Hengde stopped before a coursing river of lava, contemplating how to proceed, they were ambushed!

A flash of pale fur and wicked glints of steel were what greeted the companions from the shadow of the volcano, though with quick reflexes Schan swung Hengde before himself, deflecting the nearly unseeable attacks, which repelled the foe to a nearby rock. “Nice try, but you’ll have to do better than that!” the mighty adventurer challenged, which made Hengde giggle confidently.

“Merely a test,” responded their assailant, who rose slowly to their minute stature upon a boulder forking the river of lava. To the left rose the volcano, from which poured molten rock and to the right, downhill, came a hissing from the lava meeting the sea. The steam rose, partially obscuring the area in translucent, ivory plumes. “You’ll not survive my REAL attacks,” threatened the feline assassin. Their white and black fur bristled with intensity and their yellow eyes glared with hatred. In each front paw they held a tantō in reverse grip. The small, silvery, curved blades reflected the red-orange light from the lava sinisterly.

Schan dusted soot from his shoulder before assuming a combat stance with Hengde held before him, one meant for fast, agile foes. He had never fought a feline assassin before, but from his past adventures to the far east, he learned that speedy, dextrous enemies could most effectively be defeated with singular, well timed, powerful strikes. To land such a hit on this nimble foe, however, he would need an opening of some sort. So, as Schan physically readied for the assassin’s attack, he mentally prepared himself to seize the first opportunity that would present itself.

“For the glory of the Bundt Cake Demon!” Hissed the cat as it launched itself into a steam cloud nearby.

In faster than a blink, they appeared behind Schan, who barely had time to react. “F-fast-” the chair-wielder gasped while parrying two simultaneous dagger strikes. In another blink, the cat was gone, returned to the folds of steam, which had now grown quite thick.

“This will be tricky,” Hengde pointed out. “If only there was a way to deal with this steam...”

As she said this, an idea sparked from within Schan’s mind. “That’s it, Hengde!” He announced, but before he could continue, the dual-wielding feline reappeared. Instead of a double slash, the cat pounced forth with a two-fold thrusting attack, intent on piercing the adventurer’s red t-shirt. Instead of deflecting this attack, though, Schan side-stepped it, causing the attacker to whizz past, back into the clouds of pale vapour. “I’m getting used to their speed, we just need to spot them a bit sooner to be able to land a hit.”

With that, Schan began to use Hengde as a fan. Though, he did not use her in a wavering, back-and-forth motion, but began to spin around. Faster and faster he twirled, which left the cat no openings to attack while dissipating much of the surrounding mist. “Spinning around repeatedly while seated on me must have been great practice for this maneuver,” Hengde joked.

“Heh, not even REMOTELY dizzy,” Schan smiled as he peered into the steamy surroundings. To his right, he spotted an incoming blur, but this time, thanks to the added visibility, he was more than ready. The furry fiend rocketed forth, holding one tantō in regular grip and one in reverse, this time intent on two separate attacks instead of one made with both weapons. As the first dagger approached, Schan blocked with Hengde’s seat, catching it in front of him. With their momentum halted, and their attack angle blocked, the small ninja attempted to retreat, but could not.

“Not so fast, kitty!” Hengde taunted as Schan swung her upwards. This maneuver, immensely swift and with as great a force as Schan could muster, broke the bones of the paw the feline foe was using to hold the trapped dagger. As they broke, so did the cat’s grip, and they were launched upwards, thirty feet into the air above the warrior.

“I have you now!” Schan roared as he threw Hengde into the sky, after the cat, with a tremendous amount of power. In the air, Hengde slammed into the assassin with a skull-shattering impact. Both stunned and crippled, the baleful foe was slammed towards the river of lava. Unable to adjust their course, they plunged into the scorching river with a horrid sound: the screeching of a fiend succumbing to death mixed with the hissing of burning flesh. Soon, though, the immolated body was overrun by endlessly flowing lava, marking the end of this threat.

As Hengde descended back to the ground, she landed on the other side of the river of lava. The dagger lodged into her seat cushion freed itself due to the sudden landing and ricocheted off a rock, joining its master in the flow of lava. “Hey, that boulder leaves a gap in the lava! Schan, you can cross here with but a couple leaps,” she advised. “Just be careful!”

