











## **Copyright**

I Got a Cheat Skill in Another World and Became Unrivaled in the Real World, Too 6

### Miku

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ISEKAI DE CHEAT SKILL WO TE NI SHITA ORE WA, GENJITSU SEKAI WOMO MUSO SURU, Volume 6~LEVEL UP WA JINSEI WO KAETA~

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## **Prologue**

The World's Landfill.

In this place, a place where all the world's negative forces swirl, a Demon was humming.

"Hmm, hmm, hmm. Now, how should I kill them? Chopping would be good. But burning's always fun... Ah, scattering poison might be great, too! Oh, imagine the screams! I can't wait!"

The Demon was saying terrible things like that.

He looked like a young boy, with deep red hair and distinctive heterochromatic eyes, one red and one blue.

Another Demon appeared beside the boyish Demon.

This new Demon was a handsome young man with blue-black hair and golden eyes, with a somewhat detached and aloof aura.

"You seem to be in a good mood."

"Hmm? Well, I suppose so. After all, I can finally kill those Deities! I'm so excited, I haven't been able to sleep."

"Hmm... Well, if you're that into the idea... Then I suppose you won't protest if I give you a job to do."

"Huh? A job? What's going on?"

The young Demon seemed excited as he questioned the somewhat pompoussounding Demon.

The handsome Demon smiled.

"Rejoice. This is your first task: Destroy the country of Regal."

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"Regal...?"
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The boyish Demon was puzzled. He did not know this country.

"Hmm... Come to think of it, I don't know any human countries, do I? Ah-ha-ha!"

"Sigh... This is no laughing matter. You need a basic understanding of geography. How else are you supposed to go off on missions?"

"All right, all right... So then, what's in this country you want me to destroy?"

"The Deity of Swords."

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"—I"
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The boyish Demon's eyes widened.

"According to our intel, the Deity of Swords is currently residing in Regal. Moreover, a national foundation festival will soon be held there. Many people will gather. So, what do you think? It's the perfect stage for you to carry out your aims, no?"

""

The boyish Demon looked up when the handsome Demon stopped talking.

The young boy was smiling maliciously.

"Amaaazing! I mean, seriously? You're going to just hand this Deity of Swords over to me? And not only that, a whole country full of people, too?"

"Yeah."

"You're not lying, are you?! If this is some sort of trick, I'll kill you!"

"I'm not lying. How about it? Will you take the job?"

The boyish Demon grinned and nodded.

"You got yourself a deal!"

"Hmph...good. However, we *must* time the attack to coincide with Regal's foundation festival. Got it?"

"You don't have to tell me that! After all, that event will attract more humans, right?! In fact, there's no better opportunity! Ah, it sounds just peachy! A

slaughter party! I'll create the best hellscape ever!"

The boyish Demon was filled with a desire to massacre as many people as possible as soon as he could. But he was prepared to hold back until conditions were right for the maximum possible level of carnage.

Still, it was hard for him to contain his excitement. Something seemed to occur to him, and he looked quizzically at the handsome Demon.

"But...why bring this job to me? I thought *you* were going to kill the Deity of Swords."

"Indeed, it is likely the Deity of Swords defeated the Deity of Fists, and I did bestow that man with powers. But there's no reason I have to be the one to take revenge. As long as one of my—one of *our* own slays the Deity of Swords and wipes out humanity, well...that'll be just fine."

"Hmm... Well, whatever you want. I'll leave all that complicated stuff to you and the Deity."

"We'd like you to use your head as well."

"That's a tall order. Me, I'm always thinking about how to kill someone in the most interesting way, and I don't have the time to think about anything else!"

"...Anyway, I'll leave Regal to you. We'll be busy preparing to attack other countries."

"Okay, then. Can I head out now?"

"All right, but what are you going to do?"

"Hmm? Oh, that's a seeecret. ♪"

"...Well, as long as you don't blow our cover, you can do what you like."

"Woo-hoo! All righty, I'm going to get there ASAP and start prepping stuff to make sure those humans are good and annihilated!" The boyish Demon was now preoccupied with murdering the people of a land he'd yet to even see. "Oh, that's right. Can I borrow some of your Fallen Deities?"

"Hmm? The Fallen Deities?"

"Yeah."

"...That's surprising. I thought for sure you would want to do it all by yourself..."

"Huh? Don't say that. Don't you know? Massacring as a group is sometimes even more fun than going solo."

"I see. In that case..."

The handsome Demon snapped his fingers and a crack opened in midair, from which two figures emerged.

One was a half-naked man with a slender yet toned body. He had short, dark blue hair and sharp, narrow eyes, and on his back, he carried a spear that was longer than he was tall.

The other one was a man wearing an all-black outfit similar to that worn by Earth's ninjas, with his mouth covered in a similar black cloth. He had long green hair tied back in a ponytail, and his eyes, which were the same shade of green, were cold and steely. Two sickles hung from his belt.

The two men immediately prostrated themselves before the two Demons.

""...You called?""

"How about these two?"

"Yeah, they'll do. Let's see... Looks like a Deity of Spears and a Deity of Sickles?"

"Right. Though they are under our command now, they were once Deities. I doubt you'll have any issues with them."

Like the handsome Demon had just explained, the two new arrivals were originally Deities who'd tangled with the Demons, lost, and become the Demons' pawns. They were now known as Fallen Deities.

The pair of Fallen Deities kept their heads bowed low, but their bodies trembled in the presence of the two Demons.

The waves of power emanating from the two Demons were palpable. Clearly, they were not evenly matched.

The boyish Demon saw how the two shivered and grinned sadistically at

them. Then, suddenly, a fresh spatial distortion appeared.

The distortion seemed to be a seeping of darkness, and this distortion itself gradually took shape, until eventually a monster materialized.

The monster opened its red eyes.

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"Grr... Gragh..."
"Huh?!"
"Th-that's..."
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The two Fallen Deities immediately dropped into battle stances upon seeing the monster.

As soon as the monster's eyes focused and spotted what appeared to be a boy, it sprang forward to attack.

But the boyish Demon merely raised an eyebrow.

"Ah. This is why I hate the newly generated so much. They don't understand power imbalances, and they have no fear of death. It's really no fun at all... Just a pain to deal with."

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"Graow?"
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The boyish Demon flicked his hand irritably, smacking the monster aside and sending it tumbling pathetically to the dirt.

The Deity of Spears, who'd been watching dumbfounded, suddenly spoke.

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"Th-that monster..."
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"Ah, your first time seeing one? One of the great failures of us Demons...
That's a Demon Beast.

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"A D-Demon Beast..."

"Yep, yep."
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"Hmm, it's not so much a failure perhaps, more a cluster of our dregs. Nothing special, but if you train them up, you can make some use of them. After all, we've got a ton. They can be pretty useful in a fight."

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" "
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The two Fallen Deities were rendered speechless.

"Yep, they're our dregs... But our dregs were still enough to kill your kind, weren't they? Ah-ha-ha!"

The boyish Demon chuckled, and the two Fallen Deities went pale.

Monsters like that, that could easily kill them... And there were "a ton" of them?

Any way they sliced it, it was clear that the Deities were wholly outmatched by the Demons.

"But you should go easier on them. Now that one's useless."

"Really? It'll be fine, just needs a little healing."

"Better to put it out of its misery instead of going to the trouble of healing it. But then it'd be a waste of effort to kill it. So just leave it be."

"Ah-ha-hah! N-now, that's cold!"

"There are a ton of them, after all."

The boyish Demon continued chuckling for a moment, then spoke again to the smiling handsome Demon.

"Well, I'll be off, then. I'll take a few Beasts with me, too, if that's cool?"

"Fine, do what you want. I look forward to getting a favorable report."

"All righty. But hey... Why are you two just standing there? Make yourselves useful or you're dead, got it?"

"—! S-so sorry!"

The boyish Demon snorted at the panicking Deities, then sauntered off.

The handsome Demon watched them go, then also left to take care of his own tasks.

Only the Demon Beast that had been sent flying minutes before remained.

"Grr... Graaagh..."

The Demon Beast was on the verge of death, barely breathing.

Yet...

"Guh... Gah?"

Something resembling a magic circle began to materialize beneath the fallen Demon Beast, a magic circle that then began to glow with an intense light.

The Demon Beast tried to escape the magic circle, but its movements were hindered, and it became trapped in the glowing light.

Then, once the glow subsided... The Demon Beast was gone.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, around the same time the Demon was starting his plan, a topsecret experiment was being conducted in the dungeons of the Regal royal castle. The castle where Lexia and company had recently visited.

Figures in black robes surrounded a magic circle, each holding some sort of tome in their hands. They were having a discussion among themselves.

The robed figures were mages of the land of Regal.

"...How's the progress?"

"—! Your Majesty!"

Orgis, king of Regal, and a woman in an elegant dress descended the stairs.

The woman was about the same age as Yuuya, with long curly blond hair and golden eyes to match. She was a combination of flashy and elegant.

The woman stood a step behind King Orgis, her willful gaze lowered demurely.

One of the robed figures spoke up.

"It's going well. I had no idea that this kind of magic existed, but..."

"Well, that makes sense... To go so far as trying to summon a hero or heroine from another world."

If Yuuya had been present, his ears would have pricked up at what the king had just said.

Orgis took one of the tomes from a nearby mage and briefly skimmed its pages.

"A long time ago...in the world of fairy tales populated by beings like that legendary dragon everyone was talking about recently... A mythical being existed. Human, and at the same time, godlike... A Sage. Apparently, this Sage wandered, only once, into another world of sorts...and from this, a new kind of magic was born."

"Yes. The Sage learned of the existence of another world and created a spell to travel between that world and ours. We managed to procure some of the Sage's research materials."

"I see. And so this magic circle is you putting that research into practice..."

As King Orgis spoke, he examined the large magic circle drawn on the ground before him.

In the past, adventurers had gone out into the world seeking the writings of wise men across the land. Countries had waged war to acquire such valuable knowledge.

However, as time passed, nations made treaties designed to stop the fighting over the writings of Sages, and adventurers were forbidden from searching for them.

The documents that had already been obtained were treated like national treasures, and the countries that possessed them delved deep into their research.

But the magic within the writings was powerful, and could not be wielded effectively by mere humans.

What's worse, some Sage magic had unknown properties that could only be discovered *after* the spells were cast, and many were incredibly dangerous. While research was permitted in recent years, the casting of Sage magic was forbidden throughout the world.

"The Sage's tale speaks of this other world, of how it developed technology completely unknown to us, of how prosperous it is."

"And yet we are desperate enough to seek this unknown technology, aren't we?"

"...Yes."

One of the magicians nodded gravely in response to Orgis's words.

King Orgis lowered his gaze, his mouth twisting in a grim frown, but then he looked up again with a light of determination flashing in his eyes.

"...But if we do not pursue this, we will surely be annihilated by the Demons. We have no choice but to continue."

"…"

"The Deity of Swords said there was no need for concern, but all across the land, Deities have disappeared. They were supposed to stand in opposition to the Demons. Does this mean they have been defeated? Or does it mean that..."

Imagining the worst-case scenario, Orgis grimaced.

Orgis had heard from the Deity of Swords he had invited into his home that the Demons had returned, and that Deities were gradually disappearing.

The Deity of Swords knew the missing Deities had actually fallen under the sway of the Demons. But they did not tell Orgis this, knowing as well as he did that it was supposed to be the duty of the Deities to fight against the Demons.

After a big sigh, Orgis called out to the young woman standing behind him.

"...Lyla."

She was Orgis's daughter, the first-born princess of the nation of Regal.

Her beauty and intellect were admired by the people, and much like Lexia of the Kingdom of Arselia, she was extremely popular.

Lyla responded to Orgis with a dignified attitude.

"Yes, Father?"

"If we carry out this summoning...then we will surely receive pushback from countries across the world. We are asking humans from another world to help solve our domestic problems. In a sense...we are kidnapping them. Of course, we intend to treat them with the utmost hospitality once they are summoned.

If a great hero does appear to us, we shall reward him with all the beautiful women he could desire. Possibly...I would be obliged to offer you up as well."

"...I understand."

Lyla was aware of the importance of the magic they were undertaking here, as well as its potential brutality.

If the summoning failed, then it would spell doom for all in this realm. But if it succeeded, it would mean having humans from another plane fight on their behalf.

Either way, there would be no turning back from that point on.

But there was no one remaining in this world who could stand up to the Demons. They could not simply sit back and wait for annihilation. So they were prepared to risk everything on this gamble.

In order for the people of this world to evade the clutches of the Demons and continue to survive, they would need to rely on a new power. Even if it meant making sacrifices.

Abducting people from another world... It was surely unethical. But even if all the rest of the world was against their methods, they felt they had to do it...in order to continue living in a society that was just and right.

And Lyla had an even more important responsibility.

The land of Regal had long been known as a hub of magical research. It was the most magical nation in the world, according to many.

So, to some extent, they'd made the most strides in recreating some of the Sages' magic.

The royal family, the figureheads of this magical nation, were talented magic users themselves, and they passed their magical powers from generation to generation. Lyla herself was known to have the most magical power of any royal in history. She was a necessary component in activating the Sage's magic.

"...You, who are the most magical being in this land, are the only one who can activate this spell. It is a heavy burden to be placed upon you..."

"Father. I'll be fine. Please, do not fret."

Lyla smiled, and she appeared regal and calm.

Her composed aura rendered not only Orgis, but the mages, speechless.

The determined expression on Lyla's face was exquisitely beautiful.

Faced with the dignity of her smile, Orgis was stunned for a moment. But then he countered with a wry grin of his own.

"Hmph... You certainly are a strong-willed woman. I almost pity any man who takes you as his wife."

"Well, naturally, if he's marrying me, he'd better be made of strong stuff. This man we are to summon... If he is not at least a worthy hero..."

"...Then you will not even consider being wed. I know. But ah, now that I think of it..."

"...Father?"

Orgis trailed off, seeming to have thought of something, and Lyla regarded him with curiosity.

"Ah, it's just that I recalled my recent meeting with the princess of the Kingdom of Arselia... It's hard to believe, but she claimed to know a human who commanded a legendary dragon... The Genesis Dragon, in fact."

"What?! C-could she be telling the truth?"

"Based on her demeanor, I do not believe she was lying... But still, to think a legendary dragon actually exists... Although, that earthquake we felt the other day was really quite something. Legend says the dragon slept in a valley near the Kingdom of Arselia. Apparently the dragon woke, and a man claimed it as a companion and made a friend of it."

"S-sounds far-fetched... Then, what was this man's name?"

"Ah, yes. As I recall, she said his name was Yuuya."

"... A name with an unfamiliar ring to it."

"Indeed. It doesn't sound like any name I've ever heard. Not here, nor in the Kingdom of Arselia, either. No doubt he is someone from an even more distant land. Well, I also heard this man is now engaged to Princess Lexia. Although I'm

not sure how much truth there is to that, either."

"Huh..."

"However, if such a man exists, would he not be suitable as a husband for you? And would he not be a valuable ally in the fight against the Demons?"

Lyla, who'd been listening intently to Orgis's stories, shook her head.

"Father. Indeed, if such a gentleman existed, I would gladly offer myself as his wife. But it is impossible."

"What is impossible?"

"Well, to start with, even if this legendary dragon *did* once exist, do not the Sage's tomes recount an anecdote of having slain it himself?"

"Well, yes, the old stories do say that, but see how this magic has been rendered based on the Sage's research papers? If the magic is real, so too must the dragon be, yes?"

"Exactly, Father. If the Sage himself is true, then his story of having slain the rampaging dragon must be true also. See?"

"...Yes, I see."

"The quake and the roaring sound we heard... Those were unusual, yes, but I doubt a legendary dragon was behind them. Legends are, after all, simply legends. If it is a dragon at all, then it must be an Ancient Dragon."

"Ah, right. But even if it is an Ancient Dragon... That would still make it a big threat."

"Right... Also, according to what you said earlier, this man is already engaged to Princess Lexia, is he not?"

"Well, that's what the princess said. But from the odd reaction of her female guard, I doubt that it's an official engagement. I mean, if the Princess of Arselia really was engaged, news of that would have already spread far and wide."

"Yes, that's true..."

"Mysterious though this young man may be, I hear tell that he will compete against the Deity of Swords in a public duel at the upcoming founding festival.

We will be able to learn more about him there."

"Ah yes, I'm looking forward to it."

"Yes. Let us enjoy the founding festival to the fullest."

"Indeed. Now, back to this magic..."

In the country of Regal, big plans, based on strong convictions, were already well under way.

\* \* \*

Ousei Academy, on Earth.

"Sigh... I studied real hard again today!"

"Well, studying is a student's duty, after all."

With the day's classes over, Kaede stretched like a cat.

Rin rolled her eyes.

"Ugh... I know that. But for me, moving my body feels more natural..."

"We've got that test coming up soon. If you fail, they won't let you participate in any club activities, will they?"

"Gah! Stop! I don't want to hear anything about that test!"



Kaede covered her ears and shook her head as Rin rolled her eyes again.

"Tsk... At this rate, it looks like I'm going to have to lend you a hand this time too."

"Th-thank you for always helping me out..."

Whenever a test was coming up, Rin would tutor Kaede.

"All right, all right... So, you don't have to go to club today?"

"Right! Today's a day off. So, I can go have fun!"

"I think you meant go straight home and study."

"R-Rin, you're such a meanie!"

Rin's teasing made Kaede tremble in indignation.

Just then, Rin spotted Yukine, who was leaving the classroom.

"Hey, Yukine. Are you going home, too?"

"Oh, Yukine, if you're heading home, let's walk together."

Yukine looked surprised for a moment that she was being included but then shook her head.

"...I've got club activities today."

"Huh?"

"Oh, Yukine... I didn't know you were in any clubs?"

This was the first time they'd heard about Yukine belonging to a club, so the other two girls stared at her with wide eyes.

"Yukine, you've always been a member of the Go Home Early Club, right?"

"...Mm-hmm. But I recently found a club that seemed interesting, so I joined."

"Huh? What club?"

"The Occult Research Club."

""The Occult Research Club?!""

Both Kaede and Rin were shocked by this choice.

"I...for sure thought it would be the Easy Listening Music Club or something..."

"Nuh-uh, Kaede. Sure, Yukine looks like a musician, but I think you're assuming based on appearances here."

"Am... Am I?"

"...I didn't even know there was an Occult Research Club," Rin said.

Yukine looked surprised by their reactions.

"...? Is it really that strange? The occult is interesting, isn't it?"

"I-is it?"

"So... What's interesting about it?"

"Uh, maybe the chance to investigate phenomena that shouldn't exist?"

"I—I see?"

Then, as if a sudden thought had occurred, Yukine took a step toward the other two.

"...If you're interested, why don't you come and take a look for yourselves?"

"Eh?"

"...The truth is, we don't have many members, and there's a risk the club could be dissolved. So we're desperate for new members to join."

"N-no thanks... I'm in the Track and Field Club, so...," said Kaede.

"Hmm... I'm actually kinda curious," Rin admitted.

"What, Rin?!"

Rin's reaction shocked Kaede.

"Maybe I'll give it a try!"

"...That's cool. Why not come and take a look now? I got my hands on a very interesting document today," said Yukine.

"Oh? Color me intrigued."

"Gulp..."

"Hmm? Kaede, what's up? ...You scared?"

"W-well, yeah! The occult means like ghosts and evil spirits and so on, right?"

"...Yeah," Yukine admitted listlessly.

"See? How is that not scary?!"

Realizing how scared Kaede was, Rin grinned at her.

"Well, whatever! Just follow my lead today!"

"Er, what?"

"...Hmm. Then I'd be happy to show you both the club."

"H-hold on! I never said I was going, too?!"

"Oh? Here I am, helping you study for the test, so isn't it only fair if you come along to this club with me? I mean, finals are coming up soon, aren't they?"

"Gah!"

Cut to the core by her friend's jabs, Kaede could only groan.

"Great! Let's go then!"

"...Sure. This way."

"...! Rin, you're such a demon!"

Wailing though she was, Kaede obediently trailed along behind Rin and Yukine.

\* \* \*

Kade, Rin, and Yukine arrived at an empty classroom in a part of the school they didn't often go to.

"... This is the Occult Research Club's meeting room."

"Ohhh... It's a little creepy in here..."

"Oh, come on. You're totally overreacting to this whole thing."

"Y-you think?"

Ignoring their chatter, Yukine pulled open the classroom door.

"...Come on in."

Going inside, they found themselves in a room with a very odd vibe. There were little dolls made of straw, insect specimens, and a large cauldron filled with an ominously hued liquid.

There were also books scattered randomly about the desks, written not only in Japanese but in various other languages as well.

The room was much more equipped for its intended purpose than Rin had been expecting, and she found herself looking around sort of approvingly.

"Huh... You've got a better setup here than I thought."

"R-R-Rin?!"

"Oh my gosh, would you please stop freaking out?"

Rin groused at Kaede, who'd grabbed Rin's sleeve in panic and was trembling.

"So, incidentally, what's on the agenda for the day?"

"...This."

Yukine pulled a book from her bag and showed it to Rin.

"What's that?"

"...I found it at my favorite used bookstore. It's a book all about summoning demons."

"S-s-summoning DEMONS?!"

"Wow, now that sounds super occult-y."

Rin smiled brightly at Kaede, who looked like she was about to faint.

Yukine opened the book and began explaining.

"...After I bought this, I did some research at home, and today I picked up certain essential ingredients. My plan is to try to cast the spell with a magic circle today."

"M-m-magic circle?!"

"Hmm? But where are the other members? Are you sure you're allowed to just go ahead and do something like that?"

"...It's okay. There's only a few members, and we're all allowed to research

whatever field interests us. Personally, I'm interested in demons and stuff."

"I see."

Yukine pushed the desks and other furniture to the far side of the classroom and laid a large piece of paper on the floor.

Then, referring to the book on demon summoning, she proceeded to draw a magic circle on the paper in red marker.

"I thought you were going to draw it in blood or something... You're really using marker?"

"Buh-buh-blood?!"

"...It should be fine... I think."

"Wow, you're so casual about it."

"...Well, I have to keep in mind health and safety laws."

"The world's a strict place."

Kaede shuddered.

But Rin didn't tease her. The thought of drawing a magic circle in blood seemed to have shocked her for real.

Meanwhile, Yukine finally finished drawing.

"...It's complete."

"Let's see... Hmm, I have no idea what these squiggles mean."

"Are—are you sure this is gonna be safe?!"

"Could you please chill out already?"

"...Anyway, with the magic circle completed, all I have to do is read out the incantation written here."

"That sounds really simple."

"...Demons can't enter this world unless summoned by a human. So the simpler the process, the easier it is for humans to summon them."

"Huh? You sure about that?"

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"...It's just my conjecture."
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Rin rolled her eyes a little in response to Yukine's confident statement.

But Yukine didn't seem particularly bothered. She stood before the magic circle and began reading aloud the incantation written in the book.

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"_____"
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As Yukine recited the unintelligible incantation solemnly, even Kaede, who'd been cowering behind Rin, looked up and stared at her in wonder.

Then...

Yukine's eyes widened as she finished reciting the incantation.

*"…"* 

uu nn

There was no change in the magic circle.

Yukine quietly closed the book and nodded.

"...Right. Looks like I'm not able to summon it."

"Whaaat?"

"Wow, way to be matter-of-fact about it."

Kaede and Rin were taken aback by Yukine's calm attitude.

"It's okay. We're dabbling in the unknown here. Figuring it out is all part of the appeal."

"Wh-what's the point of trying anyway?"

"...At any rate, this time was a failure. But I was able to enjoy the atmosphere of performing a summoning. It was fun. So it's all good. Since I don't have any other books I want to try out, I guess that's the end of today's experiment."

"Huh. Well, that's kind of anticlimactic... Then today's club session is over?"

"...Yeah."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Just a hunch, then..."

"Well, since we have some free time, why don't we go have some fun before heading home?"

"...Okey dokey."

With Rin taking the lead and suggesting they hang out somewhere else, Kaede found that she could finally relax.

However...

"Y-Yukine... Rin..."

"Yeah?"

"What's up?"

"Wh-what is THAT?"

Kaede was pointing to the floor, trembling.

Rin and Yukine both looked where she was pointing.

""Eh?""

It was the magic circle drawn in red marker. It was glowing.

"Wh-what's going on?!"

"...How shocking. The book was legit..."

"That's the part you focus on right now?!"

"Th-this is bad, Rin, Yukine! It's glowing brighter and brighter!"

Kaede was even more panicked than before. And even Rin, caught off guard by this turn of events, was looking flustered.

"Y-Yukine! You said you were summoning a demon, right? Well, just what KIND of demon?"

"...I don't know exactly. But I drew the magic circle meant for summoning the most powerful demon in the book."

"What the heck...?"

Rin twitched when Yukine said that.

If Yukine was right, then the demon currently being summoned would be

terribly powerful. A demon was bad enough, but a top-tier demon? That sounded like a total nightmare.

As the three girls watched, the glow from the magic circle increased until the entire classroom was illuminated.

```
"Agh!"

"It's...blinding!"

"...Something's gonna emerge! I just know it!"

"Why don't you sound more concerned about all this?"
```

When the light finally faded, Kaede, Rin, and Yukine opened their eyes fearfully.

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"...Is—is that..."

"There's....

"...That's weird. There's nothing here."
```

Surprisingly, when the light subsided, there was nothing in the magic circle at all, much less anything demonic.

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"Yukine. Demons aren't invisible, are they?"

"...They're not supposed to be..."

"Wait! Yukine!"
```

Yukine had just approached the magic circle without any hesitation.

She tried touching the magic circle, and tugging at the paper it was drawn on, but nothing happened.

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"...Hmm. Lots of glowing, but in the end, it was a failure. That's too bad."
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"T-too bad ...?"
```

"Yeah. That glowing was a bit shocking, but in the end, I feel pretty let down."

The thought of a demon was scary, of course. But it was still sort of disappointing to be right on the verge of meeting an unknown being only to fall short.

For a few minutes, Yukine skimmed her book again and checked the magic circle against it, but in the end, she was no closer to meeting the demon. They packed up and left the club room behind.

"It got a bit hairy for a moment there, but it was definitely an experience you don't have every day. Glad I came."

"I was scared for my life..."

"I already said I'm sorry! Look, I'll buy you an ice cream or something. Stop harping on about it.

```
"Ugh... All right."
```

"...Thanks for waiting for me to lock up."

"It's cool, it was like a minute. So, shall we go?"

The three of them had already forgotten the weird scene in the club room and were discussing what they'd do next.

For a second, Yukine sensed something odd that she couldn't quite describe. She paused and looked around her.

