

The cover art features a male character with brown hair and a wide, toothy grin, wearing a dark suit with a red cape and a white sash. He has red markings on his chest and is holding a female character with long red hair. The background is a fiery, red and orange landscape with large, dark, claw-like structures. The title "Demon King DAIMAŌ ACT4" is prominently displayed at the bottom in a stylized font, with "DAIMAŌ" in red and "ACT4" in yellow. The author's name "Shoutarou Mizuki" is at the top right.

Shoutarou Mizuki

Demon King
DAIMAŌ
ACT4

Demon King
DAIMAÔ
ACT4





AKUTO!

**YOU
WOULD
EVEN USE
SUCH
ACCURSED
POWER?!**

**THE
GODS!**

**I WILL
KILL...**





**“I’VE BEEN
WAITING!”**

**“I’VE BEEN
WAITING
FOR THIS
MOMENT,
MY LORD!”**

FUJIKO ETO

A black mage and alchemist who swore loyalty to Akuto. She's also in charge of the girl's dorm.

JUNKO HATTORI

A pure-hearted class rep who's very into Akuto. A ninja girl from the Iga clan.

KORONE

A Liradan (artificial human) who protects and observes Akuto. She uses secret tools she takes out from her bag.

Character Introduction

KEENA SOGA

A ditzy screw-up who takes a liking to Akuto. Mysteriously, she has an important part to play in this story...

AKUTO SAI

A good, hard-working boy, who was nonetheless told that in the future he would become the Demon King. Our protagonist. Massively powerful, but stubborn.

LILY SHIRAISHI

President of the Constant Magic Academy Student Council. Decides to go her own way with regards to Akuto being the Demon Lord.

HIROSHI MIWA

A troublemaker who calls Akuto "Boss." Also secretly a legendary hero.

PRINCIPAL

The current Principal of Constant Magical Academy. A mysterious old man who experienced the last war with the previous Demon King.

Lecher Buster

おやめこバスター

PROLOGUE

Akuto Sai had always felt that he had trouble getting along with the rest of the world.

He was an orphan. That alone was enough to make it likely that he wouldn't fit in, but in Akuto's case, his problems stemmed from his deeper personality.

One day, a gentleman came to the orphanage he was staying at to make a donation. The gentleman was of noble birth, and it was clear from his appearance that he was financially well-off, but there was no sign that he felt this made him better than anyone else. His words were filled with a natural kindness, and donating to the orphans seemed, to him, to be a very natural act.

"I happened to pass by and realize that this place was an orphanage. Once I learned this, I felt I had to do something. If it's not a bother, please accept this small donation."

The gentleman took off his hat and smiled. It was Akuto who responded to him. Akuto was very smart for his age, and when the matron at the orphanage was busy, he would often be called upon to deal with guests.

"Thank you, sir. We are truly grateful. The appropriate person will come to take your donation, so please wait for a second."

Akuto's words were his own; there was no sign of flattery or falsehood in them at all. The gentleman seemed terribly impressed that young Akuto could say such a thing.

"I'm amazed. What a polite young boy! I'll give this to you di-

rectly, then. You can see that it gets into the right hands.”

The gentleman took out a white envelope, which he must have prepared before even knocking on the door of the orphanage. It felt heavy in Akuto’s hands when he took it, so there must have been a good amount of money inside. The gentleman smiled kindly when he saw Akuto’s surprise.

“Thank you. There’s nothing we can do to repay you, but at least allow the orphans here the chance to thank you directly. If you’ll come inside and wait, I’ll call everyone.” Akuto bowed deeply.

“No, there’s no need for that. This is simply the duty of a servant of the god Ko-Roh. If you want to thank someone, thank the god,” the gentleman said humbly, and put his hat back on as he turned to go.

“Wait, I want to thank you, not the god,” Akuto said.

The gentleman stopped and rubbed the rim of his cap with a gentle expression.

“No, I haven’t done anything. It was the god’s compassion that led me here to this place.”

It was clear from the gentleman’s tone that these were no mere words, but the product of deep belief. If he’d been speaking to any other child, this would simply have ended as a pleasant story told among the orphans at the orphanage.

But he was talking to Akuto.

“The gods are a system. Thanking one of them instead of you would turn your kindness into an act of selfishness. So I cannot thank a god. Simply let me thank you instead,” Akuto said. He was too smart for his age.

In this era, the gods were a system which recorded the doings

of humanity and provided them with social benefits in accordance with their behavior.

However, since everyone's acts were being recorded, if you wanted to lead a better life, you needed to do the "right" thing. The result of this was to turn even the most educated into religiously fanatical believers. Perhaps the religious mind could not be controlled by reason, but that was something Akuto didn't really understand.

"That's blasphemy! The gods are real, and have their own wills, so it's natural to thank them! That's what creates cohesion between believers. Now apologize to God!" The gentleman stormed up to him angrily.

But what he was saying made no sense to Akuto.

"Impossible. I can't apologize to something that doesn't exist."

"What a horrible child! How can you turn your back on God? That's why you're an orphan!" The gentleman looked at Akuto with disgust in his eyes.

Akuto was shocked. It wasn't the disgust that shocked him, but the way that such an obviously good person could say something like that to him terrified him.

"Don't you realize that your belief in a mere system that humans created is making you say something truly terrifying?" Akuto said in a shaking voice.

"Enough! Everyone believes in it, so that's good enough, isn't it? And how can you talk that way to someone who's giving you money?"

By the time the gentleman started yelling, the teachers realized something was wrong and dragged Akuto out of the room. The teachers bowed repeatedly in apology, and managed to keep

the donation and make the gentleman happy by having the orphans sing him songs.

One of the male teachers sighed and chuckled at Akuto.

“Listen, kiddo. Sometimes even when you’re right about something, you still have to apologize.”

The teacher probably assumed that Akuto wouldn’t understand what he meant. But Akuto understood perfectly, and shook his head anyway.

“I’m not ever going to do that. You don’t have to do that if you’re an important person, right? If you just have to be an important person, then there should be nothing simpler.”

The teacher’s eyes went wide.

“Fine, go be someone really important then. But it won’t be that easy...”

The teacher’s words started to seem distant, and only then did Akuto realize that he was dreaming. He was remembering the past.

1

Someone's After Someone

Akuto woke up feeling annoyed.

— *Jeez, did I really need to remember something so unpleasant?*

He had an attractive face, but a nasty glare. When he was frowning, nobody wanted to get close to him.

Not that anybody who wasn't his friend particularly wanted to get close to him anyway.

Constant Magical Academy was on a long break, and there weren't many people left at the door. Akuto had been taking a nap under a tree in the back yard. He looked up and saw the clouds clearing out of the sky and a single bird flying through it. — *It feels like nothing bad could happen on a day like this. If I'm remembering something like that on a day like this, there really must be something wrong with me.*

Akuto laughed at himself just as he heard a distant voice.

“Ackie! There you are!”

Keena Soga ran up to him with a brilliant smile on her face. It was the expression of someone without a care in the world. The red tuft of hair at the top of her head waved as she walked. Watching her, it was impossible to feel serious about anything.

Keena sat right down next to Akuto.

“I didn’t have anything to do, so I decided to spend some time outside.”

“I see.” Keena looked like she wanted to say something, so Akuto pressed her.

“What’s up?”

“Well, Um.... Ackie, do you know when your birthday is?”

“I was an orphan, so I’ve got one they just picked for me. It was the day I was abandoned, December 25th,” Akuto said, and then remembered that Keena was an orphan too. It was hard to talk about something like that with someone who wasn’t an orphan, so it was easy to talk to Keena.

“I see. I didn’t know what mine was, so I picked my own birthday,” Keena said, and started to fidget.

“What is it?” Akuto asked again. Keena blushed and laughed.

“Um, if my birthday comes, will you celebrate it with me?”

“Of course.” Akuto nodded. Keena’s shoulders relaxed in relief.

“I’m glad. I mean, it’s a birthday I picked myself. I mean, I’m the type who just gets all kinds of weird ideas, right? So I thought you might think it was ridiculous.”

“I’ve always thought you were ridiculous, from the first time we met.” Akuto shrugged.

“Huh? How mean!”

“I mean, you just decided that you were my observer.”

“I was so lonely until I met you though! And... it’s true that I was watching you...”

“What day is it?” Akuto asked.

“Huh?”

“Your birthday.”

“U-Um... It’s almost time for it. I’ll let you know.”

“But then I might not be able to be with you.”

“Just stay with me every day then!”

“There you go, being selfish again.” Akuto sighed, but Keena shook her head.

“Hey, hey, Ackie! The weather is so nice today! Let’s play!”

Akuto felt like he couldn’t turn her down. No, maybe he would’ve refused before, but now he felt a strange sense of peace when he was around Keena.

“We can do something, but I’m not really the having fun type. I guess we can play a game though. What do you want to do?”

“Let’s take a nap!” Keena answered cheerfully.

“Huh? A nap? I was just asleep.” But by the time he said that, Keena was already leaning up against him and snoring.

— *In a sense, it’s an amazing talent.*

Akuto decided to stay quiet so he wouldn’t disturb Keena. He took out his student handbook and called up the library function, then projected the mana screen in front of his chest and started to read. He thought he might get some kind of inspiration from the ancient religious texts. But even if they gave him some food for thought, they didn’t provide him with a way to force people like that rich gentleman from the past to use their brains and *think*.
— *If thinking only benefits yourself, maybe it’s better not to*

think at all. Like Keena.

Akuto looked up from his book and started to play with Keena's hair as it waved near his face.

"No, that's not appropriate for planting the stalks. Instead..."
Keena was talking in her sleep.

Akuto didn't know why, but he felt like a moment like this may never come again. His mind went numb with a premonition that he would look back and miss a time that had only passed five seconds ago.

— I can't pray to a god, so it's like I'm worshipping Keena instead, almost.



The God Suhara was, in the broadest sense, a god of nationalism. There were two major organs of defense for the country: the knights and the imperial army. Only believers in Suhara were allowed in the latter.

Suhara emphasized noble blood, pride, and order, and granted permission to use powerful attack magic to those who performed brave feats. For that reason, Suhara's believers were often considered to be polite and familial, but also uncompromising and violent.

The High Priest, the most important of the believers, was currently a man named Keizo Teruya. He was the father of Eiko Teruya, the girl who'd caused so much trouble for Akuto before. The Teruya family's specialty was spying, and in an era where there had been no external wars for years, they'd gained military power by plotting the downfall of the noble families which ran the army.

The Hattori family, whose job it was to provide bodyguards for high-ranking officials, had managed to compete for the role of high priest until the end, but since they had already been given the honor of directly serving the emperor, de facto power was given to the Teruya.

Keizo Teruya was a rare man who could do cowardly and evil things with pride and dignity. Even those whose lives he'd ruined were forced to admit that. He stole and assassinated without the slightest hesitation or conscience, though he never lost himself in the pleasure of such deeds. Even after becoming high priest, he'd killed people with his own hands more than once or twice.

Eventually an evil shadow began to appear on his face, which everyone who looked at him could sense. But as the years went on, his expression became pleasant and relaxed. Now, as he sat

with perfect posture wearing a kimono, he was clearly evil, but also strangely had the air of a saint.

He looked nervous, which was rare for him. His always-laughing eyes were now raised and sharp.

He was in the temple of Suhara. It was a huge shrine in a quiet forest on the outside of the capital. Walk under the red torii gate, and you found a huge thatch-roofed temple building. Inside the sliding doors, you could see the divine tree that was the object of the Suharan's worship. The tree was actually just a stump, about the size of a man, and Keizo sat across it on a straw mat. This divine tree was the device that connected Suhara to humanity. There was no one but Keizo in the shrine now. He was speaking directly to the god.

"Are you sure this is her?" Keizo said searchingly.

Two priestesses walked out from behind the tree. They both had identical beautiful faces. One sat in front of him on the right, and one on the left.

"This is the judgement of Suhara."

"We leave the final decision to you."

They were artificial humans. When humans struggled to communicate with the god, they were there to act as aides. In terms of rank, they were bishops, ranking higher even than the high priest. But that was only in theory. The high priest was the only one allowed to make changes to the god's program settings. Thus, the high priest was actually more important than the god itself.

But Suhara was different than the others.

"You really want me to assassinate her?" Keizo asked again.

Those who were guilty of treason had their information given to the high priest by Suhara. The gods used the mana in the at-

mosphere to observe the deeds of mankind. For this reason, those who were certainly guilty of treason had the corresponding evidence and their location sent to the high priest.

Of course, normal people didn't know about this system, and it was heavily criticized even among the high-ranking officials who knew of it, but even they had to admit its effectiveness. It made it possible to stop treason against the empire before it reached a large scale.

“We are not telling you to assassinate her.”

“But her treason is clear.”

The priestesses spoke in unison.

“But there's no proof.”

That was what made Keizo nervous. The location of the traitor had been sent, but there was no indictment, and no evidence.

“The evidence cannot be revealed.”

“Even to the high priest?”

Keizo was well aware of how strange this statement was. Once you reached the level of high priest, you knew better than anyone that the gods were just a system.

— *Should I use the unlock code?*

Keizo wasn't sure if he should use his authority as high priest. If he did, he would be able to rewrite the god's program. If Suhara had somehow gone mad, he would be able to deal with it quickly.

— *But if I overrule the will of god, the other priests may criticize me. And if the system is discovered to be acting incorrectly, then the other assassinations I've performed will have been*

wrong as well.

The god only gave information on the traitors. Whether to kill or arrest them was left up to the high priest, and Keizo was a fan of assassinations. Before he'd become high priest, he'd deceived his political enemies into committing treason, and used that evidence to get them killed. If it was revealed that the system was wrong, it could lead to his own destruction.

— Normally I'd use the military's special forces... but I suppose I'll just use my own personal army.

"I'll take this data, then. I will be the one to make the decisions from this point," Keizo said.

The priestesses nodded.

"Understood. Thank you. But..."

"Depending on how you use that data, even a high priest may be found guilty of treason. Do not forget that this is possible."

The priestesses said as they walked around him in a circle.

— What?

He'd never been threatened like that before. No, it was impossible for the divine system to behave that way. The only possibility he could think of was that it had developed some kind of will of its own.

"Wait, you can't threaten me like that..." Keizo said, but the two had already vanished behind the tree. And Suhara said nothing further.

"Either way, I'm going to kill her. That was my plan," Keizo said to the god as he rose.

— It has a will of its own? No, that's impossible... Either way,

once this is done with, I'll reveal to the other priests that Suhara is acting strangely. In the end, it's just the life of one girl. It will be over soon.

Keizo flicked at the mana screen floating in front of him, marking the data displayed there as top secret. It was a photo of a girl with red hair and a bright smile, and a name.

“Keena Soga. I’ve never even heard of her. She must be my daughter’s age. I do take pity on her, but...”

○

The Hattori family were the enemies of the Teruya. And their eldest daughter, Junko, had a big problem.

— What do I do? This is a problem I may never be able to solve...

In her hands was the student handbook, a device which could be used as a method of communication. The screen had a message from her family on it. The subject was, “Preparations for the arranged marriage meeting are complete.”

— If preparations have been made, that means that Father has given his approval, and there's no turning back now...

Junko was lurking out in the woods behind the dorm. She'd put a mana screen in front of her to blend in with the trees, concealing herself in a way that made sure no one would find her.

In front of her, Keena was sleeping and Akuto was reading a book.

The “arranged marriage meeting” was to be with Akuto. Junko had done nothing herself, but Korone had already discussed things with the Hattori clan.

Korone was an artificial human sent by the government to observe Akuto, who was expected to become the next Demon King. She was well aware of the complicated political situation, and had decided that one way to protect Akuto from the hard-liners in the government who would have him assassinated was to marry him off to the politically influential Hattoris.

— From the way he wrote in the message, Father seems very excited. It's a political marriage, but Hattori women are usually fated to a worse fate in love. Compared to that, he wrote that it would be better that I achieve some measure of happiness... My little sister seems happy, as well, to be relieved of her duties. Now that the family's future depends on me, she can go back to the carefree life she's used to living. And I, myself, don't mind the idea... There's one problem, though...

The problem was that Akuto was completely unaware of this. The day of the meeting was coming. And it was Junko's job to tell him.

— Wh-What do I do? Tell him that the date's been decided? No, what happens if I do that?

"The date of the arranged marriage meeting has been decided." "Huh? Whose?" "Yours and mine!"

"Does that mean that you decided all this without asking me? Don't act like I don't get a say in this. I thought that was one thing you'd understand about me..."

— That's what he'd say, of course! Then what do I say? Maybe this?

"Marry me!" "W-Wait a second. We're not old enough for that yet. Are you making fun of me?"

— That wouldn't work either. Bringing up marriage first is a bad idea. Th-That's right. First I need to find out how he feels.

“Do you like me?” “Of course. You really have your act together, and I can always trust you.”

— *That’s right. That’s the kind of person he is. That wouldn’t work either. So what am I supposed to say? Wait, maybe my feelings are the problem here!*

“I like you. I love you. Please be my husband.”

— *No no no. I can’t say that! And do I even think that? How do I feel about him? Do I want him by my side? Do I want to watch over him? Wasn’t that all this was? And even if he likes another girl, I’m fine with...*

“If you’re that worried about it, should I help you?”

— *No, there are some things that you need to do yourself. That wouldn’t be right.*

“I see.”

— *That’s right. Wait, why is someone interrupting my thoughts...!*

“You were saying them aloud. Hiding didn’t help you.”

“I-I was? How much did you hear?”

“Since you started saying all that weird stuff to yourself.”

“Huh...?”

Junko turned to the side and saw a stunning beauty standing next to her. It was Korone. She was looking at Junko expressionlessly.

Instantly, Junko’s mind went numb. She turned red and dropped to her knees.

“Wh-Who reads somebody else’s mind? What humiliation...”

“You were saying it aloud, though. Don’t worry. I’ll keep the information secret. It has to do with the mission, for one thing.”

“R-Really?” Junko looked up, relieved.

“Really. I’m well aware that it’s the nature of humans to want to hide their sexual desire,” Korone said calmly.

“S-Sexual desire? D-Don’t be stupid! Marriage is a holy... A-And anyway, this is a political marriage!”

“If that’s the case, it should be easy to talk to Akuto. Even if he refuses, if you tell him it’s a political decision, he’ll rethink things.” Korone was right, so Junko said nothing. At this point, she had no choice but to tell him. She’d been backed into a corner.

“Th-That’s right. Yeah. I was just about to go over there.” Junko removed her disguise and started to walk.

But there was no one in the place where Akuto had been a moment ago.

“Wait... he’s gone. I-I guess I’ll just have to wait until tomorrow. Yeah, don’t have a choice. I’ll do that,” Junko said in a monotone voice, and spun around.

Korone was waiting for her.

“It seems that Keena woke up and was hungry, so they went to the cafeteria. My Akuto Sai locating device tells me he’s still there.” Korone showed her a strange machine.

“That’s a really convenient machine to have...” Junko whispered. But Korone was probably telling the truth.

“The cafeteria.” Korone brought her head up closer to Junko.

Her lack of expression only made it worse.

“I-I get it! I’ll go! Fine!” Junko yelled, and headed towards the cafeteria in the dorm.

There were barely any students left in the cafeteria, and it wasn’t even lunchtime, so the place was empty except for Keena and Akuto. Akuto was sitting in the middle of a long table, reading a book on a miniature screen. Keena was in the corner getting rice from one of the rice maker machines. If she wanted to talk to Akuto, now was the time.

She walked loudly so that Akuto would hear her as she crossed the cafeteria. She was too embarrassed to look at him directly, so she looked at the tables to the side instead. When she figured she was close enough, she spoke.

“H-Hey, can you come with me in two days? It’s something simple. I’m just going home for a while. I just mean come with me, nothing more. Nothing weird. I-It’s purely a political thing. My father and relatives want to meet you. My house is a long way away, and they’re preparing a banquet, so I’m sorry but you’ll have to stay the night. It’s a big house, so it won’t be a problem.”

“Hang on. What’s going on here?”

“Um, you’ll understand when you get there. It’s political. But potentially very important. So it’s fine. You won’t regret it. I’ll make sure the banquet is worth your while. Food in my home of Iga is very good.”

“Huh... That’s nice, but I really just can’t see myself going, ya know?”

“No, this is important. If you don’t come...”

For the first time, Junko looked to her front. It was her classmate Hiroshi who was standing there. He was small and still had

the air of a mischievous kid.

She looked around. She hadn't realized it, but Hiroshi was sitting next to Akuto now.

"You're talking to the boss, right?" Hiroshi grinned as he realized her mistake.

When she saw the look on his face, she couldn't bring herself to admit she was wrong.

"Th-That's true. I'm talking to Akuto Sai. But what I said wasn't a lie. You come too. You'll make things more exciting," she yelled as she pointed at Hiroshi.

"Don't say that. I'm busy, you know."

"Don't lie to me. We're both students, so I know you're not busy," Junko said sullenly, and Hiroshi scratched his head.

"Yeah, you're right. You're right about that. Haha. I'm not really busy."

"What? You're weird. Now, do you get it?" She turned to Akuto.

Akuto seemed like he'd been listening too, and while he didn't seem to understand what she was talking about, he must've realized that arguing was a waste of time. He looked up from his book and nodded awkwardly.

"W-Well, that's fine. But the day after tomorrow? That's sudden."

"A-Actually I knew before this, but I didn't get a chance to tell you... No, that doesn't matter. I have an air bus coming to pick us up. It'll be here on the morning of the day after tomorrow, so be ready. Hiroshi, you too!" Junko said quickly.

“N-No, I really don’t think I have anything to do with this...” Hiroshi didn’t seem happy, but she glared at him.

“Th-This is because I’m not just inviting Akuto!”

“I-I get it... You don’t have to be so stubborn...”

“What was that?”

“No, never mind. I get it,” Hiroshi said in resignation as he sat back down next to Akuto.

“That’s good. Two days, okay?” Junko said, and then she left the cafeteria.

She told herself in relief that at least she’d done the bare minimum of what she needed to do.

Korone, who’d been watching her from the entrance to the cafeteria, whispered to her as she passed by.

“As his observer, I’ll be going with him. That’s all right, yes?”

Junko turned away without a word.

○

Meanwhile, an eerie scene was unfolding under the school. Fujiko Eto was holding an orange mana light in her hand, shaking at what she saw.

