

Demon King **DAIMAŌ** ACT 10



Shoutarou Mizuki

Demon King
DAIMAÔ
ACT 10





**THE
MAID'S
PLANTO
TAKE THE
THRONE
BEGINS!
"I'LL DO
IT, I'LL DO
IT, MOM
AND
DAD!"
MORE
CHAOS IN
THE WAR
FOR THE
IMPERIAL
THRONE!?**



**“I LOVE ALL OF YOU. THE STORY
THAT YOU CAN LOVE ONLY ONE
PERSON IS JUST
ANOTHER ILLUSION. I WANT TO
LOVE ALL OF YOU THE WAY YOU
LOVE ME,” AKUTO SAID.**



Character Introduction

JUNKO HATTORI

.....
A pure-hearted class rep who's in love with Akuto. Unable to hide her shock at Akuto's words.

AKUTO SAI

.....
Our "good" protagonist, who was prophesied (again?) to become the Demon King. How will he react to the revival of the first Demon King, Zero?

FUJIKO ETO

.....
A black mage and herbalist who swears loyalty to Akuto. Rides the demon beast Cerberus.

KEENA SOGA

.....
A ditzy airheaded girl who's taken a liking to Akuto. Who is she, really?

MIWA HIROSHI

.....
A troublemaker who calls Akuto "Boss." He is also the hero "Brave."

KORONE

.....
A Liradan responsible for guarding and observing Akuto. But she has now been taken over by 2V and Zero.



**LILY
SHIRAISHI**

.....
The student council
president, known for
her classy hat.

**MICHIE
OOTAKE**

.....
The student council
vice-president. She can
transform into a flock of
bats. Talks weird.

ARNOUL

.....
A tall Liradan who is
student council secretary.
Normally only
says "guwa."

**KANNA
KAMIYAMA**

.....
Student Council Treasurer.
She can transform into a
wolf, and ends every
sentence with
"gyah."



**YOSHIE
KITA**

.....
After being partially
responsible for Zero's revival,
she took a liking to Akuto and
began to help him. Now
she's at the academy for
no good reason.

KEISU

.....
A tiny Liradan who was
sealed in VPS with Zero.
Now she has no purpose
in life, and so is staying
with Yoshie.

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Prologue

Nozomi Sasahara was the 21st of her line. Her line of what, you ask? Her line of owners of an ancient inn.

In this era, human beings lived a long time, so the inn she ran, the eponymous “Sasahara,” was almost 2000 years old. 2000 years is a long time, but the inn had spent most of those two millennia on the verge of going out of business, so it was hard to say how much that counted for. It had gotten off to a great start, but the case of food poisoning that occurred shortly after the inn opened was when things started to go downhill.

After that, something went wrong approximately every decade. Once, terrorists took the owner of the inn hostage in what came to be known as the “Sasahara Inn Incident.” Another time, a boiler exploded, taking half of the building with it. Then there was when the hot springs themselves dried up, and the owner tried to fool everyone by putting bath salts into tap water. That one ended up on the national news.

At this point, suicides choosing the inn as a place to kill themselves were so commonplace that nobody even paid attention anymore. There was even a legend that one generation, suspecting a curse, had summoned an exorcist. The legend said he’d run away before even making it through the front door. How, after all that, was it still in business?

“Because it is the pride of our clan,” Nozomi’s mother had said. She’d said that many, many times, when Nozomi kept asking the same question over and over again when she was a child. “Our family carries the bloodline of the emperor. We cannot stray from our task.”

Nozomi didn’t know what royal blood had to do with managing an inn. Her mother probably didn’t either, come to think of it. But, well, if her mom said it, it was probably true.

In this era, magic and Liradans were common enough to ensure that every imperial citizen had the bare minimum of income they needed to survive. In a society like that, there were only two reasons to work. One was to give your life

meaning. Another was for the sake of extra spending money.

In the case of Sasahara, it wasn't giving them extra cash, it was taking money out of their pockets. They were running it out of simple stubbornness. This stubborn streak, however, was lost on Nozomi. If quitting was the more profitable option, there was no reason to continue. And if they really did have imperial blood, shouldn't the government be supporting them?

Since they were so poor, no one they knew even believed they had royal blood. Which meant nobody respected them. Nozomi was getting sick of it. "Helping manage a Japanese inn" sounded fancy, but it was boring waiting every day for guests that never came. She was 16, and her youth was being entirely squandered.

But Nozomi herself was neither tall, nor smart, nor brave. She knew that she didn't have the guts to run away from home and carve her own path. So all she was left with was the notion that she had royal blood in her veins, a notion even she sometimes didn't believe. Her tiny body swelled with pride at the thought of being a princess, until one day she saw news that sent her pride erupting off in the completely wrong direction.

"A new Empress has been born. The new empress is a commoner, but one with the power to control the Demon King himself..." Nozomi had been eating a simple meal at her table. When she heard the news reporter, her sardines fell off her chopsticks. She pressed her face up against the mana screen to get a better look at the new Empress.

The new empress's name was Keena Soga, supposedly. She had a round face, round eyes, and even a round nose. There wasn't a trace of nobility about her, so it was easy to believe that she was a commoner.

"Wait, you can have a NEW Empress?" Nozomi screamed. Keena was a girl with an ordinary face, not much older than Nozomi was. She didn't know how it had happened, but somehow, when Empress Kazuko died she'd become the new Empress.

Nozomi started to tear at her hair.

—So it doesn't matter if you're a commoner, as long as you have royal blood?

—Does that mean I can be an Empress too?

—Empress, like, THE Empress?

“Our new empress will continue attending Constant Magical Academy. Like the rest of the Emperors and Empresses in the past, she prizes learning even if it means continuing to be surrounded by commoners...” The newscaster was continuing to introduce Keena.

Nozomi’s head was starting to spin. She had a bad habit of getting confused over even the smallest things, and to make things worse, when she got confused, she also had a habit of turning reckless.

“I’ll do it! I’m gonna do it, mom and dad! I’m going to go to school and talk to the Empress myself! I’m gonna do it!” She said to her parents. Her parents were so stunned that they couldn’t offer more than the most feeble of denials.

“W-Wait. That’s crazy!”

“That school’s really hard to get into, you know. You’re way too stupid!”

But her confusion had taken root throughout her brain, and now there was nothing in Nozomi’s mind except the desire to meet Keena Soga. “Don’t worry! I’ve got this!” She showed them a mana screen with a help wanted ad on it.

“Now hiring... janitors?”

“I can put the hospitality skills I learned at our inn to use anywhere, be it a school or a train station platform! Being a janitor is a piece of cake!” Nozomi beamed confidently. But her parents had a more objective view of Nozomi’s talents.

“Wait, hospitality? Have you ever even done any work around here?”

“That’s right. You can’t even clean your own room.”

“That’s because we don’t have any customers!” Nozomi yelled. She knew that was always enough to shut them up.

When, as she expected, they shut up, she grinned victoriously. “Just wait, mom and dad. I’ll bring this inn back to life! I’ll get us out of this situation where it’s just us and the Liradans! If I can just talk to the Empress, it’ll all work out!” And with those parting words, she ran out of the house.

Now, the janitorial exam for Constant Magical Academy had many applicants. At a top school like Constant, even a menial job like being a janitor brought you in direct contact with the people running the school, and was a great way to make connections with future priests. When she reached the back of the line, Nozomi started to get a little worried.

—I'm not so sure I can pull this off. Even if I'm a pro, they might have some minor advantages of their own.

It was a mystery where this strange sense of pride was coming from, but Nozomi was certainly full of herself.

The exam consisted of an interview with the artificial spirit Yatagarasu, to determine your suitability for the job. Yatagarasu would check a database consisting of every action you'd ever taken in your life, and find the job that was best for you. It might seem no different from fortune-telling, but since he could look at your physical abilities, your actions, and even your thoughts, he'd never been wrong before. The one exception was Keena Soga, who'd been told she'd be a "nurse" only to end up an "Empress." But Empress wasn't really a job, so it didn't count.

Of course, some people rejected the results they'd been given, for example, to take up the family business, but that always ended poorly for them. For a job exam, it was a fair way to do it. All the school had to do was pick anyone who was judged to be a "servant" or an "educator."

The interviewees knew this too, so a lot of them had already undergone the examination. Even if you didn't get the exact job Yatagarasu suggested for you, it was common to get a job in a related field. Nozomi, by the way, had never undergone an examination.

She stood excitedly before the three-legged crow. After conducting the exam, Yatagarasu gave a loud caw.

"Janitor!"

"What?! Only one person in 10 thousand ever gets that!"

"Janitor" was just a term for someone who cleaned a school. It wasn't a profession. No one ever got that for an answer from Yatagarasu. Which, well,

was why they'd put out a hiring notice...

"Wow..."

"I didn't know that there were people like that..."

The other applicants were murmuring amongst themselves. There was a strange mixture of envy and disappointment in their voices. All of them had hoped to be priests or professors, and had their dreams dashed when there were no open seats. They'd used what networking and connections they had to get them here, only to be met with a natural born janitor. None of them knew what to say.

But Nozomi took it as a compliment.

—I can do this! I can do this! Ancestors, are you watching me? I'm shining brighter than I ever have before!

Nozomi's eyes gleamed radiantly.

And thus, a new janitor was born.

Her name was Nozomi Sasahara.

And she was born to be a janitor.

1 - Beginning of the Final Battle

Of course, there was no way that Keena was going to settle down and take her job as empress seriously. Sometimes, no, all the time, she would run away and make life miserable for her servants.