Schan gave a thumbs up to his ally across from the obstacle before leaning over in a half-squat and breathing deeply. The amount of focus required to track, and counter, the little ninja’s attacks were tiring, but through many quests Schan had gained the stamina of a stallion. Within a few breaths, he was back to normal and ready to continue his mission. With two great leaps he crossed the red-orange river utilizing Hengde’s advice and together they proceeded onwards, though the chair’s frame was cracked and her lower cushion gouged.

“You’re going to repair me when we get back, right?” She queried, pursing her thick, red lips in a sassy manner.

“Of course! Though, you were designed to be destructible. That is to say, rebuildable,” Schan reminded her as he swung her onto his back, into their usual travelling posture.

“You jerk! That doesn’t mean you have to break me EVERY time we go out,” Hengde complained, though more light-heartedly in tone than her words indicated.

And so the friendly banter continued as the two ascended the volcano. As they rose, there were no more steam clouds, but the way was now plagued with great crags and fissures. Some leading down to the sea below the island, others into underground pockets of magma. Neither would be a good place to end up, Schan noted as he made his way carefully upward. There were geysers of superheated water and pools of foul smelling, yellow-green sulphur as well, which made the terrain even more hazardous.

The pair carefully climbed up the rocky steppes, avoiding the threats as much as they could, but a far more dangerous one appeared about two-thirds of their way up the flame-belching mountain.

“What the hell is that?” Hengde asked in shock as a new foe revealed itself. Up, from a crag leading from the salty depths below the island, rose a shimmering, gray stretch of brine-soaked fabric. It spoke not, nor made any indication that it was hostile, but floated before Schan while waving in the wind.

Cautiously, Schan tried to make his way around it, but every time he did, the drenched towel blocked his path. Regardless of the speed or agility he used, no dash, feint, or dodge allowed him to pass the brilliantly glowing shroud. Schan sighed in annoyance, “are we really going to have to fight a TOWEL? Well, at least it should be less taxing than the tiny shinobi panther.”

But it was not. For no matter what Schan and Hengde tried, they could not harm the towel. Nothing seemed to phase it, even forcibly submerging it in lava, boiling water, and sulphur. “This stupid thing is indestructable!” Hengde accused in frustration. “How are we going to get past this thing?”

And at his weapon’s words, another idea sparked into the hero’s mind. “WE...don’t. I wonder what would happen if it tries to block both of us at once, from different sides.” With that, Schan lobbed Hengde over the towel, who landed upon a stretch of land between a sulphur pool and a deep fissure.

“Okay, cool. Now what?” Asked the chair from the other side of the towel.

“Depends, what does this thing look like from that side? Any weaknesses?” Schan replied to his ally.

“Uh...oh!” Hengde started, noticing something. “The other side isn’t glowing. In fact, it doesn’t even look like a towel from this side. Just a black square. Wait, something is coming out...coming out of the blackness!”

It was then that a severely echoing voice was heard, “who DARES look upon my backside?” It asked angrily. The object flipped around, turning its shimmering side to Hengde, revealing its back to Schan. From a blackened space, the adventurer saw naught but a horizontal tear filled with perfectly straight, white teeth. Like that of a handsome human with impeccable dental hygiene.

“...I guess I am?” Schan logically stated with a shrug.

“What? Another who dares to stare at my backside?!” roared the mouth, even more angrily than before. It then swung around once more, turning its brilliant side to Schan. Though, this time, it only paused briefly before doing the same thing again. Speeding up, it kept flipping from one side to another with increasingly angry scowls and curses. Soon, it was nothing more than a spinning towel of profanity. “Damn you! Scum! Perverts! Leave me with my modesty! Foul degenerates!” it shouted, working itself into a small tornado of light which sent salty spray everywhere.

“Maybe we should just...go...” Schan announced cautiously while circling around the madly spinning fabric to retrieve his companion.

“Yeah, let’s just go before it notices...” Hengde agreed.