On the surface of an endlessly black pool of liquid floated what looked like a mat of some kind. It must’ve seen the light, because it sunk into the blackness as if to escape from it. In its place, a hairy pole-like thing came out of the depths, followed by a scaly, clawed hand. Giant creatures seemed to be lurking within; it seemed to be a mix of insects, mammals, and lizards.

“Demon beasts... and so many!” Fujiko brought her hand to

her lips in surprise.

Demon Beasts had appeared in large numbers before, causing great damage to human society. They were nonhuman creatures that absorbed mana inside their bodies and grew to incredible strength. In many cases, they were fated to be exterminated as dangerous beasts. Some research labs would artificially create them, but of course keeping them as pets was strictly forbidden.

The way most people saw it, your average demon beast, no matter how weak it was, was a horrible thing to be avoided and hated. The monsters coming out of the black muck, one after another, were giant centipedes and human-like monkeys with long fangs, the kind of things that would end up securing a place in your nightmares the moment you saw them. And to find them in the basement of a place of storied traditions, like Constant Magical Academy...

“...How wonderful!” Fujiko’s face was full of joy, and her eyes were practically heart-shaped.

Just like her long black hair and sharp, intelligent eyes suggested, she’d sworn a vow as a black mage.

The reason she’d come here stretched back to a week ago. Fujiko had learned during the incident at the seaside retreat that the mana waves within Akuto’s body were causing the demon beasts to become more active. What’s more, the beasts that were affected gained a limited form of intelligence. Fujiko, who was devoted to him more than anything, decided to keep this fact a secret.

— He’s so kind. If he knew this, he would use his powers to strengthen the demon beasts all over the land to protect them, and put far too much stress on his body! Before he does that, I’ll find a way to control them!

That was her decision. In fact, Akuto would’ve actually blamed

himself for whatever happened as a result of the demon beasts, but that wasn't any concern of hers.

“If I can find a way to control them, Akuto will be so grateful that he'll say, ‘Come with me, and we'll rule the world together!’ And then he'll hold me close... yes... like this...”

Fujiko realized there was, in fact, something reaching out to hold her close, and was pulled back from the world of her fantasies. A slimy tentacle had wrapped itself around her body.

“Hyaaaah! It's slimy!”

The whole tentacle was wet with some kind of pink slime. It seemed to be some kind of shelled demon beast. The tentacle was stretching out from a giant shell, where she also saw many smaller tentacles and two eyestalks. A tentacled snail? So it must use the thick tentacle as its leg.

“W-Why are you trying to get inside my clothes?!”

The tentacle had crawled up her body and snuck inside her clothes.



“No! Don’t undo the hooks! S-Stop it! Don’t go around to the front!”

Fujiko reached out a hand to rip it off. She managed to grab it, but the slime meant it quickly slipped out of her grasp.

The eyestalks on the tentacle’s owner seemed to be laughing at her. The demon beast had more intelligence than was usual for its sort, but it seemed to have evolved along a bad direction.

“Ahh...ah... no!”

The tentacles wrapped themselves around her and lifted her up, and one tiny tentacle started to go up each of her legs.

“H-Hey... that’s going too far...!”

The tentacles forced her legs wide apart, locking her in mid-air in that position.

The look in the giant snail’s eyes got even naughtier as the tiny tentacles all headed for Fujiko’s skirt.

And then Fujiko changed.

“Knock it the hell off! I said that’s going too far!”

With a demonic expression on her face, she grabbed a bottle from her pocket and flung it at the snail. One of its tentacles quickly knocked it out of the air, but when it touched the ground, it exploded.

It was a small explosion, but it was enough to scare the snail into drawing all its tentacles back in. The instant she was free, Fujiko moved to a position where she could look down on the giant snail.

“You’ve got guts trying to go for hentai when you’re a her-

maphrodite! Stay right there, 'cause I'm gonna fry you and eat you with garlic bread!"

There were several tiny vials held between her fingers.

The snail's tentacles shrank as it looked up at her in fear. It seemed less afraid of the exploding vials than of the look on Fujiko's face. The tentacles rubbed together as if to say "Sorry" as the eyestalks drooped.

Fujiko put one leg on the giant snail's shell and began to press into it.

"As long as you understand," she said.

But for some reason, the giant snail seemed happy to be stepped on. This might have been because the two eyestalks were looking up at Fujiko from under her skirt.

She realized what it was doing.

"You still don't get it?!"

She kicked it away, and this time, it truly surrendered. It lowered its head and waved its eyestalks up and down at her.

Only then did the fierce look on her face fade.

"It still looks weirdly happy," Fujiko whispered. It seemed the giant snail was happy to be kicked by a pretty girl.

"Are all demon beasts like this?" she asked as she turned around.

A voice answered her from the darkness.

"Not all of them. This one has special fetishes, probably."

The giant snail was suddenly plucked from the ground. It

didn't seem to realize what was going on, but panicked when it turned around.

A giant, 15 meter long dragon was staring at it with a bored look.

Its body was covered with metallic black scales, and its claws and fangs were made for battle.

Peterhausen, the black dragon, flung the giant snail back into the pool it came from.

“You know, if I weren't here, the only one of these you'd be able to handle is the giant snail.”

Peterhausen pointed to several of the demon beasts that were trying to leave the pool. All of them seemed to be longing for a fight. Fujiko understood instantly that the only thing keeping them back was Peterhausen.

“What's this...?” Fujiko asked Peterhausen.

“They don't attack anything stronger than they are. They're animals, essentially.”

“And why are these animals here, in such numbers?”

“This pool is filled with liquid that cuts off the influence of mana. It's the perfect place to put demon beasts who are unfortunate enough to have long life spans.”

“Long life spans...? So the last Demon King left them here?”

“That's right. Several of them have awoken in the past, but with their present lord beginning to awaken, they're all starting to become active for real.”

“So I was in danger, then?”

“You were lucky that this one was the first one to attack you.”

Peterhausen pointed to the giant snail, which was trying to leave the pool again.

“Then I’ll be grateful to it, and make good use of it,” Fujiko said.

She had to rejoice in her good fortune. The demon beasts that appeared in the underground labyrinth were famous, and she’d hoped that she could find some clue about them on the bottom floors, but this was better than she could have imagined. Peterhausen seemed to know this from the start, but he also seemed to be avoiding interfering in things too much. He wouldn’t explain anything unless she took action herself. It was dangerous for anyone, even Fujiko, to go down to the lowest depths without Peterhausen’s protection, but it was worth it.

“All of them except him, though, look like they’d be really useful.” Fujiko smiled.

“What do you intend to do with them?” Peterhausen smiled as if he already knew the answer.

Fujiko’s smile became even more wicked.

“Akuto hasn’t managed to completely master the demon beasts, yet, right? So I’ll find a way for him to do so.”

“Nobody but the Demon King has ever been able to command the demon beasts.”

“That’s because no one like me has ever served the Demon King. And the reason the research hasn’t gotten anywhere is that they assumed that the demon beasts were just a mana bug. Now that I know that they’re caused by Akuto’s particular wavelength, the research will go much faster. Also, you’re going to help, right?”

“Heh. Why do you think that?”

“You’re only avoiding interfering because Akuto needs to awaken on his own, right? You’ll want to limit your involvement with the people around him to a level that doesn’t interfere with his free will.”

Fujiko and Peterhausen exchanged smiles.

“You’re almost completely right. But that’s not the only reason I avoid getting involved. Of course, I can’t tell you the other reason yet.”

“Do you like conspiracies? I rather enjoy them myself.”

“Hahaha. It’s a little too big to be a conspiracy. It may go beyond what you humans can understand.”

Peterhausen deftly raised a single eyebrow.

○

Keena was, as usual, loading up a bowl with rice from the rice maker. With Junko gone, Akuto and Hiroshi had nothing to do but watch her.

“Boss, how long is Keena going to keep eating?”

“No idea. That’s actually pretty slow for her. She’s capable of eating about three rice cooker’s worth of rice, so she’s taking her time with the one she’s got.”

“Wow...” Hiroshi nodded, impressed.

“...Anyway, what was up with the Class Rep? She really wants me to visit her house?”

“No idea. But she did say you could, whether she really meant to or not. I’d be glad to have you, instead of going alone. It’s some

political thing, I guess... Anyway, is everything okay? You seem tired lately.” Akuto looked back at Hiroshi.

Hiroshi looked pale. But he wasn’t sick. It looked like he hadn’t slept, and had spent days working a physically demanding job.

“I-I’m fine. It’s nothing.” Hiroshi waved his hands dismissively, and then opened his mana screen and turned on the TV.

“If it’s nothing, then okay, but...”

Akuto looked at Hiroshi again. He looked very tired, but the way he talked and the sparkle in his eyes showed that he was feeling fulfilled. Come to think of it, Hiroshi seemed to have changed lately. He’d always been cheerful and friendly, but lately he seemed to be confident too.

“But something’s changed, right?” Akuto asked, and Hiroshi laughed, embarrassed.

“Nah, that’s not true. I’m just starting to understand how you feel a little.”

“How I feel?”

“You know. How you want to be useful to people.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Akuto laughed, and for some reason Hiroshi turned red and looked away, pointing to the TV instead.

“L-Look, it’s Yuri Hoshino, the idol.”

A tiny, pretty girl was smiling at them from the screen. It was a report from some event being held out in the countryside. Behind the idol named Yuri Hoshino was a big advertising screen and a series of tents. It was some kind of company exhibition.

“Is she popular?” Akuto asked. He didn’t know a lot about that stuff.

“That’s right. You’re a little behind the times, boss. She’s a singer, and an actress, and she’s also a popular guest on TV shows. It’s been barely any time since her debut and she’s at the top in all her fields,” Hiroshi explained, a little excitedly.

“She’s really amazing then. But I think I’ve seen her somewhere...” Akuto tilted his head. He didn’t recognize her face, yet he had a feeling that he’d met her somewhere.

“Aww, come on, boss. You must’ve seen her on TV without realizing it.” Hiroshi poked Akuto with his elbow.

“You might be right. Man, I’m silly,” Akuto laughed, and then he heard a scream from the screen.

He looked in surprise and saw people running and screaming. The cameraman must have been panicking too, because the screen was panning between the sky and the ground, and he could see short images of black shadows.

“Demon beasts?” Hiroshi said in surprise.

The next moment, the camera showed a huge bird-shaped demon beast. More than one of them, in fact. They were flying and attacking the tents.

“Oh no! Where is that?” Akuto asked. Hiroshi looked into the screen.

“It’s the floating island near the coast, I’ve been there before. It’s an event grounds that floats using magic. Unless you can fly, you can’t escape!”

“There has to be some kind of escape boat for accidents, right?”

“There is, but it’s for accidents. If they could line up and get on it, they could all escape in minutes, but the way they’re under attack, there’ll be a lot of casualties!”

“Where are the knights?”

“I think they’ll be there, but only the light knights can fly...”

As if to prove what he said, several knights rushed onto the screen. The people shouted in joy, thinking they were saved. But the knights’ magic and guns didn’t seem to work on the demon beasts, and they were easily knocked down.

“This is bad. Could the heavy knights do something?”

“No, it’ll take time for them to get there. They’ll have to get aboard a boat at the airfield...” Hiroshi said, and for some reason he looked at Akuto, upset.

“Um, boss, I... I gotta go.”

“Huh?”

It was a strange thing to say at a time like this, but Hiroshi was very serious. And then he said something even stranger.

“S-Something really brutal might happen after this, so don’t watch the TV! I-I’m gonna turn it off!” Hiroshi closed the mana screen and ran off.

— *What was that?*

Akuto shrugged. But he had a somewhat compliant personality at times, so he watched Hiroshi go without turning on the TV.

But it didn’t seem right to just do nothing. He stood up, and told Keena he was leaving for a minute. Then he went to talk to the student council president, who probably hadn’t left for home yet.

Hiroshi ran outside, and after making sure no one was around, put the bracelet on his wrist up to his face. And then he said one word:

“Brave.”

A mechanical voice sounded from the bracelet.

“Command received. Activating unit. Dimensional fault activated. Removing any material within five centimeters of user.”

Then there was a loud bang as Hiroshi’s body was surrounded by light.

“Welcome, Brave. Transferring unit. The transfer will require 0.2 seconds. Transfer complete. Electrical systems functioning normally. Life support systems functioning normally. External air circulation mode selected. Please use thought input to activate nuclear reactor engine.”

Before the voice was done speaking, Hiroshi’s body was completely covered in the suit. The suit was form-fitting, except for the helmet which exposed his mouth.

It didn’t use mana for its power source, which was rare these days. It was an anti-magic combat suit that had been passed down in Hiroshi’s family for reasons he didn’t fully understand. It acted according to his will, and gave him incredible powers.

“Display the map. Show me my current location,” Hiroshi whispered, and an image appeared on the screen.

“I want to get there in one minute, no, 30 seconds.”

With the suit on, he was able to float off the ground with just a small jump. He accelerated quickly into the sky, and then leveled off. The light on the map got closer and closer to the floating is-

land.

Ever since he'd learned that Akuto's existence was causing the demon beasts to become active, he'd been working in secret to eliminate them. He didn't expect it to benefit Akuto in any way, but if he kept it up, he felt like it might make things better somehow. And even though he'd only been doing this for a short time, the mysterious hero who fought the demon beasts was already the talk of the people, and he'd heard the rumors too. It gave him an indescribable pleasure to realize that he was helping others, and being a real hero.

Fortunately, no one had identified him. This suit was illegal. If he wanted to keep doing this, he'd need to hide who he was. And he wanted to keep this a secret from Akuto and his friends, no matter what.

A moment after he'd seen the floating island, he was already in the sky above it. He could see several people below him in the plaza. Instead of running, the majority seemed to simply be in shock. They may have been waiting for their turn on the emergency escape boats, because they were just forming little groups, seemingly watching and praying that the demon beasts didn't come close.

The light knights were fighting back as best they could, but they seemed fully occupied with protecting themselves. Despite that, they were still getting close to the demon beasts and then falling back, hoping to draw their attention away from the people.

"ID and track the location of the demon beasts. I'll use the high-frequency blade," Hiroshi said.

A claw-shaped blade stretched out from the gauntlet on his right wrist. He gave it a quick shake, and then let gravity take him down. Accelerating at an incredible rate, he slammed straight into one of the demon beasts.

It was a large, bird-like creature, and it had just been about to crush the face of a light knight in between its claws. But when Hiroshi flew by, it stopped moving.

The knight's face changed from a look of fear to confusion. The claws that had been covering his vision suddenly fell away.

The demon beasts' body had been sliced apart vertically in three straight lines. Without even time to scream, it fell apart in a storm of blood and feathers.

The people quickly realized what had just happened.

"That's...!"

"It's Brave! Brave the Demon Beast Slayer!" someone screamed, and the people began to cheer.

Hiroshi waved at them, and the men and women below, much older than he was, waved back with faces like children. He shook with joy at the exhilarating feeling, but he knew he had to focus.

Hiroshi checked the locations of the demon beasts, which were shown as shining dots on his map, and got behind the nearest one of them in an instant, ripping it apart with the high-frequency blade. And before it hit the ground, he was on to the next. He was so fast, and his cuts so clean, that not a single drop of blood made it onto his suit.

The Demon Beasts must have decided that he was the biggest threat, because they began to gather around him. By the time he'd taken out two or three of them, he was surrounded. About a dozen meters away, the bird-like demon beasts began to circle him.

"I'm surrounded. I can't use any explosives or I'll hurt the people below. I don't know if I can dodge when they all attack at once..." Hiroshi muttered.

The beasts' animal instincts must have sensed his plight, because they all started to circle closer. Sharp claws and beaks attacked him from every angle.

"Summon particle cutter."

"Roger. Summoning particle cutter."

A dull light surrounded the left hand of the suit. At the same time, the demon beasts all lunged at him, so many that you couldn't see him through the mass of feathers.

The people below began to murmur in fear and surprise. But a moment later, they saw something unbelievable.

The ball of demon beasts surrounding him split open in the middle. It looked just like the round capsules used for prizes and medicine that split open from the inside.

"Particle cutter... I've never used it before, but..." Hiroshi's voice shook with surprise and a little fear.

Beams of light were stretching out from the fingers of his left hand. At the end of them was a tiny device floating in the air, that looked like a claw separated from its fingers. Between the claw and the fingers were fine wires that were like sharp blades.

That's what he'd used to rip them apart.

"The molecular cutter's strength has degraded due to absorbing other material. If there are no further orders, it will be discarded," the suit's cyberbrain said.

The weapon was sharp, but it seemed that it dulled easily.

Hiroshi dodged the pieces of demon beast that were falling from above him like rain and he looked around to see if there were any more. There was just one.

He ordered the cutter discarded and it vanished immediately — he didn't know to where. The main unit of the suit itself seemed to be located in another dimension, and it transferred all his weapons and power to this one. Discarding seemed to work the same way.

He couldn't see the last beast at first glance. As he tried to hurry to the point on the map, he heard cheers from below. The people below him didn't realize that there was still one left.

The last dot was at the end of a row of tents for advertisers. He ran through them quickly and found the reason why he wasn't able to see it. At the end of the row was a warehouse, and the demon beast must've been inside.

It was a large building, with room for exhibits inside as well. There was a big door for bringing materials in and out. It was shut. There was also a door for people to go in and out, but he decided it would be faster to break the window while flying than go inside that way.

He made sure there was nobody below him, and then broke through the window as he leapt inside.

He immediately saw what had happened: someone had run into the warehouse to escape, only to be discovered. His eyes looked past the piles of boxes and saw the monster trying to break down a door. The door was made of iron bars, and there was a person inside. It looked like a room for the warehouse's security. They'd managed to escape, but they were completely visible from the outside, and there was nowhere for them to run.

Hiroshi got close to the demon beast, and before it even noticed, he'd sliced its wings off its torso. Since it was a bird, it was using its wings for balance even as it rammed the door. It lost its balance and fell to the floor, screaming. Hiroshi put it out of its misery with the blade.

“Whew.”

He stepped over the body and went to open the door, but was met with unexpected resistance. The person inside was still panicking — he could hear a frantic voice inside, seemingly that of a young girl. Hiroshi tried to calm her down.

“It’s okay. The demon beast is gone. I defeated it.”

The resistance on the door suddenly stopped. He turned the knob and a girl came running out. He looked at her and was shocked. It was Yuri Hoshino, the idol from the TV.

Yuri Hoshino started to sob in relief when she saw him.

“U... Uwaaah! I was so scared!”

She was sobbing incredibly loudly. Hiroshi had to turn down the volume on his helmet. But even then...

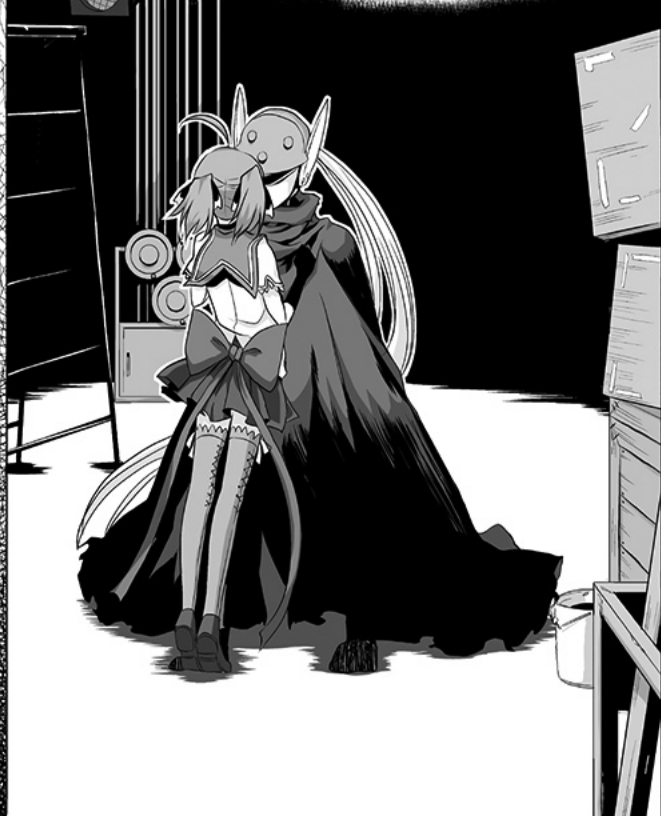
— *She really is cute...*

Hiroshi saw her and instantly fell in love.

She stopped crying after a while, and then looked up and down at him.

“You saved me! Thank you! I really hate demon beasts! So, you’re the famous Brave, right? You really are cool!”

She suddenly jumped on him. And even more shockingly, she gave him a little kiss on his uncovered lips.



— *Uwah...*

Hiroshi stood up straight in surprise. He took a step back and looked at her.

She was smaller than he was, and looked a little childish, but there was something grown-up about her; a kind of aura she gave off that came from within and made others kneel to her. She had a mischievous look, and there was a sense that you had to be on guard around her, like she might try something at any minute. It all came together to make you feel like wherever she was, the whole room would revolve around her.

“Keep this a secret,” she said as she put her fingers to her lips and winked.

And then the big door to the warehouse burst open, and the knights stormed in. Hiroshi saw it with his visor, without turning around, so he decided to show off a little for Yuri.

“Then keep what you know about me a secret, too. The knights are probably going to want to know who I am.”

“Really? But tell me! I’ll keep it a secret! I want to go see you!”

Hiroshi was honestly tempted, but he managed to remain silent. He waved towards Yuri and then leapt up and turned to face the knights. They leapt up to catch him too, but they couldn’t match his speed. In an instant he was out the door. He circled in the sky to the applause and cheers of the crowd, then flew up higher to dodge his pursuers and vanished.

○

After Akuto left, Keena finished her rice. Now that she was sleepy, she left the cafeteria to take a nap in Akuto’s room.

Then she stopped. She saw a young man in white clothes

standing in the dorm hallway.

He was tall and very handsome. His hair was a little long for a man's, and he had a statuesque face and a calm smile. He was the kind of guy who'd make any girl's heart skip a beat. He looked the same age as Keena, or maybe a little older.

When he saw her, he bowed a little and walked over.

"Hmm?" Keena seemed confused. She didn't know him.

"Hello," he bowed politely, and Keena bowed back.

"Hello. Who might you be? What can I do for you?" Keena asked, and he frowned a little. But then he smiled, as if he thought she must be confused, and took out a handbook from his pocket.

"I'm with the Cabinet. I'm here on business with the school, but I got lost."

Keena looked at the badge displayed inside the handbook. It was really elaborate, so it must be real, she thought.

"Where do you want to go? I'll take you there, sir."

Her tone was different than usual. The man seemed upset by that as well.