“All the Empress ever gets to do is pray and sign things. It’s really boring, you know!” Keena said, sitting on the bed where Akuto had been sleeping. She was talking. He wasn’t. She’d wrapped his blankets around her body and put her beloved rice cooker in front of her, and was carrying large spoonfuls of rice up to her mouth.

Akuto sat up in bed, and after listening to Keena for a while, checked his watch. It was 5:30 AM. There were 30 minutes left until it was time to wake up. In other words, this young Empress with a round face and bustles of red hair, and a stomach that you could call a white rice black hole, had snuck into his room before dawn and was eating said rice.

“Don’t you ever get heartburn?” Akuto pointed to the rice cooker.

“Did you know that at the palace, you can only get two second servings?” Keena’s response may have felt like an answer. Or maybe it hadn’t.

“Still, there aren’t any other rooms in the boys dorm where you get woken up at 5 in the morning by the sound of a rice cooker chime,” Akuto sighed.

“The Royal Guard’s gotten used to my tricks lately. They stop me when I try to take off my clothes. If I don’t leave first thing in the morning, I can’t get out.” Keena had the special ability to turn invisible, and she used it to help her escape.

“I’m glad the guards are normal, at least,” Akuto said as he yawned and got out of bed. Keena frowned. “You’re one to talk, aren’t you?”

She had a point. Akuto Sai had been prophesied to become the demon king, and it had already happened. He wasn’t normal, by any means. But he was a very serious and hard-working boy, and even as Keena sat on his bed eating rice, he began cleaning up his room in his PJs.

“I’m sick of getting caught up in your messes. I know I can’t live a normal life, so I want to just retire and live in peace. My dream of becoming a priest is a lot harder now. No, it’s not just harder. It’s impossible. But I still want to live a normal life, you know? So I need you to be a normal empress. If you do, you might be able to cause a revolution from inside the political system,” Akuto said as he put the clothes scattered on the floor into the dresser.

The Demon King was a living war machine. The only reason he’d been able to go back to having a normal life was that they’d learned the Empress could control his power. As a result, his life was now under Keena’s control. Akuto’s life now depended on her. Of course he’d want to give her a lecture.

His message seemed to reach Keena, on some level. “You’re right. I need to be a great Empress!” she said firmly. Then she licked off the last grain of rice from the paddle and put it back in the rice cooker, and stood up straight.

“First, I need to start by causing a revolution at the school! Yes, I need to make everyone understand how wonderful rice is!” Her expression was full of resolve. Her fists were gripped tightly like a goddess who’d risen to start a revolution. However, she was completely naked. The blanket she was wearing fell off, revealing a stomach that was pudgier than it should be.



“Keena!” Akuto yelled and looked away.

“Huh? What...? Wait, aah!” She looked down at herself, finally realized what had happened, and quickly grabbed the blanket.

“Aww, Ackie, you pervert. I hadn’t put on any clothes yet.”

“...That’s your fault, not mine. I’ll go get you some.” He went to leave the room, but a voice stopped him.

“There’s no need for that.”

The door to the shelf near the ceiling opened, and a beautiful doll-like girl came out. She squirmed out from the tiny door, and fell more than the height of an adult human, head-first, only to spin around like a cat and land gracefully in the center of the room.

No human could do something like that, and of course, She wasn’t human. She was Akuto and Keena’s observer: Korone the Liradan.

“I’m one of the Empress’s servants now. Here, have some clothes.” She opened the bag on her shoulder and pulled out a complete school uniform. The tiny bag was connected to a virtual phase space that allowed it to hold objects of most any size.

“Wow, thank you!” Keena said, happily taking the clothes.

Then, Korone got around behind Akuto’s back and put her hands over his eyes.

“...I’m not planning on watching her change.”

“But the desire a teenage boy has for a naked girl is a strong one. Enough to make him pedal a bike to the vending machine in the next town.”

“No, I don’t have the energy to do something like that.” Akuto replied, but Korone continued to silently hold her hands over his eyes.

Once she’d put her clothes on, Keena made a declaration. “As Empress, I will begin my revolution here at this school. A revolution in the name of rice! I will start a movement to bring back the lost joys of rice among the students. A rice renaissance! I will bring back the spirits of the ancient, rice-loving empire, and

use it to raise healthy young adults! And eventually, I'll turn the whole Empire into a rice field!"

"That's crazy..." Akuto said, but Korone began to applaud loudly enough to cut him off.

"A wonderful idea! All hail the empress! All hail the empress!"

"Listen..." Akuto looked at Korone, but her lack of expression made it impossible to tell what she was thinking.

"I shall do everything I can to aid you, Empress," Korone said, spurring her on. "Glory to the Empress!"

"No, that's not right. Glory to rice!" Keena said, like she was some kind of saint.

"Come on now..." All Akuto could do was sigh. It was a stupid idea, he thought, but there was no way she'd ever actually go through with it. But the next day, the rice renaissance was put into effect.

o

The cafeteria was crowded, like it always was at lunchtime. But today, it was far more crowded than usual. The line of students stretched out of the cafeteria, and showed no signs of moving. There was a problem at the front of it.

"Spaghetti with meat sauce," Fujiko Eto, the girl at the front, said, elegantly placing her ticket down on the counter. She was a beautiful girl with long, flowing black hair. The other girls all loved her, and looked up to her as a big sister.

Of course, that was only her public side. In private she was an evil woman. She was obsessed with Akuto, the one part of her private side she didn't try to hide, and the girls all thought that the Demon King had brainwashed her.

"We have no spaghetti," she was told. She looked up in surprise. She recognized the voice. The woman behind the counter was Korone.

"Korone, what are you doing here? And what do you mean, there's no spaghetti?"

“Just for today, I am in charge of the cafeteria by the Empress’s orders. As for the spaghetti, I’m sorry, but we don’t have any. We’ll still accept your ticket, so please change your order,” Korone said flatly.

“I see. Fine. I’ll take some udon then. Kitsune udon.” Fujiko smiled gently.

“We don’t have any,” Korone said.

“What? You don’t have any of that either?” Fujiko said, surprised.

“Correct. Now, what will you have?”

Now she knew why the line was so long, but she still had a lot of questions. Frowning, Fujiko changed her order. “Alright, soba with tempura.”

“We don’t have any.” Another almost instant answer.

“Ramen.”

“Nope.”

“Yakisoba?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Kishimen?”

“Obviously no.”

“Fine! Chilled chinese noodles!”

“Of course we don’t have any.”

“I feel like noodles today! Gaah! Don’t tell me you don’t have any!” Fujiko began to raise her voice.

But Korone’s reaction was calm. “Noodles? We have vermicelli.”

“Huh? Vermicelli?”

“Correct. I had to ask to get it, too. It was allowed, because it’s made from rice.”

When Korone said this, Fujiko finally knew what was going on. “...I see. That’s right. Keena Soga is empress now, isn’t she?”

“Correct. She told me to spread the wonders of rice, so I decided to make an

all-rice menu. I recommend the K Combo.”

“The K Combo...” Fujiko whispered, a little scared.

The K Combo. It was a terrifying combo, made especially for Keena. Even the soup and the main course were made from rice. It was something no normal person could eat. The side dish was a rice croquette.

“And that’s where this mess came from...” Fujiko looked around her. The line was long because all the other students had argued with Korone like she was doing. Some of the students had taken their meals and sat down, but all of them were sitting there with chopsticks unmoving, and faces frozen in despair. When she looked closer, she saw that all of them were sitting in front of half-eaten K Combos.

“Why are you doing this?” Fujiko asked in a low voice. It was the scariest expression she could muster in front of the other students. But Korone’s expression was unchanged.

“My order was to spread rice.”

“Gaah! I don’t know what’s going on, but I demand you return the school menu to what it was before!” Fujiko said loudly, motioning for the students behind her to say something too. Even the ones who’d been suffering in silence were driven by her voice to rise up.

“That’s right! That’s right!”

“The Empress is a tyrant!”

“Give us bread! Give us noodles!” The students began to break out of the line and storm the counter.

“If you have no noodles, then you may eat rice,” Korone said, crossing her arms and standing tall in front of the mob. The students began to get more and more out of hand.

“What?!”

“Just because you’re cute, don’t think you can act like an Empress!”

“No, it’s Korone speaking, but there’s a real empress backing her.”

“I don’t care! I just want our menu back!”

The cafeteria wasn’t tiny, but it was small enough that after you were done eating, you were expected to immediately vacate your seat. The area around the counter began to get more and more packed. Korone, however, remained calm, or at least expressionless.

“Very well. Let’s negotiate. I’ll allow you to have curry rice.” With these words, the students exploded.

“Wait, we weren’t even allowed to have curry?”

“Does that mean our only options were white rice and the K Combo?”

“No negotiations! Either we get our menu back, or it’s war!”

“That’s right! We demand real food!”

“This is our rice rebellion!”

The students expressions were turning violent. They were a rowdy group to begin with, but not the sort of people who would lose control easily. But now they were on the verge of a riot. It was a sign of how emotional people can get over food.

“‘Rice rebellion’ seems incorrect, somehow. But from your words I’m going to interpret an intent to attack me,” Korone said. The students’ faces turned tense as they started to murmur among themselves.

Kill or be killed. Things in the cafeteria were turning violent fast. Everyone there knew exactly how deadly Korone was. But the crowd was starving and angry, and wasn’t going to back down.

“We demand food! Bring back our menu!”