```
"...?"
"Something wrong?"
"...No, nothing."
```

None of them noticed something that was truly strange... The fact Yukine's shadow now had eyes that glowed bright red...

At the same time, in three separate places, similarly bizarre incidents were occurring...

#### **CHAPTER 1**

# **The Deity of Swords**

The Olds Forest, located close to the country of Regal.

A place filled with lush nature, providing many resources to the people of Regal.

But at the same time, the forest was known throughout the world as one of the most dangerous places to exist.

However, it was not as dangerous as The Weald, though, where Yuuya lived.

But since the Olds Forest had more valuable resources than The Weald did, it drew many adventurers and risk-takers. As a result, the number of monsters there was usually kept under control. So even the townsfolk who lived near the forest enjoyed relative safety.

There's another reason why the land of Regal was now safer than ever before.

And that reason was...

"Grrr…"

"Graaagh!"

"Grooow!"

"….."

A woman stood surrounded by monsters.

She had peach-pink hair in a wolf cut and pink irises in her narrow eyes.

Despite her presence in the Olds Forest, with all its dangerous monsters, she was dressed very lightly, with only a silver breastplate, a glossy black cloak, and

a single sword.

This was far too deadly a place for a woman to venture into alone. Even now, she was being circled by tigers with black fur and white stripes. B-class monsters, known as Black Tigers.

A B-class or higher adventurer could take on a single Black Tiger, but the woman was surrounded by more than a dozen of them.

Usually, a whole party of A-class or even S-class adventurers would be needed to handle this kind of attack.

But oddly, despite the ferocity of Black Tigers, these ones seemed to be unusually cautious around the woman, and they hesitated to attack.

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"Grr... Graaagh!"
```

Finally, one of the Black Tigers seemed to run out of patience and leaped at the woman.

Slash.

"Growr!"

But instantly, with a sound of slashing metal, the Black Tiger's head separated from its body, and it slumped to the ground dead before it even knew what hit it.

With their companion killed, the other Black Tigers became even more wary. But their anger at the slaying of their companion remained, and suddenly they all pounced on the woman at the same time.

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"Graaagh!"
```

"Grooow!"

The woman simply stood there, unbothered, despite being attacked by a bunch of Black Tigers that were roaring loud enough to render any sane person comatose.

Then...

Slasssh...

"Guh!"

## "Growr!"

Once again, there came a metallic slashing sound that rang out through the area, and the attacking Black Tigers found themselves missing their heads in midair, their bodies flopping to the dirt in unison.

"…"

The corpses of the fallen Black Tigers disappeared into particles of light, leaving loot behind where they'd lain.

The woman observed the scene for a moment, then sheathed her sword.

"Sigh... Wasn't much good as a training exercise after all."

The woman who'd just made that rather inexplicable statement went by the name of Iris Norblade. She was a Deity of Swords who currently resided in the land of Regal.

"...It's ruminating on stuff like this that explains why I'm going nowhere in life."

Iris let out a heavy sigh, feeling displeased with her own actions and thoughts of late.

To explain...

"Haaah... I'm the only one out of my peers who hasn't gotten married yet... But I can't just give up on my sword training, either... I just don't know what to do..."

Oddly, this incredibly powerful Deity of Swords was stressing about being forever single.

Iris had been fascinated by swords for as long as she could remember, and she had been honing her sword skills with the aim of becoming a knight someday.

But the Norblade family into which Iris was born was prominent in the aristocracy, and Iris's father had been opposed to the idea of his daughter becoming a knight.

So, even though Iris wanted to go to knight school, she had been forced to

abide by her father's wishes and enroll in a fancy finishing school for girls attended by the daughters of the nobility.

Iris tried to challenge her father of course, but the Norblade family was a powerful one, and eventually social pressure forced Iris to give in and agree to enroll in the all-girls school.

"Not that entering the finishing school did me much good anyway."

"Gaaagh!"

Iris cut down a monster who leaped at her, even as she was lost in thoughts of her past.

She didn't even appear to have drawn her sword. There was just that metallic slashing sound again.

...By enrolling her in an all-girls finishing school, Iris's parents had planned for her to learn how to behave like a proper young lady and to learn the social skills she'd need for marrying into the aristocracy, or even royalty.

Iris was good-looking, and even before joining the school, she'd had suitors asking for her hand. But Iris was more interested in swords than romance. So she had turned down all offers. Also, Iris's father had high standards, so he refused to sign off on any suitors or even set up an arranged marriage for her.

Some of the men who'd proposed to her did have important ties to the Norblade family, but her father had turned them down with bitter regret, fearing that Iris's wildness would bring shame to the family.

"Graaagh!"

"Grugh!"

With such utter coolness that it didn't even appear as if she was being attacked by monsters at all, Iris continued to cut down every beast that pounced.

The sight was so strange that even the monsters got creeped out and tried to flee from her, but they could not escape Iris's blade.

"Despite all that harping on about me giving up the sword, they never even set up one decent arranged marriage. It's odd, come to think of it... I wonder what the reason could have been?"

Iris, ignorant of her parents' true sentiments toward her, grew into a young woman, and even though she'd always been given a lot of freedom, she was never able to extricate herself from that girls' school.

Even at the school, though, Iris never once gave up her sword.

Furthermore, the girls' school Iris joined wasn't like ordinary schools. She entered the prestigious Artemia School for Girls. The principal of the school was a legendary monstrous woman who'd been an S-ranked adventurer as well as being an aristocrat.

So at this particular girls' school, they had classes on self-defense and so on, and Iris was able to keep training.

As a result, Iris ended up top of her class in defense, and she showed off dazzling talents that had wowed her teachers.

The principal, who'd taken an interest in Iris and her abilities, offered to introduce her to someone special.

The former Deity of Swords, who would become Iris's mentor.

"Guh, graaagh!"

"Grooooooh!"

"Come to think of it, I'm only who I am today because I met her."

Iris cut down the fleeing monsters as she thought about that Deity of Swords.

The former Deity of Swords, also a woman, took a special interest in cultivating Iris's skills. And because Iris had a way with the sword, she'd taken her on as her official apprentice. From then on, Iris became even more obsessed with the sword.

But Iris still needed to keep up her studies, so reluctantly, she continued attending the girls' school.

Iris was dedicated to the sword, but she also had a lot of friends.

The other students were the ladylike sort who seemed lost in self-defense classes, but oddly, they all got along well with Iris.

In the end, the other girls ended up picking up some self-defense skills from Iris, and Iris learned how to be more ladylike from them in turn.

Eventually, Iris's mentality began to shift. At first, Iris had been interested only in the sword, but as graduation grew closer, she began showing an interest in the same sorts of things that interested other young women.

Deities tended to be treated as otherworldly beings, and people were often guarded around them. But having been raised in the all-girls' school meant that Iris had made many friends, which was unusual for a Deity.

So when Iris finally graduated, she'd already surpassed the skills of her mentor, and she easily obtained the title of Deity of Swords for herself. Her father was no longer able to voice any complaint.

The Norblade family might have had a dukedom to their name, but Deities who fought against the Demons, enemies to the entire world, were given favorable treatment. Iris's father no longer had the power or might to control Iris.

So he gave up.

He no longer sought to marry off Iris and opted instead to let her be free.

This was what Iris had always wanted.

But since graduating, her friends had gradually gotten married, one by one. Iris was the only one left single. And recently, she'd seriously considered marriage for the first time.

Still, Iris had never had a boyfriend. First, she felt she needed to learn a little about what love was like.

"It doesn't make sense... It wasn't supposed to be this way...!"

In her late twenties, Iris had done a one-eighty.

In the world they lived in, it was common for people to get married by their early twenties at the very latest, but Iris had never even gone on a date with a man.

"All those times men made advances on me... Now I'm ignored! Why...?"

Iris gazed at the ground, her emotions like a storm inside her.

Like she'd just said, during her student days, Iris had been hit on wherever she went.

Even now, in her late twenties, Iris was stunning. It made no sense why men no longer approached her.

But Iris had high standards for the sort of man she was willing to date. He needed to be stronger than her, affluent, handsome... Oh dear.

When Iris failed to meet any men who met those standards, she started ruthlessly turning down the men who *did* ask her out. As a result, she got a reputation for being cold and closed off, and the date invitations stopped coming.

"I—I know I may have been a little picky, but...I mean, I've had a change of heart!"



Iris spoke aloud, her voice strained, but she wondered who these excuses were really for.

Then, as Iris stood defenseless, a monster crept up behind her.

It was a black serpent, an A-class Assassin Snake. Though it was huge—its body easily measuring over five meters long—it used its skills to approach with utter silence.

Even worse, it had a particular skill that allowed it to camouflage its huge body, making it difficult to detect. Many adventurers fell victim to its sneak attack.

The Assassin Snake calmly set its sights on Iris...

"Hissss!"

"...I won't say another word about income, or him looking cool or any extra luxuries like that. All I ask is that he's stronger than I am!"

Slash!

Another slice of metal through flesh, and the Assassin Snake's head parted ways with its body. Instant death.

Iris sword had ended up in her hand again, just as she'd been on the verge of being attacked.

"I wonder if any man exists who really is stronger than I am..."

Iris's priorities might have seemed a bit out of whack. But to her, finding a man who was stronger than her was of the utmost importance.

Iris had grown up knowing nothing of romance, but over the years she'd become dreamy, yearning for a prince who would protect her.

She couldn't let go of those girlish fantasies.

This unfortunate Deity of Swords known as Iris might have wielded incredible strength, but she was struggling hard in the fight against her greatest challenge yet... Feeling like she was running out of time to get married.

After he was attacked by the Deity of Fists, Master Rabbit's wounds healed with the assistance of Akatsuki's Holy Ground skill.

However, the attack had weakened him. Our training sessions were canceled, and now Master Rabbit is off somewhere recovering.

Still, I can't afford to skimp on my ordinary training, so I'm training on my own, alongside Yuti and Night.

I'd appreciate Ouma's help, actually, but with the difference in power between us, I doubt I'd make much progress. Ouma is far too lazy to help me out anyway.

Even if Ouma can't be my training partner, I'd still appreciate his feedback... But I don't want to pressure him.

Following the attack by the Deity of Fists, I've been gradually regaining my composure, spending my days balancing school and personal growth. That's when Master Rabbit comes to see me, for the first time in a while.

"It's been a while!"

"Oh, Master Rabbit! Long time, no see. How are you?"

"I'm just fine. My wounds were already healed. All I had to do was rest and regain my strength."

"Well, that's good..."

I'm wondering whether he's really been able to recover so easily, when Yuti suddenly appears in the other world garden.

"Don't fret. Deities are stronger than you give them credit for. After all, they have divinity from the stars."

"D-divinity from the stars?"

I've had some dealings with Deities and Demons, but Yuti seems to be hinting at abilities I've never even heard of. Ah, but I'd rather not get involved. Anything for a peaceful life.

Of course, I recall that when I first met Master Rabbit, he told me that the title of Deity was bestowed by the stars.

Master Rabbit nods now, agreeing with Yuti.

"Yes. I mentioned it, briefly, when we met. We Deities are chosen by the stars to receive our titles. Then we must choose a successor. By passing on our title to our successors, we continue the Deity line... Although some never find a successor and simply disappear. That's what happened with Gilbert Fister, the Deity of Fists you fought the other day. He didn't have a successor."

"So there won't be another Deity of Fists, then?"

"Not as such. The stars will choose a new Deity of Fists. I am not sure when they will make their choice, though."

"R-right..."

I nod, mulling over Master Rabbit's words, as he continues.

"From what you've learned so far, I'm sure you can see the Deities and the stars are interlinked. We receive divinity from the stars... Special blessings. For one, we regain our physical strength faster than other living beings do. The stars need us Deities to defeat the Demons. So you see, I had no issue recovering."

"Oh, I see..." Master Rabbit's explanation reassures me, but then I think of something. "...Huh? Then what sort of being is the Deity of Fists who attacked us, and Yuti, for that matter? Yuti hasn't become a full-fledged Deity of Arrows yet, and she has the power of Demons inside of her. The Deity of Fists had both Deity and Demon powers, didn't he? How do the stars feel about situations like that?"

My question, blunt and straightforward, makes Master Rabbit scowl.

"...You raise a good point. The situation as far as the stars are concerned is simply not good. Deities that were created to oppose the Demons have now turned their fangs against the planet and humanity itself."

"So won't the stars take back the divinity of the Deities in that case?"

"Impossible. Stars can only give, not take away. I told you this before, right? We Deities are like a cleansing force on this planet. What happened with that Deity of Fists was a sort of deviation. Something impossible to control."

Well, that's inconvenient.

Deities are powerful allies, but when a Deity goes rogue and becomes an enemy, that's a huge headache to deal with. And even the stars can't fix it...

"Also, I was wondering about something else. The stats of Deities double when they're fighting against Demons, right? Did your stats double when you fought the Deity of Fists?"

My question makes Master Rabbit suddenly look tired, and he heaves a sigh.

"If only that were the case..."

"Eh?"

"...On the contrary, my stats were halved."

"Whaaat?!"

I yelp in surprise, taken aback by Master Rabbit's unexpected statement.

Yuti looks confused.

"Doubt. Even when we fought?"

"Correct. We Deities are released from our usual stats only when we fight Demons. If we fight against other Deities, or those with only partial Demon power inside of them, our stats are reduced instead. Only when we fight against true Demons does the beneficial effect hold true."

*""* 

I'm shaken to my core.

Wow, what's the good of the stars' divinity, in that case?

If it wasn't for that, someone like that Deity of Fists would have been turned into mincemeat if Master Rabbit's stat limits were unlocked.

The reason why Master Rabbit was defeated by the Deity of Fists... No doubt it was because the Deity of Fists was able to wield his extra Demon power while Master Rabbit's stats were halved.

It would be terrible if this became more common... You know, rogue Deities running around with Demon power. Then Master Rabbit gives me a serious

look.

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"So then, Yuuya..."

"Y-yeah?"

"You have obtained true Demon power."

"Say what now?"

I'm shocked by this. Yuti's shocked, too.
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"Disagree. Impossible. The power inside Yuuya originally came from me. In other words, it is but a fragment of Demon power."

"I thought so, too, at first. But the power that emanated from Yuuya was so intense, so powerful... It couldn't just be a mere fragment of evil. The Demon power... It seems to have completely infiltrated him."

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"Er..."
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"Which means, this power is the same as that of the Demon I faced in the past. In your case, Yuti, it was like the Demon power was mixed inside of you, but Yuuya's entire body is now filled with pure Demon power."

Yuti and Master Rabbit had told me about what happened when the Deity of Fists attacked.

It's hard for me to believe, but it seems I lost control of the Demon power inside me, and I ended up pulverizing the Deity of Fists. Or at least that's what they said... I have no memory of the incident.

The power that made me lose control... Demon power. The fragment I received from Yuti seems to have gotten stronger. But even with all this explained to me, I don't really get it.

Just then, I hear the voice of the Demon inside of me... The Demon who's been silent ever since I felled the Deity of Fists.

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Ahh... What a nice sleep I had.

"Gah!"

"...?"
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"What's wrong?"

When I yelp, Yuti and Master Rabbit look at me in puzzlement.

I tell Master Rabbit that I think the Demon inside me has just woken up. He encourages me to engage it in conversation about that battle with the Deity of Fists.

"Um, good morning."

Huh? Oh. So you're still kicking, are ya? Ha-hah! But wait... What's going on? On closer inspection, that Deity of Kicks and my previous host are still around?

"I mean, that Deity of Fists attacked us the other day, right? Well, the thing is, the power running through me when that happened was different from how it was with Yuti. It was more like pure Demon power, more than what your power was. Any ideas why that happened?"

Oh, I see... it's simple. It's because your heart was too innocent.

"Eh?"

I couldn't help but react like that to those unexpected words.

"T-too innocent? What do you mean?"

I told you, didn't I? I tried to take you over, but your mind was so pure that I couldn't get a foothold. But then when you saw that dumb Deity of Kicks friend of yours being pummeled by the Deity of Fists, you saw red.

"I did? I mean, yeah, in the moment, I was pretty steamed..."

The rage you felt at that time was dark, far surpassing even Yuti's desire for revenge. That dark heart even consumed me and undoubtedly gave birth to a new form of Demon power within you. In other words, you could say that you yourself are the cause. However, an ordinary person cannot give birth to evil through anger alone. In essence, my existence was the trigger.

"Huh?"

Also, you're probably really well suited to Demon power. There aren't a lot of people who can summon big emotions like that, who are also compatible with Demon power, you know? In most cases, the Demon power ends up consuming

the host instead.

"S-seriously...?"

It seemed that the Demon power inside me had somehow reacted to my anger, manifesting a pure form of Demonic power. And the fact that I was apparently "well suited" to Demon power seemed to be a big contributing factor.

But why? Why was I well suited to Demonic power?

Thinking about it, I suddenly recall the skill called Endurance.

Could this be the effect of that skill?

Master Rabbit frowned after hearing my explanation.

"... This situation is getting messy."

"So...what should I do?"

"Whatever you do, you have no choice but to master that power. If you don't, you'll become a target for Deities everywhere."

"What?! I definitely don't want that!"

I don't want to be hunted by a bunch of Deities!

As I start to panic, Master Rabbit sighs heavily.

"Sigh... From now on, we must train to help you master this power. Communicating with the Demon inside you will be an important aspect of this... Although you seem to be doing okay with that so far."

"Hmm, I guess so. Right?"

Hmph. You are the one who keeps talking to me, the Demon responds to me in a steely tone.

Master Rabbit observes as I converse with the Demon, although I'm the only one who can hear its voice.

"Still...as Master Rabbit says, if we're going to chat, then I probably need a name to call you, right?"

Huh? A name?

"Yeah. I can't just keep calling you Demon."

It was nothing more than a fragment of Demon power that had gotten trapped inside me, but if I was going to engage it in conversation, it might be better to name it something.

Just for ease of conversation...

"So...can I name you?"

...Hmph. Do as you please.

The Demon continued acting coldly, but it didn't refuse. Maybe it didn't hate me so much after all.

As for giving it a name... Well...

The first impression I had was very strong.

Various names come to mind, but that first image was hard to get out of my head...

"Hmm... Would something like 'Kuro' be okay?"

Huh? Kuro?

"Yeah. Because when I first met you, you were a dark version of Yuti. And *kuro* is 'dark' in Japanese."

When I say that, Yuti and Master Rabbit both look at me in surprise. Wh-what?

"Surprise. So basic."

"...I don't think that works as a name..."

"Y-you don't?!"

I mean, their reactions made sense. Kuro was a pretty basic name.

"Sorry, then I guess..."

No, it's fine. Kuro. It's easy to understand.

"What?! Are you sure?"

...If that's what you've decided.

I never imagined that the Demon... I mean, Kuro, would take to a name I gave it so readily.

Kuro continues, sounding a little exasperated.

It's better than having a weird, pretentious name. I would not enjoy that.

"Is—Is that so?"

I cock my head in confusion, as Yuti and Master Rabbit speak again.

"My suggestion. 'Tote Schwartz.' All right, that's got to be it."

"Hmph. Little girl, you know nothing. 'Dark Lord Maru' is the best choice."

...Kuro was the best choice.

"R-right..."

Kuro didn't seem to like the names that Yuti and Master Rabbit suggested. They were both more elaborate than what I'd come up with. I'm not even sure what Yuti's suggestion meant.

"Despite some debate, it seems we've settled on a name."

"Uh, right."

"Well then, let us begin the training. Kindly unleash your Demon power."

"What?"

I grunt stupidly, taken aback by Master Rabbit's command.

On closer inspection, Yuti looks surprised, too.

"Warning. Yuuya's power is dangerous. If he unleashes it carelessly..."

"What I'm saying is that he should get used to wielding it. Anyway, both you and I are here. It's not like how it was during the Deity of Fists' attack. Yuuya probably won't be able to go crazy like he did then, even if he tried."

"Uh... Are you sure about that?"

I gulp, and Kuro pipes up in a languid sort of voice.

Relax. It won't be like when you first let me in. You should be able to manipulate the Demon power, to some extent. Back then, I might have been the

trigger, but you birthed a new form of Demon power inside you. You created this power, so your body will no doubt know instinctively how to wield it.

"I-if you insist..."

Besides, even if you do unleash it, you're not having any negative emotions right now that could interact with the Demon power, right? So there's no risk of you going crazy this time.

So in other words, it seemed that I would be able to unleash the Demon power at will, without needing to worry about losing control.

"In that case, I'd appreciate the help with my training."

"Yes. You can count on me, Yuuya. But I'll be stricter than ever before, just so you're warned."

"P-please don't be too hard on me..."

With the help of Yuti and Master Rabbit, who both seem very enthusiastic about this, I begin training in earnest to master my new Demon power.

\* \* \*

"Hmm... I wonder how long it will take young Yuuya to master the Demon power." Around the time that Yuuya was training with Master Rabbit, Ouma woke from a nap in the Earth house, opened one eye, and grumbled. "Tch... Deities and Demons... Such nonsense. Getting unnecessary power and then training to wield that power... Yuuya's got a lot on his plate."

"Woof?"

Then Night, also napping in the Earth house, lifted his head in response to Ouma's murmurings.

"This Earth place... This place without Deities or Demons... Yuuya is from here, yet got caught up in the dealings of another world... Poor boy."

"Woof... Woof."

Night thought for a moment, then nodded, agreeing with Ouma.

"So you agree, Night. The Demons are a scourge. Launching an attack to seize

control over the world... Maybe I should save everyone the trouble and just destroy the whole planet?"

"Woof!"

Night barked once, loud, as if to say *Don't do that*. Ouma sighed in annoyance.

"Don't get so mad. It was just a joke. I'm sure Yuuya wouldn't want that to happen... And neither would he..."

As Ouma spoke, he gazed into the distance, thinking of the Sage who was no longer around.

In the midst of this gloomy conversation, Akatsuki, who'd been snoozing belly-up, woke up.

"Oink... Oink?"

"Hmm? Are you awake too, Akatsuki?"

"Oink, Oink, Oink!"

Awake now, Akatsuki was about to get up but, seeing that Yuuya wasn't home, rolled over instead and went back to sleep.

"...Tsk, what an easygoing hog. Maybe Yuuya could learn a thing or two from Akatsuki."

"W-woof..."

Night was taken aback by what Ouma was saying.

"Well, never mind. Yuuya is training, so I think I'll take another nap..."

Just as Ouma was saying that...

"...Hmm?"

"Woof?"

Suddenly, Ouma sat up with a puzzled look on his face and stared toward the front door of the Earth house.

His eyes seemed to be directed not at the entrance, but at the world outside.

Night tilted his head in confusion at Ouma's odd behavior.

"Night... Don't you notice it?"

"Woof?"

"...Hmm. Still beyond you, is it? A little more growth and you'll get a knack for it..."

As Ouma spoke, he returned his attention to Earth, beyond the door.

"...Though faint, I sensed a Demonic presence... Yes, here, on Earth. Not quite pure Demon power, but...still, odd to detect it on this planet. I've never sensed anything like that here before."

It seemed that Ouma had sensed a faint Demonic presence.

Why would there be a Demonic presence on Earth? Where is it coming from? It was just a fleeting feeling, so Ouma wasn't sure.

"It couldn't be my imagination... It was faint, but I certainly felt it. But now that presence has completely vanished... Hmm. I don't know."

Ouma thought it over. Yuuya had told him not to go outside. There weren't dragons on Earth. Unable to go out, Ouma had no way of confirming his hunch.

"What inconvenient timing. Should I just leave without telling Yuuya?"

"Woof?! Woof!"

Night, taken aback by this, voiced his alarm, and Ouma sighed.

"Ah... Just joking, calm down. I won't go out. Still, I'd like someone to consider the fact that I might like to venture out every now and again."

"W-woof."

Ouma wasn't free to saunter around on Earth, unlike Night. So how else could Night respond?

It wasn't Night's fault, though. Ouma gave the anxious creature a wry smile.



"Yes... Despite being a Black Fenrir—a legendary beast almost comparable to me—you have the appearance of a docile, adorable creature. But I should warn Yuuya about this Demonic presence on Earth, should I not?"

Bong. Bong.

"Hmm! Is it mealtime already?"

The clock rang to signal lunchtime, instantly distracting Ouma.

Ouma found mealtimes exciting because the unusual range of foods on offer really made him feel like he was in another world.

As a result, he immediately forgot all about the Demonic presence he'd sensed on Earth.

From Yuuya's viewpoint, the presence would indicate a huge problem. But Ouma didn't really care that much, especially not when food was about to appear.

That was the difference between Yuuya and this legendary being.

"Mmm. I wonder what's for lunch today? I feel like curry. It's been a while since we've had that."

And Ouma quickly went off to nudge Yuuya about lunch.

...How the outcome of this action would affect Yuuya... No one yet knew.

\* \* \*

A few days have passed since I started honing my Demon powers with the help of Master Rabbit and Yuti.

Like Kuro said, I was indeed able to unleash the Demon power inside me, but it was hard for me to control the output, or should I say, the strength of the output.

When I tap into my Demon power, my stats increase, and I am able to unleash attacks with incredible power.

But the power was overwhelming, and it had me at its mercy. If I was to go all out, like that fight where I first met Yuti, I'd end up causing a huge amount of

damage.

Also, I'm unable to maintain the flow of Demon power for an extended period of time. It would suddenly sputter out in the middle of training, and I'd have to fumble along in my default state.

With the Demon power, I could fight against even Master Rabbit himself, but as soon as the power ran out, I got beaten to a pulp.

While sparring, I asked Master Rabbit if the stats would be doubled since I technically had Demon power inside me, and it turned out he was able to adjust them. So while fighting me, he was somewhere between half-reduced and normal stats.

And I still got pummeled. That was just the difference in skill level. And our stats were originally way different.

Now, making full use of my Demon power, I'm busy sparring with Master Rabbit again.

"Hah!"

"Hmph!"

Master Rabbit countered my Demon-powered kick with total ease, and then he counterattacked.

By the way, did I mention that when I'm using my Demon power, my body emanates a dark aura, and my pupils turn bright red?

Hey, hey, he's kicking your butt, you know?

"I know!"

Using the Demonic power with Kuro, who tempered the power inside me, I somehow managed to control it.

But seriously, Master Rabbit is incredible... He can deflect every one of my attacks!

By studying Master Rabbit's techniques, I was able to slowly pick up some tips.

I'm not sure why, but recently I've been much more perceptive of Master

Rabbit and Yuti's movements... I wonder why?

As we continue practicing like this, I suddenly get the feeling that I'm forgetting something important.

Hmm? What is it?

Master Rabbit notices I'm distracted and hits me even harder.

"Letting your mind wander during training? Such impudence!"

"Huh? Ah... What... Whoa!"

Even as I struggle to fend off Master Rabbit's attacks, I'm racking my brains to remember whatever it is that's slipped my mind.

What is it? ... What am I forgetting?

Agonizing over it, I suddenly remember!

"Ah... Ahhh! Exams are coming up soon!"

It completely slipped my mind! We'd been studying for them every day, but recently...

"Oh no! I have to prepare for the test!"

"Focus on your training."

"B-but if I don't study for the test, I won't be able to concentrate on my training, either..."

"Silence!"

"Guh?!"

Master Rabbit kicks me hard, sending me flying.

"B-but... I have to study..."

With that final comment, I lose consciousness.

...And so as you can see, my Demonic power training is proceeding... Not smoothly, but it's definitely proceeding...

## **CHAPTER 2**

## **Beach Day with Everyone**

I managed to get Master Rabbit to let me study, and I applied myself until I felt good about taking the exams.

And today is the last day of the exam period.

"Ah, it's finally over!"

As soon as the final test is finished, Kaede yells this so loud the whole class can hear. Then she kicks back and does a massive stretch.

In this moment, I fight hard to keep my gaze from straying toward Kaede's chest.

Glancing around, I notice that other guys are openly staring at Kaede. Hey, guys, watch out. You'll get in trouble at this rate.

While I'm thinking this, Rin comes over.

"Hey, Kaede? I think you're offering the boys a bit too much fan service."

"Huh? What fan service?"

"Er, your chest."

Now that Rin points it out, it finally dawns on Kaede, too.

Then...

"Eeek!"

She reddens instantly and quickly lowers her arms.

I hear disappointed mutterings from the other guys.

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"Agh!"
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"Kanzaki, always meddling!"

"A fleeting glimpse of paradise..."

"Er, boys? I can hear you, you know?"

Rin's deadpan expression makes all the guys straighten up quickly. Wow, they didn't even try to be subtle about it.

Kaede realizes that I've been watching all this play out, and she comes over, still blushing.

"Y-Yuuya... How'd you do on the exam?"

"Huh? Oh, right... Well, I think my time spent studying paid off..."

"I see... Yeah, I asked Rin to help me prep. Actually, a lot of the questions were ones Rin said would probably come up!"

"Wow... That's amazing!"

I look over at Rin, who scratches her head, looking embarrassed.

"It was no big deal. Anyone can figure it out if they just pay attention to what the teacher emphasizes."

"...Yeah, no way."

"I don't think it's that simple, either..."

Pay attention to what the teacher emphasizes? What does that even mean?

I mean, I'm not a great student anyway. I just end up studying the entire rubric.

Still, my memory's way better these days... Probably because of leveling up. And my eyesight's gotten better, too. I also seem to retain information more easily. Hmm, feels kinda odd.

Before leveling up, no amount of studying ever seemed to make a difference.

I gaze into space, and that's when my buddies, Ryou and Shingo, come over.

"Oh, the whole gang's here."