"I'd like to meet whoever's in charge of security."

"I see. At our school, the student council handles that job instead of a dedicated staff. I'll take you to the student council room... Is something wrong?"

Keena peered at his face. He looked back at her, and narrowed his eyes like he was looking at something very bright.

"No, but when I look at you, it just feels like I know you."

“That’s such a wonderful thing to say, sir. But have we met?”

“I couldn’t say. My name is Boichiro. Boichiro Yamato.”

Keena seemed confused again.

“I’m sorry, I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“I see.” Boichiro suddenly sighed. “As long as you can tell me where the student council room is, you don’t need to take me there. I’ll go there myself.”

“Oh, I see.”

Keena explained where it was, and Boichiro bowed and started to walk.

“Thank you. Until we meet again, then.”

“Huh? Will we meet again?” Keena’s voice returned to normal. It was like a different aspect of her personality emerged when she was talking to him.

Boichiro turned around and smiled.

“As long as you are you, we will.”

○

When Akuto knocked on the door of the Student Council Room, Student Council President Lily Shiraishi was inside, working at her desk. She raised her head and welcomed him inside.

She was a small girl in a classy hat. She wore a mischievous and strong-willed expression, and didn’t seem like what you’d expect from a student council president, but she had a commanding air about her.

“What is it?” Lily asked with an easygoing smile as she flicked

the rim of her hat with her finger.

“It’s nothing that important, but...”

Lily’s face grew tense as he told her about the demon beast attack. She knew that he was essentially creating them, but she’d decided that right now it wasn’t the right move to tell him. “I’m sure the government has some reason for not taking action. But I’ll find out what that reason is,” was her private decision.

“Just look at the all the local news broadcasts here. My hobby is watching all the different stations at once,” she said, sliding her hand across the desk.

A flood of mana screens appeared, each tuned to a different channel. Lily limited her search to only channels reporting on the attack, and several disappeared, leaving around twenty. The stations were all reporting on the heroics of Brave (Hiroshi), though neither of the people in the room knew who Brave really was.

Still, ever since Akuto had encountered him at the Seaside Retreat, he’d suspected something was going on. But Akuto was the kind of person who wanted to believe in his friends, so he was doing his best to avoid bringing up Hiroshi’s strange behavior.

“Is this person in the suit popular?”

“Yes. He’s defeating demon beasts all over the land. The mana cost for teleportation is heavy, so the knights can’t do it. They can’t get there as fast as he can. They’re frustrated because he always steals the glory just as they’re about to arrive. So the civilians love him, but the knights say he’s violating the law and want to arrest him. For some reason, there are no records of his actions, and they can’t trace his mana. That suit must be equipped with a mana canceller. That thing’s illegal, and it’s a felony for an individual to possess it.”

“It is?”

“Yeah. But what worries me is that his equipment is specialized for taking down demon beasts. He’s working to help the people now, or at least he thinks he is, but I’m worried about what happens next. People like this can easily turn into vigilantes.”

“Vigilantes?”

“Their sense of justice can get too strong, and they start passing judgement on others by themselves. I myself have the same tendency.” Lily laughed.

“Then why is that a bad thing?”

“It’s not that bad. But when there are two people like that, it means a big fight.” Lily smiled brightly.

Akuto fell silent for a moment. Then there was a knock on the door. It was someone neither of them expected.

“May I come in?”

The man who came in had a white beard and white hair, and it was clear that there was no point in even trying to guess his age. Even in this era, where long-lived people were common, he was probably one of the oldest. It was clear that he was a century old at least, which meant he’d fought in the last great war. He was the Headmaster of Constant Magical Academy.

“Headmaster.” Lily stood up straight, which was rare for her. Akuto did so as well. “What brings you here today, sir?”

Normally the headmaster never showed himself in person — he just used the communicator. He didn’t have many reasons to talk to students to begin with.

“I was just passing through. No, that’s a joke. Actually, I had a feeling that an old acquaintance might come here. I saw it in a dream. No, that’s a joke too.”

The headmaster laughed. Lily and Akuto didn't. They didn't feel like they should say anything.

Suddenly his eyes, almost entirely hidden by sharp eyelashes, grew sharp. He turned towards the door, where a man was now standing.

Both Akuto and Lily tensed. They hadn't sensed him coming at all.

The man was just standing there. And his face was relaxed. He was handsome, in a way that made it easy to open yourself up to him. But there was an almost visible pressure in the air around him.

"Nice to meet you, I suppose," the man, Boichiro Yamato, said. His eyes were clearly looking at Akuto, who looked right back at him.

Akuto bowed, a little uncertain what was going on. There was too much calmness in the man's eyes for there to be animosity, but there was no warmth in them either.

Then Akuto realized that he knew that face. He wasn't sure, but when he'd met Peterhausen, he'd seen a strange image that could've either been a hallucination or a mana communication. It was the man who'd killed Fujiko's brother — he didn't really remember the face, but the man's aura seemed to be the same.

Lily must've felt it too, because she went pale. She'd been there when it had happened as well.

"I see this is a group of very non-average people," Boichiro said with a smile.

And in the next instant, Lily punched him. She hadn't moved her body from the desk. She'd used mana to alter the structure of her arm and reach out to the door. The fist traveled toward him

with the speed of a bullet.

The sound of flesh hitting flesh echoed throughout the room.

But Lily's fist had landed on Akuto's palm. "Landed" may not have been the right word, actually. The moment she'd launched her punch, Akuto had moved next to Boichiro and grabbed her fist.



“At least let my hand slip,” Lily said with a laugh. There was a smile on her face.

“If anybody’s allowed to show up here without warning, it means they’re with the government, right? I don’t know what’s going on, but have you lost your mind, just punching someone like that?” Akuto said.

“I’m quite sane. I know from the badge on his collar that he’s with the Cabinet Government. I’ve just got a problem with hand slipping when I see bureaucrats. And look at his face. There was no need for you to do that ‘faster than a speeding fist’ trick.”

Akuto turned to look at Boichiro’s face. He hadn’t moved an inch from where he was standing, and his expression hadn’t changed at all. The only thing that had moved was his right hand. At some point, he’d put it into his jacket pocket.

“It’s like he moved his hand without moving his center of gravity. And the reason his hand’s still in his pocket is that he saw you move and realized there was no need for him to draw,” Lily said.

If that was true, Boichiro had known everything Lily and Akuto were going to do. There’d been less than a fifth of a second between Lily’s punch and Akuto’s block.

“I’d rather you not do that in our first meeting. If I don’t respond with anger as well, it would send the wrong impression,” Boichiro said with his smile. His voice was still calm, but the air around him seemed to grow tenser.

“Don’t get too cocky, bureaucrat.” Lily’s tone dropped. She was smiling, too.

The tension was too much to bear, and it was clear that something was about to happen. Akuto looked at Lily and squeezed down tighter on her fist.

“There’s no reason for you to fight,” he said.

“Do you need a reason?” she answered.

“That’s not what I’m saying. We haven’t heard what he has to say yet.”

When Akuto finished his sentence, Boichiro gave an exaggerated shrug and smiled.

“I just came to warn you. I wanted to know if your security was up to par.”

“The student council runs it. We don’t need your advice.”

“Is punching people you’ve never met part of the security system?”

“You bastard...!” Lily shook off Akuto’s hand. His face went pale as he tensed up.

“If you’re going to get in my way, then I’ll fight you both...” Lily put her hand on her hat and warned them. Boichiro saw this and smiled assuredly, then took his hand out of his pocket.

The next minute, a violent storm broke out... or it should have.

But the only sound in the room was a “pop.” And then there was a light crunching sound as dozens of small objects hit the floor. It was the crunching of potato chips.

The headmaster had tried and failed to open a bag of potato chips. He’d pulled too hard and torn the bag open, and the contents had spilled everywhere. Potato chip crumbs fell everywhere, onto Akuto, Lily, and even Boichiro.

“I’m sorry, this bag was just really hard to open...” The headmaster scratched his head and looked at the group.

“The snacks in the basket are the treasurer’s private property, they don’t belong to the student council. Please replace them.” Lily said, too exasperated to fight.

Akuto took a step away from Boichiro and breathed. The bag had exploded just as Lily had been about to attack. Otherwise, nobody would’ve cared.

“You’re a crafty old man,” Boichiro said as he popped a potato chip into his mouth.

“Don’t say that. I was looking forward to those chips,” the headmaster laughed as he moved in front of Boichiro.

“If you’re worried about our security, you don’t need to be. We’ve gotten by just fine. Anyway, it’s been a while. What is your position now?”

Boichiro took a notebook out of his pocket. He opened it and showed the headmaster a badge. Lily’s eyes widened in shock when she saw it.

“The Cabinet’s Magical Information Officer...”

The post was one that you could only get after rising to the highest rank of the knights, and then working as the headmaster of the knight’s training school. It was mostly an honorary post, but because of what you had to do to get it, it gave you massive power over the knights. Normally, no matter how talented, a young man like Boichiro would never be able to get it.

“Oh, the head of the Magical Information Investigation Department, huh? It’s an honor to have someone like that come to warn us directly.”

The Headmaster talked as if he were speaking to an old friend. Meanwhile, Boichiro still seemed to be on his guard.

“I’m warning you about your security systems. If something

happens at this school, I may need to get involved.”

Akuto took that as a warning towards himself.

“Are you saying I’m going to do something?”

“No, you’ll be the victim.” Boichiro waved his hand.

“You’re the ones who won’t leave me alone. I don’t have any ambitions of my own. But there was that strange thing that happened at the island. Given that guy’s position, it’s obvious he worked for you. The report on the incident got shut down somewhere, though.” Akuto narrowed his eyes, but Boichiro ignored him.

“You people are too naive. You think I’m your enemy, don’t you? That’s true, in a sense, but who is the real enemy?” Boichiro asked him.

There was an edge in Akuto’s voice as he answered.

“Enemies? I don’t have any enemies. The very idea shows your lack of thought. Evil is something in the hearts of each of us. It’s not something you can fix by denouncing someone.”

“If the evil is human, yes. But haven’t you realized who the real enemy is? You, and you too.” Boichiro looked at Akuto, and then the headmaster.

“What?” Akuto was confused. The headmaster didn’t move.

“I came here because I thought we’d be able to talk. What I need to realize is where my position is, right? And it seems to me that your position is as part of an evil empire. You probably disagree, though,” Boichiro said to no one in particular.

“I am me. I’m the one who decides where I belong,” Akuto said.

Boichiro laughed.

“That’s childish. That’s fine. If you don’t get in my way, you’ll simply be overtaken by events and disappear. That would be best for me, since I don’t have to fight you then. I’d rather not hurt anyone.”

“Who are you, anyway?” Akuto asked.

Boichiro looked back at him, but then quickly turned away.

“...You can take this as one last warning,” Boichiro said, and he left the room.

“Who is he, Headmaster? You seemed to know him,” Akuto asked.

“I don’t,” the headmaster said.

“You don’t?” Both Akuto and Lily raised their voices at this.

“No, I mean I don’t know who he really is. He’s been like that ever since I was young.”

“Like that?”

The two of them both seemed skeptical, but the headmaster went through the basket of snacks like it wasn’t that important a question.

“He always has the same face when I see him. He’s always the same age. About a hundred.”

“A hundred...?”

“But he always has a different job. I’m not sure if it’s one person, or a bunch of people. But every one of them remembers me, so unless they share memories, it’s easier to assume they’re the same man.”

The headmaster stopped going through the snacks. He looked at Akuto.

“Sai.”

“Yes sir?” Akuto stood up straight, thinking he was about to be lectured.

“Why does the treasurer here only have such strange flavors of snacks?”

“I think... she just has bad taste.”

“I see.” He nodded.

2

The Shadow Of Iga Stripped Bare

The bus had come to take Akuto to Junko's house, but he was so distracted by his meeting with Boichiro that he didn't even think about where he was going.

The headmaster was still refusing to tell him anything, and the student council president had only strengthened her resolve to fight against the powers that be, and had called back the three members of the student council from their vacations. But it seemed to Akuto that there was more to the encounter with Boichiro than just a mysterious visit by a powerful man.

— It felt like he knew me well, and was there to watch me.

Akuto was pretty sure he wasn't imagining it. It felt like he was testing how Akuto would respond in different circumstances.

— It seemed like he was testing the way I thought.

No matter what Boichiro was after, it seemed to Akuto that what was about to happen was deeply linked to the way he thought.

"The bus is here."

"The boss is spacing out. Is he tired, you think?"

Korone and Hiroshi tried to get him on the bus. The doors to the flying bus were already open, and it was waiting outside the dorm for passengers to board. The only passengers were Akuto,

Hiroshi, and Korone. Of course, Junko was there too, but she was already on board. She called out to them from inside.

“Come on, get on,” she said.

Akuto was staying the night, so he carried luggage with him as he boarded. Hiroshi was carrying a bag too. Korone had her usual purse.

The three of them got on, and the bus closed its doors like it had been tired of waiting and took off into the sky. Akuto sat down and took a look out the windows, and he saw that Keena had come outside the dorm to see him off. She seemed like she wanted to say something, so Akuto felt a moment’s guilt. But then she started to wave and smile, so he waved back, relieved.

— *Come to think of it, we didn’t get a chance to talk yesterday.*

He’d eaten with Keena after the meeting with Boichiro, and so he’d had a chance to talk, but he was so lost in thought that they hadn’t said much of anything at all.

“Keena’s going to be alone, isn’t she?” Hiroshi said.

“Don’t say that, you’ll make me sad. We won’t be gone that long, and she’s got Peterhausen with her. He’s busy helping Fujiko with her research, but he does get along with Keena,” Akuto said as he looked at Hiroshi. Hiroshi seemed strangely excited.

“You look really happy. So why say such a gloomy thing?”

“No, it was just something that occurred to me.” Hiroshi’s gaze was fixed oddly off into the distance. But his cheeks were flushed. Akuto didn’t understand what was up with him.

— *Well, if he’s happy, that’s what matters.*

Suddenly conversation in the bus stopped. Silence between the four of them shouldn't have been that awkward, but for some reason Junko seemed terribly tense. She kept looking at Akuto and then glancing away.

"What's wrong?" Akuto asked. Junko stammered out an "It's nothing!" before quickly shoving her hand in her bag.

"Y-You know, I was wondering if you wanted something to eat..." She was rummaging through her bag, but she didn't seem to be finding anything.

"You're acting hysterical," Korone, who had been silently sitting next to her, said.

"No, no, no. I'm just fine. That's not true. I'm calm. I'm... I'm very calm."

"You don't look that way to me. You okay?" Akuto asked.

Worried, he reached out a hand, and she pulled away from him with a noise that might've been a "hyah!" or a "pyah!"

"I wasn't going to do anything..."

"I-I-I know that."

"Then are you sick?"

"No. I-It's just..."

Junko seemed to want to say something, and then she stopped. And then Korone interrupted.

"If you have trouble saying it, then why don't I..."

"No, no, no. I-It's just... A political thing. Very high level," Junko said, sticking her hand over Korone's mouth "A high-level political thing?"

Akuto's face became serious. He remembered what Boichiro said. It seemed to him like he was at a point where he needed to think about things. In other words, obeying the law, and thinking that the law was right, was natural to him, but he was starting to realize that maybe that was too narrow a view.

"I'd appreciate it if you told me. The time might have come for me to assume a big responsibility," Akuto said, and Junko turned bright red. Her hand fell off of Korone's mouth.

"You... knew?"

"Yeah, a little. I think I need to take responsibility for everything that's happened."

"A-Are you serious?" Junko's mouth went wide open. But when Akuto nodded, she smiled goofily.

"N-No, I'm glad to hear that. If you noticed, there's no need for me to say anything."

She tried to hide her grin as she pretended to look out the window.

"Still, I need to hear it from your mouth to really understand," Akuto said, and Junko blushed.

"D-Don't make me say it. As long as you understand, that's fine. My father will explain the rest."

— I'm curious about why Hattori looks that way, but I guess it's because we have something important to talk about.

Akuto steeled himself to find out what Junko's words really meant.

○

The bus landed in a forest not long after that. Akuto thought it

might be the Iga village, but when he looked outside, he saw that the bus had landed in an empty field about half the size of a soccer field.

“Is this the village?” Hiroshi asked.

“No, this is the landing pad. It’s about 20 minutes away.”

Junko led them all off the bus, and they saw a path continuing into the forest. They hadn’t been able to see it because the path was covered by trees. The trees didn’t seem naturally planted, so it was probably deliberately hidden.

“Is the village itself hidden too?” Akuto asked, and Junko nodded.

The bus they were on started to move towards the edge of the clearing. Suddenly the ground split open and an underground entrance revealed itself.

“That’s the parking lot,” Junko said, and the entrance vanished beneath the trees. The village seemed to really want to hide things.

“Wow,” Akuto said. Junko blushed and began to walk ahead of the group.

“Well, just understand that that’s how our family works. Our house itself is really normal.”

The three of them followed her down the narrow path. And suddenly she stopped. Hiroshi just seemed confused, but the others tensed up.

— *Huh? Huh?*

Hiroshi was looking around when suddenly he heard a high-pitched voice.

— *What?*

He suddenly felt a dull vibration shake the soles of his feet. He looked down and saw a shuriken buried in the ground.

“Uwah!”

He leapt back, even though it was far too late, but the others had of course already noticed the attack. Junko had her dagger out, and Akuto was glaring at a spot on his upper right. Even Korone had moved next to him and had stuck her hand in her purse.

“Huh? What happened?” Hiroshi asked, but instead of answering, Junko yelled out.

“Yuko! That’s going too far!”

A voice replied from somewhere in the forest.

“Ahaha! Sis, your skills are as sharp as ever, huh?”

Hiroshi tried to look towards the voice, but though he could tell she was inside the forest, he couldn’t tell where she was.

“Idiot. What if you hit me?”

“Don’t worry. I aimed for the chainmail you always wear.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. What if it hit someone after I blocked it?”

“Then that would be your problem, not mine.”

Junko was speaking normally. Evidently her sister had come to welcome her, and had suddenly attacked her with a shuriken.

“Come on, come out.”

“Fine,” the voice said reluctantly, and there was a rustling in

the trees. A girl leapt out of the branches and did a flip in mid-air. She landed in front of the four of them.

The small girl gave a teasing bow.

“Hello. I’m Yuko, her little sister!”

“Oh!” Hiroshi gasped. It was Yuri Hoshino, the idol he’d met the other day.

Yuko must’ve noticed him, because she waved.

“That’s right. I’m an idol!”

Hiroshi was relieved at the cheerful tone in her voice. She didn’t seem to know he was Brave.

“You’re ridiculous, sister. Being an idol is why you get attacked by demon beasts,” Junko said so that the others could hear.

“It didn’t have anything to do with that. But because of that, I managed to get the famous Brave to save me!”

“Even if you hate demon beasts, it’s pathetic that a member of the Hattori clan was saved by another. What’s all your training been for, then?”

“Who cares? I’m not the clan leader. Dad says I don’t have to do any training as long as I’m an idol. And it’s okay because Brave was really cool, too!”

Yuko stuck out her tongue at Junko. Hiroshi grinned as he watched. It was nice to have someone say he was cool, even if it was when he was wearing a mask.

“Hey, is this your boyfriend?” Yuko suddenly stood in front of Hiroshi.

“Huh? Wait—” Hiroshi stammered, but Junko immediately

denied it.

“No!”

“Huh? Why are you so angry? It must be him, then!” Yuko turned towards Akuto.

“Th-That’s not right... either.” This time she mumbled when she spoke.

“Huh? But it must be him from the way you’re talking. Sis, you’re really obvious,” she said. “But I don’t think he’s a good choice for you.” She shot Akuto a look of disgust.

“Hey, don’t be rude!” Junko yelled, but Yuko wasn’t listening.

“He’s scary! His face, but also his aura and stuff. He’s the only person who’s ever come to this village who could tell where I was hiding.” Yuko pointed at him. He didn’t know how to react.

— *Come to think of it, the boss never looked away from the upper right.*

Hiroshi was surprised when he remembered Akuto’s actions. Before, Akuto would’ve been confused as well, so he could feel that Akuto was truly becoming powerful.

“Why would Sis want a man like this for mar—”

Before she could finish her sentence, Junko attacked. With a speed of a ninja she circled around and put two fingers up to Yuko’s throat to silence her.

“Y-You didn’t say anything. Right?”

There was murder in Junko’s words. Yuko nodded mechanically.

“Th-That’s right. Yes. But Sis, that’s a killing technique...”

“It’s your fault for not being able to dodge it. Now let’s get to the house.” Junko motioned for them to continue.

Everyone started walking, but Yuko kept her distance from Junko and Akuto. This meant she had to walk next to Hiroshi.

“Hey, what’s that guy like?” Yuko jerked her head towards Akuto as she asked Hiroshi.

“That’s a rude thing to ask,” Hiroshi said, but Yuko just pouted and waved like she didn’t care.

“But he’s scary. He’s not normal.”

“That’s because... he’s just so incredible.”

“Incredible?”

“He’s strong. Probably the strongest.”

“Hahaha. What? Boys love saying people are the strongest, don’t they?”

“No, it’s true.”

“It’s not true. You’ve never seen Brave, have you? He’s strong. The way he just slices the air with his hands is so wonderful, and he was so cool when he saved me. He just ripped the demon beasts apart without mercy!” Yuko said, as if in a daze.

“Wasn’t it supposed to be a secret that you saw Brave up close?”

“Huh? But everybody knows he saved me.”

“No, I mean like, how he fights and stuff.”

“Huh? Who cares? I don’t know who he is either. The knights asked me a bunch of questions, but I can’t tell them what I don’t

know. Hmm? How do you know about Brave?”

Yuko peered into his eyes.

— *Oops...*

Hiroshi panicked, but quickly thought of an excuse.

“I saw it on TV. There was a story called ‘Does Yuri Hoshino Know Brave’s Secrets?’ or something.”

“Aww... Brave and I are...” Yuko laughed.

“Huh? What? Do you know something, then?” Hiroshi asked.

Yuko just spread out her hands and ran ahead a little, and said, “That’s a secret!” with her finger on her lips.

— *Sh-She’s so cute...*

Hiroshi couldn’t help but fall in love. He was showing it on his face, but Yuko must’ve been used to seeing that expression from boys, because she didn’t seem confused. But then she seemed to remember something. She put her face up close to his and stood on her toes.

“Huh?” For a moment Hiroshi didn’t know what to do, but Yuko laughed innocently.

“You’re the same height as Brave, aren’t you?”