“We’re willing to fight if we have to!”

“That’s right, isn’t it, Fujiko?” The students all looked to Fujiko, the girl who’d started it, for agreement. But Fujiko was already gone.

“Huh?”

The students were curious as to where she might’ve gone, but there was no time to really think about it. In the next moment, a dangerous-sounding voice

came from behind Korone. “What’s all this fuss about?”

The voice was nonchalant. In other words, it wasn’t the words or the voice that was dangerous. It was Akuto Sai. A very dangerous man. The students began to back away from the counter.

“T-That’s not fair! You can’t use someone that dangerous in a negotiation!”

“You’re trying to threaten us!”

“Let’s resolve this peacefully! Have a nice cup of tea!” The students began to say, their voices full of fear.

Akuto had brought a huge war and terrible disaster to the capital. He was working for the Empress now, but he was still, in every way, the Demon King.

“K-Korone... Why is the Demon King here?” One of the students at the front said in a shaking voice.

“He’s helping me,” Korone responded. She wasn’t lying. Akuto was standing in front of a big pot, making rice and ladling it into bowls. But the students didn’t understand that it was all he was doing.

“H-Helping...?”

“The Demon King wouldn’t just help cook... He has to be there as a hired guard!” Akuto frowned when he heard this.

—*No, I’m actually really good at cooking...*

He thought this to himself, but he didn’t say it. His silence and his frown only made the students more scared.

“H-He’s angry!”

“He wants to fight!”

“Aaah! I’m scared!”

There was a crashing sound in the middle of the crowd. One of the students had seemingly passed out.

—*Is it just me, or is it getting worse than before?*” Akuto grumbled to himself unhappily, and with a bit of confusion. But he was able to figure out what was going on. He frowned even more.

“Korone. Explain what’s going on here?”

“I tried to make them eat rice, and a riot broke out,” she explained simply, without moving a cheek. Akuto put a hand on his forehead and sighed.

“Listen... Did you do what I told you to? There are better ways to make people eat rice, you know. What are you going to do about this? It’s clearly your fault,” he scolded Korone.

Korone’s expression remained unchanged, but now the students were even more scared. This is how they interpreted it: “Did you do what I told you to? So this is the Demon King’s idea!”

“He’s trying to make us eat only rice so we get a vitamin deficiency!”

“What a terrifying plot!”

“And he’s using the Empress’s love of rice to do it! He’s trying to blame it on the Empress!”

“That’s right! Keena, and Korone, who are very cute, would never do this on their own!”

“And now that the plan’s failed, he’s scolding Korone!”

—I don’t really know what’s going on, but I think it’s happening again... Akuto sobbed to himself. But then he looked up at the students, trying his best to stay strong.

“Well, it seems like there’s been a lot of misunderstandings here. Let’s all calm down and talk about this. Okay?” Akuto said, smiling.

His smile wasn’t perfect, but his handsome face looked naturally evil enough that when he said “Let’s talk,” it was nothing but a source of fear. The cafeteria filled with screams as the students rushed for the exits.

—Oh...

By the time he realized his mistake, there was nobody left in the room. Dropped meal tickets blew like tumbleweeds through the empty space.

“Well, at least that solved the problem,” Korone said flatly.

“...Listen, this happened because you replaced the whole menu with rice,

didn't it?" Akuto said, looking at the menu and finally understanding what had happened.

"It was the Empress's orders."

"...She just said to encourage more people to eat rice."

"And I strongly encouraged it."

"Strongly?" Akuto asked. Korone nodded.

"Extremely strongly."

"...So this really is your fault, isn't it?"

"That's one way to view it."

"You caused this whole mess, didn't you?"

"That's correct, from a certain point of view."

"And wait, do you enjoy causing messes?"

"A little."

"...Huh?"

"A little," Korone said again.

Akuto coughed slightly. "Ahmm... I... I see."

"Don't worry. I said 'a little' because I don't enjoy it entirely. You may interpret this as me not meaning any harm, but enjoying the results after the fact," Korone said with a serious look on her face.

"No, you don't need to explain it..."

"I don't? Then I will get to work cleaning up after this mess. I will call the Empress and have her announce that she'll be allowing meals other than rice. Fortunately, the students all think that it was your doing," Korone said, nodding.

"Did you plan for it to turn out this way from the start?"

"Something like that," Korone said as she walked away.

—Well, of course she did. It's a good idea to use me to make the Empress look

better.

Akuto did his best to convince himself, but his idea of retiring to read books all day was starting to seem better and better.

○

Meanwhile, newly-hired janitor Nozomi Sasahara was walking through the courtyard of Constant Magical Academy. A janitor was free to wear whatever clothes they wanted, but she'd been advised to bring something that she was willing to get dirty, so she brought her maid outfit from home. Her family was poor, and it was all she had. Her first job was to check up on all the sensors in each of the school's buildings. If one was damaged, contractors would be called in to repair it, but checking them daily was the janitor's job.

Nozomi was a fast worker.

Whether it was all her time spent in her run-down ramshackle house growing up, or her skills as a natural born janitor, she was several times as good as your average custodian. Today, she was just on her way to check the last sensor.

Suddenly she heard loud shouting.

"Glory to the Empress! Glory to the Empress!"

Her ears perked up, and her exposed forehead shone in the light.

"The Empress...?"

She ran in the direction of the voices. Keena was there, surrounded by students, the subject of ferocious applause. Nozomi didn't know it, but the students were cheering her for restoring the proper menu to the school cafeteria.

—So that's her? Nozomi's eyes locked on Keena.

She hadn't been able to tell when she'd seen her on TV, but not only did Keena look like a commoner, she looked like an idiot.

—Is that really her? She looks so... dumb...

Nozomi's head began to spin. She was having trouble thinking.

—Is an idiot like that really allowed to be Empress?

—Is your bloodline all that matters, then?

—Then that means that I can be empress, too!

—But there's already an Empress, isn't there...

Nozomi's mind came to the wrong conclusion.

"I know! I'll talk to her directly and have her let me be Empress instead!"

Since she'd come here without a plan, it was only natural that she'd come to a rash conclusion, but Nozomi was very proud of her wonderful idea. She looked at Keena once again.

—Now, how do I get to her...?

Keena was surrounded by students and impossible to approach.

—I'll just have to wait for my chance.

She hid herself on the other side of the storage shed. Eventually, the students started to go back into the school cafeteria. Only Keena and Korone were left, and the two of them started to walk away, talking about something she couldn't make out.

—T-They're coming this way!

As Keena got closer, Nozomi could feel her heart beating faster.

—I-I'm not nervous. Nope. I-I'm not...

She said that to herself, but she was actually *very* nervous. And she wasn't a strong girl to begin with.

—Aah! Here she is! Keena was right on top of her.

"I decided to add a rice field to the garden in the new palace."

"I assumed that you would."

"Huh? How did you know?"

She could hear them now.

—Alright, let's do this.

—No, I'll wait for them to get a little closer.

—Okay, let's do this.

—No, maybe I'll let them get by me and then approach from behind...

Nozomi hesitated. And of course, while she was hesitating, the two of them passed her by. By the time she'd worked up the courage to poke her head out, they were already gone.

—W-What? How?

She began to think with her muddled head once more. There's no reason to tell you all the mistaken ideas that she came up with, but in the end, she came to a completely absurd conclusion.

—I'll have to set a trap so I can delay her, and then I'll talk to her!

Nozomi decided that she'd leverage her position as a janitor to find Keena's daily schedule. She quickly finished her work for the day, and then called up the class schedule on the terminal in the janitor's room.

"Empress's class schedule... here we go. She changes classes... right here!"

She knew where she'd set her trap now. She'd set it on the path Keena traveled in between classes.

—What kind of trap should I set? Maybe lay down sticky glue or something? No, but sticky glue's tough to work with, and it could get somebody else stuck, too. But it would be great if I could use it... Maybe I can stick it up someplace nobody else would go? Like on the walls. Someplace high up. Someplace you wouldn't normally fly even if you could use flight magic. And then maybe find some way to get her up there...

At this point, it would be a complete waste of energy to point out how many flaws there were in what Nozomi was thinking.

In the end, this was the idea Nozomi came up with: She would put a banana on the path where Keena was going to walk.

Keena would slip and fall backwards, and when she did, she'd look up.

Up above her would be a flyer saying "Big sale on rice!"

It would lead her to a place where nobody else was around.

When she picked it up, a metal wash basin would fall from above.

It would hit her head, and she would stagger until she fell on the trampoline next to her.

The trampoline would send her skyward, until she got caught in the sticky glue that was high up on the wall.

—And then I'll be waiting at the window next to her to talk to her! It's perfect! Just perfect! I can't believe how smart I am!

It did, indeed, take a certain type of mind to come up with a plan like that. Regardless, Nozomi decided it was best to act quickly. She set up her trap just like she'd planned, and waited for Keena to come.

According to the schedule, Keena would always wait for the other classmates to go first, and then follow them by herself. Nozomi watched as Keena's classmates walked past her, laughing and talking among themselves, and then put a banana peel in the middle of the floor, then quickly hid behind a nearby pillar.

"Heheh... Now she'll trip!" she grinned to herself.

But the next person she saw wasn't Keena. It was Keena's servant, the beautiful Liradan.

—Does her servant go ahead of her, maybe...?

Nozomi gasped, but what shocked her more was when Korone reached down, picked up the banana peel, and tossed it in the garbage.

"My perfect plan..." Nozomi said, turning dead pale.