```
"H-how'd everyone do on the test?"
  "Well, I think I did better than I expected."
  "I found it fine, too."
  "I think it went okay... I mean, I'd like to believe that..."
  "Hey, I personally coached you, so don't sound so pessimistic."
  Kaede looks dubious, which makes Rin roll her eyes.
  I smile wryly at their exchange, and then I notice that Yukine, seated beside
me, seems to be spacing out.
  "Hmm? What's wrong, Yukine?"
  "...I'm exhausted."
  "R-right... Well, how did you do on the test?"
  "...I'd rather focus on the fun things in life."
  In other words...not great, then?
 While we're chatting, the other students start heading home, or to clubs.
  "Oh, that reminds me... Kaede, don't you have club today?"
  Kaede shakes her head in response to Ryou's question.
  "Nope. Club starts up again tomorrow."
  "And what about you, Yukine?"
  "What? Hyoudou, you're in a club?"
  Ryou looks at Yukine, surprised... So Yukine joined a club... Which one? Easy
Listening Music Club?
  "...The Occult Research Club."
  "Wow, I wasn't expecting that!"
  But both Kaede and Rin don't look surprised at all... Indicating they knew
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"...Also, I don't have to go to club today. Anyway, I didn't bring books to

about this.

experiment with today."

"B-be careful with that stuff, okay?"

For some reason, Kaede looks nervous and twitchy as she says that. Hmm, did something odd happen?

"Oh, by the way! Exams are over, so it's almost summer vacation!"

"Now that you mention it, that's right."

"...I've just been so preoccupied with the exams."

"I mean, me too!"

"I would have thought Kaede and Yukine would have been a little more relaxed about the exams..."

"Ah...ah-ha-ha..."

Thanks to Kaede's reminder, I realize that summer vacation really is just around the corner.

Though I don't exactly have any plans... I guess I'll spend a bit more time in the other world. I want to investigate as much of The Weald as I can.

While I'm thinking about this, Kaede's eyes light up and she suggests: "We should all do something fun together! There's a summer festival coming up, right?"

"Sure, but you can't spend all summer vacation having fun and goofing off, you know?"

```
"Really? I can't?"
```

"...Wow, you're never going to learn, are you...?"

"I... I guess you're talking about summer homework, right?"

*""*...!!!""

"And I've heard we have a lot of it this year!"

""...?!!!""

Kaede and Yukine look stunned by Shingo and Rin's conversation. Did they seriously think we wouldn't have homework?! ...Hmm, I guess there are some schools out there that don't have summer homework, though...

It seems to sink in for the two of them seem that their summer isn't going to be just fun and games. They're both white as sheets. Then the classroom door opens.

```
"...Um, is Yuuya here?"
"Huh? Oh, Kaori?"
"Oh! Yuuya!"
Kaori has come to our classroom.
Spotting me, Kaori comes right over.
"Oh phew, I was worried you'd gone home already."
"Not yet. So, you were looking for me then?"
"Yes! And everyone else is here, too... Perfect."
"...?"
```

Everyone looks confused, but Kaori smiles.

"Right! Now that exams are over, summer vacation's right around the corner. So I was thinking, if everyone's interested, I'd like to invite you all to my family's vacation house..."

"A vacation house?!"

We're all taken aback by the sudden invitation. A vacation house... Oh yeah. I'd almost forgotten...Kaori's family is rich.

```
"And it's by the sea, so if we all go together it could be really fun..."
"Seriously?! Yay! Beach trip! Beach trip!"
"Th-that sounds exactly like the kind of thing we were looking for..."
"Yeah!"
"...But are you sure it's okay?"
"Of course! You all have been so kind to me..."
"Have we...?"
```

"Y-yeah, have we...? I can't recall anything specific...."

"Aw, don't say that! You all invited me to have fun with you. And now it's my turn to invite you!"

It wasn't as big a deal as Kaori was making it sound... We all just sort of naturally ended up hanging out together.

But it seems to have had an impact on Kaori, who'd never had many chances to spend time with kids her own age.

Just then, Ryou, who's been watching the others talk, fidgets awkwardly.

"Uh, so... Is it okay for us to come as well?"

"Of course! We've hung out before, too, haven't we? You come, too, Ryou, and Shingo!"

And with that, Kaori officially invites Ryou and Shingo.

"Okay, once I have the schedule and everything sorted out, I'll let you all know!"

With that, Kaori leaves the classroom.

Watching her go, Kaede yelps in excitement.

"Yay! We're all off to the beach! Right?"

"I mean, I never expected Kaori to invite me..."

"For real. But since she has, why don't we go and have fun?"

"Yay!"

Kaede whoops in response, and Rin grins.

"We still have to get that homework done before we can have any real fun."

""Ugh!""

Both Yukine and Kaede groan when Rin says this.

\* \* \*

After being invited to Kaori's vacation house, and picking out a date that worked for everyone, we decided...we'd all be going there during vacation.

Now, here we are... Standing in front of Kaori's vacation house.

"It's...huge!"

"I mean, judging from the size of the school I was imagining something grand, but this..."

"Y-yeah... Actually seeing it is kinda... Whoa."

Ryou, Shingo, and I are standing dumbfounded in front of the massive house where we'll be staying.

The vacation house is a rustic lodge in the heart of nature, located in an area popular with the wealthy.

The lodge is fully equipped with air-conditioning and more, and there's a convenience store and supermarket nearby. Perfectly situated.

And best of all...

"Wow! The beach! The beach, Rin!"

"Yes, yes, I know."

"...Yeah. Check out that view."

There's a beach just a short walk from the lodge.

Kaede's eyes sparkle as she gazes out at the sea. Kaori comes over, clearly finished with lodge setup, and smiles.

"I'm so glad you like it."

"Are you kidding?"

"...This is amazing."

"Hee-hee... I'll show you all to your rooms now, so please bring your luggage and follow me."

"All right."

At Kaori's invitation, we all troop into the lodge.

Our bedrooms are divided by gender, of course. The room for us guys is spacious, with plenty of beds for everyone. No doubt the girls' room is spacious as well.

...Come to think of it, and this has just struck me... This counts as living under the same roof as girls...

I mean, I technically live with Yuti right now, but I guess it's still a tough thing to wrap my brain around.

Me, having an overnight stay with girls like this... It kinda feels unbelievable.

After putting our bags in our rooms, we take a breather, and that's when Kaede and the others stroll into our room.

"Now then, everyone! Beach time?"

"Y-you're so pumped, Kaede..."

"You know it, Shingo! I've been looking forward to this!"

"Hmm, well, I suppose we did actually put a lot of effort into our summer homework for once."

"... I don't even want to think about that ever again. But yeah, I did my best."

Just like Rin says, each of us had finished up our summer homework early specifically so we could enjoy this trip.

I usually finish my homework early on in a long vacation, but Kaede and Yukine don't seem to be in that habit. Completing it all before coming here seems to have traumatized them both.

"Okay, then let's get changed and go to the beach right away, shall we?"

"Yeah! All right, we're off to go change!"

And with that, Kaede and the others dash off to the girls' room.

Only Kaori remains, and she beckons me over.

"Um, Yuuya..."

"Hmm? What's up?"

"It's just... Are you sure it's okay? I mean, leaving Yuti and Ouma and everyone behind...?"

"Right..."

I smile wryly at that.

"Yuti said she'd skip it this time. Apparently, she's not that good with social situations."

"I see... So then suggesting she enter the academy might have been an imposition on her...?"

"No, that was fine! It seems like she's happy to make friends at school."

"Oh, well, phew!"

Yeah... Yuti seems to have adjusted well at school. I find that pretty reassuring, too.

And she even made plans to meet up with a few friends over summer vacation.

"And Ouma said he'd sit this one out for the same reason as Yuti."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. But I still need to go prepare meals for Ouma and the others. So I'll be heading home for a bit at lunchtimes."

"...Your magic really is handy, Yuuya..."

Kaori smiles a little teasingly. She's right, though. Teleportation magic sure does come in handy. But I need to be careful and make sure no one sees.

After our chat, Kaori heads to the girls' room to change. I put on the bathing suit I've brought with me just for this trip, and then I head to the beach with Ryou and Shingo.

\* \* \*

"Wow, it's pretty crowded."

"Y-yeah, it really is."

"Will we find a spot?"

We arrive at the beach before the others, grab beach umbrellas, and start looking for a good open spot.

But today is a nice, hot, perfect day for swimming, so there are a ton of

people out.

"Hmm... Ah, it's a bit far off, but over there might be nice?"

Ryou points to a patch of beach away from the crowds... An empty patch.

"All right, Yuuya. We'll go set up the beach umbrellas, so can you wait here for Kaede and the others?"

"Huh? I mean, sure... But don't you want my help?"

"Shingo and I can set these up."

"Y-yeah. Yuuya, you just bring over Kaede and the other girls when they get here."

"All right."

Since Ryou and Shingo insisted, I decide to stay and wait for the girls.

"Hmm. I hope I don't look weird..."

I glance down at myself.

I mean, up until now, the only bathing suit I've worn has been for school swim class.

When I asked Ryou and Shingo about it, they told me I needed a new bathing suit just for the beach. So I splurged a little and bought one. Still, I'm hardly hurting for money, thanks to selling the materials I got in the other world. So yeah, I kinda splurged.

As I'm evaluating my appearance, I realize that people nearby are starting to look at me.

"...Wow, that guy's so hot. Should we talk to him?"

"Super-hot. But I feel like I've seen him somewhere... Oh hey, wasn't he in that magazine feature?"

"Oh yeah! Wow... I assumed those photos were edited, but he really is that handsome..."

"And look at those abs! They're amazing! So tight!"

"Yeah, nice muscles. He clearly works out."

"He's got abs like a slab of chocolate! And you could grate a radish on those obliques!" ...I feel like they're saying weird stuff, but I must be mishearing them. While I wait for Kaede and the others, feeling oddly awkward, I hear a voice. "Um, excuse me..." "Yeah?" I turn toward whoever's speaking and see several girls standing there, none of whom I know. "Wh-what is it?" I nervously question the girls, and they all exchange looks. "I knew it!" "Yeah! ...Um, excuse me, are you the guy who was in the magazine with Miu a while back?" "Huh? Oh... Yeah. I mean, that's me, but..." "Um! Could we have a photo?" "A ph-photo?" What do they want a photo of me for?! Oblivious to the fact that I'm seriously flustered, the girls cluster around me, phones out. "Um... Thank you!" "Uh, no, it's fine..." I still have no idea what's happening as the girls finish taking selfies and split. Man, they came in like a wrecking ball, and now they're just... Gone. As I stand there still stunned and shocked, I hear Kaori calling me. "Yuuya!" "Huh? Oh, Kaori...?!"

When I set eyes on Kaori, I gasp.

She's wearing a cute white swimsuit with a hoodie cover-up. She notices me staring at her and looks away, cheeks turning a soft shade of pink.

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"I-is...my swimsuit...weird or something?"

"Huh?! No! No! Not at all! You look amazing! It really suits you!"

I'm so nervous I'm babbling, but Kaori giggles happily.

"I... I see... I'm so glad to hear you say that, Yuuya..."

"..."
```

Yikes.

I hadn't given it much thought, but... Us coming to the beach means everyone's gonna be in bathing suits. Well, duh! That's why we split up to get changed, isn't it?!

I'd been on autopilot, like swim class at school, and it hadn't really registered with me... But now that I think about it... It makes sense that girls would have cute swimsuits for the beach.

```
...Huh? Then that means...

"Oh, Yuuya! Here we are!"

"Man, it is HOT out!"

"...I'm melting."
```

"Should we say hi?"

I stand there, stiff with tension, as Kaede and the other girls approach.

Kaede's wearing a cute swimsuit with frills and little hotpants, Rin has on a black sporty swimsuit, and Yukine is wearing a swimsuit that resembles short overalls. And they're all holding inflatable rings.

What an amazing-looking group... M-man, what am I going to do?! I don't know where to look!

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They're all so stunning. I can't look directly at them.
"Hey man, check them out."
"Whoa! High-class cuties."
```

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"No, I think they're with that guy."
```

"Aw, man. I'm jealous!"

The guys nearby seem captivated by Kaori and the other girls.

I can even see some women shooting admiring glances their way. Wow, even other women are stunned by their looks.

The reality of the girls in their bathing suits is too much for me, and I find myself spacing out...

Kaede peers at me curiously.

```
"Yuuya? What's up?"
```

"Huh? Ah, nothing!"

"Really? So then, um... What do you think?"

"Huh?! You look great! Yep! Really great!"

Kaede blushes as I yelp out a strangled sort of response.

"I see... All righty, then. Hee-hee-hee."

"Gah..."

How am I supposed to know what the right response is? It's only recently that I've even become capable of holding a conversation with a girl.

But Kaede doesn't seem upset. I guess I passed... Maybe.

"...Yuuya. What about me?"

Now Yukine's cornering me, even though I'm basically a deer in headlights.

"Er..."

What should I say in a situation like this? Should I say the same thing? What does Yukine even want from me?

Stuck, I open and close my mouth uselessly, and for some reason Yukine puts a hand to her chest and looks at Kaede.

"... I guess it comes down to boobs after all."

"What kind of conclusion is that to come to?"

I wasn't thinking that... I didn't even say anything like that! But Yukine is now glaring resentfully at Kaede's chest. Then she gives me a disgruntled look. Hey, come on! Breasts didn't even cross my mind! This is a false accusation!

First Kaori, now Kaede and Yukine and their bikinis. I'm so flustered, I failed to notice how Kaori's cheeks were puffing out.

Seeing how panicked I am, Rin grins and comes over, nudging me with her elbow.

"Hmm? Hmm, what's this, Yuuya? Getting flustered over the girls in their swimsuits?"

"Uh, um, n-no, of course, well yes but..."

"Ah-ha-ha! That's kinda unexpected! You look like you'd be right at home in a situation like this."

Rin chuckles at my response.

I look like I'd be at home...? Nothing could be further from the truth. What about me looks like I'd be comfortable around skimpy bikinis?

"Still, Kaede has a great body, Kaori's beautiful, and Yukine's just adorable. Unlike me..."

"Huh? No, no, Rin, you're really beautiful yourself..."

"Aha?"

What she was saying was crazy, so naturally I'd refuted her with the objective truth... But now Rin's giving me this uncharacteristically loose sort of grin.

Her expression makes me realize I've just said something incriminating... Embarrassing.

But that's not right! Rin was talking nonsense! I just responded reflexively! I'm not the kind of guy who just casually calls a girl beautiful! Although I'd sure like to become that kind of guy someday!

I mean yes, Kaede, Kaori, and Yukine are all beautiful. But Rin is as slim as a model, and she looks amazing in her sophisticated swimsuit.

I still have no idea what Rin meant by "unlike me."

"I... I just mean... Look, you're standing a bit close, and it makes me nervous..."

"Oh, really? Well, Whoops! Ah-ha-ha!"

And Rin moves quickly away from me.

On closer inspection... I can see that Rin's cheeks are red, and she's shifting her gaze away awkwardly. Th-that reaction is making *me* feel even more awkward now!

"W-well, let's go! Ryou and Shingo have already gone ahead and saved us a spot."

"Oh really... We'd better hurry over and show them some appreciation..."

"Yeah."

Unable to stand the situation any longer, I tell everyone about Ryou and Shingo. This dissipates the awkward atmosphere and I'm able to breathe again. What a relief... Dealing with the girls alone is too much for me. *They're* too much for me!

So we meet up with Ryou and Shingo, and after doing some warm-ups, we head straight into the surf.

Ryou really can do anything. He shows off in the sea, swimming far out.

Shingo doesn't seem to be a strong swimmer, though. He stays in the shallows and tosses around the beach ball that Kaori brought.

Ryou returns from swimming out, and Kaede suggests something.

"Hey! Let's all play beach volleyball!"

"Oh, sounds good."

Everyone's down for Kaede's proposal. We split into teams, and Shingo offers to be the umpire.

We create three teams of two. Me and Kaori, Ryou and Yukine, and Rin and Kaede.

"Here's to a good game, Yuuya!"

"Yeah, let's do our best."

I nod at Kaori, thinking of the ball game tournament not long ago.

At the time, various things happened... And I ended up playing doubles tennis with Kaori... That's also when I realized that Kaori really shouldn't be allowed to play sports.

But by the time I remember that, the match against Kaede and Rin is already about to begin....

```
"So it's us against Yuuya and Kaori... Think you can beat us?"

"Not sure... You guys, go easy on us, okay?"

"Er..."

I doubt anyone here is going to go easy on anyone.

As I predicted, it all starts with Kaori's serve...

"Hup!"

"...!"
```

Sensing something flying at my head from behind, I twist aside as the ball pounds the sand right where I was just standing.

```
"Oh! Yuuya, sorry!"

"It's... It's fine..."
```

I managed to dodge the attack, but now I'm thinking about how dangerous these girls are...



Just then Rin sniggers over Kaori's serve.

"Fascinating. Looks like you're not very coordinated, Kaori. Guess we'll have to show you how it's done."

"Huh? Well, all right, I admit it..."

"Kaede. It's a game, right? Here's the best strat for winning..."

And then Rin starts specifically targeting Kaori, starting from the next serve.

"Hey!"

"Hup!"

Kaori manages to volley Rin's serve, but the ball flies off at an odd angle.

Right toward the sea.

But it wouldn't do to lose the ball, so I dash out into the water, grabbing the ball and returning it to Rin's side.

"Hah!"

"Hey...! Why'd you go grab that?"

"Weird, it was like he was walking on the surface of the water..."

"What? No way, that's not possible!"

"It looked that way to me, too..."

I'd gotten distracted by chasing the ball... But of course, it's not normal to run on the surface of the water! Although I had no idea I could do that until just now?!

Seems like my legs have gotten really strong from all the training with Master Rabbit.

But returning the ball to Rin's side leaves Kaori alone on our side, which means we lose the advantage and a point.

I try to hurry back to our side, but my feet are sinking into the sand. Hmm. I'm not used to sand. It's harder to move in, and seems to require more physical strength. Hey, this could be good for training.

We're just playing here, but I can't help thinking about things like that, after all my training with Master Rabbit.

After that, the other girls focus their efforts on Kaori, and we end up losing badly.

"Agh... Sorry, Yuuya. I really held you back."

"It's cool."

During the ball game tournament, she and I had partnered for tennis, so I was able to pick up the slack... But it was quite difficult to do that when it came to beach volleyball.

Kaori did her best, trying to toss and pass the ball, but everything flew at my head with a murderous intensity.

...If only there was a sport that could utilize her lethal style of play. Kaori would do well then. Her shots are so erratic, she has me scrambling all over the court. Her speed's quite impressive. Even the monsters I fought in The Weald would be afraid of her. It's quite alarming.

After that, we play Ryou's team, but we end up losing. Kaede's team are the overall winners.

"Ugh... Yuuya, I'm so sorry. You lost because of me..."

"N-no! It's fine! Don't worry about it!"

I don't know the right thing to say. I just stand there. Then Rin calls out to Kaori with a big grin on her face.

"Kaori's team always loses... Some kind of jinx, maybe?"

"D-don't say that!"

Kaori is indignant and Rin laughs out loud.

After having fun playing beach ball for a while, we stop to rest.

"Shall we take a break and get something to eat?"

"Yeah!"

Everyone's on board with Ryou's suggestion, so we decide to have lunch at a

beach café.

But since we've been playing in a less-populated area, there aren't many people in the nearby café.

I look over at the crowded section of the beach. The beach café over there is bustling.

"There seem to be a lot of people over at the other café. Nobody minds if we eat at this one, do they?"

"I'm cool with it."

"Yeah, that one's probably only popular because of the location. I bet there's not much to decide between, taste-wise."

So we head to the nearest beach café.

"Ah, Tenjou and pals. Fancy running into you here."

"Wh-what?!"

"...Yikes."

"Wh-what are you doing here, Ms. Sawada?"

To our surprise, our homeroom teacher, Ms. Sawada, is behind the till of this beach café!

What's more, she's wearing a black bikini under an apron. It's so different from her usual white blouses. I don't know where to direct my gaze... I never know where to look!

We're all shocked, but Ryou's the first to regain his senses and speak, his voice strained.

"Ms. Sawada! What are you doing here? You're meant to be...a teacher! What is this, a side hustle?"

"Yeah..."

It is shocking to encounter a teacher in the wild, especially in a situation like this.

But I never had her pinned as a beach bunny. She seems more at home in a

lab somewhere, doing experiments. It's weird, seeing her at this beach café. Still, on closer inspection, she's behind the till. There's nothing wrong with working retail to make some extra cash, is there?

And Kaori, the daughter of the president of the board, Tsukasa Houjou, is here. So we can't just brush this aside...

But Ms. Sawada doesn't seem bothered at all. She responds in a breezy tone.

"This isn't a side hustle. This is my family's business."

"Whaaat?!"

While we all struggle to digest this fact, a stern-faced man emerges from the back of the café.

He's wearing the same apron as Ms. Sawada, but his ferocious expression contrasts with her mild features. He's brawny and muscly with a big scar on his face, making him look intimidating. Not like a normal kind of person at all...

"Hey, Rie! Don't slack off!"

The man yells at Ms. Sawada, using what is surely her first name.

His appearance and demeanor has us all stiff with fright, but Ms. Sawada doesn't seem bothered at all, and she responds in her usual breezy tone.

"You've got it wrong, Dad. These are my students."

"Your students?!"

"Dad?!"

We all yelp in surprise, as does Ms. Sawada's father... Wait, her father?!

I know it's rude, but I can't help thinking they don't look like family at all... Like there's zero family resemblance?

We're all stunned, but the man seems to rally quickly and treats us all to a big beaming smile. Now he's like a totally different guy.

"Well, why didn't you say so sooner, Rie?! You poor kids have your hands full with a teacher like her! Now, is she teaching you all properly at that school?"

"Y-yes, she's a very good teacher..."

Kaori, the president's daughter, squeaks out this response. Ms. Sawada pouts.

"You're so distrustful! I'm a great teacher, you know?"

"I can't take your word for it. The students are the only ones who can say whether or not you're a good teacher. Right?"

"I guess so."

Ms. Sawada nods and smiles, and her father rolls his eyes before looking at us again.

"Hmm? Quite a lot of pretty girls here! And handsome boys, too. What's this? Are all the kids at your school like this?"

"Hmm... Yeah, there are a lot of students like them."

"What kind of freaky school is this..."

I mean, yeah. I still wonder about that, too, sometimes...

There's a lot of girls and boys at school like Kaori and Ryou, pretty with nice personalities.

"Well, you must have figured this out already, but I'm Rie's father, Ginji. C'mon in. Lunch is on me."

"Whaaat? W-we can't possibly accept..."

"I won't hear another word! Now, Rie! You're not doing much, are you? Show these kids to our nicest private tatami room while I make their lunch!"

"Hmm, no, I'm not doing much, but that's because we don't really have any customers."

"Quiet!"

It's true that there are a lot of people on the beach, but there aren't any customers here... Can being just a little distance away really make such a big difference?

Despite being yelled at by her father, I mean Ginji, Ms. Sawada leaves the register and comes over to us.

"So. I'm a teacher whose family runs a beach café. Whenever I have free time

during summer vacation, I help out. Though I don't get paid, of course."

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"I—I see...?"
```

In other words, since there's no pay, and this is a family business, then it doesn't count as a side hustle. Well, I don't really feel like we can comment on that. Maybe Kaori would know more about family businesses.

Ms. Sawada leads us to a tatami room, and after a short wait, Ginji enters with some plates of food.

"Growing kids like you eat a lot, right? Dig in, dig in!"

"Thanks!"

We're served heaps of yakisoba fried noodles, and the aroma of the sauce is tantalizing.

I try it at Ginji's prompting, and the taste surprises me.

"This is delicious!"

"Wow... I think this is the first time I've had such tasty yakisoba."

"...Nom nom."

The yakisoba we're treated to is very delicious.

Of course, eating at a beach café might make it better than usual.

However, the yakisoba that Ginji made is even more delicious than that concept could explain.

While everyone is engrossed in eating, Kaede mutters something.

"The food is this good, so why are there so few customers?"

"Kaede!"

"...Ah! S-sorry!"

When Rin admonishes her, Kaede hastily apologizes.

Luckily, Ginji doesn't get mad. He just smiles wryly.

"It's fine, it's fine. After all, it's true."

"Well, the location isn't good. We're right at the end of the beach, and

compared to the most crowded area, there are fewer people. That's why there aren't many customers."

"And the store over there does have a wider selection of food than we do."

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"I see....."
```

Indeed, when I looked at the menu of Ginji's beach café, the only things listed besides yakisoba were curry and beer.

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"B-but it's so tasty..."
```

"...It's a real shame."

Shingo and Yukine murmur sadly, and Ms. Sawada gets to her feet as if she's just had a sudden thought.