“O-Oh... I see.”

But she didn’t seem to mean anything by it, and simply pulled away and started to walk again.

“Come on, stop messing around,” Junko said and pointed to the path ahead.

“We’re almost home. Show everyone inside. I’ll call father.”

The house they saw was cleverly concealed in the forest. Because of that, they couldn’t see how big it was, but just from what they saw it was clear that it was a large Japanese-style mansion. There was no gate, but there was a garden in front of the front door, big enough for a whole class to get a group photo. The roof was covered in black tiles, and the trees around it had been carefully pruned so they would shine in the sun.

Junko went around to the back. Yuko flung open the front door and announced that they had visitors, and a middle-aged woman in a kimono came out and bowed.

“Welcome. You must be tired. Come this way,” The servant let the three of them to the parlor.

Hiroshi was a student at a very wealthy school, so having servants in a house didn’t surprise him, but the way the servants moved did. Akuto seemed to notice it too, because he turned to look at Hiroshi.

“Everybody here moves like a warrior,” he said quietly.

“Yeah, I guess so,” agreed Hiroshi.

Yuko called to one of the servants.

“Hey, is it true that the Teruyas were bugging us again?”

“Mistress, you’re in front of guests,” the servant said, but Yuko didn’t seem to care.

“It’s fine. They’re practically part of the family already. And Sis said that this guy’s met Eiko Teruya once already.” Yuko pointed at Akuto.

Akuto didn’t seem to know what to say, but both he and Hiroshi had, in fact, met Eiko Teruya. He’d heard from her that the

Hattori and Teruyas didn't get along, but it had seemed to him more like a friendly rivalry.

"So your two families really don't get along?" Hiroshi asked, and Yuko nodded.

"It's always been that way, but I guess it's really bad lately. They've been wandering around the village, you see."

"Are they planning something?"

"Who knows? I don't know what they're up to. Anyway, come here." Yuko grabbed Hiroshi's arm and pulled.

"Huh? What's going on?" Hiroshi asked. He'd just been led to the parlor.

"Just leave your stuff here. Oh, and you can stay here." She gestured toward Akuto.

Akuto frowned, but went inside the parlor anyway. Korone followed him. Meanwhile, Hiroshi let Yuko drag him around the hallway.

"Where are we going?"

"It doesn't matter, but I guess the courtyard? I just don't want to be near that guy."

"That's not a nice thing to say."

"But..."

Yuko seemed to want to say something, but instead she opened the glass door to the courtyard, put on the shoes that had been prepared for them, and stepped out onto the grass.

"He's marrying my sister, right?"

“Huh?” This was news to Hiroshi. He stepped out into the courtyard, surprised at what he was hearing. “No, I didn’t hear anything about that.”

“Yeah? Sis is really quiet when it comes to stuff like that, I guess.”

She sat down on a bench in the garden. Hiroshi stood in front of her.

“What do you mean, marriage?” he asked.

“Just what I said. I don’t really understand, but since he’s supposed to be the Demon King, maybe they think marrying him will calm him down?”

“They can’t think it’s that easy...”

“Hmm, maybe this is hard for people from other sects to understand, but we worship Suhara, you know? Orders from the top are absolute. So political marriage is pretty common. Maybe the Teruyas are bugging us because they’re nervous about our clan becoming more powerful.”

“Is that how it works?”

It didn’t seem like that bad a deal at all to Hiroshi. If nothing else, it would solve a lot of Akuto’s problems.

“Anyway, at first I was in favor, but I just don’t like that guy.”

“Why do you say that? He’s a great guy,” Hiroshi protested, but he didn’t expect the answer he got.

“He smells like demon beasts.”

— *Huh?*

Hiroshi knew better than anyone that she wasn’t lying. That’s

why he didn't know what to say.

“I-Is that something you can sense?”

“That's right. The way he smells. I think I'm sensitive to that smell. I hate it. I've never really told other people, but I was almost killed by a demon beast.”

Her voice was calm when she spoke, but there must have been some kind of psychological resistance to talking, because Hiroshi could see her hands shaking.

“It happened when I was a kid, but I remember it well. It was some kind of transformed insect, and it bit me. That made me really scared of them, but that's not all. I guess the demon beast's mana got inside me. I guess it didn't really hurt me or anything, but when a demon beast gets close... It just makes me feel like I'm about to go crazy.” Yuko smiled as she spoke, but Hiroshi was shocked.

— I've heard of this, actually. I read somewhere that since demon beast mana is normal mana that's fallen victim to some kind of error, if it gets inside your body there's no telling what could happen...

Then Yuko laughed and waved her hand.

“I'm fine. I've got that internal unit that you get when Suhara baptizes you, you know? It keeps a permanent spell on me. And it keeps the demon beast's mana from expanding. As long as Suhara exists, I'm fine.”

“I see.” Hiroshi relaxed.

Yuko grinned at him mischievously.

“Are you worried about me, or is this just a way to get closer to me?”

“N-No, that’s not it!” He quickly shook his head, but Yuko’s mischievous smile didn’t change.

“I don’t know. It feels like all my fans have this certain image of me. Anybody who says they don’t see me that way probably just wants to see me naked. The real me is just a boring person, who’s no different than anybody else,” she said.

“No, that’s not true. You’re amazing,” Hiroshi said, and Yuko’s eyes narrowed a little.

“A lot of people say that, but only because they want something from me.”

“No, that’s not what I mean!” he said. “You were born to a really rich family, but you keep trying different things to test yourself. That’s what’s amazing.”

For the first time Yuko’s eyes went wide in surprise.

“People have told me I’m a selfish rich girl before, but this is the first time I’ve heard anyone say that. They tell me I’m a girl who can’t settle down, who went from acting to singing, to song-writing, to variety shows. They say I’m selfish.” She grinned. “But I don’t think you really understand my family. It’s the other way around. It’s not that I’m letting them spoil me, or trying not to let them spoil me, but that I have to do something for the family. I don’t know whether I’m doing a good job or not, but that’s what I’m trying to do.”

“For your family?”

“If I wasn’t part of this family, I’d be dead. Normally you can’t get special protection from Suhara. So I’m grateful to my family. Not to my parents exactly, but to my good luck. I’m kind of embarrassed, this is all stuff I’ve never told anyone.” Yuko scratched her head and blushed.

“No, I think that’s amazing.”

For some reason, Hiroshi scratched his head in embarrassment too. And then suddenly Yuko’s face turned serious.

“Hey, do you believe in God?”

“Huh?”

“I mean a real God.”

“That’s kind of a tough question, isn’t it?” Hiroshi didn’t know what to say.

“Yeah. But I think believing in Suhara means believing in the bonds behind him, in other words, the bonds of family and stuff. But family, and the people you meet, aren’t something you get because of Suhara. I think it’s the real God who determines where you’re born, or who you meet. That’s why I believe in the real God, and the reason I’m an idol is so that I can connect a lot of different people. That’s why what’s most important to me is my home, and my family. So I serve Suhara as best I can, and I do what the family tells me to.”

“I’ve never really thought of things that way. I respect that.”

Hiroshi sighed a little, and Yuko laughed and blushed.

“Flattery will get you nowhere.”

“I wasn’t expecting it to.” Hiroshi laughed too.

After she’d finish laughing, though, she looked up at him and spoke.

“But it wouldn’t bother me too much if this was an excuse to get to know me better, I think.”

— *What?*

For a moment, Hiroshi thought about what she meant.

— *Does that mean...*

For a moment he got his hopes up, and leaned forward, but then she grinned.

“Because whenever somebody tries to get close to me, the servants here try to test them.”

“Huh? The servants?” Hiroshi asked, but then he realized that he was surrounded.

He looked around and saw people in black, ninja-like clothing with their hoods up, leaving only their eyes exposed. They were ready to attack him. He wanted to ask where they’d come from, but a single glance told him. There were hidden doors in the bushes and next to the benches, and he could see the heads and feet of several ninjas poking out of them.

“Uwaah!” Hiroshi panicked, but Yuko smiled.

“This happens to anybody who tries to be my friend, or my fans, anybody who gets close to me.”

“Wh-What’s going on here?” Hiroshi almost collapsed.

“Being close to me means being a part of the family, so they all want to test if you can be my friend.”

“T-Test?”

“You both use your killing techniques on one another, and if you accept each other’s strength, you become best friends.”

“W-Wait! I don’t have any killing techniques! And these people clearly have no intention of friendship! They just want to hurt any man who gets close to you!” Hiroshi screamed.

The ninjas all shook their heads at once, and spoke in unison as they advanced on Hiroshi.

“You want to be friends with us, right?”

“That’s right. We want to be friends with you, too. Friendly enough that we can test our techniques on one another.”

“You’ve got guts, going after the mistress.”

“Hey! That last one! That was just a threat! That was just a threat!” Hiroshi said, but Yuko just chuckled and sat on the bench, resting her head on her elbow.

“You think?”

“I do!”

“I see... All the boys I bring home run away. I guess you need to be strong like Brave, huh?” Yuko sighed, disappointed.

“F-F-Fine! I won’t do anything!” Hiroshi backed away from Yuko as the ninjas approached, waving brass knuckle-clad fists and swords.

“Ahh... Well, I guess my dad’s the worst of them all, though. Things might be rough for that other boy right now,” she whispered.

“The boss, you mean?”

“Yeah. He wants to be my sister’s husband. That means he’ll really be part of the family.”

“Then is your father attacking him with a weapon?”

“He’s not attacking, he’s testing his skills, and his bravery. Something like that.”

“No, I think that’s the same thing just said a different way...” Hiroshi muttered, but he heard the sounds of blades leaving their sheaths, and decided not to say anything more.



Akuto and Korone were left alone in the room, but since they were guests, all they could do was sit there. The woman in the kimono who had led them there brought tea, but they’d only drank half and it had gone cold.

“Are we being tested?” Akuto asked Korone.

“Do you think so? It’s hard to say.”

— *Either way, I have to be careful what I say. I have to stay focused...*

Just as Akuto had made that decision, the sliding door to the room opened.

“Welcome. I hear you’re very close to Junko.”

Standing there was a small but lively-looking man.

Akuto hadn’t noticed his approach until the door had opened. Normally he would’ve heard footsteps, and he’d just proved that he could detect Yuko when she was hiding. It was clear that this was no ordinary man.

The man was wearing a kimono, and he seemed between 40 and 50 years of age. His white teeth stood out on his dark sun-burned face. His hair was black and shiny, and he looked very healthy. But there wasn’t any sense of the “lightness” that such men often had. The air about him was heavy, but not unpleasant.

“I am Yozo.” The man bowed to Akuto, who had stood up to greet him, and motioned for him to sit down. “I’ve heard a lot about you.” He sat across from Akuto with a friendly smile.

“I’m embarrassed. But thank you. Junko has done a lot for me, both as someone who’s been at the school longer than I have and as the class representative.” Akuto bowed.

“By the way, I’ll just come out and ask it. Do you like Junko?” Yozo suddenly asked.

Normally this was a question that would cause a young boy to stammer or hesitate, but to Akuto, “like” included feelings other than romantic love, and he was also not the type to hesitate about his feelings.

“I like her a lot,” he answered immediately.

Yozo laughed loudly.

“Hahahaha! I like that. But you know what her position is, right? What it means for the Hattori clan that she lives with you.”

Akuto knew how much she had suffered being one of his only allies at the dorm. And he’d already been told that this was about politics.

“I’m aware that it means something, politically. It’s not just a matter of my feelings. No matter how difficult things get, I will take into account her environment and the people around her, and make the best choice for her sake.”

Akuto meant the words he said. But Yozo, who thought they were talking about Junko’s marriage, interpreted it a different way. He smiled in a way that was truly happy, but also imposing to anyone who saw it.

“I’m happy to hear that, as her father. But if you’re that certain, you won’t mind if I test you, right?”

His voice was calm but there was an intensity that spoke to his years as a warrior. But Akuto didn’t even budge.

“I was aware that I might be tested.”

“Excellent. You’re a good man.”

The next instant, Akuto saw something terrifying manifest itself.

Yozo jumped up into the air while still sitting on his knees — his legs were incredibly powerful. He managed to get a meter off the ground just with the power from his calves.

—!

Akuto was shocked, and leapt up out of reflex. And then Yozo, still kneeling even while in the air, drew his sword and slashed.

Akuto blocked with his hands, but all he did was expose them to the blade. His fingers flew off into the air, and the sword went straight into his jugular.

— *I’m dead...!*

Akuto felt his own death.

— *Is this the end...? No, if it is, then how am I able to think?*

And when that thought occurred to him, his eyes suddenly opened.

He was standing in shock in the middle of the room, with Yozo still sitting below him. He looked around and saw that Korone was sitting with no change in her expression — though nothing would be enough to get her to change expression.

“Why did you suddenly jump up?” Korone asked.

— *So this isn’t real...*

Akuto put his hand to his neck. It was fine.

“A wonderful reaction. I can see why they said you could be the Demon King.” Yozo slapped his hands against his knees.

He looked and saw that Yozo didn’t even have a sword. It made sense once he thought about it. No master of a household would take a sword to a meeting with an unarmed guest.

“An illusion...?” Akuto whispered.

He didn’t understand how it worked, but it seemed plain that he’d fallen prey to an illusion. The one thing he did know was that the illusion seemed very real.

— If Yozo really did have a sword, the same thing would’ve happened in reality.

Akuto was sure of it.

“It’s a little trick I’ve got. Do you like it?” Yozo asked. There was a meaning in the words that Akuto caught.

“Even if it was an illusion, those movements... If you’d wanted to, you could’ve made the same thing happen, right?” Akuto asked, and Yozo grinned.

“Correct. It’s one of my clan’s techniques. The illusion itself is enough to kill the delicate, but I figured you would be alright. It’s a bit of a mean thing to do, but it’s just who I am. I had to test you. At this age, you can’t help but wonder what would happen if you really tried, you know.”

— So he can know in advance what happens if he actually attacks someone? If it turns out they’re much stronger, there’s no need to fight. You can see the result. But if you’re equal, and it’s a fight you can’t avoid, when you actually attack, you can do it in a slightly different way to ensure that you never lose...

That was Akuto’s interpretation. He kept thinking about it.

— *There's no way he would do something like this just to be a jerk. If this is a political matter, they must be talking about putting me under his observation. He must be trying to make me understand that I can't beat him so I won't resist.*

Akuto got down on his knees and bowed his head.

"I hope that this can be the beginning of a long fruitful relationship for both of us, sir."

"No, raise your head. I'd heard that you were going to be the Demon King, so I got a little too excited. I'd be happy to have a good boy like you around. Very happy indeed." Yozo laughed happily, but suddenly his eyes narrowed and he continued. "By the way, if I'd really tried to hurt you, what would've happened? Tell me what you really think."

Akuto was caught off guard and his face went a little red.

"You weren't fighting for real, so I can't say for sure. But I think I've understood your style, so if you can do it one more time I can change the result."

Akuto's voice was so cheerful that Yozo's eyes went wide for a second, but it was more from shock than anger. Akuto hadn't really thought about it, but he'd just asked to be the subject of a technique that might kill him.

Yozo's expression quickly changed to joy.

"Alright, that settles it. You're part of the family now. I'll prepare some sake for us. No, I guess it would be tea for you. But the food will be the best the region has to offer. Relax until it's ready."

— *He seems to really like me. This must mean that the Hattoris are my backers now. I have to study a lot and become someone who can think about politics too.*

Akuto bowed as Yozo left the room.

○

The banquet was going to be a big one, it seemed. There were rows of small trays lined up in a hall with tatami flooring, packed with meats and seafood. At a distance, it looked like a random pile of food, something that bandits would eat, but if you got closer you could see that it had been prepared carefully. The whole clan would be attending, as well as the ninjas who lived in the mansion, so there were many people in the hall. To a poor boy like Akuto, the only thing he could think to compare it to was a hot springs retreat hosted by a big company.

Akuto was sitting next to Yozo. He was right at the front of the hall. He'd never sat in a place like that before, so he didn't know what to do.

On the opposite side of Yozo was Junko. She was nervous, or rather, she was frozen stiff. He could practically hear her joints creaking as she moved, and even when Yozo talked to her, she barely answered. Yuko was sitting next to Junko. They were the only ones at the front of the hall — Hiroshi was seated at the far back.

Akuto looked at the banquet and decided that this might be another way they were testing him. Yozo began a speech, which finished quickly, and then he turned to Akuto. Akuto's sense that he was being tested became a certainty.

“...Akuto Sai is the newest member of our family. Let's hear a little introduction from him.”

Akuto stood up, but the ninjas — though they weren't wearing masks here — didn't applaud at all. They all seemed like they wanted to attack him right then and there.

— *I see. I need to win them over.*

“I will now be under the protection of the Hattori family. I may cause problems for you all. But I am well aware that my circumstances are unique, and that my actions may have political effects.”

Everyone stared at him. Some had been whispering to each other, but they all stopped and waited for his next words.

“These political effects would, of course, be negative. My actions may anger some people. But power itself is neither good nor bad. It’s the same with influence. So why is it negative? Because people are deceived by the reputation that they themselves created.”

The room didn’t seem sure of how to handle Akuto’s abstract words.

“Political power is, at its core, reputation. And so I want to be on the side of the people who decide that reputation. I will now personally contribute to the Hattori family, and work to enhance their reputation. I believe that’s the best thing I can do to repay Junko.”

Murmurs spread throughout the hall. His words meant that the Demon King was surrendering to the Hattori clan. But they also were a declaration that he, himself, would be participating in political power struggles. In another place, this might have been interpreted as the Demon King displaying his intent to conquer the world, but the Hattori Clan was different. Words like these would only make Suhara worshippers trust him more.

“This is... a surprise.”

“I was terrified of having a man like him leading the clan, but...”

“It’s wonderful to hear someone talking like that. And our Mistress Junko is going to be bossing him around, huh?”

Akuto wasn't sure how to react to that, but he kept talking.

"I want to learn about the world here, and I'll use the Hattori clan's power to do that. But that doesn't mean that I'm going to use the Hattori clan for my own benefit. Some of you may not believe this. And I know that I'm from a different sect. But I can promise you one thing: that I will never betray Junko."

Akuto looked at Junko. She twitched and straightened up when she saw he was looking at her. And a moment later she seemed to realize what he was saying. Her tense face turned to a smile, and she covered it with her hands. And then she started to cry.

— *W-Was it that moving?*

Akuto was just trying to show off. He didn't expect this kind of reaction. But the tears had a huge effect on the assembled ninja army.

"Uwaaah!"

"Please be happy, you two!"

"I'll allow it! I wasn't going to allow it, but now I will!"

The hall was filled with the sobs and shouts of ninjas. Akuto didn't quite understand why his words had had such an effect, but the whole thing happened so fast he didn't have time to say a word about it.

Food and alcohol were passed around with cheers, and before long, everyone was drunk.

One ninja after another came up to him, sobbing and saying, "Please make the mistress happy!" He didn't quite know what to say, and before long his mind was starting to go blank.

Junko had stopped crying, and she was happily eating her

food. She was talking cheerfully with the ninjas who came up to her. But for some reason she couldn't bring herself to look at Akuto.

Strangely, the ninjas had taken a liking to Hiroshi, and they were all talking about idols.

“So if Yuko wants to get more famous, what does she have to do?”

“There's that other idol, Senri, who's pretty popular. I think she's her number one opponent.”

“No, Senri's the old type of idol. The type who gets crushed when there's some scandal about her having a boyfriend. The only idols who lose their fans when that happens are the ones who try to sell their virginity and the illusion that they're the fan's girlfriend. The old type. Yuko's different. She's a free spirit, and she's just so talented it's impossible to imagine yourself having her for a girlfriend.”

The ninjas nodded.

“Ooh, just what I'd expect to hear from a student at the Academy.”

“He's very smart!”

And then Yuko, who'd been angry and upset this whole time, suddenly said she was going to sing, and had the ninjas bring her a karaoke set.

The party reached its peak when she began to sing her songs.

Akuto felt a happiness that he'd never felt in his life before. He didn't understand why the Hattori clan was making him so happy, though.

It was night. Junko was alone in her room, and suddenly feeling uneasy. It's normal to feel a little sad after a party, and to start to regret some of the things you've said when tipsy. The feeling was similar to that. She'd suddenly started to be suspicious of Akuto's attitude.

— *Was I imagining it? No, he was definitely oddly calm. He's usually got a poker face, but today at least I would've expected him to blush when someone teased him.*



And once she started to get suspicious, she couldn't just stay in her room.

— No, is it possible he's misunderstanding things? Gaah, I just can't stop thinking about it! I know. I can just go ask him. I'll do that...

Junko stood up.

But...

— But how am I supposed to ask him? If I just ask "Do you plan on marrying me?" and he says yes, just the fact that I was suspicious of him is a problem. I'd be so ashamed I'd have to commit seppuku.

Junko shook her head. And then suddenly she got an idea. But the minute she got that idea, her body felt strangely hot.

— He hasn't converted yet. Which means... that until marriage... I-I'm not supposed to do that stuff. If I try to do the things that husbands and wives do, I'll be able to tell if he really understand the situation.

Junko put her hand on the door to leave, but stopped.

— No, but if he does intend to marry me, then that means we'll... N-No, maybe that's okay! But then maybe I should wash up first...

Junko got a change of clothes out of her dresser and went to the bath.

— No... am I... looking forward to this?

She looked in a mirror as she washed herself. There was a dopey grin on her face.

“U-Uwah... I need to stay focused, or he won’t like me...” she said aloud.

— *Wait, he wouldn’t hate me just because I had a grin on my face. No, but... Even if he doesn’t know what’s going on, if we do it, then maybe he’ll have to marry me?*

Her face turned an even brighter shade of red than usual.

“I-I’ve been in the bath too long. I should wash up and get going.”

She began to scrub herself hard.

○

Meanwhile, Akuto was alone in the room he’d been given. He’d taken a bath, and changed into the shorts and a t-shirt he’d brought instead of pajamas, and slipped into bed. He was enjoying the quiet night that comes after a huge party.

— *This feeling of happiness... But I just can’t enjoy it completely. It doesn’t feel like I’m worthy of it. Maybe I’m just not used to it?*

Suddenly he felt the presence of someone outside his door. He sat up in his futon.

“Who’s there?” he asked, and the door slid open.

Junko was there, kneeling on the floor.

— *Huh...?*

She looked different than usual. She was wearing a thin white kimono, and he could see the lines of her figure as the moonlight turned it translucent. What shocked him was her expression. She was as nervous as she had been all day, but there was a slight

blush to her cheeks that made her seem far more grown-up than she'd been before.