Just before she was about to collapse, though, a voice called out to her.

"Excuse me."

".....Huh?"

Nozomi snapped back to her senses and turned towards the voice. Shockingly, it was Korone.

"Uhyaah!" she screamed and tried to run away, but Korone calmly grabbed her by the arm.

“Wait.”

“Aaah! Forgive me! Don’t hurt me! I didn’t mean anything by it!”

“What are you talking about? I just said something to you because you were standing there like you were lost.”

“Huh? Then you didn’t realize I set a trap?”

“A trap? You set a trap?”

“Oh no! I’ve been found out!” Nozomi screamed.

She tried to run, forgetting that Korone was holding her by the arm, but of course, she failed. Korone pulled hard, and she staggered forward.

“Are you an idiot?” Korone said expressionlessly.

“Waah... I don’t want to be called an idiot. But right now... I’m a big idiot.”



Nozomi immediately gave up, fell to her knees, and started to cry.

“Crying will get you nowhere. Confess your crime. What do you mean, you set a trap? Why?” Korone asked, looking down at her.

Nozomi confessed to everything she’d done, wiping away tears as she spoke. She told her that she’d tried to capture the Empress with sticky glue. That she wanted to talk to the Empress. And that she had imperial blood herself.

“I see. And that’s why you set this terrible trap?”

“That’s right. But I didn’t mean to hurt her...”

“I can’t believe you thought you could capture the Empress like this.”

“I said I’m sorry! I’m really sorry!”

“That’s right. I can’t believe you though you could capture her with a trap like this.”

“Huh?” Nozomi looked upwards.

Korone nodded expressionlessly.

“You’ll never be able to become the new empress with a trap like this. You need to be more realistic.”

“Huh? Huh? What?”

“But think about it,” Korone explained to her, “Even if you capture her, you won’t be able to become Empress.”

“Y-You’re right. I was just going to talk with her...”

“There’s no way that you can get what you want through peaceful conversation.”

“Huh?”

“Negotiations mean doing what it takes to get your opponent to agree to your conditions. In other words, if you negotiate when your opponent is in dire peril, you’re more likely to get what you want,” Korone said calmly.

“W-Wait, you can’t mean...” Nozomi was scared, now that she realized something was wrong here. But Korone was serious. In fact, her expression

hadn't changed at all. But Nozomi could tell what it was she was trying to say.

"...Isn't that what they call a threat?"

Korone shook her head, though.

"Of course not. Negotiations aren't threats. Whether someone thinks it's a threat is up to them."

"You can't do that! It's wrong! I mean, it's really wrong! But just... out of curiosity... could you tell me how I could threat-I mean, negotiate with her?" Nozomi squeezed her eyes shut, but she was holding Korone's hand tight as she spoke.

"First, you need to make the trap something that causes no actual harm. But the negotiations have to succeed for you to get what you want, which means you should do something that puts your target at risk of psychological harm," Korone said.

Nozomi appeared to think for a moment, before she suddenly clapped her hands together. "You mean, for example, a trap that stripped its target completely naked in front of other people?"

"That's one way, of course," Korone nodded.

"Oh! Thank you, kind person!" Nozomi said with tears in her eyes.

But when she let go of Korone's hand and went to get started working on her trap, she realized she had no idea what to actually do.

"...Um? How do I set a trap like that, exactly?"

"I see. You'll need advice, which I'll be happy to provide. Complicated traps like yours aren't what you want. The more simple a trap is, the more effective. There are two basic rules you need to follow. First, don't use mana. Second, achieve your goal with one single process," Korone explained calmly.

"The reason you don't use mana is to make it more difficult for magically-adept students to discover your trap. And the reason for the second rule is that by quickly humiliating your target, you can harm the powers of concentration required to use magic, increasing the amount of time for which they're humiliated."

“I see. Good to know.” Nozomi began to take notes.

“This limits the amount of effective types of traps. I’ll show you a diagram,” Korone said as she opened a mana screen that showed the details of a number of traps.”

“Why did you have something like this saved...?”

Korone ignored her and pointed to the screen.

“The key here is this rope. You want something that activates when the rope is pulled.”

“Hmm...” Nozomi nodded, deep in thought.

“Catching both legs with a rope and dangling the target in the air is effective, but it’s dangerous and should be avoided. I suggest something that douses the target from above with a special chemical.”

“A chemical?”

“Yes. This.” Korone took out a small vial from the bag she always carried and held it above her head.

“ClothesMeltrin!”

“C-Clothesmel...what?”

“ClothesMeltrin. A terrifying chemical that only melts clothes.”

“They didn’t put a lot of thought into that name, did they?”

“Take it up with the person who named it. It uses bacteria to dissolve chemical fibers.”

“Which means you can quickly strip someone to their underwear... No, if their underwear’s made of chemical fibers they’ll lose it too...!”

“Correct.” Korone nodded.

Then she offered the vial to Nozomi. “It needs to be watered down 30 times before you use it. This one vial will give you enough to fill three buckets.”

“N-No, but...” Nozomi hesitated. “This is kind of scary, isn’t it?”

“Do you think so? All you’re doing is negotiating with someone when they’re

naked. Is there a problem with that?” Korone tried to force the vial into Nozomi’s hands.

“There isn’t, but... A-Aaah....”

Nozomi started to quietly scream. She was never a strong girl, and the plan was scaring her. In Nozomi’s eyes, Korone seemed to have transformed into Mephistopheles. Though a demon with a much more limited range of facial expressions. Her shaking hands stretched out towards the vial. And then...

“Korone, who’s this?”

Suddenly she heard a man’s voice from nearby.

“HYAAAAH!” Nozomi screamed loudly and started to run.

“Wai-”

The man — Akuto — shouted after her, but she didn’t hear him.

She ran without thinking for a while, before finally stopping to rest behind some bushes. Only after she caught her breath did she realize that the vial was tightly held in her hands.

“T-This is...”

Nozomi gulped. And what was more...

“For some reason, there’s a copy of that trap schematic on my terminal!”

○

“Korone, who was that?” Akuto asked as he watched Nozomi run off into the distance.

“The janitor,” Korone said flatly.

“Why was the janitor wearing a maid outfit...? No, that’s not what’s important here. What was that about?”

“She was a poor, delusional girl, and so I decided to talk to her a little.”

“Huh?” Akuto said, confused.

“She was trying to use some kind of strange trap to capture the Empress. She put a banana peel here...” Korone returned the banana peel from the garbage

can to its original position.

“I’m not following.”

“I see. I suppose that’s just a sign of how strange the situation was. Since the Empress cut class, we had nothing to fear, but I was in the process of learning more about her, and possibly arresting her, when you interrupted.” Korone said.

Akuto didn’t know what to say to that.

“...Does that mean I’m at fault here?”

“No, I didn’t say that.”

“But you said you were trying to arrest her...”

“No, she didn’t do anything that violated the law. I was trying to see if I could get her to do it.”

“...I really don’t follow. You’re not just trying to make things as complicated as possible so you can enjoy it, are you?”

“A little.”

“Come on, you can’t do that...”

“Don’t worry. I’m only 80% serious.”

“Listen...” Akuto put an end to the strange conversation and decided to follow after the maid-slash-janitor.

He left Korone behind as he jogged off in the direction she’d gone.

—Um, I think it was this way...

Akuto headed off to the side of the school building. He found Nozomi on a narrow route between two of the classrooms. She was a tiny girl in a maid uniform, setting up a primitive trap. She crouched in the nearby bushes, fiddling with a rope.

“Um...”

Akuto approached. He was met with a scream in response.

“Hyaaah!”

Before he knew it she was already running.

“Wait...”

He tried to stop her, but in an instant she'd disappeared beyond the corner of the school building. He went to follow her, but stopped himself just before he fell into the trap she'd set.

—That was close. So this is the trap Korone was talking about...

He'd only seen it because he'd watched her set it, but it was a thin string of fishing wire that would be almost impossible to see if you weren't watching. And if you tripped the wire, it was set to drop a bucket of liquid down on your head from above. The bucket was well-hidden too, something you'd never find if someone didn't tell you it was there.

“I need to get rid of this first.”

Akuto followed the fishing wire to the base of a tree, where he found a device hidden on the other side of a trunk. He started to think about how he could get the device undone without dropping the bucket.

—If I untie the rope, the bucket will fall... Maybe I should just drop the bucket when nobody's around? he said, and began to fiddle with the device, which consisted of branches and stone weights.

“What are you doing back there? It seems like you're hiding something.”

He heard a voice.

“Uwah! Don't move from that spot!” Akuto cried.

It was Junko Hattori. She was the class rep, and she had a long history with Akuto. Junko was a girl with a gallant flair, looked up to by her classmates, upstanding and always telling the truth. But Akuto knew that she was actually pretty clumsy sometimes. And if she was standing in that spot, then...

“What do you mean ‘don't move’? What are you doing there?”

Junko began to walk towards him in broad strides.

“I said don't move!” he yelled again, but her strides only grew longer.

“You're acting suspicious! What are you hid...!” She tripped on the fishing

line.

“Aah...!”

Akuto tried his hardest to hang on to the rope supporting the bucket. But when Junko tripped the wire, it made the weights descend with more force than he'd expected. The rope slipped out of his hands.

“Uwah!” Junko almost tripped, but managed to keep her balance and stay where she was. Unfortunately, that was the wrong move. The contents of the bucket were splattered all over her.

“Bwah... What did you just dump on me?!”