Together, they resumed their advance up the volcano, while keeping their eyes on the enraged towel. When they had travelled about a hundred feet from the wet and wild shroud, however, there was a brilliant flash and a crack like thunder! The towel had exponentially increased its energy output to the point of rending space-time. Before Schan’s very eyes, the towel tore a hole in the fabric of reality, something only capable of indestructible forces and beings close to Gods in might. Through this hole, the towel vanished, but after doing so a small, black dot of a singularity appeared near to it. The black singularity gently touched the tear and they both wavered suddenly before disappearing in a short twirl of deepest black and brightest white. What remained afterwards was nothing, save the natural features of the landscape.

Then, in the form of an ominous, but short, ethereal litany came a voice simply saying one thing repeatedly before fading incrementally from Schan's ears and mind. "You're welcome... You're welcome... You're welcome..." the voice chorused before silence returned.

"Okay, now, what was THAT?!" Hengde asked, alarm apparent.

Schan chuckled in response, "That was just Essi, I'm sure". He leaned back, angling his head to the sky, "Thank you! I'm sure the planet is grateful for you sealing that rift!" There was no response, however Schan sensed in his gut that the Greater Blobfish sorcerer had heard.

Tirelessly, the two climbed on, despite the slope becoming far steeper. With his hands occupied behind his back, holding Hengde securely, Schan clambered up the rocky face of the volcano not unlike a mountain goat. Upon small footholds and jutting rocks he stepped and jumped with the physical acuity of one who had spent a lifetime hiking the various cliffs and mountains of the world. The summit of the burning mountain was high, though, and it took him until sunset to reach it. But when he did, he found the one who he truly sought: the Bundt Cake Demon who had rent and stole a piece of his soul.

The demon floated malevolently above the centre of the volcano, directly over a lake of lava. Around the lake was a relatively thin ring of black, charred stone. There were a few great cracks and gouges in the rock, which explained the rivers of lava flowing downwards across the island. "Welcome, strong Schan," cackled the demon, I can see my minions were no match for you!" His humanoid, muscular form was wreathed in translucent, dark red flames, which glowed bright pink over a huge scar in his chest. The bundt cake, that was his head, was adorned with fierce, angry eyes that burned hotter than the volcano's vomit.

"I vowed to make my soul whole again and nothing will stop me from keeping my word!" Replied the adventurer, now holding Hengde in front of himself, ready for anything. "Return the fragment to me, foul fiend!"

"Return?" The demon scoffed, "I see you still don't recall the truth..." he continued as he floated forward, stopping but mere feet from Schan and Hengde. "I do not have something of yours, but..." he trailed off as his bundt cake head angled forward, aiming the top towards Schan. From the hole in the gooey, white centre then appeared a face: one all too familiar. Looking at Schan now from the demonic bundt cake it spoke while frosting melted from it, revealing its features, "...you have something of MINE!" shouted the new face, identical to Schan's.

Schan and Hengde both gasped, shocked and frightened. “What...but...how?! What is this trickery?!” The adventurer yelled. “This is surely a ruse to set me off guard. It will not work, demon!”

“WE are a demon, Schan. We have always been. Long ago, at the result of a grievous wound, you, my good half, were cleaved from my psyche and being. Long have I let you wander, on your adventures, but the time draws near for the next step in my plan. I need to be complete, therefore I reached out, through the void, to reclaim you, but...you’re more stubborn than I thought. Having grown mighty in your travels, I was only able to retrieve a small portion: the fragment which you seek.” The demon then paused, allowing the information to sink in.

Schan’s jaw dropped. It all made sense now. That longing he had within him all these years for something unseen, his inability to remember his past, and the empty sensation he constantly felt, regardless of how many Red Vines he consumed. His eyes glazed over in deep thought. “Schan... are you okay?” Asked Hengde, great concern in her voice accompanied by a quivering lower lip.

His companion’s voice shook him from the depths of his waking reverie, “Yes, I’m quite alright,” he responded. He then looked himself straight in the eyes and spoke boldly, remembering who he really was. Not the slice of a demon’s soul, but the man, the brave adventurer, he had been these past few decades. The words of his friends and allies in his mind, and heart, he rejected the thought of perishing to this foul fiend’s whim. “Demon!” he directed, forcefully, “It does not matter what lies in the past, as before me, as always, is only the future! I am NO LONGER part of you, I am you and you are a part of me!”