"I've got it!"

"Huh? What's wrong, Rie?"

"This teacher's just had an idea."

"You have?"

We all look up at her, blinking, and Ms. Sawada nods confidently.

"Oh yeah. A killer idea!"

\* \* \*

"Yes, table three, two plates of yakisoba please!"

"One beer over here!"

"Er, erm, two plates of curry, please!"

...We'd gotten off track from our original plan of beach fun. Before we even knew what was happening, we found ourselves working as temporary staff at Ginji's beach café.

Ms. Sawada's great idea was for us to work as waiters.

I think back to how she phrased it.

"The most beautiful boys and girls in the school are all here. What luck! So,

Tenjou and friends, I'd like to ask you all to pitch in."

"As... As customer bait?!"

"Of course, we'll pay you."

...And so, before we knew what hit us, we'd become waitstaff.

Ginji, clearly bothered by the lack of customers, asked us personally to help out, too. So we said yes.

After all, Ginji had treated us to free yakisoba.

We also got to sample the curry... And boy, was it good.

If people could just try Ginji's cooking, they'd be sure to come back again. We were helping to make that a possibility.

So we started bringing in customers from off the beach. Male customers flocked to Kaori's and the others' beauty. And female customers came to coo over handsome Ryou and cute Shingo, who was like an adorable fuzzy animal.

With the increase in customers, Ginji's been cooking like a madman.

"Gaaah! That's a happy roar, by the way!"

"Yeah, Dad!"

"You should at least learn to cook, Rie!"

But Ms. Sawada can't cook, so she can't assist in the kitchen. Instead, she was washing dishes as fast as she could.

Ryou and I could've been helping with cooking, but Ginji said he had it covered. So instead, we're focused on waiting tables.

"Two plates of yakisoba and two beers, right?"

""…""

"Er, is everything okay?"

"Can I shake your hand?!"

"What?!"

"Oh, hey, no fair!"

"Take a selfie with me!"

...I was getting a few odd requests like that. But overall, things were going all right.

The more customers came, the more news of the café spread by word of mouth, and eventually Ginji's beach cafe was packed.

"The staff here are all such hotties!"

"The girls are super cute, too!"

"Never mind the girls, look at the boys!"

"Is it some kind of event?"

"The yakisoba is super delicious!"

"The curry, too, right?"

I kept catching snippets of the customers' conversations. So far, no one had any complaints. Ginji's food really is great.

Now I wasn't just serving tables, I was clearing them, too. Eventually just carrying plates one at a time got to be too much.

So I started stacking them.

"W-whoa. What's he doing?"

"Amazing..."

"Just how many is he carrying?"

I had trays in my hands, in the crook of my arm, and even stacked on top of my head.

In the old days, I would have crumpled under the weight, but with my leveledup body, and subsequent improved strength and balance, I can carry all these plates without trouble. Wow, leveling up really comes in handy in unexpected ways.

"Tenjou! A little help here."

"Yeah? What's up?"

"We're running low on ingredients, so I'd like you to go buy some. You seem

to be the most capable, after all."

"D-do I?"

"I mean, you're the one who tossed that bear on the field trip, aren't you?" Well, yeah.

So I went with Ms. Sawada to buy more ingredients... And that's when the incident occurred.

\* \* \*

"Um... Could you please stop?"

"Huh? Oh, come on. Let's have a little fun."

"Yeah. We can show you how to loosen up."

Some male customers with deeply tanned skin were grabbing Kaori by the arms.

Kaede, standing nearby, spoke up for her friend.

"Uh, she doesn't like that."

"Oh, you're cute, too!"

"You come and have some fun with us as well, girly."

"Yeah, yeah, and why don't you invite your other friends too?"

"C-cut it out!"

"Hey! You guys!"

Ryou, nearby, ran over to intervene, but one of the male customers, a real bulky guy, blocked his path.

"Don't be a buzzkill, man."

"I'm not. But you need to quit it."

"Are you gonna make me? You little shrimp. What can do you? Eh?"

"Gah..."

One of the guys pushed Ryou, sending him stumbling backward.

Ryou was a sporty type, not a shrimp by any means.

But the guys who'd been sniffing around Kaori and the girls were all more muscular and much taller than Ryou. In fact, they were downright intimidating.

There were more of them, too. The atmosphere in the café was getting pretty tense...

"Uh, excuse me. Coming through."

"Y-Yuuya!"

Yuuya had just returned from grocery shopping with both hands full of shopping bags.

But Yuuya didn't seem to have grasped the situation yet. He headed right over to Kaori and the others, looking like he had something to discuss with them.

"Sorry. I just need a sec."

"Huh?"

As Yuuya approached without hesitation, one of the men scowled.

"Hey, are you blind or something? Us and these girlies are having a nice time right now. Get lost."

"Huh? Ah, sorry. However, we're a little short on manpower, so we'll need these two to help out..."

"Wha ...? Are you completely oblivious?"

"Look, I just need some extra hands..."

Ms. Sawada, back in the kitchen with the extra supplies, said that orders had resumed service, and things would be getting busy again.

"Anyway, we have work to do. I need those two. If you have a complaint, I'll be back to hear it in a minute."

"Hey! Butt out, buddy!"

To stop Yuuya from taking Kaori and Kaede away, the man grabbed Yuuya's arm, but Yuuya didn't even flinch.

Free from the man's grabby hands, Kaori and Kaede made a beeline for the kitchen, and Ginji.

Seeing them go, Yuuya breathed a sigh of relief, then turned to go and put the grocery bags in the kitchen.

But just then, the muscly guys closed ranks around Yuuya.

"Hey! You jerk! You think you can mess with us, huh?!"

"Wh-what? N-no, I..."

"We're gonna mess you up!"

"Eeeek!!!"

Female customers screamed as one of the men suddenly punched Yuuya.

But Yuuya, the one under attack, had other concerns.

A surprise attack! This could be dangerous for the other customers, or cause damage to beach café property!

Yuuya, had no idea why this was happening, but he was more worried about the other customers than being harmed himself.

He dodged the man's punch, and then the other guys moved in to attack, too.

Yuuya was about to counter, but then he remembered the grocery bags he was carrying.

He wouldn't be able to fight while clutching groceries. So he tossed the bags into the air, then started calmly parrying the men's punches and kicks, and corralling them into a safer position. Then he caught the bags neatly as they fell.

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"Wha-?"
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"H-huh?!"

The men were dumbfounded. They had no clue why or how they'd been shunted across the café floor.

After Yuuya was sure that no harm had been done to the café's interior or any of the customers, and that the men themselves weren't harmed, he took a deep breath.

"Um, could you please stop acting violently? We have customers here..."

After Yuuya said this to the confused men, they regained their composure and tried to attack him again, but...

"D-damn you!"

"...Hey! I'm cooking back here! What's the commotion? What are you kids doing, huh?"

"Huh? Yeek!"

Ginji's face was a mask of anger as he glared at the men.

The look on his face was so ferocious, the wind was knocked out of the men's sails and they all cowered.

"You jerks... You dare start trouble in *my* café? You wanna be chopped up and added to the yakisoba, huh?!"

```
"""S-sorry, sir!!!"""
```

Ginji's ferocity made him come across as some sort of scary criminal, and the men fled the beach house with tears in their eyes.

In the aftermath, the customers all sat stunned. Yuuya quickly bowed to them in apology.

"Sorry, Ginji. Thank you for that."

"Huh? I didn't do anything. You all okay?"

"Y-yes! We're fine!"

"Thanks to Ryou and Yuuya."

"I mean, I didn't do anything. It was all Yuuya."

"I see... Well, good job, Yuuya! Now that I take a closer look at you, you've got some muscles on you, don't you?"

"Tenjou is the best athlete at our school. The Phys Ed teachers have been so impressed with him. He could even go to the Olympics."

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"Seriously...?"
```

Ms. Sawada nodded proudly, and Ginji tensed up.

Then the customers all broke out into applause.

"That was amazing!"

"Yeah, yeah! It was like watching a scene from a movie!"

"I mean, I've only seen moves like that in manga!"

"He moved so fast, I barely even saw what he did!"

"Um, er, I..."

Yuuya, who hadn't been expecting any praise, was taken aback by everyone's reactions.

Ginji laughed and addressed the customers.

"Our staff is something else, huh? Well, everyone, back to enjoying your meals."

...And so, despite that unpleasant scene, Ginji's beach café recorded its bestever sales that day thanks to the efforts of Yuuya and friends, and Ginji's cooking, of course.

## **CHAPTER 3**

## **The Mysterious Shrine Maiden**

After finishing up our unexpected work at Ms. Sawada's family beach café, we return to our fun on the beach.

That's when Ryou and Shingo start getting approached by girls. And even I have a few coming up to talk to me. Maybe because I was involved in that incident at Ginji's beach café. Either way, I'm not really sure how to handle it.

We all stick together this time, since we don't want Kaori and the other girls to have any more trouble with random guys.

We enjoy the rest of our time on the beach, then return to the lodge for dinner, and afterward we kick back and relax.

While the others are doing that, I take the opportunity to find a secluded area, magic myself home, and make some food for Night and the others.

Ouma seems to have slept the day away. The others, though, have been doing a good job of guarding the house.

After they've all finished their meals, I sneak back to the lodge. Then Yukine emerges from the girls' room, carrying a book.

"Can I get everyone's attention for a sec?"

"...? What's up, Yukine?"

Kaori looks interested. Yukine holds out the book in her hand and makes a suggestion.

"Let's test our courage, shall we?"

"...What do you mean by that exactly?"

Everyone else looks confused by Yukine's unexpected proposal. But Rin and Kaede seem to know something's up. Especially Kaede, whose seems uncomfortable.

"Y-Y-Yukine, you've got to be kidding, right? A test of courage, really?"

"...Oh, I'm serious with a capital S."

"Noooo!!!"

"K-Kaede?!"

We're all confused by Kaede's panicked yelping. What's up with her?

Then, smiling wryly, Rin explains more about the Occult Research Club Yukine is part of.

"So this test of courage has something to do with the club?"

"...It's not a club activity, or anything. Just before coming here, I found out about this cool place nearby that's great for spooky dares. It's just a thought."

"Spooky dares?!!!"

Kaede yelps again. Sounds like she's really scared of ghosts. Luckily, ghosts don't really creep me out so much. I'm fine with the idea.

In fact, I even fought a ghostly monster called a Wraith in the other world. Although, I don't know if the ghosts in this world and the Wraith monsters have much in common.

"I've been coming here with my dad since I was little, and I didn't know there were any ghost hotspots nearby."

"...Hmm. So there's this old shrine. It's really, really old, apparently," Yukine explains to Kaori, who seems surprised. Then Ryou pipes up.

"Okay, I get a shrine being a good place for ghost-hunting. But don't people usually do that kind of thing at night?"

"...Yeah. I mean, it's open to the public. We just can't go crazy screaming or anything. No one will mind if we just go and take in the ghostly atmosphere."

"Well, okay."

Hmm. So we can go in at night, but we can't make too much noise. "What I'm saying is, I want us all to go visit that shrine." Yukine sounds out of breath with excitement. Kaede's hand shoots up. "Here's my answer! Nope! That's a big nope!" "...Oh, come on. You'll like it once you're there, Kaede." "I'm not some kind of fear fetishist!" "Aw, come on, it sounds kinda fun?" "Ryou!!!" "I-I'm actually kinda interested, too!" "You too, Kaori?!" Kaede seems surprised to see that so many people are interested in ghost-"Ah, what about you, Shingo? You don't wanna go ghost-hunting, do you?" "M-me? Well... actually, yeah, I'm kinda into the idea as well..."

hunting. She looks around at us all, as if searching desperately for allies.

"Y-you guys..."

Kaede blanches, and she looks devastated. Wow, she's really that scared...?

"Y-Yuuya, what about you...?"

"Er, I... Sorry, I guess I don't mind the idea, either?"

"Gah! No one's on my side!"

Kaede moans, her eyes filling with tears. Y-yikes, sorry.

Seeing Kaede's reaction, Rin bursts out laughing.

"Ah-ha-ha! Hang in there, Kaede. Besides, we're going to a shrine, you know? It'll be totally safe, right?"

"It... It will?"

"I mean, shrines are places where gods reside, you know? The total opposite of scary demons, ghosts, and so on, right?"

```
"M-maybe...?"

"Right."
```

Rin sounds pretty persuasive... But just 'cause it's a shrine, does that really mean it's going to be safe? Even if it is open to the public at night, aren't shrines technically the homes of gods? Entering someone's home at night without permission...sounds like that wouldn't go unpunished. Ah, but what about when we visit shrines on the first day of the new year? Is it a gray area?

Kaede seems like she's almost been persuaded by Rin... Then she suddenly stiffens and shakes her head.

```
"Ah! B-but not going at all has to be the safest option, right?"

"Tch..."

"Rin... Are you clicking your tongue at me?!"

"Tsk...so you're really going to be the only one who stays behind?"

"Huh?"
```

Rin's sly suggestion seems to take Kaede aback, not to mention the rest of us. Rin grins.

"We're all going to the shrine to have ourselves a little test of courage. If you're scared, you can wait here, Kaede. However, you'll be all alone in the lodge, you know?"

```
"Yeek!!!"
```

Kaede shrieks. Wow, Rin can be pretty awful...

Trembling, tears in her eyes, Kaede yells.

"R-Rin... You're a demon!!!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha!"

...And so, Kaede also ends up taking part in the ghost-hunting expedition as well.

```
"A-are you okay?"
"I—I—I think so...!"
"...Well, you don't look it... At all..."
```

Kaede managed to force herself to come on the ghost-hunting trip, but as we get closer to the shrine, she seems to become more and more terrified, and now she's got my arm in a death grip.

At first, I was nervous about Kaede holding on to me. But seeing how scared she was trumped my jitters.

"Well...if you're scared, why don't you go back to the lodge?"

"Don't leave me alooone!"

"I mean, if you're going home, I'll come with you..."

Kaede's crying and panicking is making me worried. But nothing I say seems to get through. She just keeps on shaking her head and plodding forward. So in the end, I guess we're all going...

Then, I notice Kaori closely watching me and Kaede.

```
u n
"Kaori? What's wrong?"
"Huh?! No, no, it's nothing!"
"Okay?"
```

If she says it's nothing, then I guess it's nothing.

"Aw... I should have gone the 'I'm so scared' route from the start, too..."

I don't notice Kaori murmuring this because I've returned my attention to Kaede, who's still freaking out.

```
"Yuuya... You're a devious guy, huh?"
```

"What?"

Rin gives me a meaningful grin. I'm...devious? Have I done something wrong...?

Then Yukine, in the lead, comes to a halt, and we all follow suit.

"...We're here."

"Wow. It's big."

"Y-yeah. And it looks... Really mysterious..."

Shingo was right. The shrine before us is located deep in the forest, illuminated by the moonlight. It looks more mysterious than scary.

We're all mesmerized by its beauty for a moment.

"I had no idea there was a place like this so close by..."

"Potential ghosts aside, this is a nice place. Don't you agree, Kaede?"

"Uh-huh. It's beautiful..."

The enigmatic charm of the shrine seems like it's been able to make Kaede forget her fear, if momentarily.

Then Yukine mutters something as she, too, admires the shrine and its ephemeral atmosphere: "...It's stunning. But it's not a good spot for ghost-hunting."

"Well, never mind about that. This view alone was worth it..."

There's a pause after Rin says this.

"...I knew I sensed a strange presence."

"...?!"

Suddenly, a lone woman emerges from the shadows of the shrine.

She's wearing the attire of a shrine maiden, her shiny black hair tied back on either side and her forehead covered by neat bangs.

Her shrewd eyes give off the impression of a strong-willed individual.

She looks to be about the same age as us, but she gives off a sacred sort of vibe.

We're all surprised by the sudden appearance of the shrine maiden, but Kaede actually points at her and shrieks.

```
"Aaaagh! A ghooost!"
```

"Whaaat?"

"Who are you calling a ghost?!"

The woman responds to Kaede's accusation with a frown. Since we came for a test of courage, I can see why Kaede thought she was a ghost. But she's obviously just a shrine maiden who works here.

The shrine maiden lets out a sigh and looks over at us.

"I sensed something out here, so I came to see, and... Well? You don't look like you're here to worship?"

The shrine maiden's expression is wary. Yukine answers her with honesty.

"We came here to, er, test our courage."

"Oh, you did, did you? Then you—"

"...Hmm? What?"

The shrine maiden looks sharply at Yukine, then quickly moves away from her in alarm.

"Oh! You're possessed! By something terrible!"

"...? S-something terrible?!"

"How could you not have noticed? Agh! It's all right. I'll perform an exorcism right away!"

The shrine maiden pulls out a slip of paper from somewhere.

*"…"* 

Then she chants something under her breath, before throwing the paper at Yukine's shadow!

"What are you doing?!"

"Guh... Gruh... Gragh!!!"

```
"...?!"
```

Yukine's shadow shifts... And a black mist billows up from it.

What the heck is this? We're not in the other world right now!

"Y-Yuuya, what is that?!"

Kaori, who also knows about the other world, looks shocked out of her mind to see a monster here on Earth.

Even Kaori and I are taken aback. So I can only imagine how shocked the others must be.

```
"Wh-wha...?"
```

"This can't be real!"

"Eeek!"

"Y-Yukine... Have you done something crazy again?!"

Kaede and the others are pale, shaking. But Yukine's the only one who doesn't seem all that scared. Maybe this sort of thing happens often in the Occult Research Club?

Everyone stares at Yukine, but she just nods, her expression composed.

"...That's surprising."

"You... You don't know what it is, either?!!!"

Rin sounds exasperated. G-good... So it's not normal after all...

But while I'm thinking about this, I realize the shrine maiden, the one who tossed the paper charm and drew out the monster...is looking very pale.

"Wh-what is this thing...?!"

"Huh?"

"It's no malevolent spirit... I've never seen such an obviously evil entity before!"

Apparently, even the shrine maiden hadn't expected this monster.

The black mist changes shape in an instant. Now it stands on two legs, its

whole body bulging with muscle.

Its claws and fangs are sharp, and its skin pitch black, like pure darkness made flesh.

```
...Huh? This is...

"Gragh... Grugh!"

"...?!"

"Guh!"

"Y-you guys...!"
```

As the monster lets out an air-shattering roar, Kaori and the others fall to their knees.

I reach out to my friends, but the monster closes in on me, blocking me... What *is* this thing?!

The shrine maiden, on one knee, looks up at me with anguish on her face, and her eyes are wide as saucers.

"H-how...? How are you so calm?!" Wait...! I sense an evil presence inside you, too!"

"Wh-what? I don't know anything about that... Nothing at all!"

"Graaagh!"

From my point of view, it's like everyone's fallen to the ground as a result of the monster's roar. That's all. I don't feel any different...

Even the monster seems caught off guard by the fact that it hasn't intimidated me.

I hesitate, trying to process the situation, and that's when Kuro stirs inside me, yawns, and then speaks.

Yawn... Felt a strange presence, so thought I'd check it out... What's that thing doing out here? Hey, Yuuya. This is Earth, right?

"Yes, but... Kuro! Do you know what this monster is?"

I don't know the details. All I can say is it's a creature that failed to become a

true Demon... A Demon Beast.

"A D-D-Demon Beast?"

As I repeat this unfamiliar term, the shrine maiden, still looking pained, gives me a puzzled stare.

```
"Huh? You... Who are you talking to?!"

"Me? Uh, well... Er..."
```

You're so clumsy. But whatever. Pipe down and listen to me. That Demon Beast is bad news. Bad news for you, and bad news for this land. I have no idea what it's doing here, but...if you let it escape, it'll spell big trouble.

Th-that's all well and good, but what am I supposed to do about it?!

Demon Beasts... If they'd gotten even halfway to becoming true Demons, then that must make them strong opponents, right?

Night and the others aren't here. Can I seriously deal with this all by myself?

As I stand there panicking, the Demon Beast stops being cautious and starts attacking me for real.

```
"Gragh... Growr!"

"...?! Y-yikes!"

"Graaagh!"

"Huh?!"
```

The shrine maiden whips out another slip of sacred paper... Perhaps trying to save me from the attack? But in her clumsiness, it flutters from her hand.

I think about dodging, but I'm positioned in front of the others. If I dodge, they'll be exposed...

That's when my body, honed by the training of Master Rabbit, acts on its own. My leg flies up, kicking the attacking Demon Beast away.

```
"Growr!"
```

The Demon Beast goes flying and hits a nearby tree before crumpling to the ground.

```
"G-guh..."
```

"Oh no... I thought that would have done it, but it's getting back up..."

Despite receiving a full-strength kick to the face, the Demon Beast is trying to stand... Albeit painfully.

The creature may be a failure, but it still has some level of Demon power in it... Which makes it exceptionally strong, no doubt.

```
"All right, then...!"
```

Just as I'm about to attack the beast again before it can rally, the shrine maiden leaps forward and throws a sacred paper slip at it.

```
"Get lost!"
```

"Grargh!"

The paper slip lands on the beast's head, and the beast begins to writhe as if in great pain.

It scrabbles for the paper slip, which has adhered itself to the beast, but in vain... Then it disappears, in a puff of smoke.

W-wow, that's *some* sacred paper... And more importantly... That shrine maiden... Just who exactly is she?!

Although... Never mind that now! What about the others?!

I run over to the group and check that everyone's okay.

They're all passed out...asleep. But otherwise unharmed... Phew.

```
"Oh, thank goodness..."
```

```
"...Hey. You."
```

"Huh?"

I turn to the voice and see the shrine maiden standing there, staring at me.

"Why were you the only one unaffected? And what power was it you used to overcome the monster? Would you mind explaining yourself, hmm?"

```
"Er..."
```

Well, I have no idea how to explain And no idea what to say next



## CHAPTER 4

## **Writhing Evil**

After getting permission to let my passed-out friends recover at the shrine a bit, we carried them all in to rest.

"...So? What was that thing?"

Once we made everyone comfortable, the shrine maiden starts interrogating me.

"I mean... I don't really know..."

"You're lying. It's clear you've got something to do with it. Otherwise, there's no way to explain your odd strength when you defeated that monster earlier."

"I mean..."

Was I involved? The monster was clearly a Demon Beast. A being that had failed to become a true Demon, from the other world. I couldn't say for sure it had nothing to do with me.

Still, I have no idea why a creature like that had appeared here on Earth.

For a moment, I thought it might have come through the Door to a Different World in my house, but I can't imagine how it would have gotten through the Sage's barrier. Much less how it could have gotten past Ouma and Night. No way would Night have let it come through.

While I'm thinking about this, the shrine maiden gives me a shrewd look.

"I don't know how I know, but I sense evil within you. So I'm going to exorcise it."

"What?!"

I yelp idiotically when she says this, out of the blue.

"You don't mind, right? I don't know if you're aware of it yourself, but I can sense the same evil presence as that monster inside of you. So if we don't exorcise it right away, it'll be bad news for you."

"Er, no, that's..."

Hey! This girl's trying to destroy me?!

Kuro sounds pretty angry about what the shrine maiden's saying. But yeah, she managed to wipe out that Demon Beast with her sacred paper slips...so no doubt her sacred powers would work against Kuro as well.

"I mean, I don't really..."

"Just trust me! Now, take off your clothes for the exorcism."

"Wh-whaaat?!"

Her request has my eyes bugging out in shock. Take off my clothes?!

I'm confused and frazzled, but the shrine maiden just looks irritable.

"Look. In order to exorcise that evil presence, I need to borrow power from the sacred energy floating around in the atmosphere. It's easier to absorb the sacred energy if you expose your bare skin. That's why I'm telling you to take off your clothes. Otherwise, they'll just get in the way."

"Whaaat?!"

Yuuya! Do not take off your clothes, you got that?!

"I... I won't!"

"Why not?! I'm telling you to strip!"

Finally, the shrine maiden resorts to force and tries to rip my clothes off!

I know she's trying to help, but I really can't have Kuro destroyed right now.

Though I'm much stronger than her, I don't want to tussle with her too roughly. For one, I don't want to hurt her. For another, too much roughhousing will tear my clothes anyway.

Wh-what the heck do I do?!

```
"Gah! Enough of this! Stop resisting! It's pointless!"
"N-nooo! Help meee!"
```

"...Yuuya, what are you doing?"

""Huh?!""

I look up, startled by the voice, to see Kaori glaring at us.

"Yuuya... Who is this girl? And why does it look like she's trying to...undress you...?

Kaori trails off, staring at me, her face getting redder and redder.

"N-no, Kaori! You've got the wrong idea!"

"R-right! This isn't what it looks like...!"

The shrine maiden and I both scramble to clear up Kaori's misunderstanding.

Kaori, looking at least a little reassured, seems to be assessing the scene again.

"More importantly, I guess...where are we? I thought we went out for ghost-hunting..."

I look to the shrine maiden, but she looks confused.

The others...have no memory of encountering the Demon Beast, then?

After that, everyone wakes up one by one, and I start checking that they're okay.

It seems like no one remembers anything about the Demon Beast. They only recall heading out for a test of courage.

After seeing how Kaori and the others are acting, the shrine maiden quietly approaches me.

"...It seems no one remembers anything."

"Y-yeah."

"Sigh... I'd really like to ask you more, but it seems you don't know much about that monster. So I'm guessing it'd be pointless to ask your friends anything, either. I'm still slightly concerned there might be some negative

aftereffects, but there's nothing much I can do... I've never encountered anything like that before. But I guess it attacked me, too, and I'm fine. So maybe your friends will be okay as well..."

Certainly, considering that everyone suddenly fainted, it would be wise to consider some sort of negative health effects.

Just to be safe, I use my Identify skill to check everyone's condition, but I don't pick up on anything strange.

"Well, whatever. Anyway, if you've learned your lesson, stop all this silly ghost-hunting stuff and behave yourselves."

With that said, the shrine maiden turns to leave.

```
"W-wait!"
```

"...What?"

I call after her in a panic, and the shrine maiden turns back with a frown on her face.

Undeterred by her glare, I clear my throat.

"Sorry for everything... Also, thank you for letting Kaori and the others rest for a while."

"...You don't need to thank me for that. But next time, have fun in a more responsible manner, okay?"

```
"Right...we'll be careful."
```

Then we all bow our heads and prepare to leave, when suddenly the shrine maiden demands.

```
"You!"

"Huh? M-me?"

"Yeah."

I point at myself, unsure, and the shrine maiden narrows her eyes.

"...What's your name?"