She looked up, shaking her head and sending water droplets scattering from her wet hair as she stormed over to him.

“Listen, it's not...” Akuto started to flail his hands.

Junko didn't understand what he meant, and kept walking forward, her eyes locked straight onto his.

“Don't try and talk your way out of this! You're not a little child anymore, so don't...”

She raised a hand to point at Akuto. When she did, the sleeve of her uniform began to turn to dust and fall to the ground.



“What’s... going on...? H-Huh...? AAAH!” Junko’s eyes went wide as she realized all her clothes were starting to crumble from her body.

“Aaah!” She covered her body with her arms and dropped.

Fortunately, the cloth she’d wrapped around her breasts and crotch to serve as underwear hadn’t melted.

“A-Are you okay?” Akuto ran over to her, took off his jacket, and placed it on top of her. She gripped it tightly to her body, tears in her eyes, and looked up at him angrily.

“I-I thought this was just a childish trick, but it’s far worse. Don’t tell me you went through all this just to get my clothes off...”

“No, this wasn’t an attempt to get your clothes off...”

“Oh... So you weren’t setting the trap for me, you were setting it for someone else who came along this path... I-If you did this because you wanted to see me naked, I could’ve forgiven you, but...” Junko bit her lip and stood up.

She ran her arms through the sleeves of Akuto’s jacket, and then summoned mana light into her hands.

“Wait, you’ve got it all wrong...”

“I understand everything. Now that your power has been sealed, you’ve been reduced to playing pranks like an ordinary student!”

“No... that’s really not it.”

“Fortunately, I’m now capable of punishing you. And I know that most of what I can do won’t kill you, too...” She approached him with a violent look on her face.

The rest of the student body didn’t know this, but Akuto no longer had the incredible power he’d had after he awakened. He retained his toughness, it seemed, but his mana control was incomplete. In other words, if he was hit, it would hurt.

“You need to listen to me...” Akuto started to back off.

“If you’re running, it’s proof that you don’t feel like you need to atone!

Prepare yourself!”

She threw a mana ball at him. Akuto dodged it and ran.

“Uwaah!”

“Stop right there”!

“If I stop, you’re going to hit me!”

“Of course I am!” Junko screamed as she ran after him.

The first person to hear them was Fujiko, the girl who’d caused the fuss at the cafeteria and then fled the minute things got complicated. She was sitting in the quiet area behind the school building, eating a pasta lunch she’d bought at a restaurant outside the school.

“Oh? What’s all this fuss?” She looked up from the bench and saw Junko chasing after Akuto. Then she quickly stood up.

“Hey, what are you doing?” she yelled, and started to run after Junko.

“I won’t let anybody stop me from punishing him, even you!” Junko turned back a moment to yell at her.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but absolute subservience to Akuto is our job!” Fujiko yelled back.

“Who’s this ‘we’? Since when were you and I in the same group?”

“No! I mean obeying Akuto is all of humanity’s job!”

“That’s crazy!”

Junko and Fujiko kept yelling as they ran.

“I don’t care! Just leave me alone!” Akuto looked back for a moment to scream.

But then he turned to look ahead again, and stopped in surprise at what he saw.

“Uwah! Wait! Watch out!” He’d seen Nozomi running from behind a nearby building. That meant that there was another trap nearby.

“‘Watch out’? Couldn’t you think of something more clever?” Junko jumped

up, ready to attack Akuto.

“Hold it!” Fujiko leapt in front of her to stop her.

And then...

Fujiko tripped on something and fell.

“Ah..!”

“Huh...?”

Akuto and Junko froze as they saw Fujiko trip. Something splashed on her from above.

“Hey, what is this?!” She stood up. Her clothes were melting on her body.

Fujiko didn’t realize this, though. She stood up tall and straight, exposing her underwear-clad body to the world.

“Oh no...” Akuto covered his face with one hand.

“Fujiko!” Junko quickly waved her hands at her.

“What... just... happened...? Huh? Hyaaah!” Fujiko wrapped her arms around her body, blushed, and looked at Akuto.

“If you wanted to see me naked, you could’ve just said so... Wait, now’s not the right mood for that sort of thing!” She seemed to change her mind halfway through her sentence, because she suddenly yanked Akuto’s jacket off of Junko.

“Uwah! Aah! W-What are you doing...?” Junko dropped to her knees and covered herself.

“Hahahaha! So that’s why you’re wearing Akuto’s jacket, huh? But his jacket is too good for you!” She put the jacket on and began to rub her cheek lovingly against the collar.

“E-Even if you’re an upperclassman, you can’t do this to me...” Junko grit her teeth and glared at Fujiko, but she couldn’t do anything while crouching on the ground.

“I’m not sure what I should say here, but...” Akuto took off his shirt and laid it on Junko.

“Oh! I think she got a better deal than I did...” Fujiko whispered as she watched Junko put on and button the shirt.

Junko blushed.

“D-Don’t be stupid... This shirt’s all sweaty...”

“That just makes it better!” Fujiko said with shining eyes.

“No... Well, never mind that. This should be enough to get you to understand that I wasn’t the one who did this..” Akuto interrupted.

“I did see someone strange-looking running away...” Junko said, averting her eyes from him.

“In other words, someone else came up with this ridiculous idea.” Fujiko said. She looked around, and then raised an eyebrow.

“Oh?”

“What is it?” Akuto said, but there was no need to wait for a response. He realized that a good number of students were watching them from a distance.

“What is that? Exhibitionism play?”

“The Demon King is toying with Fujiko again...”

“No, Fujiko is one thing, but he’s got the class rep naked except for her underwear and a t-shirt...”

“I can’t believe they’re doing that on school grounds...”

He could hear the students talking.

“People are starting to notice. Not that I mind being watched.” Fujiko said casually, but Junko went pale.

“Y-You’re crazy! You can’t just humiliate me like this...”

“I told you, it wasn’t me.” Akuto said, but Junko was so embarrassed that she couldn’t even think straight.

“Shut up! It has to be your fault somehow! Gaaah! Forget it! I’ll just punish you first and think later!” She took out a sword from somewhere, drew it, and began to charge at Akuto.

“Come on, think about this!” Akuto started to run as she chased after him.

“Stop attacking Akuto!” Fujiko started to run, too.

“Man, I really need to find that girl now...”

Akuto sighed. As he ran, he looked around to try and find Nozomi. What he saw terrified him.

“How dare he humiliate girls like that?”

“But what if the Demon King gets mad?”

“He can’t use his powers in this situation. Let’s surround him and say so many mean things he never recovers!”

“Oh, this is getting fun.”

“We might be able to see some tits!”

“I want to see more of the class rep wearing just a shirt.”

“Knock it off, boys!”

The students were on the move, chatting and arguing among themselves. And of course, they were all following after Akuto. By now, most of the crowd didn’t even know what was going on, and was simply following the group.

“Uwah! What’s going on here?”

Akuto searched even more frantically for Nozomi.

○

—*Aah! I did it again!* Nozomi screamed to herself.

She’d been running from Akuto, Junko, and Fujiko, when she’d unconsciously set a second trap, the one that had gotten Fujiko.

“Why am I doing something so scary...?” she said to herself regretfully as she ran.

After a moment of running, though, she noticed something was wrong. She began to hear a sound like the rumbling of the Earth.

“W-What’s going on?” She looked around. She could see a cloud of dust in the distance.

—W-What’s that? She didn’t say anything about all this stuff happening!

The cloud of dust was getting closer and closer. When she saw that the dust was being thrown up by a rioting crowd of over 100 students, she was so scared that she completely went nuts.

“KYAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

Her head spinning, she came to an (of course) incorrect, and also absurd, conclusion.

—I’m gonna have to do that other thing! Nobody can stop me now!

○

“Why do I have to be humiliated like this?”

“A true lady turns that humiliation into pleasure!”

Junko and Fujiko were both screaming.

“I don’t care, but I’d appreciate it if you could stop chasing me... You can’t, can you?” Akuto sighed.

The students were swarming after him. If they stopped they’d be swallowed up.

—I just need to find that little maid... Oh!

He saw Nozomi out of the corner of his eye, and turned towards her. She seemed to be running towards the gym.

—I need to catch her and make her tell me what’s going on...

Nozomi seemed to have gone into the gym. The gym had a lot of exits, but they were in places that weren’t easy to spot. If he was lucky he might be able to catch her.

“I might be able to do this...”

Akuto jumped into the gym. Just as he did, he saw Nozomi climbing onto the stage in the back.

“Wait...!” he called out to her, but she ran off towards the backstage area.

“Oh, jeez...!”

He followed after her, but of course, Junko and Fujiko were right on his tail. And the rioting students were behind them.

“Uwah.... I’m gonna get them all trapped in here... She’s running towards a spot without any exits, so I guess I’ll be okay...” Akuto whispered.

He jumped up onto the stage to follow Nozomi. When he did, he looked up to see her on the second floor of the backstage area, next to the control panels that controlled the lights and curtain.

“Hey! Don’t be scared! I’m not going to hurt you!” he yelled, but when he looked into her eyes he saw no trace of sanity at all.

“You’re lying! You’re going to catch me and do all kinds of horrible, naughty things to me, aren’t you? Yeah! I know what’s going on here! That’s what you’re going to do, isn’t it?”

“I am not!”

“Then why are there so many people with you?” Nozomi pointed behind him.

Akuto looked to see that the gym was completely packed with people.

“Uwah... Well, this isn’t my fault...” Akuto said, but Nozomi shook her head.