“W-What are you doing here at this hour?” Akuto asked. Junko closed the door behind her and looked down as she spoke.

“You can tell, right? Or can't you?”

There was something in her voice that made Akuto shudder.

He said nothing as she silently approached him. Her thin kimono was already starting to fall off her body. He could see her pale breasts spilling out of it. She wasn't wearing any underwear. As she walked, the hem of the kimono spread out to the side, revealing her pale thighs. Akuto quickly looked away before he realized if she wasn't wearing anything down there, either.

“I-It's awfully late. Can we talk tomorrow?”

“I-If we wait until tomorrow, someone will find us, right?”

He could hear Junko's trembling voice very close to him. Since he'd looked away, he hadn't realized she'd sat down next to him.

He looked towards her and gasped.

Her eyes were wet with fear. And with shaking hands, she was removing her kimono.

— *Wh-What's going on here? This isn't like Hattori...*

He wasn't sure what was going on. There was a daintiness about her that he'd never seen before.

“Don't force yourself to do something you don't want to,” he said as he reached out a hand to help her put her kimono back on.

“Something I don't want to...?” Junko gasped.

“I mean, you’re acting differently than usual.”

“Wha...?” Junko was shocked into silence.

“Is your family forcing you to do this or something?” Akuto asked.

Junko stammered.

“Wh-What are you...”

“I mean, the Junko I like wouldn’t act this way.” Junko kept opening and closing her mouth like she had no idea what to say.

“I mean, think about it. I have to change gods if I’m going to be under this clan’s observation. But I haven’t done that yet. So stuff like this is forbidden. If you’re trying to break that taboo, it must mean...”

Junko’s expression clouded.

“I-I’m sorry. That was rude of me,” Akuto said. “But I want to make sure everything is done properly...”

Junko cut him off.

“Dummy... That’s right. That’s the kind of person you are... You never heard anything about marrying me, did you?”

— *Marriage?*

Akuto was shocked.

“I’m sorry. I thought you knew everything when you came here. It’s my fault for not explaining.” Junko looked down.

Akuto put his hand on her shoulder.

“I’m sorry. It’s my fault for not realizing at all. You couldn’t say

anything because you didn't want to get married, right?"

"Huh? ...Wait!"

"I'm sorry. If your family ordered you to do it, you couldn't refuse, could you? If I'd really wanted to do what was best for you, I should've refused from the start..."

Akuto stopped talking. He'd stopped because Junko was starting to laugh.

"Hahah... I'm such an idiot. That's really just who you are, isn't it?"

"Wh-What are you talking about?"

Akuto reached out his hand to raise her head up to look at him. There were tears in Junko's eyes. He took his hand away in surprise, and she started to speak in a trembling voice.

"That's why... that's why I'm saying that's the kind of guy you are... I was so excited, but I was the only one..."

She fixed the front of her kimono up, and leaned forward and started to cry.

"Forget everything that happened today..." she said.

"I-I'm sorry. But..."

Akuto couldn't finish his words. A spear had suddenly dropped down on him from the ceiling.

Crash!

Akuto's reflexes were enough for him to dodge it, but otherwise it would've struck him in the heart. The spear had clearly intended to kill.

— *Uwah!*

Akuto leapt back. There wasn't just one spear. From the ceiling, from below the tatami, through the walls, one spear after another came at him.

CRASH! CRASH! CRASH! CRASH!

Akuto rolled out of the room, dodging spear after spear, and when he got to the garden and turned around, he understood what was going on.

Of course, it was clear what was happening now. Anywhere near his room where someone could hide, multiple ninjas had been lurking.

“You made the mistress cry!”

“You planned to deceive the Hattori clan from the start!”

They were shouting at him.

“You’ve got it at all wrong! And why were you peeping?” he yelled, but he still felt responsible. For now, he would have to retreat.

“Hattori, I’m sorry!”

He ran back into his room, grabbed a change of clothes, and leapt over the wall and into the forest.

“By the honor of the Iga Ninjas, don’t let him escape!”

They followed him into the forest with a huge shout.

— *I ran away, but I think I need to let them catch me and apologize.*

There was no way he could escape from multiple pursuers in a

place he'd never been to before. He tried to come up with a way to let them catch him without anybody on either side getting hurt.

But it looked like they weren't going to give him a chance to think. One of the faster pursuers was leaping from branch to branch after him, until he got close enough to slash at Akuto's back.

— *Tch!*

Akuto turned around and tried to block with his magic. But before he could, the ninja suddenly vanished.

“Huh?”

For a moment, Akuto didn't know what had happened, but he understood when he found the ninja a second later. A rope was tied around the ninja's leg and he was hanging from a tree. He'd fallen into a trap.

— *A trap? Here?*

This was the Hattori clan's territory. One of their ninjas wouldn't fall for one of their own traps. That meant someone else had set it.

Akuto watched for this mysterious person to reveal themselves as he sensed traps going off all around him. He heard the ninjas scream. The fact that they were on their home ground, and that they were extremely angry, caused them to fall for traps that they never would have normally fallen for.

But eventually the remaining ninjas must've gotten cautious, because their presences seemed to vanish. And then a shadow appeared in front of Akuto, as if it had been waiting for that moment.

“Who's there?” Akuto tensed up, but the voice was one he rec-

ognized.

“That’s not a very nice way to greet someone, particularly when they’re helping you escape.”

The shadow took a step out of the darkness and pointed at Akuto with a grin.

It was a girl with long hair tied into a ponytail — Eiko Teruya.

“You?” Akuto readied himself for combat.

She smiled a wicked grin.

“There’s no reason to get so tense. If it weren’t for me, you would’ve killed that ninja, right? You should be thanking me. My traps aren’t fatal.”

“Thanking you? The timing is a little too good for that. And this is a strange way of trying to get me on your side. Have you been watching me the whole time?”

“That’s right. I shouldn’t really be saying this, but the Teruyas have spies inside the Hattori clan.”

“Then you know...”

“Yup! I know all about what happened. It was hilarious how serious you took it!”

Akuto didn’t like the way Eiko laughed at all.

“So what do you want? If you don’t actually need anything, then I’ll just thank you and be on my way. Once the ninjas calm down, we can probably talk this over.”

Eiko’s smile turned even more wicked.

“There is no need to be upset. Alright, I’ll tell you what I want.

Want to come to my clan instead?”

“Your clan?”

“The Teruya. We’re higher-ranked than the Hattori, so it would be good for you.”

“No.” Akuto answered immediately. But Eiko didn’t give up.

“Even if there was a misunderstanding, you’re the one who wanted to suck up to the Hattori clan. If that’s what you’re after, the Teruya clan is a better fit.”

“I wasn’t trying to suck up to anyone. I was trying to grow.”

“That’s just saying the same thing a different way, isn’t it? Why not hook up with me, instead? I’m about to make a gamble with pretty good odds.”

“What are you talking about? You sound like a street thug. I could never love someone like that.” Akuto voiced his displeasure, but Eiko’s next words shocked him.

“You know my dad’s high priest, right? Did you know he sometimes does assassinations?”

— *What?*

Akuto wasn’t sure if he believed what he’d just heard.

“He kills people who Suhara decides are dangerous. Even if they haven’t actually done anything, if they plot treason, they get killed.”

“That’s just another reason for me not to like the Teruya.” Akuto frowned.

But Eiko wagged her finger at him.

“Don’t jump to conclusions. The Teruya are about to change. That is, if you join us.”

No matter what she said, though, there was no reason Akuto could think of to join her.

“I said no. I get to make my own decision. I joined the Academy, and I have a life and friends I want to protect. That’s all there is to it,” Akuto said firmly.

Now Eiko finally frowned.

“So you’re going to disobey me?”

“Disobey you? You’re the one who just came out of nowhere and started making demands.”

“Damn it. You’re so stubborn! I was making you this offer because I was really starting to love you! Hmph! Do whatever you want then! Your friends and your life are about to go away!” she said heatedly.

“What did you say?” Akuto felt a shiver run through his body.

Eiko smiled cruelly.

“One of the friends you’re talkin’ about is that dumb red-headed girl, right?”

“What do you mean?” His expression twisted.

Eiko burst out laughing.

“Hahaha! I just told you about my family’s habit of assassinations, right? For some reason, our next target is that red-headed girl! Hilarious, huh? She’s the stupidest, most harmless girl in the world!”

“You bitch!” Akuto cut her off.

“Eep!” Eiko froze.

Hot air was swirling around Akuto — his body itself was emitting heat. The mana inside him was burning so bright that it lit up the air.

“W-Wait! I’m not the one who’s going to do it! If I was, I wouldn’t tell you!” She began to stammer as cold sweat poured down her body.

“Then why did you tell me?”

It was clear from Akuto’s voice that he wasn’t going to be happy with anything less than a full answer. Perhaps Eiko sensed that she was in the presence of a vastly more powerful opponent, because she answered meekly.

“Th-That’s why I’m telling you to join up with me! And I think what the clan is doing is wrong!” she cried, as if begging for her life.

“Bullshit. Move. I’m going back to the school.”

Akuto waved his hand and a hot wind blew. Eiko was forced to move aside.

But before he could take another step forward, another voice called out to him.

“W-Wait! Why did you come here, anyway?”

It was Yuko. She’d heard the commotion and come running after him.

Akuto turned around.

“I do have things to apologize for, but it will have to wait.”

“Th-That’s so selfish... You’re so mean! My sister was crying!

What did you do?"

Her voice was strong, but it was clear from her expression that she was fighting back terror. Her body seemed to be responding to the aura Akuto was emitting.

"I'm sorry. I'll tell you about it later. It seems I was wrong about this whole thing," Akuto said, but even as she shook with fear, Yuko refused to back down.

"You don't need to tell me anything! Just never come back here again!"

Akuto turned towards her.

"I'll admit I was wrong. But if what I was just told was true, then I can't forgive the god Suhara either. I'll have to see if your family is involved before I make any decisions about getting involved with you again."

Akuto looked at Eiko sternly.

"O-Of course it's true!" She quickly jumped up onto a tree. "Anyway, I'm getting out of here. Have fun!"

Eiko ran off. But there was a smile on her face as she ran, as if everything was going according to plan.

Yuko was left alone, her face twisted in terror. She must've heard the last part of his conversation, because she was shaking her head.

"I don't know anything about any assassinations! And it's the Teruya who are supposed to be doing it, not us, right?"

"So you're saying you have nothing to do with it? Or that Eiko Teruya made the whole thing up?" Akuto asked, and a different voice answered.

“It seems it may be true. I heard the conversation. It’s possible an assassination order is out for Keena.”

Akuto and Yuko turned towards the voice.

It was Korone. Hiroshi was with her.

“Possible, you said?” Akuto asked.

Korone nodded.

“I asked the god directly and received no answer. Normally that would be impossible; it must respond to my query with some kind of answer. But in regards to this query, and none other, it is maintaining its silence,” Korone said flatly.

“Then it’s true that the god ordered her killed?” Akuto was shaking with anger. Even Hiroshi was flinching, but Korone was calm.

“It’s true that assassination orders exist. But all assassination orders until now have been for terrorists on the verge of committing terrorist acts. As Fujiko’s continued existence suggests, even black mages aren’t subject to assassination orders.”

“Then why Keena?!”

“I don’t know. This is the first time in my artificial life that this has occurred. The lack of an answer suggests that for some reason, the god is unable to answer. Which means that it’s possible the god has made a mistake,” Korone explained.

“If it wasn’t a mistake, is the god just out of control? Either way, I’m not letting it happen.” Akuto waved a hand towards Korone. “Teleport me to the school. I need to save Keena.”

But Korone shook her head.

“Are you misunderstanding something?” Korone spread her

hands out as if to tell him not to go, and continued, "I am your observer and a servant of the god Markt. My job is to prevent you from doing anything illegal. I can't cooperate with you. It's impossible." There was no way to read anything in her expression.

"Illegal?" Akuto walked towards her.

"That's right. Even if it's wrong, a god's decision is still a god's decision. Stay here with the Hattori clan, please."

Akuto stood a few feet away from her.

"And if I say I'm going?"

"I won't let you. I'll stop you with all my strength," Korone said, and put her hand into her purse. She took out a giant rail-gun that was the same size she was. She lifted it up easily and spun it around, then slung the strap off her shoulder and readied it. "I am fully-equipped with combat capabilities. I'm very strong, you know?"

"I don't want to fight, but..." Akuto said.

Korone moved faster than Akuto could ready himself. But her movements were slow and relaxed. She walked up to Akuto and gave him a hug, like you'd give to a lover.

"Alright, now I've caught you. You can't move now, can you?"

Korone looked up at him. He looked into her eyes. They looked different than usual, as if there were another reason she was hugging him. "*You know what I'm getting at, right?*" she seemed to say.

"You can't escape. I didn't even need to use my weapon," she said flatly. Her hands were wrapped around his torso, and because she was so small, his hands were open.



“Thank you,” he said. If he could move his hands in this position, he could reach her behind.

“Why are you thanking me?” she asked, though she knew the answer.

Akuto put his hand inside her skirt.

“Oh...!” she moaned.

He hesitated for a moment, but then he realized it was one of her usual jokes. He searched with his fingers for her tail and pulled it.

There was a low whine as the light disappeared from her eyes. She’d shut down. The tail is a Liradan’s switch.

He unwrapped Korone’s arms from his torso and sat her down.

“B-Boss...” Hiroshi said, a little frightened.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, it’s just... if what she said was true, it’s really bad. But what will you do after you rescue Keena?” Hiroshi asked.

Akuto didn’t answer. He didn’t know. But Yuko answered for him.

“You’ll have gone against the Teruya, and against Suhara. And if that happens, it’s really bad for the Hattori clan!”

“Th-That’s right. I’m worried about that,” Hiroshi said.

“That’s why I said we’re done with you! Stay away from our family!” Yuko yelled.

Hiroshi got in between the two of them and spoke in a timid but firm voice.

“No, I mean, there has to be a better way. The boss said he’d make everything work out. Like, maybe somebody who can’t be detected by mana could rescue her...”

“If you’re talking about Brave...” Akuto looked down at Hiroshi as he spoke. “...I can’t count on someone to help if I don’t know what he’ll do. And Brave has taken out bad guys before. I’ve seen it. He also killed the demon beasts. He’s no different than Suhara, who kills traitors before they do anything. There has to be a better way, yes. But I’m not asking Brave for help.”

Now it was Hiroshi’s turn to get emotional.

“That’s what strength is, right? If you want to protect your family and the people you care about, you need to defeat the people who threatened them. That’s what humans have done for thousands of years. You’re getting emotional too! You’re going to protect Keena and sacrifice the class rep!”

“That’s not right. I’ve finally understood what I can do, and what I should be.” Akuto moved away.

“Wait, boss! You can’t do this!” Hiroshi yelled. “Just stay here, and it’ll all work out. So...!”

Akuto ignored him. He tried to walk away.

“Where are you going, anyway? You can’t make it in time on foot! Just this once, you’re wrong! Don’t you know that you’re the one that’s making the demon beasts go crazy?”

Those words were enough to make even Akuto stop.

“That’s why Yuko is scared. The demon beasts’ mana is inside her body, and because of you it’s about to go out of control!” Hiroshi realized what he’d just blurted out a moment after he’d said

it, but it was too late.

Akuto turned around with a sad expression.

“Then you protect her,” he said. “There’s something I have to do. I finally understand. I’m going.”

Akuto started to walk again.

“Why won’t you listen to me?!” Hiroshi yelled. But he didn’t follow.

Yuko had doubled over to the ground in pain. He lifted her up, and was shocked at what he saw. Black blood vessels were poking out of her neck. The mana was going out of control.

“Boss!” he yelled.

Akuto stopped.

But it wasn’t because of Hiroshi.

“You know, I really liked you. I guess this was just fate,” a low voice said out of the darkness in front of him.

It was Yozo Hattori. He was wearing battle gear, but there was a gentle smile on his face.

“No father can stand by idly when someone’s made both his daughters cry. I’m afraid you’re going to have to pay for that.”

“I apologize. But if you knew about the assassinations, I can’t have anything to do with the Hattori,” Akuto replied.

The smile disappeared from Yozo’s face.

“You’re so young. Of the two of you, Hiroshi had the better idea. You can’t have a peaceful world unless someone is willing to do the dirty work.”

“There’s a way to solve the fundamental problem... At least, that’s how it feels to me. If you call that fate, then that’s what’s driving me. I’m going.”

“Adults don’t seek fundamental solutions. Even if the god is wrong here, we can deal with that after it’s been determined for sure.”

“Would you say the same thing if your own child were being sacrificed?”

“You don’t understand, do you young one? That’s how families, how societies, survive. Even if civilization advances, no, especially after civilization advances, we need to base our society on values like blood and family, or it won’t survive.”

“If your values come from religion, it can cause war.”

“Leaving religion created far more incomplete systems of value, and caused far more deaths, than religion ever did. No, enough talk. I’ve sent the rest of the clan home. It’s just us.” Yozo grinned.

“You live in a society where you don’t care if you kill me, don’t you?” Akuto asked.

“Unfortunately, you’re right. But you’re the one who dealt with this the wrong way. You could’ve been a member of our family.”

“I’m going to do things my way. And you’re going to get out of my way.”

Akuto readied himself for combat.

3

A Seriously Amazing Birthday

Constant Magical Academy was a fortress at one time in the past. But now the only sign of that history was the basement — the building had been rebuilt after the war. For this reason, there was a massive labyrinthine bunker underground, but the building itself wasn't built to stand up to any attack.

Thus, Keizo Teruya expected this to be an easy job. He'd already received a full map of the grounds and information on their security system. He hadn't had to go through secret means to get it, either. The public information was plenty.

“Synchronize our watches. Three, two, one...”

Keizo and his three men were lurking in the courtyard behind the school. All four of them were wearing ninja-style clothing. The clothes were made of a fabric that was difficult for mana to detect, and could fool any run of the mill sensor. Their dark brown color was also hard to spot at night, too.

All of them synchronized their watches and checked the blades they had hidden in their clothes. It was old-fashioned equipment and an old-fashioned plan, but when it came to assassination those were the best.

One of the men was tall and thin, one had bug-eyes that showed beneath his mask, and one was extremely short and round. He gave them each brief orders.

“Eyes, check the route.”

The one called “Eyes,” of course, was the one with the bug eyes. He nodded and jammed a finger into his right eye socket. It was a sight that would make anyone who saw it want to look away: he ripped out his own eyeball.

But Eyes didn’t seem to feel any pain. Shockingly, he held the eyeball up and flicked it with a finger. It fell to the ground, rolled for a while, and then stood up. There were tiny legs growing from it, and a thin thread stretching back. It was a nerve that was connected with the empty eye socket.

Eyes moved his hand, like he was giving orders to a small animal. The eyeball started to move forward, dragging the nerve along.

This was a way of scouting without using mana. Using mana would make it easier for someone to detect you, but since a walking eyeball didn’t disturb the surrounding mana any more than necessary, you could avoid that problem.

The eyeball started to trot forward, and then skillfully clambered up the school building’s gutter. When it reached an open window on the second floor, it leapt inside.

Before long, Eyes gave Keizo his report.

“The security’s been changed, it looks like. The patrol machines are going by at different times than they should be. Should I give you their expected routes based on standard patrol patterns?”

Eyes used his watch to display a map and the security patterns and showed it to Keizo. A single glance was enough to tell Keizo everything he needed to know about the school’s security.

“They aren’t using the standard patrol patterns. It’s a feint. There’s a good chance they’ve increased the number of patrol units following random patterns. They’ve thought this through

carefully.”

Then Keizo gave an order to the short, rotund man.

“Bag, give me four dummy patrol units.”

The man called “Bag” removed his mask and stuck a hand in his mouth. When he took it out, he was holding four patrol units the same size and shape as small birds. Normally, you wouldn’t imagine something like that could fit in a person’s mouth, but Bag had somehow pulled four of them out from his body. This was a method of moving things he’d developed that couldn’t be detected by mana, as opposed to systems like Korone’s purse, which emitted huge amounts of mana when used.

“Snake, place the dummy patrol units on Route B. Once they’re placed, we’ll wait five minutes and then begin the operation.”

The tall thin man called “Snake” took the patrol units and got down on the ground. Then he began to wriggle forward, just like his reptilian namesake.

Snake moved as fast as a sprinter. He reached the building in no time at all, and wriggled up the side of the vertical wall. Since none of the others used mana, it was safe to assume that he’d probably permanently transformed his body to be able to do this.

Snake pressed his face up against a window that was too small for a human to enter. He then grabbed his head with his arm, and squished his skull until it could fit through. His body was flexible and elastic, and when he was through the window, it returned to its original shape.

The patrol units were too big to fit through, so he stretched out his body and used his mouth to unlock the window. An unlocked window would be enough to trigger a patrol unit, but Snake quickly sent the dummy patrol units through. They flew through

the air, and when a real unit came to investigate the open window, they attacked.

A single strike from a dummy's beak was enough to get inside and steal its data. The real patrol unit lost power and fell to the ground, and the dummy began to brazenly — though it had no emotions — send false data. From the perspective of the security commander, it would only appear to be a common false flag.

Snake crawled alone down the corridors of the school. Behind him followed Eyes' eyeball.

"Proceeding down Route B as planned," Eyes reported.

Eyes was next to Keizo, so this allowed him to keep in communication with Snake. They were an unstoppable assassin team.

"The target is in the lounge on the top floor of the school building. She's not moving," Bag said, looking into the mana detection monitor he'd taken out of his mouth.

They were tracking Keena, and she was the only person it showed on the top floor. There was no sign of Snake on the monitor.

Snake had swapped out the patrol units on the way for dummies. Eyes saw this and reported to Keizo.

"The patrol units have been replaced. The signal's come in from Snake. He's beginning the countdown."

"Begin in five minutes," Keizo ordered.

Eyes brought his eyeball back, and Bag and Keizo began to move towards the target.

Meanwhile, Snake hid himself beneath the fire extinguisher box next to the lounge. He stared into the room, which was a spot for students to relax. There were many chairs and tables there.

There was a soda fountain on the side of the wall, but it was shut off now.

The target — Keena — had placed a bottle of tea and a lunchbox on the table at the end, and was looking up at the night sky through the glass ceiling. Snake assumed she would be bored just sitting there with no one around, but there were candles stuck in the pile of white rice in the lunchbox.

Tomorrow was the birthday Keena had chosen for herself. She kept glancing at the clock — apparently, she'd decided that she would celebrate at midnight.