"Huh? I'm Y-Yuuya Tenjou."
```

```
"Hmm... Tenjou, huh..."
 The shrine maiden repeats my name in a murmur. I clear my throat again.
  "And... And you are?"
  "...Mai Kagurazaka."
 The shrine maiden...Kagurazaka...turns her back on us once again.
 Then...
  "I feel like we'll probably meet again."
  "Eh?"
  "Bye."
 Then she leaves.
 After that, we go back to the lodge and quietly go to bed.
                                     * * *
 The next day, we return home.
  "Ah, the beach was so fun!"
  "Y-yeah. It was a good time, hanging out with everyone."
  "But being asked to help out at Ms. Sawada's family beach café was kind of a
shock."
  "Yeah. In fact, encountering Ms. Sawada at the beach was the shock."
  "...Well yeah, you don't usually see your teacher so ... exposed."
  "Y-Yukine?!"
  Ryou grins as we're all reminiscing about the beach trip.
```

"Man...time sure flies when you're having fun."

"Right. We had a great time, all thanks to Houjou."

"Thank you!"

"Right...I also had a blast with everyone! Thank you, guys!"

"R-really? Oh, I'm so glad I invited you all."

"Well, the beach trip may be over, but we've still got a lot of summer vacation left... Maybe we can all get together again?"

Kaede's eyes light up when I suggest that.

"Yeah, let's hang out! Let's do it! I've already finished my homework for summer vacation!"

"Only because I made sure you finished it."

"Thank you for helping me..."

"...If we're hanging out again, how about going to a summer festival?"

"Oh yeah! A festival would be fun!"

"I'm down! Let's do it!"

And just like that, we've made plans to meet up at the next summer festival. After that, we go our separate ways.

Then I go straight home...

"I'm home!"

"Woof!"

"Homecoming. Welcome back."

"Oink!"

"Hmm? So you're finally back? Good, you can make food. I'm hungry."

Night and the others emerge to greet me.

...I wasn't even gone that long.

It's nice to have fun with friends. It's also nice to come home to a house full of people.

Savoring that joy, I prep a meal for Night and the others.

But even as I'm busy cooking, I keep thinking about the same thing.

That monster... The Demon Beast... What was that? Apparently, some kind of a failed Demonic entity...

And what was it doing, out of the other world?

It occurs to me that I should ask Ouma.

"Um, Ouma...?"

"What? I'm hungry right now. Make me some food first! I want to eat curry!"

"Uh, all right."

I want to ask him about the Demon Beast that somehow escaped the other world, but I miss my chance to ask since I'm so busy making dinner.

\* \* \*

The day after I got back from Kaori's lodge...

Since there's still plenty of summer vacation left, I've been thinking about tidying up Grandpa's storehouse a little, since I haven't had time to do it lately.

Ouma, Yuti, and the others appear, looking interested in Grandpa's storehouse.

"Hmm... I've always thought there was a strange aura about this place...but yes, now that I think about it, it's very strong..."

"I agree. It feels strange."

"R-really?"

It's true that this storehouse is stuffed to the brim with things Grandpa acquired during his travels, but I have no idea what most of them are...

Ouma sighs and rolls his eyes as I blink in surprise.

"Yuuya... There is so much power swirling around in the storehouse air, but you don't feel anything?"

"Huh?"

"It's not just one form of power, either. It's a real variety... Including powers I have no knowledge of... Just who exactly was your grandfather anyway, Yuuya?"

"Er... Uh..."

Even Ouma doesn't know what all this stuff is... Grandpa... What kind of things have you collected?!

I was planning to tidy up in here, but now I'm scared to touch anything.

But I need to start. This place won't clean itself. So I resign myself to it.

Though Ouma seems interested at first, he soon grows bored and goes back to his room in the Earth house. Even Yuti wanders off to go practice archery in the garden of the Sage's house.

... Never mind. I was planning to do the work by myself to begin with.

While sorting through the piles, I try using my Identify skill on various items.

"...Really, Grandpa, where did you get all this stuff from?"

Surprisingly, even when I used the Identify skill on some things, I can't figure out the names of some items, let alone their effects.

For example, this stone cube (?) levitating above a plinth. I don't know what it's for. I don't know what it's called, what effects it has, what it's really made of... And why the heck is it floating? Doesn't seem to be magnetic...

As I continue sorting through the piles, using Identify, I come across something that looks familiar.

"Huh? This is something a Buddhist monk would have, right?"

The object is a long staff... I have a mental image of a Buddhist monk clutching one.

It's not so weird an object to encounter, among all this mysterious stuff, but for some reason, finding it sparks my curiosity.

I try Identify on it, not expecting it to work, but...this time it does.

Only...

"Heavenly Staff... Huh, that's interesting. Says something about a purifying effect..."

Surprisingly, there's only that one word, *purifying*, written about the object's effects. That doesn't make sense to me at all.

"What is this? Maybe something similar to the sacred paper slips Kagurazaka was using the other day?"

I recall that, just the other day, the shrine maiden Mai Kagurazaka used sacred slips of paper to dispel the Demon Beast that attacked me. Something like an exorcism, right?

What sort of item is this? Could it be a weapon? Now I'm more intrigued and confused than ever...

```
"Woof... Woof!"
```

"What's wrong, Night?"

All of a sudden I hear Night barking. Just as I'm wondering what's happening, I pick up on the fact that we have visitors...

```
"Hmm?"
```

I can sense the presence of numerous people in the other world house... So I give up on organizing for now, put the staff into my item box, and head to the other world garden.

There, I find Owen, Lexia, and many others...

Lexia and her group quickly enter the Sage's garden.

```
"Puff... Gasp..."
```

"We finally... Made it..."

"Th-that was close. We've entered The Weald many times, but this time we barely made it by the skin of our teeth..."

"Yeah, all thanks to him... Though, thank goodness we had Captain Owen with us, and Lexia's bodyguard Luna, too..."

"I mean, it's only *him* and the other two who have the strength needed to cross The Weald in the first place..."

The soldiers all seem to have minor injuries. Owen and Luna seem visibly out of breath.

I looked around to check if anyone else is injured, but luckily everyone seems okay. They don't need Akatsuki's healing powers.

I have no idea what Lexia and company are doing here, but it looks like they have some sort of business with me, so I tell Night and the others to go relax at the Earth house for the time being. And now, I'm curious about whoever the aforementioned *him* might be.

Of those in her group, only Lexia seems perky. Her eyes sparkle when she spots me.

```
"Yuuya! I've some to see you! But hey... Who's the girl?!"
"What?"
```

"...?"

Yuti looks confused as Lexia points right at her. Luna nods, still trying to control her breathing when she sees how Lexia is reacting.

Come to think of it, I did mention that we'd captured the one who attacked us when we were guarding Lord Reigar, the first-in-line prince of the Kingdom of Arselia, but I didn't say exactly who it was to either Lexia or Luna.

I'd explained it to Owen and Arnold the other day, though, during the whole Ouma incident.

Since Owen already knew, I briefly explain Yuti's presence to Lexia. But Lexia and her group all just look puzzled.

"I can't believe this girl is from the same Guild of Darkness who were plotting alongside my brother... Are there only girls in the Guild of Darkness?"

"No, no, not at all... But I mean, I've never seen this girl before in my life, either. And what a shock to hear that she was an apprentice to the Deity of Arrows..."

"Yes... I thought Deities only existed in the fairy tales."

Seeing the reactions of the two, Yuti looks even more quizzical. Then she goes and says something outrageous.

"...? Unclear. I have no affiliation with the Guild of Darkness anymore."

"What?"

It seems this was the first time Owen had heard that, too. Everyone is looking startled.

Oh yeah... Now that Lexia mentions it, that reminds me Yuti was previously affiliated with the Guild of Darkness...

And more importantly, she was the apprentice to the Deity of Arrows.

"Prior. I wanted revenge on the humans who killed my master. But then I discovered it was all the work of Demons. So now I don't have any particular reason to kill humans... I still find it hard *not* to hate them, but I no longer take out those feelings on uninvolved third parties."

It seems like Yuti's done some thinking about how she feels about humans, and although she attacked them at first, now she no longer thinks of humans as her enemy.

No doubt this is due to the friends she made at her school on Earth, like Kaori. It was a good decision, after all, to enroll Yuti in the school.

"Conclusion. I am no longer affiliated with the Guild of Darkness. I have no need of them."

"N-no need of them? What kind of role did you play in the Guild of Darkness anyway?"

"Bodyguard?"

"Are you asking me, or telling me? You must be tough, then, if the Guild of Darkness took you on as a bodyguard. You're not a full-fledged member like me, but you must have some connections with the higher-ups. No wonder I never encountered you..."

"Yes. The people I often saw did seem to be the elites."

Owen looks deep in thought, his expression grim, as he digests what Yuti's said.

"In other words, there's no one currently in the Guild of Darkness with the level of powers that Yuti has... At the time, when I found out that Yuti was with the Guild, I realized how difficult it would be to seek to nullify the Guild, but

now... I have to tell His Majesty about this as soon as I return to the capital..."

"Incidentally, how'd you all get here? It must have been a dangerous trip...?"

According to Owen, this house is located in an area known as The Weald, which people generally avoid if they can. It's not the kind of place people visit casually.

But Owen and the others have come to The Weald many times to see me. There are no telephones here, nor magic, so there's no other way to get in touch... I mean, we do have a phone, but only at my house.

"Ah, about that..."

"They got here because I protected them!"

"Huh? Master Rabbit?!"

Apparently, Master Rabbit had been their escort. So that meant Master Rabbit was the *him* the soldiers had mentioned earlier?

"Well, how did that come about?"

"What? I was heading here as usual for your training, when I spotted humans, which is most unusual. They were dawdling around at the entrance to The Weald, and it seemed they had some business with you... So I escorted them."

"I—I see...?"

True... If they had Master Rabbit with them, they'd have been totally safe...

But the soldiers look exhausted. I find myself eyeing them.

"The... The challenge of it... Twice as tough as ordinary training..."

"Forced to go one-on-one with the Goblin Elite, what a nightmare..."

"Running's no good... That flying kick...!"

"Gah... It's a miracle we're still alive...!"

"...Er, Master Rabbit?"

"What? I threw in a little light training on the way."

"...Is this normal, in The Weald?"

"A rabbit... A strong rabbit... Doesn't make sense..."

"And it uses human speech..."

Apparently, Owen and company look so exhausted because they've been trained hard by Master Rabbit... Their faces are gray... Yikes...

Owen clears his throat, like he's trying to change the mood of the conversation.

"Ahem! By the way, the reason we came here today is..."

"Oh, that's right! Yuuya, let's go to the festival together!"

"What?"

"...Lexia. At least explain the situation first."

Lexia's proposal takes me by surprise... And that sparkle in her eye...

"Oh, whatever! This girl... Erm, Yuti, was it?"

"Affirmative."

"I'd like to ask all about you, Yuti! Buuut, more importantly, I want Yuuya to come to the festival with me!"

"That's still not an explanation..."

Luna rolls her eyes at Lexia, then gives me a more serious look.

"So the situation is this: The country of Regal, an ally of the Kingdom of Arselia, is holding a festival to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of its founding. And Lexia wants to invite you."

"I... I'd have to check my schedule..."

"Incidentally, a refusal will not be accepted."

"Er, why not?!"

Yes, turning down a request from Princess Lexia would be difficult at the best of times... Wait, not difficult... Impossible... Because I'm a commoner, right?

As I stand there flummoxed, Owen rubs his head as if pained while he explains more.

"Ah... I'm sorry about this. After Lexia acted out...the nation of Regal became very interested in you, Yuuya..."

"Er, they did? B-but why me? I mean, I'm just a regular guy..."

"""No you're not!"""

"Y-you don't all have to say it as a chorus..."

"Yuuya. While in Regal, Lexia and I heard tales of your great deed. You tamed the legendary dragon, did you not?"

"Oh, you mean Ouma? Er, I didn't exactly tame him... It was more of an accident..."

"Accidents like that don't exist!"

"Er, I g-g-guess not?"

Yikes, I'm so stunned, I'm babbling!

I'd nearly forgotten that Ouma's a legendary dragon.

I mean, all he does is lie around sleeping and eating. When he first came to Earth, he seemed interested in the books and documents and stuff I have... But these days he can't be bothered with them.

I'm on the verge of buying a brand-new TV just to keep Ouma entertained. I can't have him wandering around outside, after all. Aw, poor Ouma.

"Sigh... Anyway, the country of Regal has shown an interest in you. The king himself has made a request."

"Huh? What request?"

"He wants you to participate in a duel at the founding festival."

"And what about what I want?!"

A duel... A demonstration of combat strength in front of an audience... For pure entertainment... Sort of like a show... That kind of thing?

...Why would I do something like that?!

I stand there flabbergasted, and Lexia averts her eyes as if she's feeling awkward.

"Th-the thing is... The king insisted that you were not as strong as their Deity of Swords..."

"Okay?"

"Young lady. Did you just say, the Deity of Swords?"

Master Rabbit, who's been looking bored, suddenly perks up when Lexia says this.

But Lexia seems indignant at Master Rabbit's phrasing.

"Young Madam?! Who do you think you are?! Don't go thinking you're above everyone just 'cause you're a little stronger than Owen and the others and you can speak Human!"

"What's this, Yuuya? You haven't told them about me?"

"Huh? Oh... Now you mention it... But Master Rabbit, didn't you introduce yourself?"

"I did. I told them I'm a rabbit."

"I mean, that's not really introducing yourself..."

Now I'm completely confused. I mean, it's obvious he's being truthful. But it also seems like he hasn't mentioned anything about him being a Deity of Kicks, or anything really vital here.

"...Now I think about it... We accepted the protection of this individual without even knowing exactly who he is. He approached us and displayed immense power, so we felt we had no other choice and just went along with him..."

Owen's murmuring to himself, looking slightly aghast. Well, yeah. Master Rabbit can be kinda overwhelming to deal with. I can hardly blame them.

I decide to introduce Master Rabbit right now, though the atmosphere is awkward.

"Um... This is my mentor, Master Rabbit. He is also known as the Deity of Kicks, and sometimes as the Deity of Ears."

"What?!"

"Huh?! Him?!"

"How many surprises do you expect us to take, Yuuya?!"

When Lexia and company realize that Master Rabbit is a deity, their eyes go wide. According to Owen and the others, Deities, much like Ouma, are beyond respected and considered as almost fairy-tale-like beings...

While I'm digesting this, Master Rabbit looks quizzical.

"Hmm? You're not done explaining, are you?"

"Huh? What else is there you want me to say?"

"True, I am your master and am training you in fighting techniques, Yuuya. But at the same time, I am learning magic from you. As you are apprentice and I am master, so too am I apprentice, and you master."

"Uh..."

"Whaaat?!"

"Agreement. Yuuya is rather strange."

Master Rabbit's explanation elicits gasps of surprise from not only Lexia and her cohort, but the soldiers listening in, too.

"I... I mean, I get the part about being a Deity apprentice but..."

"Hey, hey, do you even realize what it means to be apprentice to a Deity?"

"Apprentice to a Deity, master of a legendary dragon... Just who *are* you anyway, Lord Yuuya?"

A lot of things are being brought up right now, but all of them are the result of coincidences!

Master Rabbit helped me out of a tough spot, and then before I knew what was happening, I ended up his apprentice but also sort of teaching him at the same time!

I want to explain, but Master Rabbit's description of our relationship has given everyone the wrong idea. They're acting like I'm some kind of superhuman.

Ignoring my flustered state, Master Rabbit gives Lexia a big grin.

"So, that explains that. Understand now, young lady?"

"G-guh..."

Now that Master Rabbit has established himself as a VIP, it looks like Lexia has no choice but to grin and bear him calling her young lady. In truth, I have no idea how old Master Rabbit is himself... But he's no doubt the most elite person I know, besides maybe Ouma...

Then Master Rabbit's grin fades. He grows serious once more as he looks shrewdly at Lexia.

"But that's enough teasing. Let me ask again. Is there really a Deity of Swords in the land of Regal?"

"Er, yes. Well, the king there says so. And when the king heard about Yuuya and how amazing he is, he started saying all this stuff about how the Deity of Swords was even more remarkable. I objected, and then before I knew it..."

Lexia trails off. So she really went and challenged the king of Regal...

I wish she hadn't done that...

I have no idea why Lexia's so convinced I could beat this Deity of Swords. I mean, we're talking about a Deity, right? Master Rabbit level. There's no way I could take on a Deity in a fair fight.

"Erm, excuse me... About this royal duel, then... I think I—"

"You will participate."

"Say what?"

I stare at Master Rabbit in shock. Er... Master Rabbit? What was that you just said?

Breaking into a cold sweat, I ask for clarification, thinking I must have misheard.

"Er... Would you mind repeating what you just said?"

"Are your ears blocked? I said, you will participate. You have no right to refuse. This is a direct order from your master."

"Are you some sort of dictator?!"

I can't help yelping, backed into a corner as I am.

But Master Rabbit just crosses his forepaws and grins.

"If there really is a Deity of Swords in that country, it would be most convenient for me. I'd like to discuss the Demons with them. But even more importantly... This would be the perfect place for you to bolster your training."

"Huh?"

"I can teach you how to kick, but I can't teach you how to use a sword. Your fighting style is a combination of bare-fist fighting and the use of a variety of bladed weapons such as swords and spears. In that case, sword training is also necessary, right?"

"Well..."

As Master Rabbit says, I mainly fight using weapons like the Omnisword and Absolute Spear left behind by the Sage. Of course, I also use the kick techniques I learned from Master Rabbit...

Seeing how I'm slow to catch on, Master Rabbit gives me a solemn look.

"Whether you're under delusions about this or not, the Demons will not leave you alone. You're not a true trainee Deity, so I feel bad that you've gotten mixed up in the fight against the Demons. But there's nothing to be done about it. My mission is simply to train you as best I can, to give you the best chance of survival."

"Master Rabbit..."

I think about that time when Yuti attacked us. I really don't have the strength it takes to live comfortably in this world...

...And I still regret how I wasn't able to do enough when Master Rabbit was being beaten by the Deity of Fists.

According to Master Rabbit and Yuti, I was able to defeat the Deity of Fists only due to the power of the Demon fragment inside me... The piece I call Kuro... But the truth is, on my own, I don't have what it takes.

I could never forgive myself if I got Master Rabbit, Yuti, Night, and the others in trouble... And what about Kaori and the others on Earth?

I have no choice but to get as powerful as I can... So that I can live in this world without fear... And without having to rely on that piece of Demon inside me...

"...Er, this is all kinda shocking stuff we're hearing here..."

"Let's just pretend we didn't hear anything."

Lexia and the others are talking from somewhere behind me, but I can't pay attention to that right now. I just take a deep breath and nod.

"...All right, I understand. Luckily, I do have time in my schedule right now. I don't know how well I'll do... But I'll accept the invitation."

"R-really? That's great! Right, Luna?"

"Er, yeah. But are you sure you're all right with that?"

"Yeah. I mean, like I said, I don't know if I'll be able to live up to your expectations, Lexia... But as long as you don't mind that..."

Master Rabbit grins wide as I shrug, showing a clear lack of confidence.

"In that case, I shall give you some extra special training, starting right now, to give you the best possible chance."

"Eh?"

"Young lady. When is this founders' festival?"

"Huh? Oh, er... It's a week from now."

"One week... That's not very long, but we can make some improvement by then. I hope you're prepared, Yuuya?"

"Y-yeah..."

I can't help trembling a little, wondering what kind of hellish training awaits me between now and the day of the founders' festival...

While Yuuya was undergoing intensive training with Master Rabbit in preparation for the match against the Deity of Swords, a boyish Demon and two Fallen Deities were talking in the Olds Forest, in the country of Regal.

"Argh! I want to go on a rampage, and soon! I want to make mincemeat of the Deity of Swords and hear her sweet screams!"

```
"Graaagh?"
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"Grooo!"

The Demon boy, eyes sparkling, was taking out his stress on the monsters around him.

All of them were A-or S-rank monsters. Not the kind of creatures that could be defeated easily.

But to the Demon boy, there was no big difference between monsters. He viewed them all as equally weak.

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"Come on. Help me kill some time, here."
```

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"Graagh!"
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"G-guh..."

A black mist billowed forth from the Demon boy, then transformed into countless sharp blades that pierced and sliced the monsters' bodies.

Since they were monsters classified as A-or S-class, their defensive strength was far higher than the average. but the Demon's attacks easily penetrated the monsters' defenses and slayed them where they stood.

The ground was littered with the corpses of the monsters the Demon boy had already slain for fun. Now he was standing amid a mound of them, and the air was filled with the stench of blood.

The spear-wielding Fallen Deity called out to the Demon even as he continued to toy with the monsters.

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"Are you sure you should be doing that?"
```

"Huh? Why, what's wrong?"

"A while ago, when I came to scope out the situation in Regal, I heard that...

Well, it seems that the Deity of Swords has recently been thinning out the monsters in this forest."

"Oh really? Is that so?"

"Therefore, if we act too conspicuously, there's a risk that our movements will be detected..."

The spear-wielding Fallen Deity trailed off.

The sudden waves of murderous intent coming off the Demon had rendered the Fallen Deity motionless in alarm.

"Hey.... Is there a reason why you're trying to tell me what to do?"

"Ah... Uh... Well..."

The spear-wielding Fallen Deity opened and closed his mouth but was unable to speak further.

Usually, when a Deity went up against a Demon, not only were their stats fully unleashed, but the Deity would be granted double strength against the Demon.

But in this situation, even if the spear-wielding Fallen Deity and the sickle-wielding Fallen Deity both attacked this Demon boy at once, they wouldn't be able to inflict so much as a scratch.

Such was the difference in their abilities. And with this made clear, the Fallen Deities knew that they were both far inferior to the Demon boy.

The murderous intent emanating from the Demon made not only the spearwielding Fallen Deity but also the sickle-wielding Fallen Deity stiffen.

"You sure sound cocky. But you two are nothing more than our pawns. You're our slaves. Do you understand?"

"…"

"A slave, voicing opinions to his master... It puts a bad taste in my mouth."

Irritated, the Demon Boy waved his arm, emitting black waves that quickly vaporized a large portion of the Olds Forest.

All that was left behind was a huge crater.

The boy's strength was overwhelming. The Fallen Deities went even stiffer still. Then suddenly, the Demon boy chuckled, and the atmosphere lightened.

"...Well, as nice as it would be for the Deity of Swords to stumble across us here for a fight... That alone wouldn't be very entertaining. Okay, I got a bit carried away again, but you're not wrong. I should behave myself, for now. I want to save those delightful screams for the best possible stage, after all!"

The Demon boy laughed in a carefree way, as his thoughts turned to the upcoming founders' festival.

And so, the country of Regal was becoming rapidly surrounded by a swirl of different desires...

## **CHAPTER 5**

## **The Duel**

```
"This is the country of Regal!"

"Wow!"

"Sure is lively."

"Woof!"

"Oink!"

"Hmph. Far too much bustle."
```

A week later, we meet up with Lexia and her cohort at the boundary of The Weald, and we enter Regal. The whole nation is clearly in the party mood, celebrating the hundredth anniversary of its founding.

Unlike the royal capital of the Kingdom of Arselia, Regal was too far to get to on foot in one day, so we had to go through camps and villages along the way... but it was an exciting experience that I found refreshing.

Of course, I could have used teleportation magic to get there without camping, but it would be extremely dangerous for anyone other than Lexia and her friends to learn of my magic, so we all camped out with the others, and in the end, we safely reached the country of Regal.

The city's just as lively as the Kingdom of Arselia, but the atmosphere's quite different.

The biggest difference is that there are a lot more people wearing robes, and a lot more people doing business using magic.

For example, there is a street performer controlling numerous fireballs at

once, and when people buy things from the shops, the items are wrapped in midair and sort of float along behind the buyer. I get the impression that magic is in everyday use here.

According to Lexia, magical research is far more active in the country of Regal than in other countries, and it shows. Makes sense.

Incidentally, when I toured the Kingdom of Arselia with Lexia and her friends, Lexia had been in disguise. But now she's dressed in the luxurious clothes of a princess. The townsfolk all stare at Lexia with interest, but they don't speak to her, nor do they seem particularly welcoming... Perhaps they don't realize she's the princess of Arselia.

I don't really get it... Maybe the people here are just more chill? Either way, I'm glad about it.

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"Lots of people about."

"Woof."

"Oink."

"Hmph. It's quite noisy."
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I look around, taking in my surroundings, and Lexia speaks with a curious tone.

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"By the way, Yuuya... Where's your master?"
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"Huh? Oh, now that you mention it..."

"He said he was going to meet the so-called Deity of Swords."

Ouma mutters, gazing gloomily out at the crowd.

Lexia and Luna both seem to twitch a little as they look at Ouma.

"Y-you know, it's still so hard to believe... That this cute little dragon could be the legendary dragon from the stories..."

"An item that facilitates body size alterations is extremely rare, and yet he used it on a legendary dragon..."

When Lexia and the others came to tell me about the Royal Duel being held in Regal today, they hadn't met Ouma yet. They only met him when we were about to embark. But it seemed like they had trouble believing Ouma in his tiny form was really the great dragon of legend, and this irritated Ouma, who kept trying to make himself bigger and caused all sorts of trouble just before we set off.

Anyway, according to Ouma, Master Rabbit's gone ahead to see the Deity of Swords... But how will he be able to find them without a guide? Or is it like two Deities can sense each other's proximity?

While I'm thinking about this, Lexia suddenly grabs me by the arm.

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"Er, Lexia?"
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"But never mind all that! Since we've come all this way, let's look around the royal capital!"

"That's fine, but...your chest is pressing against..."

"It sure is!"

"It... It is?"

I wasn't expecting her to agree like that...

Then Luna scolds Lexia.

"Lexia. You're a princess. Don't act so indecent..."

"Hmm, but I'm a woman first and a princess second. Or perhaps, Luna, you're jealous?"

"Ugh!"

Luna blushes and grunts.

"N-no way!"

"Then just stay quiet. I'm going to have fun walking around the festival with Yuuya! You trail behind as my guard."

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"Guh!!!"
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"Um, Lexia? And Luna, uh..."

"Yuuya!"

"Y-yes?!"

Hearing my name being barked, I straighten up and yelp a response as Luna grabs my other arm!

"L-Luna?!"

"I-I'm going to check out the festival with Yuuya, too!"

"What?! But who's going to guard me?!"

"Lexia. I'm a woman first, and a bodyguard second, you know?"

"Ugh!!!"

For some reason, Luna looks triumphant, and Lexia looks annoyed.

Meanwhile I've got a girl on either arm, and my brain seems to have ceased processing any other stimuli.



Lexia previously proposed marriage to me, and Luna, well... She's kissed me. It would be impossible not to be conscious of those facts.

"First off, it's not just Yuuya here. There's the legendary dragon Ouma, and Night and the rest, too. We couldn't be safer!"

"W-well..."

Certainly, as long as Ouma and the others are here, there is no safer place. Although I'm not sure if Ouma would protect us or not.

Perhaps for this reason, Owen and the other soldiers are also guarding our group from a short distance away.

"Come on, Yuuya. Let's have a look around."

"Hey, hold on! Yuuya, let's go this way!"

"Whoa!"

Lexia and Luna tug and yank me around by my arms.

Seeing me like that, Ouma mutters in disgust.

"...I think his biggest enemy might not be the Demons, but women."

"...? Doubt. In that case, I could beat him?"