“Even if it’s not your fault, there’s no way for me to escape now! So you know, there’s only one thing left for me to do!”

She put her hand on the control panel.

“Do? What are you going to do?” Akuto asked, a little afraid, but Nozomi simply said “Hmph!” and slammed her fist on the control panel.

“This!”

Rain started fall down behind Akuto, covering the whole gym. Cold water began to fall on the students.

“That’s not rain... The sprinkler?”

Akuto was right. The sprinkler system had activated. The whole gym was covered in water.

“It’s cold!”

“What is this?”

“Does he really think this will help him get away...?” the students began to yell. The whole gym was filled with students now, they had to yell just to be heard.

“...Water? No way!” Akuto gasped and looked up at Nozomi.

Nozomi began to scream. By now she’d totally lost it. “I told you, this is the only thing left for me to do!”

The students’ yells began to turn to shrieks.

“Hyaaaah!”

“Kyaaaah!”

“Uwaaaah!”

“Iyaaaah!”

The whole gym began to shake with the cries of boys and girls. The scene was beginning to turn the color of exposed skin. Everybody was either naked, or in their underwear. In other words, everyone had lost their uniform.

The girls began to use magic to blast the nearby boys away,

“This is... awful.” Akuto said, looking down on the crowd below him from the stage.

“I think a painter once drew a picture of hell that looked like this,” Fujiko said casually. Of course, she was on the stage and had avoided the carnage.

“I finally understand what’s going on, but... Now what?” Junko said as she glanced from Akuto to Nozomi.

Akuto looked up at Nozomi and sighed. “If we can just explain...”

Nozomi was shaking, now that she’d lost her only path to escape.

It wasn’t clear whether sanity had returned to her, but now she looked like a poor, frightened girl. It was a sad sight to behold.

“...No, I don’t know if we can have her explain anything.” Akuto whispered quietly.

Reluctantly, he looked down. The students had seemed to realize that if everybody else was naked, it wasn't embarrassing. They'd stopped fighting and were all glaring up at Akuto. He could see several red, bestial eyes shining against a backdrop of dark skin.

"So how do we calm them down, then?" Junko said to Akuto in a way that made it clear she had no idea what to do.

"Well..." Akuto began. There was a darkness in his eyes that made it clear that he was reluctant to do what he was about to do.

"...I'll do something bad." He whispered, and walked forward.

"Wait," Junko said, trying to stop him, but it was too late. Fujiko leapt in front of him.

"If you and I make love here, nobody will be able to stop us..."

"I'd really rather not," Akuto said immediately. But he didn't have any ideas except letting himself get beat up. He no longer had the strength to fight the whole school without hurting anyone.

"Well, if that's how it has to be, then fine. I can take the hits, at least." He said casually, and then stepped in front of the assembled students.

The students began to swarm the stage. Akuto simply closed his eyes so as not to scare them. But then a voice echoed throughout the gym.

"Stop this at once!" It was a voice clear and loud enough to drown out the yelling students.

Everyone froze and looked towards the voice. It was coming from above. Keena was slowly descending from the window. She had a speaker in her hand, and Korone was riding on her back. The sunlight shining in from the window behind her gave her an almost divine aura.

"Keena..." Akuto whispered as his eyes opened wide. The students all froze and began to murmur among themselves.

"I apologize for this incident. It was my failure to keep control of him that led to this. I apologize here and now for the trouble I caused you. I will officially have new uniforms prepared for you," she continued in a clear, unhesitating

voice.

The students were listening quietly. But Akuto could see that she was occasionally looking down at Korone's hand. She was reading off of cards.

"But that's not enough for an apology. I'm going to punish the Demon King here and now!" Keena declared. The students murmured among themselves.

"What? Punish me?" Akuto said in surprise. He knew Keena could supposedly control his power, but this was the first he'd heard about any kind of power like that. Keena landed in front of him. And she looked up at him with a rare look of anger.

"Ackie"!

"Y-Yes...?" Akuto mumbled.

"Ackie! The rice got hard because of you!" She pointed a finger at him as she scolded him.

"Huh? Rice...? Hard...?" As Akuto stood there confused, Keena called Korone over.

Korone walked over and took out a large plastic bin from her bag. It was what the school used for trash bins.

"We ended up with extra rice in the cafeteria. It will have to be thrown out at this rate," Korone said expressionlessly.

"You made more than you were supposed to! It's all dry and hard now, but your punishment is that you have to eat it!" She opened the trash bin, which was filled to the brim with dry, hard rice.

"W-Wait..." This was enough to cause even Akuto to take a step back. Korone thrust a ladle into the rice. There was a cracking sound.

"It's totally dry!" Akuto screamed.

"That's right! It's dry! Now, eat it all up and don't waste a single grain!" Keena grabbed the ladle with one hand and Akuto with the other, and began to force the rice down his mouth.

"S-Stop it! It's so hard! My teeth...!"

“Don’t worry! You can still eat it if you just ignore the pain! I know I could eat this much rice if I really tried, so as long as you ignore how hard it is, it’ll be fine!” Keena said, forcefully. By now Akuto had fallen to the ground, and she was on top of him and jamming rice down his throat.

“She’s forcing him to eat hard rice...”

“Without even steaming it again?”

“There’s so much of it...”

“This whole thing is starting to feel stupid...”

“Yeah... let’s just go home...”

The anger had completely drained from the students. They were watching in shocked silence as Akuto was forced to eat dry rice. Korone walked in front of the students and opened her bag.

“Now line up. Just tell me the size and type and I’ll give you a new uniform...” The students began to peacefully form a line.

Thus, the whole mess came to an end with one great sacrifice made by a single man.

○

And now, Akuto was lying alone on his bed. He had no idea how he’d managed to digest it all, but a full trash bin of rice had disappeared into his stomach. The price he’d paid was a stomachache worse than being punched.

“Oh... my peaceful life seems so far away...” He sobbed as he looked up at the ceiling.

Suddenly Korone appeared in his field of vision. She was looking down on him from above the bed.

“What is it?” Akuto asked. Her answer was immediate, but also awkward.

“I was curious if you were mad.”

“Mad?” Akuto said, and for once she took a moment to answer.

“...You must be aware who was responsible for all of this. Even if it was in large part a series of coincidences.”

“Yeah...” Akuto sighed a little and shook his head.

“...If it’s anyone’s fault, it’s that girl’s. And whether I’m mad or not is a separate issue. I am pretty sad, though.”

“I want to make it up to you, then.”

“Make it up to me?”

“Yes. I was thinking I might be able to make you feel better.”

“...You’re not teasing me again, are you?”

“You don’t trust me?” Korone said expressionlessly. But her voice sounded very sad.

“N-No, I do...” Akuto stammered.

“Good,” she said, and gently smiled at him. If he remembered right, this was the second time he’d seen her smile. Then she lifted a leg up and over his body, and crouched over him.

“Hey... If you’re not teasing me, then please don’t try and do anything dirty,” Akuto said, stammering.

“Don’t worry. I’m going to give you what you want. I just want to make you feel better. Fortunately, I was given an exterior which humans do not find displeasing, so I will sleep next to you and sing you love songs.” She slid into his bed and wrapped his arms around her.

“...Hey.”

“Is it not okay?” she said, looking up at him. Her eyes were shining like precious jewels, and he couldn’t help but put a hand around her shoulder.

“Um, it’s... okay, but...”

“Did an erection occur?”

“Huh?”

“No, I mean, did you get erect?”

Akuto stared at her. She was looking at him expressionlessly.

“...You tricked me again, didn’t you?” Akuto said, and the corners of her

mouth curled up into a grin.

“I’ll tell the rest of the girls that this is how you trick a man. Now, let’s check on that erection...”



“Let’s not!” Akuto slapped away her hand and yelled.

Korone lay on her side in the bed, and this time answered with her usual tone.

“Then, will you not get mad if I tease you again?” Akuto stared at her, and when he was pretty sure that this time it wasn’t an act, he sighed.

“If it’s something that doesn’t cause any real harm, and if it helps Keena. But don’t go too far, okay?”

“As you wish.” Korone nodded.

“Okay...” Akuto said, and closed his eyes.

“Um...”

“Hmm?” He opened them again upon hearing Korone speak.

“You’re not kicking me out of bed, then, are you?” she said mischievously.

“My stomach hurts, so I was trying to go to sleep!”

“I’ll also record the fact that men make excuses like that. Now, if the Empress were to see us like this, you might be forced to eat rock-hard rice again. I’ll be returning to my shelf.” she said as she stood up from the bed.

“Sure. You know, I never saw Keena after that...”

“She went to take that trash bin back to the cafeteria... I wonder what happened to her?”

○

“Waaaaaah! It’s so sticky I can’t get it off! Help me, Ackie! Korone!” Keena screamed. She’d gotten stuck on the glue on the wall of the school building’s second floor.

“I tripped on a banana peel, and then I saw a flyer talking about a sale on rice, and then I went to grab a bag of rice when a metal wash basin fell down and hit me on the head, and then I staggered onto a trampoline that knocked me into the air and I got stuck on the wall!” she sobbed. But Nozomi, the girl who’d set the trap, was now curled up in her futon in the janitor’s room, shivering and shaking.

“Scary! This school is scary!”

In the end, it was an hour before anybody found Keena.

2 - What If You Made a Copy Human?

A dark room, filled with all sorts of strange machinery.

Glowing panels, monitors displaying graphs going up and down.

The sound of endlessly whirring cooling fans.