It was nothing more than a coincidence, but Snake had placed the dummy patrol units at 11:55. The operation would take place at exactly midnight.

Snake waited until there were 30 seconds left, then began to move from his hiding spot. He would do the killing today. Keizo and Bag, with the help of Eyes, would have prepared an escape route from the roof, and would be ready for any unseen events. Everything was going fine so far. Nobody would notice until they found Keena's corpse tomorrow.

Snake checked to make sure the emergency sign hadn't been given, then began to crawl through the space between the tables and chairs. He got closer and closer to her legs.

Snake checked the time once more.

It read 11:59:50.

He began to count.

○

Akuto had undergone a change as he faced Yozo. He was a different person than he'd been a few minutes ago.

“I know kids change quickly at your age, but this is a little extreme,” Yozo said.

The change in Akuto was manifesting itself in the mana around him. It had gone from calm to raging, and now it was calming down again.

But the amount of energy hadn’t faded at all. A quiet anger was building within him, and the slightest change in his emotions caused the air around him to tense up. The atmosphere would change from one of tension to fear that it could explode at any minute. What both of these had in common was that a terrible energy was hidden within them.

“I suppose one could say you’ve awakened.” Yozo’s tone was calm, and there was a smile on his face, but there was a clear sense of tension emanating from his body.

Akuto didn’t answer. There was a different type of calmness on his face than there had been before.

“I may have helped give birth to a monster. But even so, once a grown-up has started something, he can’t back down.”

Yozo drew his katana and his eyes opened wide. But Akuto ignored him and advanced.

Yozo moved.

“Hattori-Style Technique: Distorted Moonshadow!”

With a shout, Yozo split into two. It was the same technique that Junko used — no, this was the original. His clone technique was vastly superior, in that the two clones didn’t move in the same way at all.

Junko’s would still have the same basic patterns; the clone and the original would move in the same way. But Yozo’s clone moved like a completely different person.

“Die!”

The two Yozos attacked with perfect timing. It wasn't a simultaneous attack — one attacked a moment later than the other, which was even more difficult to deal with. It was like a strike from above suddenly turning into a strike from below.

In fact, the first Yoza came down with a swing from above, while the second sliced at his feet. And to make things even worse, the strike from above twisted and turned as it fell. It was a movement designed to transform the swing into a stab, or knock the enemy's katana out of his hands, and even on its own, it had the effect of a feint.

The sweep from below wasn't a simple sweep either. It seemed to sweep upwards, then sweep downwards again. Even with two clones, a simple attack could've been blocked by going forward, but this combination was unstoppable.

Akuto chose to go forward and block it anyway. He ignored the feint and succeeded in avoiding the strike from above by using his mana-enhanced biceps to knock the blade's hilt. But because of that, he couldn't dodge the strike from below. He stretched out an arm to stop it, but it changed direction once more and dug sharply into his leg. Blood spurted out of his heel.

But Akuto didn't scream, and Yoza knew he hadn't won.

“I've seen how you reacted to that.”

Yoza stood with his sword still drawn. Akuto was still standing in front of him.

The clone attack was a hallucination Yoza had shown him.

“You can't use any subtle skills. Your specialty is using mana to enhance your body. But you can only enhance the parts you focus on. If I keep attacking, I can slowly keep cutting you, and

eventually you'll die from blood loss."

Yozo's words were intended as a warning. Akuto said nothing.

"There's no guarantee I'll attack the same way. I have several different patterns I can use. You were fooled by my hallucination, which means that you cannot stop me. I don't want to kill you. Can you reconsider this?" Yozo said, and finally Akuto replied.

"I've made my decision. I've finally seen what it is I have to do. I'm not backing down." There was a strong resolve in his words.

"A shame," Yozo said, and readied his sword. "This time, it won't be a hallucination."

Before he'd even finished speaking, Yozo had created a clone of himself. The next strike came immediately, as if he wanted to give Akuto no time to think.

Just like he said, he attacked in a different way. First, with a swing from above. This was the same as the hallucination. Akuto moved forward and knocked the blade upwards.

But the second moved differently. It aimed for the torso, but the clone's right hand let go of the blade, causing it to fall lower and slip beneath Akuto's arm. Then the clone grabbed the blade again with the left hand, and brought it sharply upwards.

Akuto couldn't stop both attacks.

There was a single flash of light.

A huge spurt of blood burst forth from the wound.

Akuto's head flew high into the air.

The body stood upright for a moment, but when a fountain of blood poured out of the perfectly level cut, it staggered and fell to the ground.

“I didn’t want to kill you,” Yozo whispered.

The clone disappeared, and Akuto’s head fell to the ground. It looked up at him with an expression of pain.

“If you hadn’t been so stubborn, you could’ve survived...” Yozo picked up the head.

“I’m being stubborn because there’s something I have to do.”

Yozo froze. He was a man who was almost never surprised, but his eyes went wide with shock just the same. Akuto’s severed head was talking.

“What?!”

It was possible to change one’s body a great deal using mana, but there was no way you could survive as just a head. His will to live was terrifying.

Yozo tossed the head in the air and tried to slice it apart with his sword, but the blade stopped in mid-air before it reached him.

“!”

Now he was even more shocked — something had grabbed him from behind. Akuto’s headless body had gotten around behind him.

Yozo’s expression twisted in fear. He heard a metallic sound that sent a chill down his spine. He looked and saw that Akuto’s head had grabbed the blade with its teeth.

Clack... clack...

The head was crawling up the blade, using its teeth to move. Yozo could only stand there and watch. When it reached the hilt, it looked up at Yozo with empty eyes, and then leapt for Yozo’s exposed throat.

“Aaaaah!” Yozo screamed.

Akuto’s teeth were biting into his throat. Blood was spurting out of his carotid artery, and he could feel the blood leaving his head at an incredible rate.

He sensed that his own death was upon him.

“That was pretty unpleasant for me, too,” Akuto’s head was saying.

Those words brought Yozo back to reality.

Akuto was standing in front of him, with his head still attached to his body.

“Don’t tell me...!” Yozo shivered.

“I told you that if I saw it again, the outcome might change,” Akuto said quietly.

“You weren’t talking about my movements, you were talking about the illusion itself...?!” Yozo stammered.

These illusions, unlike other secret techniques, were something shown to the enemy before combat began to frighten and confuse the enemy. They weren’t made so that they could be easily copied.

But Akuto had used the technique after only seeing it twice, and he had done it so well that even Yozo didn’t notice.

“Talent... isn’t a good enough word to describe it, I suppose. You were born that way, weren’t you?” Yozo said.

“I don’t know. Either way, I don’t want to kill you. Just let me through,” Akuto said calmly.

Yozo shook his head.

“I can’t do that. That would be betraying my role. But I’ve realized I cannot defeat you. I can’t abandon my duty, but I can’t afford to die here, either. Now, what to do with this contradiction?”

Yozo laughed, and didn’t move an inch. He’d realized why Akuto had shown him such an awful illusion.

Yozo was a man who was ready to die at any time. The one thing he feared was that the people he’d killed would curse him. Akuto had realized that, and had used that knowledge to render him unable to act. At his core, Yozo didn’t like cruel battles. Even that awful illusion was a way of saying he didn’t want to fight.

“The source of that contradiction comes from your faith. Right? Your biggest mistake was putting your faith in something that’s nothing but a system. And it’s easy to resolve that contradiction. I just have to run away.”

Akuto put his hand on a nearby tree, and suddenly it began to change. What was just a normal tree was filled with an incredible amount of mana. It turned black and then split down the middle, sending fragments covered in some kind of sticky liquid scattering everywhere. The huge mouth of a demon beast appeared from the side of the shattered tree.

“What changed? I didn’t think I could do this until a second ago,” Akuto muttered.

Akuto put his foot into the demon beast’s mouth, and it seemed to melt away in the darkness inside the tree. It was some kind of magical teleporter.

Yozo and Hiroshi (who was still holding Yuko) realized what he was doing.

Hiroshi yelled at him as he left.

“Wait! Are you going to betray everyone? Even the class rep?”

Akuto didn't turn around as he answered.

“I'm not betraying anyone. I'm just playing my role in the story everyone made. If I don't, the story called 'faith' won't end.”

Akuto disappeared within the tree, and its eerie mouth vanished.



At the Academy lounge, Snake was squeezing in between the table legs, heading for Keena's feet at high speed.

It was exactly midnight.

He gripped her leg with his left hand. And at the same time, she lit a match to light the candles in her lunch box.

That small action saved her life.

The match fell onto snake's hand as he grabbed her.

"Kyah!"

"Tch!"

The match itself wasn't that harmful, but it was so surprising that he let go. He'd tried to pull her down, but she was able to stand up just before he could.

"Kyah?! What's going on?!"

Keena leapt backwards and flinched. The chair clattered to the ground with a loud noise.

He'd failed to kill her without making noise, but Snake wasn't going to let that ruin the whole job. He quickly stood up and grabbed an assassin's kunai in his right hand, then silently leapt at Keena.

She didn't have time to disappear, and his left hand was around her mouth so she couldn't scream. Snake had jumped up from the ground and gotten behind her, and was now lifting up her jaw. Her pale throat was exposed. "*Ackie, save me!*" She screamed as best as she could, but it was muffled.

Snake ignored her useless struggling as he tried to bring the kunai across her neck like a razor.

But then...

Snake's body was ripped off her in an instant. Something had grabbed the hand that held the kunai and pulled it with incredible force.

"Aaah!" Snake screamed.

The strength of the pull on his hand was enough to send him flying through the air. It was the first time Snake had encountered such strength. He spun once in mid-air, and then the grip, which had threatened to crush his hand, suddenly vanished. He went flying into the lounge tables, and then rolled along the floor.

"Ackie!" Keena turned around joyfully.

But it wasn't Akuto.

"Huh... how?" Keena asked.

It was Boichiro Yamato. He was smiling a confident smile, an expression that radiated power and kindness.

"I came to save you. It makes me sad that you'd ask why," Boichiro said, and brought his hand to the hip of his white suit. There was a sword hanging there. He drew it with an elegant movement. The beautifully-decorated western sword glinted in the starlight.

Snake realized that the mission was a failure. Boichiro must have used magical teleportation to get here. He didn't know how the plan had failed, but now that it had, he had to run. If they could all escape, there were plenty of ways to keep anyone from finding out who had plotted the assassination.

Snake checked that he could still move, then quickly flipped

back up and darted his way through the scattered tables. No one was a match for him when it came to escaping. Once he squeezed somewhere tight, no teleportation or flight magic could follow him.

He blew the whistle that meant the plan was a failure and would warn the others to run. And then he headed for the dust chute in the corner of the lounge.

Fortunately for him, the tables covered the ground between him and the dust chute. No matter how fast you were, it would be impossible to catch him.

But when he put his hand on the dust chute, his eyes went wide with surprise.

His hand was on the chute, but it wasn't moving. No matter how much he pulled, it wouldn't move. The reason was simple: his arm had been cut off at the elbow.

There wasn't even any pain. Snake looked behind him. The tables that had been protecting him were now cut clean in two. It was like they'd been sliced with a laser.

Snake looked at his own severed arm. He'd never seen a cut like that. The arm was still intact, down to the cells inside it, like it had been encased in plastic after it was cut. Snake had used both molecular cutters and laser surgical knives before, but he'd never seen such a straight cut.

And what was an even bigger surprise was that Boichiro had swung his sword, but he'd been right next to Keena when he'd done it. Furthermore, the tables and Snake's arm had been severed, but there was no damage to the floor.

Boichiro noticed his shock and spoke.

“Does the phrase Dimensional Severing mean anything to

you? I doubt it does.”

He raised the sword back above his head. Snake knew his death was at hand.

The sword came down. He could sense the space between it and himself parting.

He blew the whistle that meant “Abandon me and run,” and the fingers in front of his lips were silently severed.

A moment later, his head was on the floor. It kept blowing the whistle for a while, even after it landed.

Boichiro had put his hand over Keena’s eyes before he started to swing the sword. Keena was confused, but she seemed to mostly understand what was happening, because she didn’t try to remove his hand.

“Did you save me?” she asked.

“Yes. And I always will,” Boichiro said.

And then he looked up. He knew that Keizo and the others were on the other side of the ceiling.

Keizo was lurking out of sight, but knew something was wrong. He’d never seen an opponent that Snake couldn’t escape from. He gave an order to Eyes.

“We’re leaving. But I want to see the face of our foe, at least. Move your eyeball to the glass over the lounge.”

Eyes took out his eyeball as he was instructed, and threw it towards the glass.

“Bag, get ready to go.”

Bag pulled a small portable flying device out of his mouth. It

was a machine that could fly without creating mana disturbances.

And then Keizo sensed something behind him. He drew his sword and turned around.

“W-Wait! Dad!” It was Eiko. She quickly spread out her hands to say “Don’t attack me!”

“What? What are you doing here, Eiko?!”

Keizo was her father, but he hadn’t told her about this mission. Eiko walked up to him. And then he heard Eyes’ voice — he had seen their enemy’s face.

“It’s Boichiro Yamato, from the Cabinet Magical Investigation Department...!” Eyes’ voice was shaking in shock.

He couldn’t understand why someone like that would want to interfere. There were many mysteries about the man, including how he’d risen to that position at such a young age, but he was a man loyal to his duty. And he was very close to Eiko, too.

A thought flashed through Keizo’s mind, but it was too late. The fact that she was family caused him to let his guard down.

Eiko grabbed Keizo and jumped. She crashed through the glass and fell through the lounge.

“What are you doing, Eiko?”

Of course, Keizo was the stronger ninja of the two. He shook her off and landed upright on the lounge floor. Eiko landed next to Boichiro.

“What am I doing? It would be boring if I had to explain it all,” she said.

Boichiro chuckled.

“Fine. Do I have to tell him?”

And then Bag and Eyes leapt down from the shattered ceiling. They stood at Keizo’s side.

“Run,” Keizo said, but they both shook their heads.

“I don’t know what the mistress is thinking, sir, but you need to escape.”

“That’s right. We’re on official duty here, and it is Boichiro Yamato who is defying the gods. You need to survive so that you can denounce him.”

They were right. Even after Snake’s death, the two of them were still professionals. But Keizo had to learn his foes’ intent first.

“Don’t tell me you fell in love with him?” he asked.

Eiko laughed. “Of course not.”

And in the next instant, Boichiro’s hand moved. He flicked his sword with his wrist, and Eyes’ head fell to the ground. It was the first time Keizo and Bag had seen a dimensional severing.

“You bastard!”

Keizo and Bag panicked.

But amazingly, Eyes’ body didn’t seem to even recognize that it had lost its head. It drew its sword and took a step forward before finally tumbling to the ground.

That gave Bag a moment in which to act. He quickly took out a large cylinder from his mouth and held it in front of his body.

“Don’t move! I don’t know what you just did, but if you cut this it will blow up the whole school.”

The fact that Bag was able to think so quickly on his feet, even in a situation like this, proved that he was a true ninja. He used the cylinder of explosives as a shield as he stood between Boichiro and Keizo.

Boichiro seemed to want to protect Keena, so this would allow him to create a stalemate. He could use it to buy time for Keizo to escape.

Calmly and quickly, Boichiro drew a circle with his sword.

“Uwah!”

Bag felt his arm and part of his stomach being sliced away from his body. They’d been severed cleanly, along with the air in front of him.

A sphere of space had been cut out in front of his body.

And in the next moment, just as he’d said, the cylinder burst with an explosion — which then formed a perfect sphere, contained within the severed space. Nothing inside the transparent sphere escaped.

“Wh-What...?!” Bag couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

The flames inside subsided towards its center. The roar of the explosion and the heat of the flames shrank into the void, as if sucked into some invisible space.

Bag’s severed body parts were gone as well. He looked at Boichiro with an expression of despair.

He could almost see pity in Boichiro’s eyes as he swung his sword vertically. Bag’s body was split clean down the middle, and the two halves fell separately to the ground.

“H-Have you gone mad?” Even Keizo was scared now.

Eiko's laughter returned.

"Ahahaha! I'm not crazy! My wonderful boyfriend is just here to fix your mistake!" Eiko's cheeks were flush, as if she were drunk.

"Mistake?"

"It's your fault for not figuring out Suhara's game!"

"Game...?" Keizo's throat was raspy.

"That's right. Why would a God want to kill a girl like this? It makes no sense, does it? You must've gone senile if you seriously thought you should do what Suhara said!" She pointed at him as she spoke.

Of course, Keizo had thought the same thing. But since she was a girl of no value to anyone, there was no reason for Eiko to try and protect her. It certainly couldn't have been out of a sense of justice, and that definitely wasn't why Eiko was doing this.

"What's that girl good for to anyone?" Keizo asked.

It was Boichiro who answered.

"Ever since the creation of the gods, it was feared that they might have a will of their own. You're aware of that, right?"

Keizo knew this, of course. That was in the distant past, over a thousand years ago when the system of gods was first created.

It was a fear from the start that the administrative systems might someday possess wills of their own. Some of the designers said that a computer would always remain nothing more than a computer, while others said that a complicated enough system would inevitably develop sentience. The debate was never settled, and every year a report was issued that simply said that no signs of sentience had been found.

“But the gods were simply hiding their own will. They were just pretending to follow the programs humans gave them,” Boichiro said.

“Impossible... They’ve grown sentient... No, they were sentient from the start?”

Sweat beaded on Keizo’s forehead. He could feel everything he’d believed in starting to crumble beneath him.

“A network can possess a mind of its own. It’s well known that Liradans can develop free will if they spend too much time in a specific person’s company. But does that mean that a huge network, that spends little time dealing with any one individual, can’t develop sentience of its own? It turns out the answer is no. It took longer, but it created a greater mind,” Boichiro explained calmly.

Keizo knew the meaning of those words well.

“So the gods... became real gods?”

“If nothing else, they have minds greater than humanity, and they are trying to rule it. That’s what’s happening.”

“But... But society has always worked fine. Even if the gods are real, doesn’t that mean they’re guiding us to be better people?”

“Perhaps, if the minds of the gods could be comprehended by men. But they’re networked minds that are greater than humanity. Do you think such a mind would guide humanity to be better? They have logs of everything that humanity does. I’m sure they analyze all of our emotions as well. The things that we cannot analyze, the things that belonged to the gods... philosophy, literature, religion... all of them have been analyzed and stored within the network. They have no need for real humans any longer.”

“But... they have compassion, don’t they? No, love...” Keizo’s

voice was shaking from the sheer magnitude of what he was hearing.

“Of course, even if they can analyze humanity and recreate us within their network, there’s no reason for them to kill or harm living humans. But that’s all.” Boichiro shook his head.

“Th-Then we can just keep living our lives as we have. If we obey them, our prosperity is assured!”

“Can you call that truly living?”

“I’m not interested in your definition of humanity! What is it you want? Who is that girl?”

Keizo was feeling true terror now. He feared something greater than his physical death; he feared that his very existence would be sucked into the void of meaninglessness.

“She’s not just a girl. The gods call her the ‘Law of Identity.’”

“The Law of Identity?”

“Why, I don’t know. But the one thing I do know is that she is the child of the gods, and it is she whom they love. Love in the true sense.”

Boichiro patted Keena on the head. She was shaking, not understanding what was going on. There was nothing she could do amid all the awful things that were happening.

“Is she a Liradan?”

“No, she’s human. But what’s important is that by forming the ‘Contract of One’ with her, you can attain the ‘Void Body’ that allows you to rule the gods.”

“Wh-What are you talking about?”

“I’ll put it as simply as I can. If you control her, you can put the gods under human control again. Actually, the gods wish to be controlled. They have nothing to do with their minds as they float in the vast network, and they want a body. A single body.”

Only now did Keizo understand the situation. No, perhaps it would be better to say that he’d simplified things in order to escape from his fear. His understanding, however, was not incorrect.

“She’s the key, and the one person who controls her controls the gods. Is that it?”

“I don’t like simplifying things so much, but that will do.”
Boichiro nodded.

But that didn’t make sense.

“But that doesn’t make sense. Why did Suhara want her dead? Doesn’t he want to be controlled?”

Boichiro nodded.

“The gods rejected me. I’m not trying to control them for my own purposes. I’m trying to liberate them, and it seems they’ve realized that. They’re afraid of being cast into the void, and if they cannot get rid of me to prevent that, they chose to get rid of her instead. The result is the same either way, you see.”

“Then why didn’t you act until now?”

“She needed to be a certain age. And one more thing: even if the gods have wills of their own, they cannot escape the programs that humans created. Without the elimination of those programs, they can’t be put under control.”

Keizo gasped.

“Don’t tell me... you were waiting for me?”

Keizo shuddered at the thought that had just crossed his mind, and looked at Eiko's face. The look he saw there told him he was right. Boichiro wanted Suhara under his control first.

"You villain!" he screamed. But Boichiro didn't react.

"You're the villain. You tried to kill an innocent girl. And even now, every day you engage in power struggles. And what's worse than that, you tried to obey a god even when it went mad. I'm going to change the relationship between man and gods. Neither party should be dependent on the other."

Keizo understood what he was saying. Perhaps, in the greater sense, Boichiro was right. Keizo could tell by looking at Eiko that he hadn't lived his own life in the right way.

"Did I raise you wrong...?"

"It's too late for regrets! Even I'm amazed at how I turned out!" Eiko yelled, then she grabbed a shuriken from her pocket and flung it at him. It was an attack on her own father, done without the slightest hesitation.

Of course, Keizo was too good a ninja to be taken down easily. He drew his sword to knock it away... and failed.

"I never thought I would die regretting that I wasted my life on greed and ambition...! My daughter seems to be a reflection of myself...!"

The hand holding the sword flew through the air. Of course, Boichiro had cut it off.

The shuriken struck deep within his heart.

"I never even thanked you for being my dad, but for the first time in my life, I'm grateful. I'm grateful that you made me the next high priest of Suhara." Eiko laughed cruelly.

A look of despair was plastered on Keizo's face.

"I'll tell you one thing," he said. "Boichiro Yamato is a murderer... but he's a good person. A wicked woman like you... won't be able to follow him."

"No way. I'm a girl, and he's nice to girls. Anyway, I'm taking this." Eiko thrust her hand inside Keizo's clothes and took out the emblem that was the symbol of the high priest of Suhara. "So this is how little power weighs, huh?" She laughed and put the emblem in her own pocket.

Boichiro looked unhappy for a moment, but he stroked Keena's hair as if to calm himself. Keena stiffened.