"Huh? I didn't mean literally... But even the Sage himself struggled with this. He had trouble with the ladies, too. Now that I think about it, he and Yuuya really are alike..."

I had no idea such a conversation was taking place behind my back.

\* \* \*

"A duel, eh...?"

In a swanky chamber somewhere in the land of Regal, Iris the Deity of Swords reclined and sighed.

She'd already completed one of the tasks she'd been given, thinning out the monsters in the Olds Forest. Now Orgis, the king, had instructed her to get some rest ahead of the upcoming bout.

"But why a duel? Could I possibly be about to encounter a man stronger than myself...?"

Iris's eyes sparkled. She really wanted a man stronger than her for a husband. But in the next moment, her expression turned gloomy again.

"...No, I can't go hoping for that. I've been looking all over the place, but I've never met anyone who fits the bill. It's not going to be that easy. *Haaah*..."

"Hmm. Unusual for a Deity of Swords to sigh so much."

"...?! Rabbit?!"

Iris whirled around to see the Deity of Kicks—the rabbit—standing silently on the balcony of her chamber.

"Long time no see, Iris."

"It certainly is. But isn't it unusual for you to come to a place that's so heavily populated? What's up?"

"Well, I have some business of my own in this land. I've come to you to report on the current situation, and to exchange information."

"I see... Very well then, come in. I'll pour some tea."

Having been invited inside, the rabbit looked around the fancy chamber curiously.

"Such a fancy room, and yet, no servants?"

"I said no to all that. I can take care of myself, and anyway, it's too distracting."

"I see. But are you sure it's all right for you to just invite me in?"

"I mean, you're already inside now... But yeah, it should be fine. After all, you're a Deity. You should be welcomed."

"Hmph. Humans really are obsessed with status."

"Well, if you say so. But I'm a human, too, you know?"

"Anyone who bears the title of Deity has ceased to be a mere human."

"That sounds awful, like I've become some sort of monster."

Though a little irritated, Iris prepared tea, sat down opposite the rabbit, and spoke again.

"So? You came all the way here to see me. What's up?"

"The Deity of Fists has fallen to Demonic influence."

"...! Goodness." Iris murmured and took a sip of tea. "...It was predictable, to a point... All information pointed that way, didn't it?"

"Yes. Everyone knew that he was the least controllable of all the Deities. So it's not that surprising that he fell to the Demon influence. But he started using his powers to hunt other Deities."

"...I see. That's why we've lost contact with so many..." Iris looked sad for a moment, but then she continued calmly. "But even if the Deity of Fists has fallen to Demon influence, there are still some Deities who could stop them from running amok, right? For example, the Deity of Arrows..."

"...Slain. By humans."

"What?!" This news left Iris speechless. A Deity who protected humans from Demons, slain by the very humans they sought to protect? That was staggering. "W-what do you mean? They so loved humans... To be slain by them..."

"...Yes. But it was the Demons, prompting the humans to act. It was humans possessed by Demonic influence who slayed the Deity of Arrows."

"I see... You know, I've noticed more and more Demon Beasts about these days..."

"...! Demon Beasts? Are they appearing in large numbers?"

"Yeah. I figured about the movement of the Demons, after what you've said about the Deity of Fists, and the situation with the other Deities... But it also can't be denied that there's been some real stirrings among the Demon Beasts of late."

"...I see. If Demon Beasts are popping up here and there, that's proof that dark forces are at work. It is only a matter of time before we shall be forced to act."

"So, do you know how many Deities remain?"

The rabbit frowned at this question.

"I know not. The Deity of Magic appears to be about... But the others were either hunted by the Deity of Fists, or have otherwise fallen to Demonic influence as well..."

"So there are others... Deities who've fallen to the influence of Demons..." Iris knew it must be true, but it wasn't something she wanted to believe. She sighed with disappointment. Then she seemed to realize something. "Now that I think about it...you said you had business in this country, but were you actually invited here by the king of Regal, too? I thought you were a Deity who doesn't like to get involved with humans much..."

"Oh you did, did you?" The rabbit smiled at her remark. "Are you taking part in the tournament today?"

"Huh? That's right...how do you know that? Wait... No way! You're my opponent?"

"No. Unfortunately, you are mistaken."

"Oh... But if it's not you, then who could it be? I still haven't heard anything concrete about my opponent. I doubt there's anyone who could offer me any kind of real challenge though."

"Do not worry. Your opponent is an extraordinary talent."

"Hold on. You're talking like you know this person...?"

"Yes, because your opponent is my very own apprentice."

"...!" Iris's eyes went wide. "An apprentice?! You took an apprentice? You and the Deity of Fists are the last two I'd ever think would take an apprentice!"

Iris sounded genuinely surprised, but her words made the rabbit look away, sulkily.

"Hmph. Don't lump me in with the Deity of Fists. But I can understand your surprise, I suppose. Still, I felt like taking him on as my apprentice, and so I did. I've been training him."

"...Your apprentice must be pretty special if you went out of your way to take him on, then?" "You'll see for yourself soon enough. Just don't go letting your guard down."

"...I see. I'll keep that in mind."

And so, information exchanged, Iris headed to the arena to watch the bouts that would take place before the Royal Duel, her mind full of thoughts about the rabbit's apprentice.

\* \* \*

"So many people..."

After being dragged around town by Lexia and Luna and seeing all kinds of sights, we all finally arrive at the arena where the Royal Duel is to be held.

Apparently there are matches before the main event, so we decide to watch those.

But since I'm a challenger in the Royal Duel, we enter the arena from the back door instead of the normal one.

An arena attendant sees that Lexia is with our party and guides us all to a room.

The heavy wooden door and the elaborate decorations make it look quite grand, but who could be inside?

"His Majesty awaits."

"Huh?"

"Okay."

To my surprise, it turns out that the person in the room is the king of this very land...the king of Regal. I wasn't expecting this, and I feel pretty flustered.

"W-wait a moment! I'm not even wearing formal attire or anything...!"

"No worries! You're elite enough without fancy clothes, Lord Yuuya!"

"That's beside the point!"

I haven't done anything! How can I be elite?!

Also, is it all right for Yuti and Night and the others to be here, too?

Sensing my concern, Luna sighs a little, as if impatient.

"Oh, don't worry so much. For whatever reason, Yuti's involved with us now. Surely, past transgressions will be overlooked."

"W-will they?"

"Suggestion. If we get scolded, we will simply leave."

"That sounds even worse?!"

Help...! I'm panicking, here!

Oblivious to the state I'm in, the staff member who guided us here knocks on the door, and a voice summons us from within.

The staff member opens the door wide, and Lexia strolls in.

I scurry into the room behind her, whispering an apology and my thanks while looking at the staff member.

Inside the room, two suave, middle-aged guys resembling Hollywood actors await us, along with a woman in a fancy gown.

Me, Night, and everyone else enters the room, but Owen and the other soldiers hang back and wait outside. Perhaps they want to put on a display of strength in front of foreign royalty? Or maybe there's some other reason that's beyond my understanding. Either way, Luna enters with us, so at least Lexia has her bodyguard.

One of the men, very fancily dressed, spreads his arms wide and comes to welcome us.

"Ah! Princess Lexia! It has been too long."

"Indeed. You look well, King Orgis..."

While I try to shrink in on myself, Lexia begins a chatty conversation with who appears to be the king (?) of Regal.

But while the conversation seems pleasant on the surface, there's something intimidating about it...

Luna stands right behind Lexia, guarding her, and Night and the others sit quietly and attentively as always.

Akatsuki and Ouma, however, are yawning visibly and looking bored.

Yuti is examining the room with interest. Maybe she's spotted something of note? Why am I the only one tense? That's weird. Just why am I so nervous, anyhow?

Stiff as I am, I sense someone looking at me. I turn my head that way to see the woman in the gown staring intently at me.

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"Um... Is something amiss?"

"Huh? N-no, it's nothing!" she said.

"I... I see..."
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I panicked for a moment, worried I'd done something offensive, but that doesn't appear to be the case... So then, why is she staring? Although, I am a total stranger. I guess maybe I stand out in a weird way.

While I'm trying to wrap my brain around it, the man stops chatting with Lexia and turns his attention to me.

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"So...this is the fellow? He has quite the entourage..."

"Yes, that's right. This is Lord Yuuya...my fiancé!"

"F-F-Fiancé?!"
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Okay, yes, she did propose marriage, but I thought I'd been clear about turning her down!

Luna sighs a little as I gasp and sputter.

"...Lexia. Don't torture Lord Yuuya like that."

"Oh, whatever! You're just jealous I got to him first!"

"That is not a princessly attitude."

Sorry, Lexia, but...I think Luna's got a point there...

The man seems stunned by what Lexia just said, so I take the chance to bow politely and introduce myself.

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"My name is Yuuya Tenjou."
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<sup>&</sup>quot;Self-introduction. I am Yuti."

Yuti introduces herself briefly, too.

Then I introduce Night and the others.

"This is my family. Night, Akatsuki, and Ouma."

"Woof!"

"Oink."

"Hmph..."

Night offers a dignified bark, but Akatsuki casually waves a hoof, and Ouma doesn't so much as stir from the floor where he's curled up.

Panicking, I open my mouth to scold Akatsuki and Ouma, but the man speaks first, sounding taken aback.

"B-but this is... I can't believe it, a dragon who can actually speak the human language... I've heard rumors, but I never thought anyone would actually be able to tame an Ancient Dragon..."

"Eh?"

When the man says *Ancient Dragon*, I can't help but tilt my head in confusion, but Ouma...

"...What did you just say, you jerk?"

"..."

Instantly, the room fills with an ominous tension.

A force is coming off Ouma in waves, directed at the man before him.

All the glass in the room shatters... Even the walls crack. Yikes... Ouma's power is even affecting the surroundings...

The well-dressed man, the other man, and the woman in the gown all go pale and start trembling, faced with this enormous wave of negative vibes.

"I'll ask again. What did you just call me?"

"Ah... The thing is..."

I hadn't been expecting Ouma to react like this... I froze up initially, but now I quickly rush to scold Ouma.

"O-Ouma, that's enough! Stop it at once!"

"Yuuya, why do you seek to check me? These people lumped me together with those Ancient Dragons. Such an insult is unforgivable, is it not?"

"Well, I don't know what an Ancient Dragon is..."

"Are you serious?! You have to at least know that much!"

Ouma stares at me with wide eyes, in total disbelief.

At that moment, the pressure dominating the room dissipates instantly, and the men and woman all fall to their knees, gasping for air.

"Ah! Forgive us! So sorry!"

I hurry over to them, trying to help them back into their chairs.

But Ouma seems annoyed by me doing this and starts grumbling.

"Hmph! Yuuya! Why do you grovel to them?"

"I don't know why you're so offended, although I understand that you are. But your menacing aura is too much for ordinary people. And besides, these people have never met you before today. You can't blame them for not knowing all about you. That's why I'm apologizing...because it's my job to make sure you behave."

"Ugh..."

Ouma groans and lies back down, sulking.

But then...

"...My apologies."

Yup. He actually apologized.

After that, the man finally seems able to catch his breath and speak, his face drawn.

"I—I—I apologize, too. It seems that the stories about the great Genesis Dragon are true..."

"That's right. I'm not one of those puny lizards you were referring to. See that you don't forget."

"Y-you think of Ancient Dragons as puny lizards..."

The other man mutters, voice wavering.

It sounds like Ouma views these Ancient Dragons as weak, but to humans, they're apparently incredible beings.

I mean, I doubt any dragon is weak. It's just that Ouma's super strong.

While I'm thinking about this, the woman in the gown speaks, her eyes wide.

"But in the legend, the Genesis Dragon was supposed to have been defeated by a wise man..."

"Lyla!"

The man quickly scolds the woman, who still seems stunned.

Did she just say wise man? As in the Sage?

I'm surprised, but Ouma looks away, awkwardly.

"...When I was a youthful and impulsive dragon, I acted out a lot... That fellow...he put me in my place. With his fists. From then on, I have been quite docile. So I suppose in a way, he did defeat me."

Yeah, I think Ouma said something like that when I met him.

They all seem taken aback by Ouma's explanation, but then one of them, the one wearing extravagant clothes, laughs out loud.

"Ha-ha-ha! I see! I see, the wise man who appeared in that old tale, he was quite something, eh?"

"Hmph, yes, that's correct. There will never be one to top him... Unless..."

"Hmm?"

For some reason, Ouma trails off and turns his head to look at me.

I blink in confusion, but Ouma merely chuckles and says no more. What?

Suddenly, the well-dressed man clears his throat.

"Ahem. Well now, we haven't introduced ourselves yet. I am Orgis, the king of Regal. This man over here is my prime minister, Royle. And this is my daughter, Lyla."

"Oh, hello..."

The two of them bow elegantly to me, and I find myself returning the gesture, although I know my bow comes across more casually. Yikes! I'm so out of my depth... I don't have any manners... I don't have any poise!

"Ah. But you know... Your name... It seems that you are not from around here, Lord Yuuya. Although I assume you are a man of high esteem?"

"Er... I wouldn't say I'm..."

"I mean... You are accompanied by a legendary dragon! What else would you call such a man?"

"R-right..."

Seriously? Ouma just sort of...attached himself to me. It's not like I actually tamed him or anything.

While I'm thinking about this, King Orgis of Regal gives me a shrewd look.

"For example... Even if a Demon attacked, I assume you would be fine?"

"Huh? Well... I'm not actually sure Ouma would help if it came to a fight against a Demon..."

"Huh?"

The King, Prime Minister Royle, and Lady Lyla all stiffen at this.

Even Lexia and the others seem surprised.

"Wh-what do you mean? You mean that legendary dragon... Er, Mister Ouma... Would not lend a hand in a time of need?"

"Er..."

I flinch as the king leans forward, but Ouma snorts laughter through his nose.

"Hmph. You humans have no shame. I have zero interest in either Deities or Demons. Handle your issues yourself."

"So...as you can see..." I said, trailing off.

"Goodness..."

King Orgis mumbles in disappointment and weakly sits back down on his

chair.

I mean, I get how he feels, but... All this business has nothing to do with Ouma.

If Ouma felt like it, he could wipe out the Deities and Demons alike. But he's not the one being hunted or attacked, so why should he?

Think about it from Ouma's perspective. Why should he care about the survival of the human race?

If he did help, it would purely benefit the humans. What would be in it for Ouma?

I mean, if I'm honest, I'd love his help...but I don't want to force him if he's not into the idea.

The king descends into quiet disappointment, until Lexia, unable to bear it any longer, speaks up.

"You mentioned fairy tales earlier, but...what do you mean exactly, 'if a Demon attacked'?"

"...Right. Well, we've heard some information from the Deity of Swords... Ah, it seems you and your company still haven't heard about it..." The king continues in a subdued tone. "Right now the world is on the verge of crisis. All thanks to the Demons... Creatures we once believed only existed in fairy tales..."

"Demons...?"

"Yes. You've heard of the Deities and the Demons, right?"

"I mean, yeah..."

"I too have heard the legends. All the bad aspects of human beings coalesce into these creatures called Demons... Deities protect humanity against them," Luna pipes up.

"You are correct, Guard. But these are no mere legends. This is real life."

"Goodness..."

"And according to the Deity of Swords...the Demons are stirring again and are actively seeking to attack us humans."

"Affirmative. Those stories are true."

"Right. I woke up because I was hungry. I could smell the strong scent of Deities and Demons about."

With not only Yuti but also Ouma corroborating this story, Lexia and the others have no choice but to believe it.

King Orgis frowns and looks at Yuti, who just spoke with a lot of confidence in her statement.

"Um... Yuti, was it? You speak with a lot of confidence. Do you have some sort of proof?"

"Foolish question. I am the apprentice of the Deity of Arrows. So, I know."

"What!"

"Oh, and I'm apprentice to the Deity of Kicks," I quickly admit.

"""Whaaat?"""

When I say this, not only King Orgis, but also Royle and Lady Lyla cry out in surprise.

"So, not only can you tame a legendary dragon, you are also apprenticed to a Deity..."

"W-what an elite!"

u n

While everyone's staring at me, Lexia is puffing out her chest for some reason.

"That's right! Yuuya is amazing!"

"Well, why do you look so proud, then?"

"Because I am his wife!"

"You're really not?!"

From fiancée to wife already?!

How...free-spirited Lexia is...

"I see... Well, an elite like this can't fail to defeat the Deity of Swords..."

"Right?"

"But the Deity of Swords is an elite, too, you know? ... Although, Lord Yuuya, as the apprentice to the Deity of Kicks, no doubt you're already well aware what Deities are capable of..."

"Ah-ha-ha..."

Master Rabbit really is super strong!

I mean, if I don't use my recently acquired Demon powers, I don't have a chance...

Though if I do use my Demon powers, Master Rabbit, as a Deity, is able to unlock his stats and double in power...

Still, if Deities become stronger against Demons, that just proves that Demons are so tough it's necessary.

I think about Kuro, who's been sleeping a lot since the attack from the Deity of Fists. And I realize all over again how formidable Demons are...

"Well, enough. While I'd love to discuss this further, today is the day of our nation's founding festival. Let's forget all this business and simply enjoy the day."

"R-right."

"Ah, that's right. From here, we have a fine view of the ongoing tournament. Would you like to join us?"

"Oh yes, thank you very much."

Lexia takes Orgis up on his offer, and we decide to watch the proceedings from these VIP seats.

This room is located high up and overlooks the entire arena, so we have a good view of the matches.

Then Lexia tugs on my arm.

"Yuuya, let's sit together!"

"Huh? Oh, all right."

Lexia tugs me down into the seat beside her, while Lyla, the princess of Regal, comes to sit down on my other side.

"Lord Yuuya. May I sit next to you?"

"Huh? S-sure, but..."

I look around, taking note of the fact that there are plenty of open seats.

Even the seat beside Orgis, king of this land, is open... Is it really proper for Princess Lyla to be sitting beside us?

Or does Princess Lyla have some royal duty to entertain high-ranking guests from other countries like Princess Lexia?

"Grrr..."

As I nod, figuring what Lyla's doing is making sense, I suddenly hear a grumbling sound from Lexia beside me.

"...? Lexia, what's wrong?"

"...Never mind."

"Huh...?"

Any way you slice it, she seems upset...but I think it's better not to press the issue.

In contrast to Lexia, Princess Lyla smiles brightly and places her hand on mine!

"P-Princess Lyla?!"

"Oh, no need for the 'Princess.' Just Lyla is fine."

"Oh, I couldn't possibly..."

"R-right! What are you doing grabbing his hand? Yuuya is my fiancé!"

"Umm, that's a bit of an exaggeration..."

Lexia seems flustered by Princess Lyla's actions, but Princess Lyla just smiles calmly.

"But Lord Yuuya says that's not the case, right? Isn't it just a misunderstanding on your part?"

"I-It's not a misunderstanding! It's true! Well, it's true for me!"

"I wouldn't call that objectively true, then..."

"Anyway! Please don't get between me and Yuuya!"

Lyla smiles dryly when Lexia says this.

"As a member of the royal family of Regal, a country that is actively researching magic, I think I can explain the magic that will be used in the upcoming tournament in more detail than anyone else, don't you agree?"

"Uh, uh, that's..."

Lyla's logic has Lexia stumped.

Indeed, I've heard that this country, Regal, is a magical powerhouse, and I'm sure Princess Lyla, a member of the royal family, would be able to explain about all the forms of magic I have no concept of.

Actually casting magic itself isn't a problem for me, thanks to the Sage's mana pathways and magic theory, but I don't know anything about commonly known magic. This could be a great opportunity to learn more about it.

"Then may I take you up on your offer?" I ask.

"Yes, of course."

"Gaaah!!!"

Princess Lyla beams at me, while Lexia growls with frustration. Sorry, but I really am interested in learning about magic.

Internally apologizing to Lexia, I suddenly remember something.

"Incidentally, where is the Deity of Swords now?"

Our duel will apparently be held after this tournament. When I ask about my soon-to-be-opponent, the Deity of Swords, King Orgis smiles and speaks up from across the room.

"Ah yes, the Deity of Swords is resting in a VIP room until the match begins. You will both be summoned by staff before the match begins. Please, follow them to the arena at that time."

"All right."

"Hmm. Ah, it appears it is about to begin."

King Orgis gets regally to his feet and moves to where he can see the entire audience.

Something like a microphone stand is placed in front of the king.

He clears his throat and speaks into the microphone thing.

King Orgis's voice reverberates throughout the entire arena, and the excited spectators all fall silent to listen.

I'm not really sure how the device works, but I imagine it's a magical tool that has the same purpose as a microphone.

I'm distracted by the magical device, and while I'm busy wondering exactly what kind of magic it uses, I realize that King Orgis's opening speech has finished, and the audience has started getting very excited. Darn... I wasn't listening properly...

Feeling guilty, I turn my gaze toward the arena, where it seems the first match is about to begin. A burly-looking man and a slender man in a robe have appeared in the arena.

They are total opposites in appearance, but I'm guessing one is a mage, and the other some sort of warrior?

When the match begins, the burly man, true to his appearance, swings his large sword and lunges at the robed man.

However, the robed man keeps a safe distance from the attacker, chanting something and pointing his palm toward his opponent.

A ball of fire shoots out from the palm of his hand, straight toward the burly man.

Since I've rarely had the chance to see other people using magic, the sight of someone using magic to attack someone else is fascinating.

"That's a fire-element spell called Fireball. For an ordinary magician, it would take two more incantations in a row to cast such a powerful spell, but that

magician seems to be skillful enough to cast it in a single incantation."

"Oh... Fascinating..."

Despite Princess Lyla's considerate explanation, I still don't quite grasp the significance of it.

Of course, the monsters in The Weald use magic, but they don't chant incantations like this.

The Sage's book does briefly mention incantations for casting magic... Apparently, it's standard procedure, then.

According to Princess Lyla's explanation, a longer incantation is generally necessary to cast a spell of that power, but all I know came from the Sage's books, so I'm not familiar with the ins and outs of magic.

On closer inspection, the robed man seems to be using only fire spells... My guess is that he's bound to a certain magical attribute.

In the Sage's book, chanting incantations doesn't seem to be emphasized that much, and attributes are irrelevant. What's important is visualizing the spell. It strikes me that the Sage's philosophy on magic is different from that of the general population.

As I watch the battle with a new perspective, the warrior ends up backing the mage into a corner and ultimately wins.

I've been training with Yuti a lot recently, so I've been slowly gaining experience in one-on-one combat. Still, I have a long way to go, so being able to watch other people fight like this is a great learning experience.

Although, since it's an arena fight, sort of a controlled environment, it probably can't be applied to every situation, but it's still a valuable experience.

As the matches progress, the skill level of the competitors seems to be increasing.

The final match is a pitched sword battle.

I watch the fight closely, concentrating hard to observe as many of their movements as possible.

Until now, I haven't had the chance to learn from elite fighters, or to borrow from their techniques.

But for some reason, I feel confident that I could perfectly reproduce the movements of the swordfighters and magicians in the fierce battles unfolding in front of me. Weird. What makes me feel this way...?

I'm still confused by these new feelings when the battle finally comes to an end.

Then there's a knock on the door, and an attendant comes in.

"Excuse me. I'm here to escort the Deity of Swords's opponent..."

"..."

"...? Yuuya?"

"Huh? Y-yeah, what?"

"Yuuya. You're being summoned."

"Oh... It's my turn already..."

"...Are you all right?"

Seeing that I'm in somewhat of a daze, Yuti looks at me with obvious concern.

"Yeah, I'm fine. It's just... That match just now. Something like that might really work for me, more than I would have ever thought..."

"...Understood. At that time... The harmful effect...? The benefit of it...?"

"Er... At that time?"

I'm not sure what time she's referring to, but I don't have time to question her.

When I get up to follow the attendant, Lexia and the others give me words of encouragement.

"You can win, Lord Yuuya! I know it! Just hang in there and do your best!"

"Show us your skill."

"Woof!"

"Oink!"

"Hmph. May as well give it all you've got."

I'm not sure if that's Ouma's version of encouragement or not... But I'm determined to do my best, so as not to embarrass my people.

I follow the attendant, filled with determination.

"Please wait in the waiting room."

I find Master Rabbit waiting there for me.

"Ah! Master Rabbit!"

"Finally, you're here."

Master Rabbit spots me and grins.

"Yes, well... I heard you were going to see the Deity of Swords, but what are you doing here?"

"I went to swap a little info, and brag about you a little. That okay? You think you can fight against a Deity of Swords who is not holding back?"

"What do you think you're doing?!"

If the Deity of Swords comes at me seriously, I doubt I could last five seconds!

As I stand there panicking, Master Rabbit glares at me sharply.

"Nonsense! It won't be decent training unless your opponent fights in earnest."

"Well, that may be true, but..."

"Also, don't make a fool of yourself, understood? If you lose, it will call into question my abilities as a master."

"That's an unreasonable request!"

My opponent giving everything they've got... And I'm being told I can't lose? What am I gonna do?!

N-no, this is just Master Rabbit's way of encouraging me! Yes, that's right,

there's no doubt about it! Please let me delude myself into believing that...!

I don't know how serious Master Rabbit is, but I don't want any more of his pep talk right now, so I stay quiet.

While I'm standing there in a cold sweat, I realize something.

"Oh, come to think of it, Master Rabbit... How'd you get in here? Did the attendant bring you?"

"No? I just walked in."

"You sure move about the world freely, don't you!"

Although I had a feeling that was the case!

I'm taken aback by how unrestricted and carefree Master Rabbit is... But then I decide to ask him about the odd difference I've noticed in my eyesight... Or rather, my perception...

"Um, Master. Ever since we defeated the Deity of Fists, my eyesight has, strangely, improved. I can see many different, even subtle movements, and it seems as if I can absorb everything I see and retain it..."

"...What?"

Master Rabbit looks puzzled and lapses into thought.

"...Perhaps... Yes, in that moment, could it be...?"

"Um, Master Rabbit?"

I'm just trying to break Master Rabbit out of his thoughts when we're interrupted by the attendant who's come to get me.

"Excuse me. We're ready for... Huh? A rabbit?"

The attendant sees Master Rabbit and looks shocked... I quickly speak.

"Oh, it's nothing! No big deal! Is it time to go?"

"Huh? Ah, yes. I'll escort you."

"Okay, well, Master Rabbit... I guess I'm going now."

"Yes, off you go."

Master Rabbit dismisses me, and I head to the arena entrance.

I change into my Bloodstained Ogre set so I'm prepared to fight.

Though, since I'm about to meet the Deity of Swords for the first time, I have removed my helmet so I can see their face.

After a short wait, I hear King Orgis making an announcement.

Sounds like he's explaining the rules of the duel... Yikes... I'm getting really nervous!

Lamentably, time waits for no man, and before I know it, King Orgis is done with his speech, and I have to head into the arena.

I can't stop myself from flinching as the crowd roars.

Y-yikes, this is a big deal!

Earlier, observing from above, I didn't pay much attention to the number of people in the audience. After all, I was one of them then. But here, the roaring of the crowd is overwhelming. I want to turn tail and run.