In the center of the room, a girl was controlling an electric screwdriver attached to a robot arm. She must not have cared about her appearance, because she was wearing an unpressed white lab coat and her short hair was uncombed. There were goggles on her forehead and oil stains on her cheeks.

Yoshie Kita. That was her name.

Her talent for researching Virtual Phase Space had caused her to be caught up in a huge conspiracy, and at the end of it, she'd ended up joining Akuto in the Demon King war. Now that it was over, she'd gone back to her job, but she spent most of her time on her hobbies. Even on weekdays she was usually found here in a Constant Academy warehouse, working.

"Heheheh... It's finally done," she looked up, grinning.

There was a doll in front of her. "Dolls" were Liradans without high-class AI. They were often used for simple jobs, and often didn't even resemble humans. This particular doll had a flat, featureless surface that made it resemble a mannequin, and it looked like it hadn't been fully assembled. It was lying on a large work table. Yoshie went to press the round button on its nose, but then stopped.

"Hmm... I don't know if it was god or the devil that created this invention. Perhaps it's like summoning some accursed being from the black depths of darkness..." She talked like that all the time. It was a habit she'd picked up after playing too many video games.

"Master, you sound like a dork."

Suddenly there was a voice behind her. It was a tiny Liradan. She was a strange looking girl, clad in the clothes of a samurai. She had a long ponytail that reached down to the toes of her tiny body, and she carried a katana that

seemed to be twice her size.

She was Keisu. A Liradan made to seal away the first demon king. But now her job was done, and she spent her days helping Yoshie.

“Mph. What are you doing here?” Yoshie turned around.

“That’s a strange question. You’re the one who asked me to come here. You have a visitor.” Keisu pointed behind her.

“Oh, right.” Yoshie grabbed some cleaning spray off the ground and sprayed it into her hands, then wiped them with a cloth. Then she kicked the wheeled chair next to her across the room and motioned for her guest to sit down.

“You seem pretty busy.” It was Akuto. He sat down in the chair like he was meeting with an old male friend. Maybe it was Yoshie’s unfeminine personality, or maybe it was the fact that they both were prone to weird speeches, but Akuto was more open with Yoshie than he was with others.

“No, I was busy. But I just finished.” She put her elbows down on the table next to Akuto.

“That doll? No, is it a Liradan?” Akuto jerked his head in the direction of the work table.

“Doll,” she said. “But it’s a little dangerous.”

Yoshie grinned proudly.

“Dangerous? Is it illegal?”

“It can’t be illegal if there aren’t any laws about it. This is something that the modern legal system has never had to deal with,” she said confidently.

“But it’s still dangerous, right?” Akuto asked, and she nodded.

“That’s why I called you. No, there’s no risk of it exploding or going out of control or anything. I wanted your opinion.”

“My opinion?”

“Yeah. This is a doll that copies somebody’s personality, you see.” She pointed a thumb in the direction of the doll’s smooth, empty face.

“Copies somebody’s personality? Like necromancy?” Akuto asked, his eyes

going wide in surprise.

“Necromancy uses the data logs stored in the gods. This makes a copy of somebody’s personality inside virtual phase space, so it’s different.” Yoshie said. Akuto leaned forward, interested.

“That’s right. There was a time when we were sent into VPS and our bodies stayed here, right?”

“Yup. I used that same idea to make a robot that copies personalities. I got started when I was thinking about where a human soul actually is.”

“And you ended up with this thing? Does that mean that the soul is real, and that you can copy it?”

“Yup. Weird, huh? But this means that the gods are right, and it’s possible to take human souls to another dimension and recreate them there. That’s why I wanted you to hear it.”

“Seems like something I’d better remember,” Akuto said, nodding.

“But the immediate question is: what do we do with this thing?” Yoshie sighed.

“What do you mean?” Akuto asked. Yoshie beckoned him over to the table.

“Here, come take a closer look.”

“It seems like its body is pretty big,” he said as he looked down at the doll.

Yoshie put her hand over it and spoke.

“You see, I made this thing, and then I realized there were all kinds of evil uses for it. It’s featureless because when you press this button on the nose, it copies the appearance of the person who pushes it. It’s like Hattori’s clones; it uses condensed mana to cover itself.”

“So you get two of the same person? That could be weird.”

“Yup. That’s why I put in a safety device. I made it so it knows it’s a fake, and also so it won’t hurt anybody.”

“This is interesting, yeah. But since there’s so much potential for misuse, you should destroy it after one test,” Akuto said as he crossed his arms.

Yoshie nodded.

“Well, I figured you’d say that. I just wanted somebody to give me a little push. Also, I wanted to get some data.”

“Data?” Akuto asked. Yoshie responded by grabbing his hand and using it to touch the button.

“Hey..!” Akuto shouted in surprise.

There was a low rumble from the doll. Its surface began to shine as the mana gathered around it.

“Sorry, sorry. I wanted to try it with you. Don’t worry. It won’t be too big of a deal.” She put her hands together and apologized to him.

“Are you... sure it’s okay?” Akuto looked down at the doll, worried.

“It’ll be fine!” Yoshie waved her hands irresponsibly.

The light cleared up as the process of mana condensation finished. On the table lay someone who looked exactly like Akuto.

“Uwah,” Akuto said, shocked.

“It hurts to see you surprised like that, even if you’re me,” the Akuto on the table said as he sat up.

“That sounds exactly like something I’d say,” Akuto said with wide eyes.

“Well, ’cause I’m modeled off of me. I know I’m fake, but being a fake is an unpleasant thing. It’s fine if you want to do an experiment, but if you’re not going to give me anything to do, then I hope you’ll delete me soon. I don’t really feel like talking to myself,” the Akuto on the table said.

“I agree. Though I guess it’s natural that I would agree.”

“That’s the thing. How many minutes do you need to get the data?” both of them said.

Yoshie laughed.

“One hour of small talk should do it. It’s fun seeing two people with the same personality together.”

“It’s not fun for me.”

“Of course, it’s not fun for me either.”

“Now, I’d prefer we didn’t have to spend the next hour talking to ourselves.”

“That’s right. I’d rather talk to you than me. We never really got a chance to talk.”

“I’d love some hints as to how I’m supposed to act from now on, too. Keena is too much of a free spirit.” The two Akutos were speaking in tandem.

“It looks like you two have already learned how to split up your words so you’re sharing the same idea. But if I’m going to be talking to you both at once, that’s going to take a lot of effort,” Yoshie laughed.



“T-This is fascinating...”

A black shadow scuttered near the door of the warehouse. It was Nozomi, the girl born to be a janitor. She was wearing her maid uniform on her tiny body, and her forehead was glistening as she looked into the room. She'd been passing by on her janitor duties when she'd stopped to listen to their conversation. She couldn't help but look inside when she'd heard what they were saying, and had witnessed two Akuto's.

“So from what they said, if you push that button it turns into a copy of you!” Nozomi began to plot. Her idea was a little better this time, but it was still very selfish.

“I know! I'll borrow that doll and make a copy of the Empress, then make her do what I tell her to! And then... I'll become Empress! It's perfect!”

And then her janitorial powers began to manifest themselves. She quickly moved to the control panel conveniently located on the outside of the warehouse, triggered the fire alarm, and turned off the power.

“Uwah!”

“The lights went out,”

“Looks like something's wrong. The backup power isn't working either. Let's check outside.”

She could hear three voices from inside. She started to run back towards the door, and as soon as she saw them come out, she blasted them with a fire extinguisher.

“Uwah!”

“Hyah!”

The three of them screamed as they were bathed in white... No, two of them. Nozomi could see that one of them wasn't moving.

—*A doll wouldn't panic at a fire extinguisher...!* It was a brilliant insight for her, and she grabbed the one who didn't move.

“This way!” she said, as she grabbed the doll and ran.

“Um, okay?”

The doll’s personality was Akuto. In this case, Akuto would’ve just gone along with it. Then, she used her janitorial powers once more to stop Akuto and Yoshie from catching up with them. She dragged the doll Akuto down one of the side alleys with her. In her short time at the school, she’d learned every nook and cranny of it.

“Wait!”

“Where are you going?”

She could hear Akuto and Yoshie’s cries getting further away from them. Even the students didn’t know the path she was using, so it was easy for her to escape.

“Heheheh... they won’t find us here,” Nozomi said. She was hiding with the doll in a maintenance crawl space.

“So, what’s going on?” The doll had Akuto’s personality and appearance. He was nicer than he needed to be, even to Nozomi, the girl who’d dragged him out here.

“W-Well, you see...” Nozomi began to stammer.

Of course, she’d barely ever talked to a boy. Being this close to Akuto in a cramped space was too much for her.

“C-Can you get away from me?”

“Sorry. But I think this is your fault for choosing such a cramped space... Excuse me for a second. Is this better?”

Akuto grabbed her waist with both hands and lifted her up, setting her on top of a nearby panel at a spot higher than his chest.

“Hyaah!” Nozomi gasped, but after a moment she realized that having more space around her really did calm her down. Akuto’s face, however, was closer than she would’ve liked.

“U-Um, listen...” Nozomi began to flail her hands. Her face was beet red. But

Akuto put a hand on her head, like he would a child's.

"So, why did you do this?"

"W-Well... Hey, get your hand off me! I'm not a kid! I'm a grown-up!"

"I'm sorry. You looked young to me. No, I suppose that's rude."

"I'm probably older than you," Nozomi pouted.

"Then I must apologize again. But there must be a good reason for why you did this, right?" Akuto straightened himself and looked up at her.