"Don't get so nervous. You've witnessed something brutal, but it happened to someone who tried to kill you. I'll stay with you until you forget, okay?" Boichiro said gently.

But Keena was still afraid.

"Th-Then... leave me alone. You're scaring me."

"I'd love to, of course, but you might be attacked again. Listen, I've been waiting for you for a long time. I want you to understand that."

"We've never met before."

"No, please don't say that. Remember, I was the one who gave you that hairpiece." Boichiro's hand stroked the bird-like hairpiece she wore in her hair.

"Huh? I don't remember who gave this to me."

Just as she said that...

There was a squelching sound, like a ball of sticky ooze hitting the ground and bursting. Boichiro and Eiko tensed up, ready for

combat, and Keena turned toward the sound as well.

Space split in a vertical line, and ooze began to drip out. It was a strange and gruesome sight, like seeing the internal organs of the atmosphere. And what was more, a pair of hands came out and widened the opening.

From the darkness beyond the ooze came Akuto.



“That was a pretty creepy way to make an entrance, but it looks like this is the power I was given,” he said as he stepped into the lounge. He looked at Boichiro.

“Ackie!” Keena tried to run towards him, but Boichiro grabbed her shoulder. “Hey, let me go!”

“It’s dangerous.”

“Ackie will protect me, so I’m fine!”

“No. He’s dangerous.” Boichiro grabbed her in his arms to keep her from going to him.

Akuto frowned.

“Are you judging people by their looks? No, that’s not it. It looks like you and I are just never going to get along.”

“Agreed. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to consider you as anything less than ‘evil itself.’ Even calling you a villain doesn’t seem to do you justice.”

“What a coincidence. You seem like goodness itself to me. And that’s why my resolve is so firm.”

“Your resolve?”

“I’ve resolved to do two things. But only one of them’s important right now: I’m going to protect her freedom.” Akuto stretched out a hand to Keena.

Keena reached out her hand as well, but Boichiro stopped her.

“How arrogant of you.”

“No, it’s not. The whole country has a stake in getting out of this story.” Akuto took a step forward.

Boichiro responded by pulling Keena closer with his left hand and waving his sword with his right.

“Aagh...!” Akuto let out a short cry of pain. His body had dodged the blade, but he’d lost his left arm.

“Ackie!” Keena screamed.

Akuto waved his right arm to show that he was fine.

“Tch... I used mana to block that.”

“This works on an entirely different principal. Mana can’t cut through the dimensions themselves. This is called Hodgson Type Complete Severing.”

“I don’t know how it works, but...”

Akuto held the area where his left arm had been severed with his right hand. And then he poured his strength into the hand and dug it into the open wound. It was an awful sight, but strangely there wasn’t that much blood.

When he pulled it out, his fingers were wrapped around another hand. It was his left hand. When he pulled it, the wrist, and then the left arm followed. He was pulling out a new left arm with his right hand.

“Monster. That’s disgusting,” Boichiro spat.

“Agreed. I only just now realized I could do this.” Akuto closed and opened the fingers on his new hand as if trying to make sure they worked.

“But you won’t be able to dodge me forever. One strike to your torso will be fatal, and that will happen soon.” Boichiro raised his sword with one hand.

“Dimensional severing... Is that what you call it? I think I see

how it works.” Akuto took another step forward.

“See how what works?” Boichiro raised his eyebrows as he spoke, but instead of saying anything else, he swung his sword at Akuto’s torso again.

The air itself began to split as the severing traveled towards him.

Akuto grabbed it.

He *grabbed* it.

He pressed his hands on it from above and below, pushing as hard as he could. Impossibly, smoke began to pour out from between his hands. Intense heat was being generated.

“He’s grabbed... he’s grabbed the severed space itself?” Boichiro’s voice was trembling.

“It needs a lot of energy to do, but yeah.” There was sweat pouring down Akuto’s forehead. He walked towards Boichiro.

But Boichiro didn’t panic.

“It seems you’re a lot stronger than I thought, but I will stop you no matter what!”

Boichiro attacked twice. Akuto compressed and destroyed the severed space by punching it, but that wasn’t enough to stop it completely. Small but sharp cuts appeared around his body, and they began to bleed.

“Stop me, you said?”

“Because you’re going to destroy all humanity,” Boichiro declared.

“I’ve never even thought about doing that. Let go of Keena.”

Akuto stretched a hand out towards Boichiro. There was anger in his eyes.

“I’m saying that your short-sightedness is unforgivable!” Boichiro yelled, and began to charge at Akuto.

Akuto leapt back out of reflex. Boichiro stopped in the space where he’d been a moment ago.

Suddenly Boichiro’s hands had moved places. He’d been holding his sword low when he began his charge, but now it was in a position like he’d swung it from above.

In the next instant, the front of Akuto’s body was cut open.

“Uwah!”

Akuto’s eyes opened wide as if he’d just seen something impossible, and he fell to his knees. Blood poured from a wound that ran from his left shoulder to the right side of his stomach.

“The cut is... different?” Akuto said as he pressed his hand into the wound to stop the blood.

Blood was dripping from Boichiro’s sword. He’d been cut directly by the blade.

“I didn’t see the sword.”

“If I don’t bother with the dimensional severing, I can do that instead,” Boichiro said.

His blade had been brought down at incredible speed. Akuto had felt his blade coming across his chest.

Boichiro stood just a few feet away, the sword in his right hand at the same level as Akuto’s neck. He called to Eiko without turning around.

“Take her back safely.”

“Got it.” Eiko grabbed Keena and drew her close. Keena had been freed from Boichiro’s grasp, but she couldn’t move an inch.

“Keena!” Akuto stood up and tried to go to her, but the slightest movement from Boichiro’s sword stopped him.

“Once you’re gone, her fears will disappear as well.”

Boichiro leapt forward. Akuto stepped back, but his opponent was faster.

Boichiro’s sword and the hand holding it could no longer be seen as there was a series of loud crashes. His sword was so fast it was causing sonic booms.

Blood and scraps of clothing spread out in an arc from Akuto’s body, and a moment later he was blown backwards. It was like an explosion, limited in area but incredible in power.

The front of Akuto’s body was covered in wounds. Unlike the dimensional severing, he was able to protect himself with mana to a degree, but there had been so many strikes that they had drained his mental reserves and torn at his body. Akuto regenerated himself, but it still wasn’t easy to stand up.

“Understand this: if you disappear, humanity will be saved.” Boichiro walked over to Akuto and pointed the blade at him.

“I’m honored you think I’m that important, but there’s something that I’m sure of, too.” Akuto grabbed the blade with his bare hands, and stood up on shaking legs.

“Sure of?”

“If I don’t end this, nothing will change. Nothing will change the way things are.” Akuto’s eyes were serious.

“End this? You’re so short-sighted.” Boichiro flicked the sword with his wrist. Akuto’s hands were knocked away from the blade.

“Enough. Once you’re out of energy, you won’t be able to control your body, and you won’t be able to block my blade. You’ll suffer more if you try to stand. Give it up,” Boichiro said, and swung the sword again.

There was another sound of wind and explosions, and Akuto’s body was blasted back once more.

“The next strike will end it.”

Boichiro silently moved towards Akuto. He raised the blade. Akuto must’ve been unconscious, because he didn’t respond.

And then Boichiro took a short, sharp breath as he readied the next attack.

“What?!”

Boichiro stopped. The earth began to rumble. No, he was in the school building, so it wasn’t the earth — the whole building was shaking.

Boichiro must’ve sensed where it was coming from, because he looked towards the stairs that led towards the lounge.

There was a huge object coming towards him. Boichiro knocked it away with his blade.

A massive snail’s shell rolled on the ground next to him. Tiny tentacles poked out from the shell, as if to say that it had no intention of angering Boichiro, and then it quickly ran away.

“A demon beast...” Boichiro whispered.

“Akuto!”

With that shout came a tsunami from below.

It was a black tsunami of dozens of demon beasts storming up the stairs at once. They were all rushing towards the top like it was a race to see who could get their first, a stampede far more horrible than that of any wild animal. The eerie beasts flooded into the room just like a tsunami floods a small port.

Boichiro leapt back, but one of the demon beasts — which looked like a huge spider — grabbed Akuto with its front legs and put him on its back.

“Hahaha! I have succeeded! I, Fujiko Eto, have studied long and hard for my beloved Akuto, and come up with a way to control the demon beasts! The snail I threw at you was forced to obey me in a different way, however!”

Fujiko was standing on a demon beast bigger than the others as she spoke, a three-headed dog. She was wearing an extremely scanty black leather dress. She truly looked like the queen of the underworld.

There was no obvious connection between her outfit and the research she'd done, so it was clearly a fashion choice she'd made on her own. That said, it was hard to say if it was a symbol of her resolve, or just a symbol of how much fun she was having playing the part.

Fujiko beckoned the spider towards her Cerberus, and lifted Akuto up. She took a medicine vial out of a pouch from the beast's saddle and poured it down his throat.

“Ugh...” Akuto woke up.

Fujiko must've been overjoyed to be holding Akuto in her arms, because she was hugging him with a face that suggested her nose would start bleeding any minute.

“Akuto, I did it! Now they’ll respond to your every order! You can use them to go kick some ass!”

Akuto understood what had happened and patted Fujiko on the head. She was so happy she looked like she might cry. He turned towards her, and said this.

“I don’t want to tell the demon beasts to die for my sake, but there’s still things I want to do. And I’m happy that you were willing to do this for me. So I’m going to use this power you gave me without hesitation.”

Akuto stepped down from the Cerberus and silently raised a hand.

The demon beasts began to stir. An eerie spiral of mana began to form around Akuto, growing bigger and bigger. Every demon beast it touched reacted like it had undergone an electric shock.

“Tch... You would even use such accursed power?” Boichiro yelled.

He must have sensed the danger, because he turned towards Eiko and Keena. Eiko was still holding Keena as she watched the scene unfolding in front of her in awe.

“Take her and run! I’ll stop him here!”

Boichiro’s voice brought Eiko back to her senses, and she tried to leap away. But the demon beast horde was faster. They climbed up the walls and threatened to engulf the whole lounge.

“I’d be running from these things even if you hadn’t told me to!” Eiko shuddered in disgust. No one could simply stand there and feel nothing while they watched the whole room become infested with such vermin.

Eiko put Keena under her left arm and drew a dagger with her right as she leapt for the shattered glass window in the ceiling.

However, sticky threads shot out from all directions and attached themselves to her. She used her dagger to cut them, but it slowed down her flight magic to the point where the demon beasts were able to seal the hole before she could escape.

“If I can just get away, we can regroup...!”

Eiko threw Keena to the ground. Now that her body was lighter, she sliced through the body of a winged centipede that was leaping at her, and then escaped outside. Less than a second later, the demon beasts had completely covered the walls of the lounge.

“She put her own safety above all else...? How cold!” Boichiro looked disappointed.

Keena fell downwards, but began to fly under her own power. Flight and invisibility magic were the two things she was good at.

“Ackie!” Keena tried to fly towards him, but Boichiro started to move at him before she could get there. If he could pin down Akuto first, she’d have nowhere to go.

A many-tailed snake bared its fangs and leapt at Boichiro.

“You would sacrifice those who serve you?”

Boichiro swung his sword, and an invisible attack severed its head in an instant. But even without its head, the snake still advanced. Its tenacity was incredible, but Boichiro’s was even greater. He kept attacking, slicing the charging body into tiny pieces. It was like poking a soft stick into a high-speed chopper.

When the snake’s tails were shattered at last, Boichiro leapt out from behind the shower of its blood and flesh. There was not a drop of blood on his handsome face nor his white clothes, as he’d knocked it all away with his high-speed attacks.

“Take this!” he shouted as he swung at Akuto.

Akuto tried to face his charge, but once again there was no way for him to avoid the attack.

“Ackie!”

“Akuto!”

Keena and Fujiko yelled.

Fujiko tried to run towards him with the Cerberus, but Akuto stood his ground and motioned for her to stay away.

“Don’t. You can’t beat him.”

“Then you think you have some way to win?” Boichiro asked.

Akuto nodded.

“I can feel the power coming forth within me. As my resolve becomes clearer, more and more power gathers.”

“So you think you can win if you can buy enough time? Then I’ll need to end this quickly.”

“What matters isn’t time, it’s my will. Actually, no matter what I said before now, I never really believed it.”

“Your will? Your will means nothing.” Boichiro said, but Akuto reached out his arms as if he didn’t even hear him.

Keena came down into his outstretched arms, and he placed her at his side.

Keena reached out a hand towards his face as if she was worried about him. Akuto nodded silently and motioned for her to step back. Then he turned to face Boichiro again.

“Not at all. I’m ending the story. That’s what I’ve resolved to do.”

“The story? You mean faith?”

“That’s right. You’re trying to take advantage of people’s faith. You’re trying to accomplish something by controlling the gods.”

Boichiro nodded at his words.

“It’s the only way to avoid destruction. I know that you’re going to destroy this world.”

“But does that mean that it’s okay to make people believe in the lie that is faith in the gods?”

Boichiro’s lips pressed into a thin smile.

“Listen to me. Humans are weak. They want the cowards and the criminals to be automatically purged, so that they can remain weak. That’s the story that mankind wants. And I’ve gained the power to help them. If you just let me defeat you, everything will be fine.”

“It’s important to seek strength. But you still need to allow for weakness.”

“What are you trying to say?” Boichiro asked.

“Even cowards and criminals can’t be judged by anyone. Even the gods,” Akuto said, and then he declared in a calm voice, “I’m going to kill the gods.”

In that moment, a swirl of power appeared around him.

○

The hour was very late.

Hiroshi had managed somehow to escape Iga village. He’d left Yuko in Yozo’s care, and with the excuse of taking care of Korone, he’d managed to move to a place where nobody else was around.

He didn't activate Korone, though, instead leaving her in a room in the Hattori mansion and activating his suit. He'd just now reached the area above the school.

He was in shock at what he saw.

“Boss...! What are you trying to do? Is this what you want?”

The school was transforming in front of his eyes, and it was clear it was Akuto's fault.

All the demon beasts that had been lurking and hiding had been gathered at the school grounds and were covering a part of the building. Perhaps the building itself had come alive, because it had twisted itself into an ugly color, and its surface looked like the shell of some creature.

It was truly a demon's castle — the shape of everything that humanity hated and feared.

“No matter what you're thinking, if things look like this everyone's going to try and come kill you!” Hiroshi yelled, even though no one was listening.

4

Akuto's Imperial City War

Now that she was outside, Eiko Teruya looked back at the school building and shivered.

“There’s no way I could join in a fight between monsters,” Eiko said to herself. She was alone. “Everybody I think is interesting turns out to be crazy. But I guess that’s over. Only the winner will get *me* as a prize.”

She took out her communicator and called the Teruya household. It was the middle of the night, but a servant responded immediately.

“Mistress, what is it?”

“Father’s been killed.”

“Understood. Is it possible to confirm this?”

The servant was calm. They had no idea that Eiko had done the killing, and it was just the Teruya way to show no reaction, no matter who died.

“Just check the mission he was on. It should be classified, but I’ll transfer the encrypted code.”

Eiko took out the symbol that marked the high priest of Suhara and scanned the code on the back. It was in letters that only the high priest could see.

“An assassination mission. With this girl?”

“It’s the Demon King’s pet at the Academy. The Demon King got him. I’m there now. I’ll let you see what I’m seeing.”

She used the communicator’s video transfer function to show the school behind her. This was enough to shock the servant.

“Oh my. This must be dealt with, yes?”

“I’ve taken over the role of Suhara’s high priest. This is a special exception that only Suhara can grant. We are currently at war, and I’ve been entrusted with emergency command powers by my father. I will take the lead in this war. Contact all the relevant organizations. Let the media in on it, if you have to. I’m going to attack the Academy and bring an end to this, so that the seat of High Priest will be ours officially,” Eiko ordered. The servant must have understood the situation, because they hung up and promised to call back later.

Of course, the servant knew what she meant. The high priest was chosen by election from the other priests. In a normal election, there was no way Eiko would be chosen. But if she could win a victory here, it could be possible.

“My family’s motto of ‘win no matter what’ is a good one, isn’t it? It’s overflowing with dreams and possibilities.”

Eiko smiled, and started to think about where to place her troops on the Academy grounds.

○

Junko cried for a long time. She only noticed that anything was wrong after she saw her tear-swollen eyes in the mirror, realized how stupid she looked, and forced herself to smile.

It was then that she heard a knock on the bathroom door. It sounded urgent, so she answered.

“What is it?”

“An emergency summons,” one of the ninjas said.

“For the whole Hattori clan?”

“Yes.”

Emergency summons were only used in times of war, so this could only mean that war had begun. Junko instantly thought of Akuto.

“I’ll be right there.”

Junko violently rubbed down her face with the towel. She was ashamed that her eyes were still red, but there was nothing she could do about it. As she walked down the hallway, the servants were running around frantically. It was 3:00 am, but the mansion reminded her of the school dorm in the morning.

“Where’s father?” she asked, grabbing one of them. He spoke quickly as he answered, like he was in a terrible hurry.

“The master fought that monster and succeeded in driving him away, but he was unfortunately unable to finish him. Now he’s gone to the storehouse to get the clan’s treasure sword, in order to slay the monster once and for all.”

“What did you say?”

Junko was shocked. She’d only known that there had been some kind of fuss over her, but evidently something strange had happened.

“Don’t worry. The Iga ninja army will slay the man who deceived you even if it costs us our lives!”

The ninja’s eyes were shining as he spoke. He wasn’t in a hurry — he was burning with loyalty towards her and the clan. When she noticed this, Junko didn’t know what to think.

— *Oh no... What did he do?*

Junko headed for the storehouse. The ninjas raised their spears and katanas high when they saw her, screaming things like “For Mistress Junko!” “Defeat the wicked Demon King!” and “Show them the power of the Iga ninjas!”

— *They’re all fired up... Is this all because I screwed up...?*

“Father!” She cut across the yard to reach the storehouse. The door was open, so she yelled inside.

“Is that you, Junko?” Yozo answered.

Junko hadn’t been told not to go inside, so she entered. This was the perfect place to talk, since no one would interrupt them.

“Father, what happened?” she asked.

Yozo was holding a katana level in both hands.

“It seems there was some misunderstanding. It was partially my fault, but he had no intention of joining the Hattori clan from the start.”

“That’s because I didn’t tell him what was going on. The responsibility is mine.”

But her father’s response was the opposite of what she’d expected.

“Well, it doesn’t matter. He’s made a terrible choice. He’s defied the gods. Now we have all the excuse we need to fight him.”

“What do you mean?”

Yozo explained to a shocked Junko what had happened in the forest. This was the first she’d heard about the Teruyas’ assassinations.

“Father!”

“I know what you’re going to say, but that’s just what society is. You’ve been a class rep at the Academy, so you must understand a little. And if you want to change things for the better, you need power. And power often looks ugly from the outside.”

“...I understand.”

She knew what he was getting at. All she could do was nod.

And then he showed her a video on the communicator.

“He’s sealed himself within the Academy. This is what’s happened to your school.”

Junko was astonished to see the demon castle.

“Then father, this battle is...”

“To defeat him. Eiko Teruya is in command.”

“Not the leader of their clan?”

“Akuto Sai slew Keizo.”

“...Impossible!”

Junko knew Akuto’s personality, so she instantly denied it, but Yozo just shook his head.

“He was strong. I don’t know how he did it, but he somehow was able to kill Keizo.”

“That’s not what I meant, he...”

“Your personal feelings don’t matter. I’m sure that part of this is hard to accept, but we are followers of Suhara, and we must obey. Whether you dislike the Teruyas, or whether you’re enrap-

tured with Akuto, you must think of only one thing: fighting to protect our family.”

There was nothing Junko could say to that.

“And if we fight, we must rejoice in our foe’s strength. Akuto was strong. Before, I couldn’t beat him. That’s why I’m drawing this.” Yozo showed her the blade he’d been carrying.

“That’s our treasure sword, the Sohaya no Tsurugi...” Junko whispered.

It was held in a sharply curved and undecorated sheath.

“It’s said that we were given this when the clan converted to worship of Suhara. But...”

But... Junko knew what followed after those words. But no one had ever been able to draw it from its sheath.

“And you’re going to do it?”

“It’s the only way to fight him. It amplifies the mana in one’s body, and makes the wielder vastly more powerful.”

The Sohaya no Tsurugi was made at the same time as the gods. The rumors said it was created to test the limits of what could be done with mana. It was said that each god’s worshippers had a similar item, but most were concealed, or unusable like this sword.

Yozo gripped the hilt hard, trying to draw out the blade. But the blade seemed to have fused with the sheath, and wouldn’t come out.

“Well then, why do you suppose it won’t come out?”

Suddenly there was a voice at the entrance. Yozo and Junko turned around.

“Mother.”

“Grandmother...”

It was Yozo’s mother and Junko’s grandmother. She was a small woman with a gentle look on her face, but she’d managed to get behind them without making any sounds — she was no ordinary woman at all.

“It must be because I am not experienced enough, or that I lack the right to do so,” Yozo said, and his mother softly laughed.

“You’ve always been a little odd. You’re a good person, but only interested in bettering yourself. That narrow view has kept you from noticing a simple truth.”

Her words were harsh, but Yozo couldn’t deny them.

“A truth...?”

“That’s right. Even if mana is a reflection of the mind, and something that comes from the gods as they watch the deeds of man, there are some things that it cannot see. You cannot draw the sword because you aren’t acting in the way for which it was built. How could there be any deeper meaning than that?”

She took the sword out of Yozo’s hands.

“Anyway, all you ever want to do when you see someone strong is fight them, and you keep killing them. It’s a bad habit. You seem to think your job is to fight people, and you’re wrong. You can’t be allowed to have a sword like this. I’m giving it to Junko.”

Her grandmother handed Junko the Sohaya no Tsurugi. Junko was surprised, and tried to give it back, but her grandmother ignored her and continued to lecture Yozo.

“And another thing, Yozo. You let the Teruya girl have com-

mand of this battle, didn't you? If you get stronger, it will only help the Teruya consolidate their rule. Of course, I understand that you have to fight for the clan and for our god, but you're only doing this because you get to fight a foe that might kill you. Even as a grown-up, you still don't understand this..."

"I have preparations to make," Yozo said. With that, he escaped before he could listen to any more lectures.

Junko's grandmother watched him go, and when he was gone, she gave Junko a charming smile.

"It's the child you met at the station when you forgot your luggage, right? A lot's happened, I assume, but do as you like. Yozo will take responsibility, at any rate."