I can't run away, though. I gird my loins and plant my feet firmly.

"...You're the rabbit's apprentice, aren't you?"

"Eh?"

Amid the roaring and applause from the audience, a woman's voice reaches my ears.

I turn in the speaker's direction to see that a woman has quietly entered from the opposite entrance.

The woman carries herself so elegantly, it's hard to believe she has anything to do with this duel. If you told me she was some titled lady, I'd believe it.

However, the sword strapped to her waist, and her imposing aura, makes me realize that this is my opponent... The Deity of Swords.

"Are... Are you the Deity of Swords...?!"

Whaaat? No way?! I've heard the Deity of Swords is the toughest Deity of all, so I was expecting someone scary as heck, but...not this!

"Yes. I am Iris, the Deity of Swords. And you are—?!"

As I stand there sweating and freaking out, the woman...Iris...slowly opens her eyes, then does a double-take when she sees my face.

"Er... Hold on... Hmm?"

"Uh... Is... Is something wrong?"

Iris appears taken aback for some reason... She claps her hands to her cheeks and then crouches down on the spot.

"What is this clamoring in my heart? Could it be...this is what it means to fall in love?!"

"Er... What?"

"Huh? N-nothing. You should know, I'm only interested in men who are stronger than me."

"Uh... Oh...? Is that so?"

What... Is... Happening...?

As I stand there more confused than ever, Iris clears her throat.

"Ahem! So, who are you?"

"Uh, I'm Yuuya Tenjou, apprentice to the Deity of Kicks..."

"H-hmm... Well, Yuuya... B-by the way, how old are you...?"

"Huh? Erm, I'm sixteen years old..."

"Damn! There's a ten-year age difference... No, no! An age difference isn't unusual these days! In fact, everyone will be totally jealous!"

I have no idea what she's talking about... But for some reason, I'm getting shivers up and down my spine...

As I shudder involuntarily, Iris stops looking excited and shoots me a sharp glare.

"But...if you don't have the skills, there's no point even considering it, of course."

"...! Of course, I'll give it my all!"

I draw my Omnisword and get into a fighting stance.

"All right. Come at me!"

Iris speaks the words that officially start the duel, and I charge at her full-speed, slashing.

However...



```
"You won't get me that way."
```

**"**—?!"

Clanggg!!!

Before my attack can hit Iris, it bounces off, with a ring of metal on metal!

A second later, I see her arm flex.

"You... You swung your sword so fast, it wasn't even visible...?"

"Huh? Wow, you saw it clearly. Usually, my opponents never even see me move at all..."

Iris laughs, amused, and I break into a cold sweat.

No, no, no, that's just too ridiculous! How am I supposed to deal with a sword that's swung at such a speed that it's almost impossible to perceive?!

And her sword, even now, is back in its sheath... How? How could she have done it all so fast?

I'm stunned, but Iris gives me a provocative grin.

"You're not going to surrender already, are you?"

Of course not... But that was my best shot...

Only, Iris blocked it with ease... Moreover, like me, she didn't seem to have been strengthened by magic or anything. This was her, fighting in her natural state...

...Outmatched like this, what else can I do but laugh?

Iris narrows her eyes at me.

"Hmm? You don't seem anxious at all..."

"No, actually... I think I've gone beyond anxiety and come back round to zen."

"I see. So, will you surrender?"

"No way...!"

It's clear that my skills won't be of any use here. Still, I have to do what I can.

I put away my Omnisword and retrieve my Absolute Spear from the item box.

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"—! A spear?"
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"Hah!"

As Iris blinks curiously, I fling the spear at her with all I've got.

But with another ring of metal, the Absolute Spear bounces off.

"No idea what you're doing, but an attack like that..."

"Hyah!"

"Wha-?!"

Immediately after flinging the Absolute Spear, I grab a new weapon... My Void Bow... And shoot a barrage of invisible arrows at her!

```
"...? ...?!"
```

For a moment, Iris doesn't seem to understand what I'm doing, but then she seems to sense the invisible arrows. With another series of metal clangs, all of my arrows are deflected away.

"...How surprising. My slashing attacks are so fast they can't be followed by the naked eye, but to use invisible arrows..."

"Hyah!"

"Wait, there's still some left?!"

I get the sense Iris is saying something or other, but in order for me to fight her properly, I have no choice but to attack ceaselessly and with total focus, and without giving her any time to get in an attack of her own.

Even so, she still manages to deflect all my attacks with her superfast sword swings. My Absolute Spear comes flying back to my hand again, and using one of the kicks Master Rabbit taught me, I fling it at Iris again.

Iris's eyes widen as the spear sails through the air and comes flying at her along with the barrage of invisible arrows.

"Hey! Are you kidding me here?!"

Now my Absolute Spear is turbocharged, and even Iris isn't able to deflect it so easily. For the first time since our bout began, she has to block with her

sword.

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"Curses...!"
```

Yes, Iris managed to deflect my attack... But she's left herself open... The very thing I'd been waiting for.

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"Hyaaah!"
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"Huh? Wait...that big hammer looks kind of dangerous!"

Right, I was getting ready to swing Worldsmasher.

Unlike other weapons, this weapon leaves me vulnerable for a few seconds after it hits.

However, if it does hit, it has enough power to knock down any opponent. After all, it's an attack with a mass equal to that of the entire world's mass.

Also, to make doubly sure, I'm going to use my Infuse Magic, too.

Suddenly, a pale blue light shoots out from all over my body, like crackling lightning.

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Iris's eyes go wide.
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"...What is it now?!"
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I'm going all out. Using all my strength.

But...

"...!"

"Huh?!"

Iris scowls at my Worldsmasher, and before she can attempt to parry my blow with her sword, she twists instead and uses her sword's swing to dodge. My Worldsmasher hammers down on empty space.

But even Iris struggles to recover from such a near miss... And she isn't able to use the small window of time where I'm wide open to counter.

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"This... These attacks... Can't be..."
```

Iris holds up her hands and gazes at them, brow contorted.

On close inspection, her hands are shaking a little. Maybe numbness? Nah, you can't dodge an attack equal to all the world's mass and just get away with numb hands, right?

But I've gone ahead and used my strongest attack. Now I've got no other aces up my sleeve. The element of surprise only works the first time, after all. No doubt, Iris won't let me get the drop on her again.

I break into a cold sweat, but Iris looks thoughtful.

"It's not that I was careless, but...this was completely unexpected. Who are you?"

"I'm no one in particular..."

"Well, whatever. But you understand that your previous attacks won't work again, right? ... What are you planning to do next?"

Now that even my Infused Worldsmasher attack was blocked, I've got nothing.

I rack my brains while Iris smiles.

"Huh...well, up until now, you've been doing all the attacking. I guess it's my turn, hmm?"

**"**—?!"

In that instant, my dynamic vision and thinking speed, enhanced by my Infuse Magic, succeeds in picking up on a barely perceptible movement made by Iris.

Purely on reflex, I grab my Omnisword and take a defensive stance, and I can feel her blow all the way down my arms when I block.

"Oh, I didn't think you'd be able to block the first hit. But I bet your arms are feeling pretty bad right now, huh?"

"Gah!"

Like Iris said... My arms are numb and tingling just from that one hit. I need to dodge, like Iris... Or I'm never going to make it.

Only...

"But I won't give you a chance to dodge, either."

"Gah!"

Her barrage knocks me back.

Somehow, I'm able to defend myself because my Infuse Magic has strengthened my physical abilities and dynamic vision, but if I was in my natural state, she'd have defeated me with the first blow.

"How unexpected... You can defend against this, too... Are you really the rabbit's apprentice?"

"That's...right...!"

"...You learned the sword anyways... Really, you're quite an impressive talent. Too bad I'm going to have to forge ahead anyway and crush you now."

"Guh?!"

To my surprise, Iris's attack speed gradually increases, and even my enhanced kinetic vision is no longer able to keep up with it.

However...

"...?"

Iris pauses, as if she's noticed something strange.

I'm picking up on something, too...

Huh? Why am I able to react to her blows... Even though I can't see them with my eyes at all?

Yes, Iris is swinging her sword at a speed I could never manage to keep up with, but for some reason I'm still able to block her attacks.

Iris looks confused, and speeds up even more, but my body continues to react almost as if on instinct.

Iris's eyes widen in frustration.

"This can't be real?! How are you still able to react?!"

I've given up on trying to see with my eyes, and I'm just letting my body move instinctively... But Iris seems utterly shocked by this. I mean... What's going on, anyway?

Even I don't know why my body's doing this. I'm completely flummoxed.

It's almost as if my body has fought this exact battle before...

Iris backs off, exhausted from me blocking all her attacks.

"Gasp... Pant..."

"It's bizarre. You obviously can't see my movements... And yet you continue to react to them? How did you do that?"

"I... I haven't got a clue myself..."

"Hmm, fine, perhaps it defies explanation... But I'll still overcome it!"

Iris comes at me with incredible speed.

The ground cracks beneath her feet, and the entire arena shakes around us.

Then...

"Swordflash!"

A fast, hard-to-follow slash, like all her attacks, but this one's on another level in terms of power.

Earlier, her focus was on speed and consecutive attacks, but the blow she fires at me now is all strength.

Even if my body helps me to parry, she'll still crush me with the impact.

In order to survive, I need to dodge, like how Iris dodged my Worldsmasher.

But I don't have the skills... Unless...

"...?!"

I use my Absolute Spear to swing away from her attack and spin out of range. Then I close in on Iris!

"Gah!"

Though she swings at me with all her might, she manages to pull her attack at

the last second and deflect my counter, knocking me back.

"Are you really the rabbit's apprentice? You're not merely apprentice level... You're Deity level! No... Maybe even higher!"

Iris mutters, sweating profusely.

For some reason, when I saw Iris's attack just now, I instinctively knew I could dodge and counter.

Because of that, I was able to replicate Iris's earlier dodge and counter and use it for my own purposes.

Only...

"I thought that would have been the end of it..."

Yes, I counterattacked beautifully, but Iris still managed to block me again.

Of course, I still haven't been able to win against Master Rabbit. And it's too much to ask to expect for me to be able to win against a Deity, like Iris. But being blocked so easily is enough to make me lose confidence.

In order to have a chance against Master Rabbit, I always had to use my Demon power... But... Would it really be all right for me to do that right now?

I've learned to control the Demon power for short periods of time, but if I release it, Iris might mistakenly think I'm an actual Demon, and that thought scares me.

I don't know how much Master Rabbit's told her about me, but I'm fairly sure he hasn't mentioned my Demon power. I mean, Master Rabbit himself even warned me about trying not to look too Demon-like.

So in that case, I'll have to defeat her without my Demon power... But... Isn't that impossible?

As I hesitate, no idea what to do next, I sense Kuro wake up inside me with a yawn and a stretch.

Yawwwn... Ahhh, I slept so well. Huh...? Why are you fighting the Deity of Swords?

"Sorry, Kuro. I don't have time to explain things in detail, so I'll keep it brief,

but basically...this is how things turned out!"

What circumstances could have led you to end up fighting this Deity of Swords? ... Wow, you really are starting to become quite Demonic!

"Oh, pipe down!"

I mean, I'd prefer a quiet life, if anything!

But, because the Demons are attacking, I need to get strong to stay safe. And this situation I'm in is essentially training in order to be able to fight the Demons.

Surprised to hear from Kuro after so long, I accidentally end up speaking out loud to him. Iris looks at me curiously.

"Who the heck are you talking to?"

"Huh? Ah, no, I... This is..."

"...Well, whatever. It looks like you've run out of cards to play, so let's wrap this up now, shall we?"

As she spoke, she came at me again with tremendous strength.

Darn... Iris suddenly seems stronger, as if she's actually started using strengthening magic. Her aura is much more formidable than it was before.

In fact, it's all I can do to survive the next few seconds... Then Kuro bursts out laughing.

Ha-ha-ha! Hey, you're about to get beaten to a pulp! What happened to the Yuuya who defeated the Deity of Fists, hmm?

"The thing is, I don't remember anything about that fight!"

Well, I suppose you wouldn't. You weren't in your right mind back then. You'd become a hundred percent pure Demon! All right, I guess you're just going to have to lose, then.

"Ugh... Master Rabbit is gonna be so mad."

I picture the lecture... And I can feel the blood drain from my face...as Iris readies her sword for a killing blow.

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"Now, finally, I'll finish you off with a good, clean cut."
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"C-cut?!"

Yep, you're dead for sure, Demon boy.

"I don't wanna die!"

This is just a mock battle, right?! No one died or was seriously injured in the rest of the tournament, right?!

I tremble, honestly terrified, and Iris grins like she's never had this much fun in her life.

"It's been a while since I've had such fun fighting... This may sound self-indulgent, but I kinda wish you'd turned out to be stronger than me after all."

"Say what now?"

"...Heavenly Deity Slash!!!"

Iris takes a big leap forward, and suddenly, she's right in front of me.

She moved so fast, it was like teleportation...

And then, just as she's about to bring her raised sword down on me, my Magic-Infuse strengthened eyes notice something black approaching from behind her at an unbelievable speed.

I'm not the only one to spot it, either. Kuro starts shouting.

Dodge, Yuuya!

"Hyah!"

"Whoa?!"

I realize suddenly that Iris hasn't noticed the black...thing...that's approaching. She's still attacking me... But I can't dodge! In desperation, I grab her arm and pull her down on top of me.

"Wh-wh-what the heck are you doing?!"

Iris goes bright red and thrashes in my arms.

But in the next second, the black something swooshes through the spot where Iris was just standing.

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"Huh?"
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"Yikes, that was close..."

Iris stares at the crater the black thing left in the ground.

The audience begins to mutter over the sudden outside attack... And then we all hear a voice coming from above.

"...Ah, you dodged it. Well, it would be kinda boring if you died right away, now, wouldn't it?"

"What...! That must be... Reaper... but, why are they with you?!"

Iris gazes up at the sky, her eyes wide.

I look up, too, to see a boy and two men, one half-dressed and carrying a long spear, the other dressed as a ninja with two sickles... Just standing there. Completely calm.

## **CHAPTER 6**

## An Attack

"Deity of Spears! Deity of Sickles!"

"Huh?!"

I turn to look at Iris, who's just spoken those odd words, and the half-naked guy and the ninja-looking guy floating in the air above us slowly shake their heads.

"... Unfortunately, we have now abandoned those titles."

"We are Fallen Deities."

"F-Fallen Deities...?"

The term is unfamiliar to me... But as I register my confusion, the odd young man laughs.

"Hey! Bit rude to ignore *me*, don't you think? Also, too bad. These two are no longer the Deities you knew. They have succumbed to us... And have gained new power!"

"'Succumbed to us?' Could it be...?"

Iris looks shocked, like she's just realized something terrible... And the boy floating in midair grins even wider.

"Finally, you get it? Then let us begin...your subjugation."

The boy's eyes gleam, and a dense, dark mist—the same kind I saw when Yuti and I faced off against the Deity of Fists—begins to seep from his body.

Suddenly, a loud crashing noise erupts somewhere far away.

The sound of destruction gradually gets closer and closer, until finally the source of the sound becomes apparent.

"What?! What is this?"

"Graaawr!"

My eyes widen at the sight.

"What?! They're the same as the thing I saw at the shrine the other day...?"

Unbelievably, a horde of Demon Beasts surges into the arena.

The audience screams and tries to flee in confusion and panic, but the Demon Beasts attack them mercilessly.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! Just listen to those gorgeous screams!"

The boy, likely the mastermind of this bloodbath, soaks in the scene with a look of wonder on his face.

"Stop this, right now!"

Iris slashes at the floating boy with lightning speed, but the black mist flowing from his body blocks the blow.

"Now, now, don't be so hasty. At least allow me to introduce myself first."

Laughing mockingly, the boy performs an exaggerated bow.

"I am Cuaro, the Reaper, one of the Demons. Nice to meet you."

"—I"

The adorable boy grinning at us—Cuaro—announces that he is a Demon... One of the sworn foes of Master Rabbit, Iris, and Yuti.

But the aura of evil emanating from him, coupled with Iris's reaction, is enough to convince me that he truly is a Demon.

Just as I'm about to run over and try to help the audience members, the two men Iris referred to earlier as the Deity of Spears and the Deity of Sickles block my path.

"...Sorry, but we cannot allow you to interfere."

"Indeed. It's time for you to die."

"Guh?!"

"Yuuya!"

Iris moves to help me as I struggle in the face of the two men and their menacing auras... But Cuaro intercepts her.

"Hey, don't ignore me! That's so rude. I came here to turn you into mincemeat, you know. Shouldn't you try to flee? Or, I don't know, call for backup? Although I won't give you the luxury of choice, you know?"

"...Certainly, you've got us cornered. But as a Deity, I shall fight with all I've got!"

"Oh? Well, let's see what you've got, then?"

"...Hyah!"

I can sense Iris and Cuaro beginning to battle behind me. Now I try to figure out how to handle the two Fallen Deities that are closing in on me.

If Iris is right, I'm going to have to take on both of them.

But based on the situation, it looks like they both have Demon powers in them, acquired when falling from being pure Deities.

In other words, I have to take on two enemies who are on par with the Deity of Fists I fought the other day...at once.

Even Master Rabbit couldn't defeat the Demonized Deity of Fists. What chance do I have?

It's just one thing after another with you, isn't it?

"...It's not like any of this is my choice!"

Right, Kuro is awake... I don't remember what happened at the time, but if I use my full Demon power like I did against the Deity of Fists, maybe I can win this...

But my power is unstable, and I can't fully control it yet... If I use it, I might go full evil like Cuaro... And then I'll be hunted down by all the other good Deities!

And while I'm standing here hesitating, the Demon Beasts are causing carnage...

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Then I realize.
  "Grrr? Graaawr!"
  "Grrrr!"
  "Groo!"
 Countless arrows are piercing the Demon Beasts.
 Those arrows... Yuti?
  Along with Yuti's arrow onslaught, I also hear the voices of my reliable family.
  "Grrrrr... Woof!"
  "Oink, oink."
  Night takes down one Demon Beast after another, and Akatsuki is healing the
injured audience members.
 The Fallen Deities both gape at the fluffy, life-saving duo.
  "...What's that little wolf thing?"
  "It's not just the little wolf. That pig is using some strange magic as well..."
 I notice the brief glance Night shoots at me as he annihilates the Demon
Beasts.
 It's like he's saying Leave this to me, so I nod.
  "Now I can focus on fighting you guys."
  "Oh? You talk a big game. You don't think you can win against the two of us
on your own, do you?"
  "So, these are the ones we're fighting, huh?"
  "Huh?!"
  "M-Master Rabbit!"
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"...Hmph. I knew some of the Deities had fallen to Demon influence, but... I never thought it would be you, Deity of Spears Ronus, or you, Deity of Sickles Jin."

Master Rabbit appears out of nowhere beside me, staring down the men.

Upon hearing Master Rabbit's words, the half-naked man carrying a spear on his back... No doubt the Deity of Spears, Ronus, grimaced slightly.

"...The weak are weeded out. This is simply the law of nature."

"Oh? So the result is that you became a minion of the demons. A Fallen Deity, was it? That sounds fancy, but in essence, you're just a pawn."

"Say what you like. By surrendering to the Demons, we have gained new powers. You are the weak ones. You will be eliminated."

Ronus and Jin each quietly ready their weapons.

Seeing this, Master Rabbit drops into a fighting stance and hisses at me.

"Yuuya."

"Yeah?"

"I've explained the situation to Night and Yuti already. The king of this land will no doubt come up with some sort of countermeasure. As for the princesses, the young lady guard and Yuti should be able to keep them safe. For now, all you must do is focus on defeating the enemies right in front of you."

"G-got it!"

Master Rabbit seems to have taken charge. Now I can relax a little.

But I am a little curious about what Ouma is doing... Although I bet he could sleep through even this type of situation. No need to worry about him, probably. Actually, why should I worry about an all-powerful dragon, anyway?

It's my own butt I should be worried about. I quickly cast Infuse Magic.

Seeing my new resolve, Ronus expertly swings around his spear and snorts.

"...Hmph. Have you two finished your little chat? I'll attack, then!"

"Yuuya! You handle Ronus!"

"Right!"

I whip out my Absolute Spear and clash it against Ronus's own.

"...Ha! You must really want to die if you're going to challenge *me* with a spear! In that case, I'll fulfill your death wish. Piercing Whirlwind!"

Ronus draws his spear and thrusts forward with all his might, a swirling gust of wind rising around the spear and razing the ground.

I parry cleanly with my Absolute Spear, just like when I blocked Iris.

"What... You can parry that?!"

Ronus probably seems surprised because I parried not only the spear, but also the sharp whirlwind that was gathering at the tip of the spear.

I, myself, am secretly surprised that I pulled it off.



"...Damn you! You're mocking me!"

Ronus unleashes a volley of furious piercing thrusts.

But I perceive each one and dodge them in turn.

"...What *are* you? You're not even a Deity, just a normal human! How are you able to match my techniques?!"

"Hmph! Don't compare him to common humans. He is my apprentice."

"... Your apprentice, Rabbit?!"

Ronus's eyes bug out when Master Rabbit says that, and Jin takes advantage of the opportunity to attack.

"Allowing yourself to be distracted? You've got some nerve!"

"I could beat someone like you with one eye closed."

"Ha! I wonder if you'll be saying the same thing after you've seen my amazing power!"

In that instant, a black mist emanates from Jin's body, and he unleashes a powerful, fierce swing of his sickle at Master Rabbit.

But Master Rabbit anticipates the attack, and he counters with a swift kick to the Fallen Deity's solar plexus as the attack goes wide.

But Jin has another sickle in his free hand, and he brandishes it for another attack. Master Rabbit, though, has already jumped far out of range.

I'm instinctively following his movements with my eyes, so Master Rabbit yells at me.

"Yuuya! Don't just watch me! Defeat your opponent!"

"Huh? R-right!!!"

I hastily ready my spear again, only to see Ronus trembling with a ferocious expression on his face.

"...You. You're the rabbit's apprentice, and yet you choose to fight me with a spear instead of his techniques?"

"...What?"

I wasn't planning on a spear-only attack, but I can't find an opportunity to kick Ronus, and it's easier to keep a safe distance with a ranged melee weapon like my spear instead of using my Omnisword... That's all. But Ronus seems to see it differently.

"...Well, fine! I'll show you the vast difference between us!"

A black mist begins to billow from Ronus's body, and his dark aura increases.

Inside me, Kuro laughs like he's incredibly amused.

Hey, hey, your opponent is getting serious now... What do you want to do? Want to draw on the Demon power like you did before?

```
"...No."
```

Really?

"Even if I use the Demon power here, my opponent has Demon power, too. If I can't defeat a Fallen Deity without using Demon power myself, I'll never be able to defeat a true Demon without it."

Kuro seems taken aback by this for a second. Then he guffaws loudly.

Ah-ha-ha! Well, good! I never expected you to show such guts against a Deity! Well I'll sit back and watch, then!

```
"Okay!"
```

After finishing my conversation with Kuro, I put some distance between me and Ronus and switch to my Void Bow. Then I take aim at Ronus, determined to take him out.

```
"...Hyaaah!!!"
```

```
"Seriously...?"
```

At that moment, Ronus lets out a shock wave of sorts from his body, and all of the arrows I shot get deflected.

```
"...Die."
```

"Huh?!"

Just like Iris, he comes at me as fast as teleportation, and thrusts his spear,

attempting to gouge my guts out.

"... Ascending Dragon!"

From the tip of his spear, a phantom shadow of a dragon appears to emerge, and it tries to devour my stomach.

I have no way to dodge this close-range attack, but I switch from my Void Bow to my Omnisword and bring it down on the head of the dragon.

"Guh!!!"

I feel the impact through my arm from the sword, and through my whole body.

If I carry on like this, I'll lose, I know it... But suddenly I feel heat burning inside me.

It's like my body's showing me what it's capable of... The heat from the mana pathways I inherited from the Sage...

"...! Haaaah!"

"What?!"

While blocking Ronus's attack, I prepare to release a magic spell, and as soon as I'm able, I fire Water Ball at him.

Ronus doesn't seem to have expected this counterattack, but he quickly scrambles to distance himself.

I'm not letting this chance get away. Demonstrating my training from Master Rabbit, I rush forward, gaining momentum, then leap and kick Ronus as hard as I can in the stomach.

"Hyaaaah!"

"Oof!"

Ronus can't block my kick. He doubles up and stiffens in pain.

I'm about to deliver a follow-up attack, but Ronus grits his teeth, straightens, and counterattacks before I can.

"...Don't underestimate me! Ten Thousand Spears!"

Ronus aims at me with another barrage of spears.

This is bad... I can't dodge these... But just as I'm about to despair, Kuro speaks up inside me with an amused sort of voice.

Hey, hey! Don't go dying right now. That would be so boring! Look, use your eyes. You know, even if you don't know.