“Enough! Let us settle this,” the demon roared before flying towards Schan swiftly and savagely.

Instead of his usual tactic of swinging Hengde at foes, he placed her gently on the ground and stood, with arms stretched out to the side, facing the incoming demon. He welcomed himself into his arms and wrapped them around his evil half until one could not be distinguished one from the other. Merging into one, their psyches did battle on the plane of pure willpower and mental fortitude. Their spirits clashed violently and a tug of war for the soul raged until the sun fully set below the horizon.

In the red-orange glow of the lava, Hengde watched helplessly as Schan and the demon wrestled for control over their destiny and being. The harsh light cast deep shadows about the rocky ring of the volcano’s summit, as if specters of the abyss were lingering, watching, and waiting for the victor of the conflict to emerge.

Just then, an echoing voice from beyond chorused throughout the sky once more. That of a Greater Blobfish sorcerer, "...Remember who you are...Don't die!...Fresh ambergris!..." and then was gone as quickly as it came.

Hengde saw that it had greatly affected the battle, and sensed that Schan's will was beginning to overpower the demon's from the expression on the body's face: the happy, cheerful smile of an explorer travelling new lands. She added her voice to that of Essi's and cheered on Schan's spirit, "YOU CAN DO IITTT!!!" She screamed as loudly as she could.

And then, at sentiments as strong as the sea, like a tidal wave smothering a descending river of lava, Schan's mind overwhelmed the demon's, taking full control of the body and snuffing out the fiend's mental fire like a mere candle. His gaze focused and he returned to his usual self, though drained from the conflict he fell backwards.

With a deft reaction, Hengde moved to her friend and she caught him in a comfortable sitting position. One they had enjoyed together countless times in the past. Unfortunately, though, Schan has passed out from the exertion. She gently kissed him on the back of the neck before whispering softly, "Don't worry, I got you pal." She noticed that despite being his usual self, Schan now had a faint red aura about his body.

Hengde then carefully made her way down the volcano, retracing their path of ascension. The way was rough, and by the time she reached the shore of their arrival, she had lost three of her five wheels. When approaching the sea, however, Schan awoke in the darkness of night. The briny breeze's sharp scent has revived him to a starlit night enhanced in crimson by the glow of the mountain's molten spew. Dim, but with enough light that he could see lapping waves and the furious maelstroms in the distance. "Are we...still alive?" He asked his sensual massage chair, who he noticed was missing a few bits.

"Barely." Hengde replied before nibbling on Schan's ear from behind, almost angrily, "You owe me some new wheels! Just because I have spare parts doesn't mean I want to use them. Have you ever had to break in THREE new wheels at once?"

"I don't know how that would even begin to feel," Schan replied drowsily, adjusting his blue denim jeans sluggishly.

"Imagine having to get used to a new foot! Ignorant human..." she compared while scolding the explorer without real venom. "Whatever, it's fine, let's just go home. I want some Red Vines."

At the mention of his most treasured treat, Schan perked up and remembered their way off this lava leaking island. “Time to give Essi the signal,” he said as he rose and took a taco out of a frontal pocket, still completely intact and untarnished, and held it up to the starry sky. It glowed with a delicious aura from absorbing the light, as the sorcerer told him it would. Following the rest of the instructions for sending the signal, he placed the tempting taco into the shallows of the rocky beach. Within moments, the Greater Blobfish appeared up from the depths and devoured the beacon.

“Well done, ready to head out? I could go for some Red Vines as well, actually,” the blobfish spoke, as if she was there, in the conversation, the whole time.

“Yes, let's,” Schan said as he grabbed Hengde and hopped onto Essi’s back.

And off into the night they sailed, weaving between maelstroms and waving at sea monsters they passed by. Schan’s new aura glowed and lit their path, and forever remained about his person, a remnant from the demonic energy he had become one with. For, in essence, he was both the Bundt Cake Demon and the bold adventurer, complete and one for the first time in a long while. But his mind was singular and that of a man. One who embraced and had conquered his darker side with naught but his will. He rode the waves; towards home, and towards treasured treats, but feeling much more complete than before.