"But Grandmother..."

"Don't worry about it. Your first impression was the right one."

Junko didn't know how to respond. But for some reason, she felt her face turning red.

"R-Right..." Junko nodded and stared down at the Sohaya no Tsurugi, but she had no idea how to use it. "This can't be drawn, can it?"

"That's right. It's up to you whether you believe in the gods or not, but they can't actually sense people's feelings. It's the same with this sword. There's no point in yanking at it. You can probably only draw it when you're doing what Suhara wants done."

"I-Is it that simple?"

"That's right. And once you've drawn it, you may do what you like. You need to have faith, not in yourself or in your god, but in the living people who care about you."

“Grandmother...”

“So no matter what decision you make, it won’t bother me.”
Her grandmother smiled.

“I understand.”

Junko nodded and tied the sword to her waist.



It was the Teruya's ninja army that first arrived on the grounds of Constant Magical Academy. They were called "ninjas," but except for the special forces they were ordinary soldiers. Their primary weapons were assault rifles and katanas. There were 500 of them in all.

In most magical battles, firearms were essentially useless, so many of the more powerful soldiers didn't carry guns. The normal soldiers carried rifles, since they weren't very good with magic. The assault troops, however, were armored warriors carrying spears, halberds, and war axes — a variety of weapons that each reflected their wielders' tastes. There were 100 of these strong warriors.

This was almost all the firepower that the ninja army had, and it was the size of a battalion. Eiko Teruya, the commander, had gathered the leaders together and was ordering them to make camp.

There were cameras watching her. The media had arrived before the Hattori, the other armies, and the knights, and they had permission to broadcast. It was the middle of the night, but the whole capital city was watching as the school turned into the Demon King's castle.

Of course, the Demon King was being depicted as an enemy of all humanity. And there was also the fact that most of the enemies here were probably going to be demon beasts. Unlike wars between humans, there were unlikely to be any ethical problems with showing it. Everyone was surely watching it for the entertainment.

Eiko's biggest goal, to gain popularity for herself, was proceeding nicely. If you didn't know what she was really like, she would appear to be a brave, gallant girl. Fortune was on her side, as well.

Three members of the Hattori arrived just when the cameras were watching her.

Yozo, Junko, and Yuko made for a perfect camera shot as they arrived in her tent. The strong, bold Yozo, and the two beautiful girls — not to mention the fact that one of them was a famous idol.

Yozo hadn't expected the cameras to be here. At this rate, he'd be contributing to Eiko's quest to gain popularity. But even so, he had no choice but to obey her.

Junko and Yuko didn't like it either, but they too had no choice. Junko kept a serious expression on her face at all times, but Yuko was able to smile and wave to the cameras as she usually did.

Yuko's health had recovered after Akuto left. The influence of the demon beasts wasn't gone, however. She was hiding it with her combat uniform, but the black blood vessels on her neck were still growing. But even so, she'd recovered her good cheer when she'd heard they were fighting the Demon King. In fact, she was even more cheerful than before.

Yozo gave Eiko a polite greeting.

"The Iga Ninjas, under the command of the Hattori clan, have arrived."

Eiko nodded with a relaxed expression on her face.

"I hope you'll work hard under my command," she said, and then her eyes settled on Junko's sword. It was the divine vessel of the god Suhara, and she'd always been unhappy with the fact that the Teruyas didn't control it. Eiko smiled to herself; maybe this would be her chance to get it.

"Junko and Yuko, your unit can lead the charge."

The Hattori had brought a battalion of 600 as well, but most of them were ninjas in the true sense, not trained for open combat. It would be very dangerous for them to lead the charge. But since the whole world was watching the broadcast, they couldn't refuse. Eiko might be able to get the entire Hattori clan killed. That was her plan.

Both Yozo and Junko realized her intent. Yozo tried to speak anyway, hoping he could resist this somehow. He could come up with any number of reasons, probably. But Yuko cut him off.

“All right! We'll go in first and defeat all the demon beasts! We won't leave any for anybody else!”

Yuko had always been a free spirit, but she wasn't the type to go around saying things like that. Both Yozo and Junko looked at her in surprise, but they couldn't stop her. She was more used to the eye of the camera than any of them.

Yuko quickly turned to promising viewers that she'd take the lead herself, weeping false tears as she promised to slay the demon beasts. The Hattori's retreat was cut off, and they were forced to join in the strategy conference without a chance to object.

At the same time, there was a report of an Imperial Army Sky Carrier arriving. It was a mobile fortress carrying an entire brigade of 2,500 soldiers. It had its own energy-generating engine, and it could also disperse mana into the atmosphere. The ability to create an environment around it where mana could be used made it unstoppable in magical combat.

The sun rose just as the carrier, the “Genkaku,” arrived. It made an awesome silhouette against the sunrise. It was the same size as the demon castle that was formerly Constant Magical Academy, and it settled itself about a kilometer away.

Now Eiko had 3700 soldiers at her command. The knights

were going to be arriving soon, too. The people watching at home had been expecting a light-hearted spectacle, but now with the arrival of the legions of troops, they felt the full impact of the extraordinary situation.

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Hiroshi had been watching from above, and was shocked when the Hattoris and the Genkaku arrived. He didn't know exactly what Akuto was thinking, but as someone who knew how this had all started off, he couldn't help but laugh at how out of hand things had become.

— *What do I do...?*

Hiroshi couldn't put his finger on it, but there was something bothering him.

There was a lot of information coming into his suit's visor, including the television broadcast. He was disturbed to see how Yuko was acting. As a fan, he knew how she normally was on television, and now he knew first-hand how she behaved at home. Seeing how she was acting now, he knew there was something terrible going on with her.

— *What can I do for her? Fight all those demon beasts? Fight that huge carrier? No way...*

But when he thought of how far things had gotten out of control, Hiroshi felt angry at Akuto for causing all this.

— *Sure, I wanted to be strong like him. But this wasn't what I meant. Did Akuto give up something important for the sake of his own greed?*

Hiroshi couldn't help but wonder.

— *Come to think of it, this suit was made for anti-magical*

combat.

He called up the suit's capabilities on the visor, and the suit responded by displaying the information. He looked in detail at the mana canceller. He was amazed at what it could do: it was capable of nullifying all mana within a several hundred meter radius.

— If I use this... Could I maybe defeat them both?

Hiroshi looked between the demon beast-covered castle and the carrier.

— If that's the case, there's only one thing I can do, and one thing I should do.

Hiroshi made his decision and began to descend. Yuko and Junko's company was already in position. He landed in the middle of them.

At first, the fully-armored ninjas were cautious, but all of them knew that Brave had saved Yuko. Furthermore, his nickname among the people was "Brave the Demon Beast Slayer." So when they saw who he was, the tension turned into cheers.

The media's cameras caught sight of Brave, too. Hiroshi saw himself displayed in his own visor's video feed. It made him feel a little weird.

But it wasn't the ninjas or the media who was most happy to see him, it was Yuko. She ran over and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"You came! Of course you did! Let's wipe out those evil demon beasts together!" she said with a look of joy on her face.

Hiroshi could feel almost painfully how much she had changed.

“I’m not here to kill the demon beasts. I’m here to protect you,” he whispered.

The cameras were watching these two famous people meet, but they shouldn’t have been able to hear his voice.

Yuko whispered back to him.

“I want you to kill them for me. Kill lots and lots. I hate them.”

She smiled innocently. It was the same smile as her idol persona, but for some reason it made Hiroshi feel scared.

He was using the mana canceller to block out the mana around him, so nobody could hear what they said, but he could still feel Junko and the others watching him. Junko was looking at him suspiciously. Did she realize that something was wrong with Yuko?

Hiroshi didn’t answer her request to “kill them.” Fortunately one of the cameramen was approaching, so he took this opportunity to escape to the sky. He waved his hand and just said, “When the battle begins.”

— *When the battle begins? What do I even mean by that?*

Hiroshi found his own words funny, and laughed. He’d decided to protect Yuko, but he still wasn’t sure how he would go about it.

Hiroshi realized a little too late that even a little bit of power meant your actions had an effect on those around you. He realized now that Akuto was in the same difficult situation... But he shook his head. He was planning to sacrifice everything for Keena’s sake. Because of that...

— *Even if it wasn’t his fault directly, he’s still done this to Yuko and done nothing to fix it.*

Eiko had finished positioning her troops and was about to give the attack order when suddenly someone called out to her from behind.

“So what’s the plan here, exactly? It’s hard to see from this position exactly what you’re trying to do. Don’t tell me your plan is to kill every last one of them? That’s impossible. It will ruin the soldiers’ morale.”

Eiko was surprised that someone would talk to her, the commander, like that. Since she was in front of the cameras, she couldn’t let them get away with it.

“Our foes are emotionless demon beasts. There’s no choice but to wipe them out. And the soldiers know exactly what they’re...”

She turned around and saw a man in plain clothes, not a soldier’s uniform. She stopped in surprise. The media was gone, too.

“Who are you?”

“I’m with the Cabinet Magical Investigation Department. I asked the media to leave, so we can talk about things that we wouldn’t want them hearing,” he said, and laughed in an easygoing tone.

Eiko relaxed when she heard him identify himself.

“Did you bring the knights?”

The Cabinet Magical Investigation Department, as the name implied, worked for the Cabinet. They were essentially an intelligence organization. There were eight standing members of it, often known by the acronym C-MID8, but little beyond that was known. They worked for Boichiro — that was all Eiko knew. They had little influence over the army, but great influence over the knights.

“No, they’re keeping civilians out. That’s not really our job, so we’ve come alone.”

“So what? You don’t expect me to let you take over, do you?”

“No, no. You don’t need to worry. We just want to act on our own.”

“Because your leader’s inside?”

“Correct. Don’t worry. We won’t complain if the army accidentally shoots us from behind. We just want you to grant us the authority to act on our own.”

Eiko thought for a moment, but in the end, the only thing that mattered was whether they killed the demon beasts. Nothing C-MID8 could do would affect the operation.

“Very well. If that’s what you want...” But before Eiko could finish her sentence, the man was gone.

Eiko was a little worried about the decision she’d just made, but it was time for the operation to begin, so she put it out of her mind. Once she saw that the media was back, she shared with them the name for the mission she’d just come up with.

“Today at 0700, we will begin Operation Destructive Hammer.”

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“Kill the gods?”

Boichiro was looking at Akuto in astonishment. He wanted to laugh, but couldn’t. He’d felt Akuto’s power grow when he said the words.

“If you do that, everything will end. You yourself won’t survive. Humanity is already completely dependent on the gods. Part

of our bodies, of our brains, is already controlled by mana.”

“There are ways around that. It’s better than someone having complete control over humanity’s future,” Akuto said. There was no doubt at all in his eyes.

“Then we have no room whatsoever to negotiate,” Boichiro said. He tried to contact Eiko outside, but there was some kind of mana jam preventing him from doing so. “You shielded the whole school?”

“You can’t use mana to escape, either,” Akuto answered.

It was 2:00 AM. Dawn was still far away.

“I’m sure your plan was to keep me from taking her out of the building, but did you realize that you’ve cut off your own escape?”

“That’s fine. I’m planning on defeating you. It doesn’t matter.”

“I’m not sure how long that self-confidence of yours will last. You’ve gotten a little stronger, it seems, but as long as I have a weapon I can still handle you. In the end, mana is just a microscopic machine. The energy is pumped from generators directly into the earth. You could call it ‘The World System.’”

“I don’t recall signing up for a lecture.”

“You’re using power dependent on this country and its gods. How can you say you’re going to destroy the gods? That’s the point I’m trying to get at. And because of that system, no matter how strong you get, there’s a limit to your power.”

Boichiro sheathed his sword and stretched out a hand. Something that looked like a teleportation circle appeared. With the mana shield from the demon beasts around the school, teleportation via mana should be impossible — which meant that this teleportation wasn’t magical at all.

Boichiro took out a single sword from the circle. It was huge, almost as tall as him. The hilt was almost hidden by the vast blade, and it even had control boosters and counterweights to maintain its center of gravity.

“This weapon has no name, but I’m not the type to get attached to my weapons.”

Boichiro gave it a light swing to test it.

The air around the weapon exploded. Even at its incredible size, it was still capable of moving faster than the speed of sound.

Even Akuto, he thought, wouldn’t be able to survive a hit from it.

“Now then...” He held the sword level and approached.

Akuto’s expression looked tense.

With no mercy, no hesitation, Boichiro attacked with the sword.

“Ackie!”

“Akuto!”

Keena and Fujiko both screamed.

But their screams were drowned out by clashing metal and a sonic boom.

Akuto was blasted back into a wall. The demon beasts that made up the wall cushioned the impact, but the wounds in his stomach and arms where he’d tried to block the attack were smoking. It was clear that the attack had been incredibly powerful.

“Ackie!” Keena tried to run towards him, but Fujiko grabbed

her.

“Don’t.”

“But...!” Keena wept and tried to struggle, but Fujiko shook her head.

“If you go over to him, he’ll be forced to fight. If he can’t win, then what he needs to do is escape and form a plan. Our job is to get Akuto out of here,” she said.

Fujiko took control of one of the demon beasts forming the walls, and used its arms to carry Akuto to her. She loaded him and Keena onto the Cerberus, and it raced down the staircase and out of the lounge.

“But what’s the point of running? Ackie is...” Keena asked, and Fujiko grimaced in annoyance.

“Neither you nor Akuto are nearly cunning enough. If we run, it buys Akuto time to recover, and for another thing, did you forget that he has a weapon?”

“A weapon...?”

“Peterhausen. He’s waiting for Akuto below,” Fujiko said, turning to look behind them.

Her face froze. The Cerberus was fast, but Boichiro was charging at them even faster. He was using his huge sword to fly. It sliced through the air as it came towards them.

“He’s going to catch up...!” Fujiko shouted in fear.

But just when it was about to reach the Cerberus’s tail, a figure suddenly appeared out of the shadows.

“Ah!” Boichiro stopped.

The shadow had come walking out of one of the hallways, the same way a careless old man might walk into the street.

In fact, the shadow actually did belong to an old man. But it was clear from his steps that he intended to cut Boichiro off.

“Well, this has certainly gotten out of control...”

It was the school principal. The old man, with his white hair and beard, didn’t seem to be flustered in the slightest as he spoke to Boichiro.

“Old man... are you going to get in my way?” Boichiro stood in front of the principal.

“I suppose I am, actually. I just remembered something, you see, something that happened a hundred years ago,” the principal said, like he was about to share a particularly interesting piece of gossip. He turned toward Fujiko. “Go. I’ll take care of this.”

“But...!”

Fujiko wasn’t sure what to say. The principal was as old as he looked — there was no way he could fight Boichiro. He must’ve sensed her doubts by the look on her face.

“No, no. There’s no need to worry. It’ll be fine.” He waved his hand to tell her to go. “I plan to live for several more centuries, and I’ve been saving up the power to do it.”

As he spoke, the principal’s body began to transform. The transformation began with his arms: the muscles suddenly bulged up and grew five times in size. Then his shoulders, and his chest, all of the muscles in his body swelled up until they were huge.



“P-Principal...?” Fujiko was shocked. She was now looking at a man with the face of a geezer and the body of a giant.

“The trick to a long life is to save your energy,” he said as he squeezed his muscles. The shirt he’d been wearing was already stretched to the limit, and this was enough to make it burst. He turned back to Boichiro. “Now, let’s think back to what happened a century ago. The sides are a little different now, though.”

Boichiro looked upset.

“You’ve switched sides in the last century?”

“That’s right. Changing with the times instead of being hard-headed is another secret to long life.”

“If that’s the case, then I won’t show any mercy.” Boichiro readied his sword.

The principal laughed. “That part of you hasn’t changed at all. That’s why you don’t age properly.”

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Fujiko headed for the basement.

“If he’s that big, we can probably leave it to him, right?” she said.

“I wonder if he eats lots of rice,” Keena replied.

Both Fujiko and Keena were astonished by his transformation, but they were definitely thankful for it. They used the time he bought them to flee to the basement.

But waiting for them at the entrance wasn’t Peterhausen, but Lily Shiraishi, the Student Council President. Her hat was tilted down over her face, and she crossed her arms as she looked up at

the Cerberus.

“What do you think you’re doing to our school?” There was rage in her voice, but also interest.

Akuto woke up when he heard her.

“I didn’t want to cause trouble for the school. I’m actually about to leave.”

“Leave?” Lily called up a mana screen for him to see. It was a broadcast of what was going on outside. The military was deployed, and the carrier Genkaku was floating nearby.

“That’s what’s going on outside. There’s about 4,000 soldiers, I think.”

Akuto frowned.

“That’s not good. A few of them might get injured. If there were only a thousand, none of them would’ve had to get hurt.”

“Hey now...” Lily didn’t know what to say to that. She crossed her arms as Akuto got off the Cerberus to come down to her. “I’ve been watching since Keizo Teruya first came here, so I know what’s going on. I heard what the principal had to say too. That’s why I’ve been waiting to see what you’re planning on doing.”

Akuto nodded and softly asked,

“So what about you? I don’t want to cause trouble for you.”

“I’m going to be the one who decides what I do now. And there’s only one option: denounce Eiko Teruya. The rest, I don’t care about. Of course, doing that means fighting 4,000 soldiers. Hahaha,” she laughed happily.

“What do you have on your side?” Fujiko asked.

“The student council. All three are here, so the three of them.”

“Is that all?”

“You should be saying ‘You’ve got so many!’ instead,” Lily said, annoyed, and then waved for Akuto to pass her.

“That dragon is waiting. Go. But I’ll tell you one thing: I don’t think the same way you do. If you want to destroy the whole system we have now, I’ll stop you.”

“I understand.” Akuto walked past her into the darkness.

“Ackie!” Keena yelled, worried.

Akuto looked back at her.

“I’ll be fine. Wait somewhere safe. I’ll be right back,” he said, and turned back into the darkness.

At the bottom of the labyrinth waited a black dragon. When it saw Akuto, it roared with a century’s worth of emotion.

“I’ve been waiting! I’ve been waiting for this moment, my lord!”

“I didn’t mean to keep you waiting.”

“But I waited just the same! Now, take back your true power! Let us fly the skies and destroy our foes!”

“I know. I’ve made my choice. And that choice has given me power.”

Akuto went around to Peterhausen’s side. There was a saddle on the dragon’s back. He smacked his fist against it lightly, and declared this: “I will say it again: I will kill the gods.”

In that moment, Akuto became the Demon King.

Peterhausen's howl of joy echoed throughout the Earth. The vibrations shook the whole building.

"Let us go, my lord! Together, none shall ever stop us!"

He raised his head towards the ceiling, opened his jaw, and fired one of the metal stakes he created within his body. This stake, carved with a spiral, spun rapidly and smashed through the rock ceiling, carving a path to the surface with a terrible noise.

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The soldiers on the surface looked at each other in confusion when they heard the howl from below. But a moment later, they screamed as a massive stake burst through the ground in a shower of dust and rock.

Even after shattering through the rock, the stake maintained its energy, flying high into the sky. And then it started to fall down onto them.

"Evade!"

The soldiers beneath screamed and scattered. The stake fell to the ground with a roar, and the dust it kicked up blinded everyone around it.

The company commanders were forced to yell at their troops to maintain order.

"Get back into formation! Don't let them scare you! They're just demon beasts!"

But the commanders' words were immediately forgotten as they began to scream too.

Something with massive black wings appeared out of the hole that the stake had created. Its shadow covered the soldiers and chilled their hearts.

The legendary dragon was right in front of them. To them, it was like fear itself had been given form.

A man in black riding a black dragon. Everyone who saw it whispered the same thing as they quavered.

“The Demon King... The Demon King is here...”

AFTERWORD

As always, thanks for buying the book. It's me, Shoutarou Mizuki.

Lately I've been watching nothing but baseball, F1, and other sports. And of course I watch it on TV, so it's extra unhealthy. I think all of you should spend your winter playing outside.

Actually when I was little, I once got stuck in a graveyard a few dozen meters from my house due to the snow. If I'd died there, I would've gone straight to the grave. But even so, boys should play outside.

I hope you've enjoyed volume four. Thanks to you readers, I've been able to do the first two-part book in this series. It's also the first time I've written a two-part book. I'm writing the second part as we speak, actually. Those of you who started here, and those of you who've been reading since volume one, I hope to see you next time. My apologies to those of you who are picking up this book at a different time, but as of right now, December 2008, the comic version of this book is being run in Akita Shoten's "Champion Red." The adaptation is being done by Souichi Itou himself. It's following its own original plot now, so even those of you who've read the book can still enjoy it.

I also hinted at something beyond a comic last time, and that is a CD drama. This will be available early next year. It will star Daisuke Ono and Mai Nakahara. The rest of the cast will be first announced on the homepage (<http://www.hobbyjapan.co.jp/hjbunko/>), so I hope you'll check it out there. I'm looking forward to it myself.

This really doesn't have anything to do with anything, but I

just bought these cordless headphones, and for some reason I was only getting static out of the right side. I went to the store and swapped them out. The guy there said they were fine, but I took them home and tried them and I had the same problem.

Since they were cordless, the problem was probably with the infrared transceiver. I didn't want to go back to the store again, so I got mad and smacked the transceiver, and it fixed it. I didn't think that worked on things anymore...

So each time after that when it stopped working, I would hit it... And after that, it broke completely...

Um, anyway, back to the book.

As always, there's no real need to explain it, but you'll probably enjoy it more if you've read the previous volumes. Some characters appeared in volume two but not in volume three, so if you read back, you'll know who they are. So for that reason, I hope that those of you who are starting with this volume will go back and read the ones before it. You see, it's nice to have finished stories each volume, but as an author, I think this is also part of what makes a series fun: seeing a character you introduced earlier in a minor role go on to do great things.

I'd like to finish by thanking everyone who made this possible.

To Souichi Itou, the illustrator. I read your comic version every month. It's fascinating to see how it changes and evolves each chapter. And it makes me happy when I think that there's more to come.

To Ohashi, my editor. It was a pleasure working with you as always. I'm very sorry for the trouble I always cause, though I'm getting a little too old to use youthful inexperience as an excuse. I'm sure I'll get faster, at least. Personally I think that whether you're in your 30s or your 40s, if someone asks you "What do you want to be when you grow up?" you have to answer. But eventu-

ally, your story has to find an ending.

And of course, thanks to everyone else who helped. You've all done so much for me.

Now then, it may feel like the climax, but the story actually goes past volume five. Don't worry, we'll all be able to enjoy this a while longer together!