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"Look...? At what...?"
```

Even with the tip of the spears coming right at me, I do what Kuro says and focus on Ronus, his movements, the trajectory of the spear, the whole scene...

Then it is as if all the sounds and the environment are melting away...

It's similar to the weird feeling I had watching the tournament earlier... But this time it's amplified.

All unnecessary information is blocked out. I can only see the scene right in front of me. Everything moves in slow motion... I can see everything...

Later on, I would find out I'd reached a higher plane of concentration in this moment.

Perceiving Ronus's movements, my body reacts.

"…!"

"Wh-whaaat?!"

To my shock, I've just replicated Ronus's Ten Thousand Spears technique.

My ten thousand flying spears accurately pierce and knock aside every one of his.

"Insanity! How could you replicate my Ten Thousand Spears technique?!"

Ronus shakes his head as if in denial of the scene playing out before his eyes, then he performs a different technique.

"Star Strike!!!"

He grips his spear in his opposite hand like a flagpole and then thrusts it at me.

I roll to the side to avoid the attack, and Ronus's spear stabs into the ground.

That makes the arena shake violently, and the ground begins to cave in.

But I'm not shaken by that. I just calmly stare at Ronus and come at him with my Absolute Spear.

"It's... It's not supposed to be like this... It's not supposed to be like thiiis!"

Ronus screams, then scrambles to distance himself from me, whipping out his spear.

"D-Diiie!!! God Attack!!!"

I can tell, at a glance, that it's the most powerful attack he's used yet.

The tip of his spear is enveloped by a whirlwind, like a tornado, and it's coming right at me.

So I strike back.

...Using the exact same technique as Ronus.

"God Attack."

"Ah..."

My attack doesn't create a tornado like Ronus's did.

After all, right now, I have no concept of wind or open space.

I just attack.

The instant my weapon makes contact with Ronus's...his spear shatters into pieces.

"Gah...!"

Ronus seems to have put his all into that last attack. With his spear shattered, he loses consciousness and crumples to the ground.

As I gaze at this unbelievable sight, my awareness of my surroundings, of the sounds of battle, begins to return to me.

"...H-huh? What happened to Ronus?"

Don't sound so dumb. You defeated him, didn't you?

Kuro sounds half-stunned. I gaze down at Ronus, collapsed before me.

Did I...defeat him? When did that happen?!

"Oh no, has the Demon power been activated again?!"

No. Although I wouldn't say it's completely unrelated... But no doubt, you are the one who defeated that Deity of Spears lying in the dirt there.

"What do you mean?"

You may not remember, but your body remembers how it was to fight the Deity of Fists with the power of the Demon inside you. However, you're the one who capitalized on that and defeated your opponent.

"I capitalized on...that...?"

"Right. Demon power consumes everything. And perhaps because you've already used it once, you're able to unconsciously tap into that power, even if only partially. Just enough to benefit from it without losing control of it."

"Huh...?"

I'm not really following, but it sounds like it's not just Kuro keeping the Demon powers in check, but my own unconscious, too.

You've learned, on some level, how to control the Demon power. And as a result, you can sort of wield it. It's showing in your eyes.

"My eyes?"

I reach up instinctively to my eye as Kuro continues.

Yes. As I've said many times, Demon power consumes everything. Not just tangible things. I'm talking techniques, small movements... It absorbs them, you see?

"Then..."

I kinda see what Kuro is getting at... Though it's shocking. Then I realize Kuro is grinning.

With your Demon Sight... You can absorb any action and replicate it.

Now I'm really shocked. A... A power like that...

A major factor in using this power is no doubt the fact that I followed Kuro's advice and began closely observing Ronus's moves.

I look down at my hands...then I remember there's still a battle going on!

"Th-that's right! Master Rabbit, he..."

Looks like that one's done, too, though?

"What?"

I look over to where Master Rabbit and the Deity of Sickles were battling...and see Jin covered in blood.

"It... It can't be... For us to lose... Though we have the power of the Demon inside us...!"

"Hmph. Yes, I was beaten by the Deity of Fists, who used Demon power. But I have been polishing my skills, instead of trying to rely on Demonic powers myself. And thus, I was able to defeat you. That's the long and short of it."

"I... I can't accept it... I cannot accept defeat! Not when we have the power of the Deeemon!!!"

Jin shrieks, crossing his sickles in front of his face and swinging them down toward his enemy.

Master Rabbit calmly observes the flashing sickles.

"Steps of the Three Gods."

And with those muttered words, Master Rabbit vanishes.

"Huh?!"

"Step one."

I'd thought Master Rabbit had vanished, but now he reappears one step closer, closing in on Jin.

I can perceive this from my vantage point, but to Jin it might have looked like Master Rabbit simply disappeared.

```
"Step two."
```

Master Rabbit crouches into a ball, then springs up and lands on top of Jin's head with his "second step."

```
"Gah...!"
```

This "second step" carries Master Rabbit onto Jin's head with tremendous force, a powerful heel slam that knocks the Fallen Deity unconscious.

Master Rabbit vaults off Jin's head and spins once in the air, landing with a snort of laughter.

"Hmmph. No need for that third step after all."

Yikes, my master really has gotten stronger... I have a feeling I can never beat him now...

Seeing how Master Rabbit defeated Jin, that's all I can think.

I watch Master Rabbit, my cheek twitching with tension, and that's when he turns to look at me.

"Don't stand there goofing off. Now we must defeat the Demon."

"R-right! Where is Iris, is she..."

But as I'm talking, I'm interrupted by a smooth voice from above... Cuaro.

"What's this? Both of them, defeated already? Tch, useless."

"Huh?!"

I look up at the sky and see Cuaro, black mist pouring out of him, in the middle of attacking Iris!

```
"Guh...!"
```

```
"...This isn't good."
```

The black mist erupting from Cuaro's body transforms into a multitude of sharp blades and thorns, raining down on Iris, who frantically parries with her sword.

But she can't hold up against them all and is visibly struggling.

"Iris?! Master!"

"Yes. Let's assist...!"

Master Rabbit flies right at Cuaro, while I draw my Void Bow and shoot a barrage of arrows.

Only...

"Too bad. You won't get me like that."

Before any of my arrows can hit Cuaro, he deflects them all with the black mist.

"By the way, I don't know why, but it looks like you've got a little piece of us in you, too. Which of us gave you that power? Why don't we chat about that? No need to go head-to-head with me. Hmm?"

Cuaro's looking at me with curiosity, but I ignore him and continue firing arrows.

They're easily blocked by Cuaro's black mist, but Master Rabbit takes advantage of the opening to pummel him.

"How do you like this?!"

Master Rabbit flies at Cuaro at speeds I've never seen and kicks him so hard there's a rush of wind.

Right! Cuaro is a pure Demon. That means Master Rabbit's stats have been unlocked, and he's doubly powerful!

Just as I'm thinking this, Kuro mutters darkly inside me.

...That's not going to work.

"Huh?"

Haven't you realized yet? If the Deity of Kicks can unlock his stats, that must mean that the Deity of Fists could do the same. And that means...

Cuaro calls out in a cheerful voice, as if cutting off Kuro.

"Like I said... You won't get me like that!"

```
"Wha—? ... Gah!"
```

Master Rabbit's kick is deflected easily by the black mist, which transforms into a sharp bladelike object and flies at Master Rabbit.

"Master Rabbit!"

"I... I'm all right! Just... Don't come any closer!"

"Huh?"

Master Rabbit clutches his torn-up stomach and steps away from me.

"...If you get too close to him, his Demon power will feed upon you. This is just a scratch. If we get close to him again... We'll be killed."

"N-no..."

"Continue attacking from a distance. Use magical attacks or your bow and arrow. Iris and I will create an opening for you!"

"Wait... Master?!"

Then Master Rabbit scurries off, back into the fray with Cuaro.

Left behind, I do what Master Rabbit said and fire arrows and magical attacks, but...they all get deflected by Cuaro's black mist.

That black mist seems all-powerful! How should I attack it...?!

As my panic deepens, both Master Rabbit and Iris are attacked more and more, and they gradually get pushed back.

Then Cuaro yawns, bored.

"Yawwwn. I guess I overestimated you people. I was expecting more from the Deity of Swords, said to be the strongest of all Deities, and the Deity of Kicks. But you're not all that impressive. And I overestimated those two goons I brought with me, too. It would have been better if I'd come alone."

Cuaro stretches and fixes his cold gaze on us.

"I'm bored now. Let's just end this."

"—! ...Rabbit!"

"Got it!"

The black mist billowing around Cuaro suddenly gets denser and more voluminous, forming a large sphere above his head.

It grows, bit by bit... Menacingly... Like it has the power to cause total destruction...

Even from this distance, that sphere has my alarm bells ringing.

That's...bad...!

Inside me, Kuro speaks up in a cold voice.

...He's really here to put an end to us all. If he activates that thing...this entire city will be wiped out.

"What?!"

I do what I can, shooting arrows, throwing my Absolute Spear, but everything I try gets blocked.

Then...

"Bye-bye!"

The black sphere comes barreling toward us.

"Deity Sword Boundary!"

"Deity Kick Wave! Deity Ear Flash!"

Immediately after Cuaro releases the black sphere, Iris raises the sword she's holding and slams it into the ground with great force.

Then countless shining swords shoot up from the ground and streak toward the black sphere.

Then Master Rabbit makes his legs glow with the same sort of shining light coming from Iris's swords, then kicks the light at the black sphere. At the same time, he makes both of his ears shine with the same light, emitting a bright flash.

Beams of light, one from Iris's sword, and two from Master Rabbit, hit the black sphere.

"Guh... Haaah!"

```
"—!"
```

Then Iris's sword beam and Master Rabbit's light beams obliterate the black sphere!

```
"Gasp... Pant..."

"Guh... I'm all out..."
```

But both Iris and Master Rabbit seem exhausted from the effort... And it looks like they can't fight on any longer.

Cuaro looks surprised, his mouth hanging half-open.

"Wow... I never thought you two could block me... I guess you really are Deities, even if you're weak..."

```
"Gasp... Pant..."
```

"But it seems like that was all you had left. All right, let's give this another go!

"What?!"

Cuaro was planning to simply repeat his attack?

And true to his words, a black sphere appears above Cuaro's head once more.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! Come on! Try blocking it again!"

"Iris! Master Rabbit!..."

I'm done listening to Master Rabbit's advice. I swing my Omnisword and charge at Cuaro.

But before I can reach him, more black mist blocks my path.

"Move!"

"Don't be silly. You're not even a Deity. What can you possibly do?"

Cuaro's right. None of my attacks have any effect on the black mist. It just keeps coming at me.

Also, Cuaro shows no mercy, sending his black mist after Iris and Master Rabbit as well.

They respond as best they can, but they're on the back foot, clearly on the verge of defeat.

Seeing this unfold, Kuro speaks up inside me.

He's right, you know. Only Deities, recognized by this planet, are capable of fighting the Demons. You shouldn't even bother.

"What do you suggest, then?!"

I yell, fighting the black mist with my Omnisword and Absolute Spear, while Kuro responds in a lackluster way: *Hmm... All I can think of is using a weapon infused with the power of a Deity...* 

"'A weapon infused with the power of a Deity...'"

When you met the Demon Beasts in that other world, the woman who was with you used a sacred charm to exorcise them, right? That charm certainly dispelled the Demonic power. Not that you have anything like one of those, though.

"...No, I do... I think I actually do...!"

What?

Kuro sounds like he's given up. Meanwhile, I scrabble through the item box and simultaneously fend off the black mist.

Just recently, I'm sure I came across an item with a similar effect to the sacred charm Kagurazaka used.

While I search frantically, Kuro watches the black sphere above our heads with amusement.

Come on, the black sphere's almost fully formed.

"Too bad, but you should really give up. You gave it your best shot, now, didn't you?"

"Darn it!"

Ignoring both Cuaro and Kuro, I keep searching...and I find it.

"This is it!"

```
"Hmm?"

"Y-Yuuya?"

Cuaro and Iris stare at me as I hold aloft the weapon in my hand.
```

"Heavenly Staff!"

By which I mean...

When I first examined this weapon for its effects, I didn't really understand them.

After all, the explanation was sort of vague.

But now I think I know exactly what this weapon does.

Jingling the gold strap, I strike the black mist with the staff.

"Like I keep saying, that's not going to work..."

Cuaro trails off, having noticed something odd.

The black mist dissipates the instant I hit it.

"What..."

Taken aback by this phenomenon, Cuaro widens his eyes in shock.

This Heavenly Staff that I found in my grandpa's storehouse has only one effect: to purify. That's all.

...Even now, that's the only explanation given regarding its effects, making it a rather mysterious weapon. But being able to purify means it works against Demonic power, just like those sacred paper charms...or at least, that was my guess. Which turned out to be correct.

I use the Heavenly Staff to dispel the rest of the black mist near me, then rush over to Iris and the others to get rid of the black mist that's been attacking them.

```
"Are you all right?"
"Yes..."
"..."
```

Master Rabbit mutters a reply, but Iris doesn't speak. I gaze at her face, worried, and find that she's staring intensely at me.

"Iris?"

"Huh? Oh... Y-yeah! I'm fine."

"That's good, then. I'll take care of the rest, so just stay there and watch."

Then I turn back to Cuaro.

"..."

"Hmm... You must be pretty taken with him, to space out during a fight like this..."

"Wha...? No, that's not what this is! It's just... This is the first time in my life that someone's actually protected me... The first time..."

"Hmm. Well, now you know how incredible my apprentice is, don't you?"

"...Yeah. Believe me, I know."

I can hear a discussion behind me, but I don't have time for that. All my attention is now focused on Cuaro.

I speak to Kuro inside me.

"How about this? Think it'll work?"

...Ha! You really are a force of nature, aren't you? Fine... I'll lend you some of my power!

Kuro chuckles, and black mist starts to emanate from all over my body.

"...Let me ask you one thing. Can I really beat that pure Demon using the Demon fragment inside me... In other words, you, Kuro?"

Ha-ha! Well, I'll lend a hand. But whether you can win or not...that's up to you.

"Man, can't you give me any better reassurance?"

...Hmm, well, anyway, you and I seem to be a good team. Shall we do this, then?

"Sure."

Kuro sounds a little embarrassed, which makes me grin.

Behind me, Iris shouts, sounding panicked.

"What Demon fragment?! Rabbit, you...!"

"Calm down. I understand how you feel, but Yuuya is perfectly in his right mind. And there are extenuating circumstances. He can use a little Demon power without any bad effects."

"Seriously? What kind of extenuating circumstances give a person Demon powers?!"

"...The power was not originally Yuuya's, but came from an apprentice to the Deity of Arrows. Yuuya took it upon himself to help her, and it now resides inside his body."

"'T-took it upon himself'?"

"...Sadly, he's kind of an idiot."

Cuaro, meanwhile, has frozen at the sight of the Demon powers overflowing from my body.

"What... What's the meaning of this?! You must have a fragment inside of you... But that power, it is not like ours... Just what exactly *are* you?"

Well, I'm the last person he should ask.

Cuaro doesn't seem to like this development at all. His expression twists with hatred.

"You ignore me? How dare you? ...Go."

"-Graaaagh!"

Cuaro swings his arm, and three Demon Beasts appear, charging right at me.

"Crap...!"

Clannng!

I lunge to attack the beasts, but my ears suddenly ring with the sound of clashing metal.

```
"Guh... Gah..."
```

The Demon Beasts that were attacking me collapse on the spot.

I turn my head to see Iris behind me...a brave grin on her face.

"...I have a ton of questions, but for now, leave the Demon Beasts to me. You... You take care of him, all right?"

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"...Right!"
```

I nod firmly and call out to Kuro.

```
"...You ready?"
```

Yeah, leave it to me. But you can't keep it up too long, you know? Your power is too strong...

```
"It'll be enough!"
```

After unleashing my Demon power, I add Infuse Magic as well, then I take a step toward Cuaro.

At that moment, everything else fades away, and all I can see is the Demon boy.

```
"Wait..."
```

"Hyaaah!!!"

"Huh?!"

I swing my Heavenly Staff at him like it's my Absolute Spear, slamming it into his head.

Unable to predict the attack, Cuaro crumples to the ground.

Capitalizing on this chance, I pierce the still-expanding black sphere above his head with the Heavenly Staff.

The black sphere cracks, and light explodes out of it.

```
"No... Who are you?!"
```

Cuaro staggers to his feet, screaming at me.

```
"I don't know!"
```

"What?!"

My answer seems to leave Cuaro flummoxed.

I've been asked that question a lot today, but I don't even know who I am myself. I want someone to tell *me*.

All I can say is, I'm just a guy who's gotten caught up in a battle between Deities and Demons, and I have to get stronger to ensure my own safety.

But Cuaro doesn't seem pleased with my response. He's gone red with anger.

"D-don't be a smart-ass! You... You come out of nowhere and ruin all my fun... I'll kill you!"

Cuaro emits a huge amount of black mist from his body, mist that turns into multiple branches of sharp blades and thorns, and he comes flying at me.

I swat the branches away with my Heavenly Staff, closing the gap between me and Cuaro.

"Stay back! No! Get away!"

**"**—!"

I keep attacking furiously, and Cuaro turns his open palm toward me... Where a black sphere begins to float, and a flash of black energy comes toward me.

In response to the black flash, I take another step forward, using the step method Master Rabbit used when he fought the Deity of Sickles.

I move faster than I ever have, closing the gap between me and the black flash...

Then I use my Heavenly Staff to unleash the same God Attack that the Deity of Spears, Ronus, used.

"God Attack...!"

The end of my Heavenly Staff cuts through the black flash and hits Cuaro.

"Gaaah!"

Cuaro bends back unnaturally and shrieks in agony.

"This isn't how it should be...!"

Smoke starts to billow from Cuaro's body... The Heavenly Staff has worked its magic.

"I...I'm going to lose? It can't be! It's impossible!"

Cuaro tries to get away from the Heavenly Staff, grabbing it and trying to push it away from him, but his palms begin to emit smoke as well, and he lets go in a panic.

As the amount of smoke increases and Cuaro's body gradually begins to disappear, he stops resisting, going quiet, and he mutters something softly.



"Gah... So, this is my end...How anticlimactic... But I guess I'm done. My Demon Beasts have been slain, too... Yes, this is defeat. Oh, I was hoping to have so much more fun before the end..."

Cuaro looks genuinely disappointed. Then his eyes fix on me.

"...You. I never factored someone like you into my plan. I failed to predict you, failed completely."

u n

"But now... Now at least we know you, right?"

*"*...?"

I tilt my head, not understanding what Cuaro's saying.

Not that he seems about to elaborate. Instead he looks over at the others.

"I don't know how much you people know about us... But I'll at least say this... We are one."

"Huh?"

"...What?"

Iris and the others don't seem to understand what Cuaro's saying, either. They stare at us, looking confused.

"Well... Good luck."

And then Cuaro's body finally turns to smoke... And the smoke turns into mist, then dissipates into the air.

\* \* \*

"...So, Cuaro is defeated."

In the World's Landfill, the young male Demon muttered.

He looked down at his palms, as if to take stock of his own strength.

"Hmm... I see. Integrated, like this."

"...What now?"

The other Demon present questioned the young man.

This Demon had the appearance of a somewhat nervous-looking man, maybe in his midthirties.

"Yes, Cuaro is gone... But there have been some benefits."

"You have been...enhanced?"

"Hmm... Yes, but that's not all."

"What, then?"

The young Demon narrowed his eyes, as if looking at something far away.

"I found him. The outsider."

The young Demon's eyes reflected the image of Yuuya, the one who had defeated Cuaro.

\* \* \*

Around the time Yuuya was busy defeating Cuaro, the Demon Beasts were being defeated by the Regal soldiers, Night, and the others.

"Hmph. I was wondering where they'd come from... They were followers of the Demon..."

Luna muttered, looking down at the corpses of the slain Demon Beasts.

The Demon Beast Kagurazaka had defeated on Earth with her sacred charms had disappeared completely as a result of the purification. But in this world, the corpses remained.

Lexia, who'd been lying low, puffed out her chest beside Luna.

"Excellent job, my most effective bodyguard!"

"Hmph... Just doing my job. More importantly, Yuuya..."

She turned to look at Yuuya and the others just as Cuaro dissipated into the air.

"...Looks like they're all right over there, too. Yuuya saved the country from a huge crisis... No doubt, Yuuya is Regal's hero."

"Hmph! How annoying. Just when Yuuya was so cool fighting against the Deity of Swords and everything!"

"...You really miss the point a lot, don't you?"

Everyone had been spellbound by the bout between Yuuya and the Deity of Swords, up until the Demon appeared.

Everyone in Regal knew that Iris, Deity of Swords, was incredibly strong, but to see Yuuya fighting her as an equal... It struck everyone, not just Orgis and the other higher-ups. It had been a true spectacle.

Then the Demon suddenly attacked, interrupting Yuuya and Iris's battle and unleashing all those Demon Beasts into the arena. It had been chaos, but the situation had been wrapped up surprisingly neatly.

And the reason for that was...

"Finished. No signs of further Demon Beasts."

"Woof."

Lexia and the others found Yuuya's companions, the mysterious Yuti and the unusual Night, fascinating. Between them, they'd defeated almost all the Demon Beasts.

Although he didn't take part in the battle itself, Akatsuki did his part and had used his skills to heal the injured civilians and soldiers.

"Night, Akatsuki. You saved us all. Thank you."

"Woof."

"Oink."

Night preened, enjoying Luna petting him, while Akatsuki stuck his snout proudly in the air.

"As for him... He really just slept through it all."

After petting Night, Luna looked over at Ouma, who was still snoozing, with an exasperated look on her face.

Ouma opened one eye.

"What? You got a complaint?"

"You were awake?!"

"I just woke up."

Ouma yawned and looked at Luna.

"I told you. I have no interest in the affairs of humans. I won't lend a single claw to you people."

"...Oh, right."

Luna didn't seem to have anything else to say to that.

She knew that, as a legendary dragon, Ouma was far above petty human concerns.

Ouma was powerful enough to destroy the whole world...the universe...if he wanted. Compared to that, what did human squabbles matter?

Luna sighed, having accepted this situation somewhat, but then she seemed to notice something.

"Hmm? By the way... What happened to the Regal royal family?"

"Huh? I don't recall seeing them in the fight... Though I do recall seeing them give orders to the military..."

They looked around the whole arena, but there was no sign of Orgis or the other royals. Luna and Lexia assumed they'd left the arena to instruct the military.

Meanwhile, Ouma yawned again and gazed up at the blue sky above the arena.

"Hmph. Perception magic. Doesn't work on me... But Yuuya... You've been found out, you know?"

Ouma chuckled, unconcerned, and went back to sleep.

## **Epilogue**

When Cuaro attacked, Orgis immediately gave instructions to his soldiers and headed to the Magic summoning circle in the basement of the castle with Lyla.

"...I never thought that the Demon would attack today of all days...!"

"Father....."

While Orgis frowned, Lyla had a worried look on her face.

Orgis, noticing Lyla's gaze, slowly let out a breath.

"Haaah... It's unavoidable. I'm leaving the soldiers to Royle for now. We... We now have no choice but to rely on the other world."

When Orgis saw the bout between Yuuya and the Deity of Swords, he was stunned by the strength on display and even began to think that maybe they didn't need to try to borrow the power of that other world after all.

But the subsequent Demon attack quickly changed his mind.

He saw the Deity of Swords, the strongest of all Deities, overwhelmed by Cuaro.

Convinced that if things continued like this, the country would be destroyed by the Demons, Orgis immediately took action.

Even with Cuaro defeated, the world was full of Demons.

If they withstood *this* attack, Iris and the other Deities could still fall to the Demon influence at any time. The destruction of humanity was imminent. So they must summon a hero from the other world.

At the summoning circle, Orgis found the Regal mages there already, having finished the preparations on his order.

"Your Majesty. The preparations are complete. All we have to do is infuse it with magical power and the spell will be activated."

```
"...Lyla."
```

"Yes, Father. Let's invite a hero here to this world. I'm sure that person, whoever they are, will save us."

Lyla, on Orgis's signal, stepped forward and touched the magic circle with her hand.

When she infused it with her magic, the circle began to emit a strange glow.

```
"Gah! It's...!"
```

At first, Lyla was the one infusing the circle with magic... But then it seemed to take over, sucking away her power, making her gasp.

The magic circle glowed brighter and brighter as it absorbed Lyla's power at an alarming rate.

How much time has passed?

Lyla, pale and drained of her power, did not know... But when she was almost completely spent, the circle stopped draining her.

```
"Ah..."
```

"Lyla!"

Orgis rushed to grab hold of Lyla, who swooned and almost fell.

Then the magic circle burst into brilliant light.

```
"Oh!"
```

"F-finally...!"

When the light faded away, a human remained standing in the circle.

Seeing this, Orgis and company realized the summoning spell had been successful.

Then...

"Wh-what the heck?! What's going on?!"

In the circle stood a shrine maiden... Mai Kagurazaka.

\* \* \*

"Hmm... So that's how..."

After witnessing that I defeated Cuaro by using my Demon power, Iris asked me how I acquired it.

"It's exactly as the rabbit said."

"I told you, didn't I? Why don't you believe me when I say it?"

"Because it's unbelievable! A tale like that..."

"Well, we're talking about a big idiot here."

"Guh..."

I shrink as Iris and Master Rabbit both raise an eyebrow at me.

Then Kuro starts snorting with laughter inside me.

Ah-ah-ah! You're such a weakling! Hard to believe you just defeated a Demon!

"Oh, leave me alone..."

I had to defeat Cuaro. It was that or die. But it's not like I'm strong or anything.

Iris rolls her eyes, then sighs and smiles wryly.

"...But you saved my life, Yuuya. You... You protected me. No one has ever done that before... It made me happy... Or, or something..."

"What?"

"Haaah..."

Iris's voice fades to a faint mumble, but Master Rabbit rolls his eyes at her.

Then he looks at me, all business again.

"Yuuya. This incident has given you a greater understanding of the threat posed by the Demons. Moreover, it has raised more questions for us. We cannot let our guard down going forward."

"...Right."

"So. We will redouble our training efforts so that you are prepared for any more surprise attacks."

"Oh, okay..."

I'd rather just relax and take a break, but under the circumstances, I can't voice that wish. I have to nod along obediently.

Iris, watching me and Master Rabbit talk with a somewhat envious look on her face, smiles sadly.

"I see... So this is good-bye, Yuuya..."

"Yeah...I guess so."

"What are you planning to do now?"

"Well, like Master Rabbit said... Intense training, I guess?"

The training will be tougher than ever. Will I survive...?

"Even though I finally met someone stronger than me..."

"What's that?"

Iris mutters something, looking sad, but I don't catch it.

Then Iris gives herself a little shake and lifts her head, her eyes shining.

"Right!"

"Wh-what's up?"

Iris grabs my hand in excitement.

"Yuuya! I will take you on as my apprentice, too!"

"...Say what?"

"Oh?" I'm confused by what Iris is saying, but Master Rabbit looks oddly impressed and even nods. "Good. My skills alone might not be enough. It would

be best for Yuuya to train under Iris a little."

"Whaaat? Hold on! This is all a bit sudden!"

"It'll be fine! Just trust me! You're already stronger than me... We'll start off as master and apprentice, and then segue into marriage! Oh yes, I'm a genius!"

"Er, Iris ...?"

"It's decided! We'll start training right away!"

"Whaaat? Right now?! But... We just finished fighting..."

"It has to be now!"

I go pale.

Wow, seriously... My training with Master Rabbit is already going to get even tougher, and now I have to add training with Iris on top of that...?

Will I be able to take the strain?

While I ponder this question, Iris and Master Rabbit suddenly turn to gaze at the castle, brows furrowed.

"...? What's wrong?"

"That... That surge of magical power just now..."

"You felt it too, Iris? What manner of magic was that...?"

It seemed they sensed something coming from the castle, and the two of them had serious expressions on their faces.

...But at that time, I had no idea that what was happening at the castle in Regal would have a direct impact on me.

### **Afterword**

Thank you for purchasing this work.

This is the author, Miku.

How is everyone doing, health-wise?

I'm still in good health, with no particular changes.

People around the world are living with certain restrictions on their lives, but I would be happy if you could enjoy this work as a way to pass the time.

Now, in this volume, Yuuya is once again extremely busy, with a public match against the Deity of Swords and a battle against a true Demon.

In the real world, Kaori and her friends encounter a Demon Beast during a fun ghost-hunting trip, and the influence of the other world begins to spread even to Earth.

At the same time, in the other world country of Regal, a ceremony is held to summon a hero to help fight against the Demons.

As a result, the shrine maiden Mai Kagurazaka, of Earth, is summoned to the other world... What will happen next?

It's a mystery to me, too.

So I would be so happy if you could look forward to the next volume.

Now, I would like to thank the editor in charge who cooperated with me this time as well.

And thank you to Rein Kuwashima, who has made this work extra amazing

with their cool illustrations.

And once again, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all the readers who picked up this book and enjoyed it.

Thank you very much.

See you next time.

Miku

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