"W-Well... I want to use you to make a copy of the Empress." Nozomi decided to tell him the truth.

Akuto frowned at her.

"You know that's wrong," he said, and put strong hands on both her shoulders.

"W-What are you doing?"

"Turning you over to the authorities. You can't just..."

"Hyah! Noo! No! I'll scream!"

"I don't want anybody to get the wrong idea, but if somebody comes we can all go to the police together."

"Gyaaah! Noo!" Nozomi began to flail her arms around.

"Don't struggle like that...ah!" Akuto gasped. And then he froze. Nozomi's fist had landed on his nose.

"Hyaaaah! ...Wait, the switch..." Nozomi let out of a sigh of relief.

"But if I hit the switch, what happens...?"

○

"Oh jeez... She's the girl from last time." Akuto shook his head.

"Is she dangerous?" Yoshie asked.

"In a way, yeah. You probably weren't paying attention, but she's already caused trouble once. I think she's got personality issues. She's got an overactive

imagination and a very proactive personality, but she doesn't handle surprises well," Akuto answered.

"That's an issue, then." Yoshie nodded and took a look at the warehouse panel, then shook her head.

"There's no issues with the warehouse. That's bad news. It means she was after the doll. Seems like she's got a screw loose, like you said, too."

"Yeah. She's probably trying to misuse it. Supposedly she wants to take the Empress's place. She might be thinking of making a copy of Keena..." Akuto said.

"Then we're okay, for the moment," Yoshie said with a sigh.

"Why's that?"

"It's not something that's really easy to misuse, you see. It won't harm humans, but it also won't just do anything it's told. And the Empress is Keena. Even if she tried something, there's not all that much she could do."

"I see. You're right. And if it's copied my personality right now, then probably nothing will happen," Akuto nodded.

"Heheh. I don't know about that. It looks like you still don't know how difficult your personality can be." Yoshie laughed a little. Akuto looked confused.

"Huh?"

"No, don't worry about it. But there is a problem. There's one part of the doll that's rather fragile. If you push the switch too hard, it might malfunction."

"Malfunction?" Akuto asked. Yoshie looked worried for a moment, but then shook her head.

"No, it's nothing to worry about. Normally, pushing the nose just copies your personality onto the doll. It also deletes the old personality, too. But if you push the nose too hard, there's a small possibility the personalities can get mixed. Outside of the worst possible pairing imaginable, though, all you'd end up with is a bit of a weirdo."

"The worst possible pairing... For instance, somebody who was imaginative and proactive, but didn't handle surprises well, mixing with somebody who

could adapt to any situation but who was too much of an intellectual to take action most of the time?” Akuto whispered. Yoshie laughed.

“Yeah, something like that. Something like...” Her expression froze.

“That would be this Nozomi Sasahara and you, wouldn’t it?”

○

“Huh? If you’ve stopped moving, that means I can run away, you know,” Nozomi said as she went to jump down from the panel. But then Akuto’s hand grabbed her more tightly.

“Hyah!” Nozomi screamed. Akuto looked up at her and laughed.

“There’s no need to run. It’s fine. I understand now.”

“Y-you understand? You understand what?” Nozomi’s voice began to shake in awe of the terrible presence before her.

But Akuto whispered to her in a gentle voice.

“Basically, I just need to become Emperor myself. All I’ll have to do is trick Keena. And I’ll become the new Emperor.”

“W-Wait! You can’t do that! I’m supposed to be Empress!”

“If I’m Emperor, it’s the same as you being Empress. And I won’t just forget about you, anyway. Once I have the throne, you can be by my side.”

“That’s so selfish...”

“It’s not. I’m also you, you see,” Akuto said.

That’s when Nozomi realized what had happened.

“I get it! Our personalities mixed...”

“That’s right. Now just leave everything to me.” Akuto smiled at her, but she shook her head.

“Y-You can’t! I won’t be able to become Empress, then...” She tried to resist, but Akuto put a finger up to her lips.

“You’re a naughty girl, aren’t you? I think you need to be quiet for a while.”

“M-Mgggh...” She shook her head.

Akuto grinned and ran the hand he'd placed on her shoulder across her neck. The feeling of it made her shiver.

"Hyah!"

"I'll make it so you can't resist, little girl," He grinned and ran his hands down her chest as he brought his face closer to hers.

"Uwahh... fwaah...." All she could do was scream and shiver.

o

"Hmm...? She's just lying there," Yoshie said when she found Nozomi.

"Then did he do something to her? I thought he couldn't hurt people," Akuto said, surprised. The two of them had been searching for a while before they'd found her.

"She's breathing," Akuto said as he ran over and lifted her up.

"Just knocked out cold, I guess," Yoshie said, looking down at her face. It was bright red, and her breathing was shallow.

"Hey, you okay?" Akuto said, shaking her.

"U-Uhhnn..." Nozomi's eyes fluttered open. When she saw him, she screamed.

"Nooo! Stop! Wait, don't stop!" She grabbed him and began to pant violently. It was so sudden that Akuto jerked away.

"Uwah! What's going on?"

Nozomi squirmed up to him and pressed her body against his. "Unyaaah! Have your way with me!"

"Uwaaah! Please get away from me!"

Akuto yanked her off him and with one hand grabbed her neck and lifted her off the ground. That was enough to bring her back to sanity. She struggled, but quickly stopped and looked embarrassed.

"Are you the real Akuto, then?"

"I am. I'm not the doll you stole. So... what happened?" Akuto asked. He

didn't seem to really want to hear the answer, though. Nozomi's face turned red and she started to shake her head.

"N-Nothing... Y-Yeah! Nothing! He just gave me a karate chop to the neck!" Nozomi said, but she was buttoning up her maid outfit. Akuto looked back at Yoshie with a frown. She shook her head. Her face was red too.

"Would you not look at me? Um... I can kind of guess what happened, you know."

"No, I wouldn't do that... That's what I wanted to say," Akuto said.

"D-Don't even talk about it. It's pretty embarrassing for me too." Yoshie chuckled, embarrassed. But then she tapped her goggles, and her face assumed a serious expression. She turned to Nozomi.

"Anyway, the doll ran off, right? Don't tell me he got any ideas about becoming Emperor himself, did he?"

Nozomi looked stunned. "H-How could you tell?"

"I knew it..." Akuto and Yoshie looked at each other.

"The two personalities have mixed, and made a huge mess. But the doll can't hurt anybody, so it shouldn't be too bad, right?" Akuto said optimistically. But Yoshie shook her head.

"You probably don't know this about yourself, but... He's planning on making girls do what he wants by doing this." She pointed to Nozomi.

"Making girls do what he wants...? Huh? Really? YOU CAN DO THAT?" Akuto looked surprised.

"Well, um... some girls, maybe. If it was a girl who was already favorably inclined to you... probably? And the real problem is, because he's got a female personality too, he knows exactly how girls would want to be approached..." Even the normally loquacious Yoshie was beginning to stammer.

"So what you're telling me is... No, just never mind. Do you know where the doll went?" he said to Nozomi as he set her down.

"I-I don't know! Uwaaah!" As soon as her feet touched the ground, Nozomi set off like a fleeing rabbit. She was gone before they could say a word.

“Welp, there she goes again...” Akuto sighed.

“Forget about her. We need to find the doll,” Yoshie said.

“How?”

“Well, we should probably start with the girls that it would be easiest for you to seduce.”

“Seduce...? Do you really think...”

Yoshie just sighed.

“Just do what I tell you. First, let’s use telepathy to find out where they are. We can start with Fujiko...” She took out her terminal and began to scroll through her contacts.

○

Fujiko Eto was at the café, looking through administrative data for the girl’s dorms, when her terminal started to glow, indicating an incoming call. But just before she picked it up, she decided to reject it instead.

“Fujiko!” Akuto had called out to her. The call was from Yoshie, and it was clear who she needed to prioritize.

“What is it, Akuto?” Fujiko smiled.

Akuto’s face took on a mischevious grin.

“I wanted to talk. Alone.”

“Oh? It’s not often you give me an invitation like that.” Fujiko’s eyes sparkled as she stood up, leaving her coffee cup on the table as she took Akuto’s hands. Akuto squeezed back, and Fujiko blushed.

“Shall we go for a walk, then?”

“No, I was hoping we could be alone.”

“Oh my...! Then why don’t we go to my room in the basement? Hey, what’s gotten into you, really? I’m so happy!” Fujiko clung to his arm.

“I need to talk to you about something important,” Akuto said, as soon as they were inside Fujiko’s underground room.

“Anything you want is important to me,” she said, pressing up against his arm.

“Great. You see... there’s a fake version of me running around.”

Fujiko beckoned him to sit down on a velvet sofa, and he did. She leaned up against his shoulder and looked up against him.

“A fake?”

“Yes. It’s a doll Yoshie made who can copy someone’s appearance and personality.”

“Oh my!” Fujiko gasped in surprise. Akuto looked into her eyes with a stern expression.

“But the doll has gone out of control, and now it’s become dangerous. It looks like it wants to become Emperor.”

“Emperor?” Fujiko asked, but she didn’t seem to be listening. She was blushing as Akuto stared at her.

“Yes. He’s going to use Keena to kill me, and then make Keena into his puppet. So I need you to prove to the others that I am who I say I am.”

“Prove it?” Fujiko said, only half paying attention.

“That’s right. Give me a small accessory or something. When I’m in the same room as the fake, you can use it to prove that I’m the real me,” Akuto said as he ran his hands along Fujiko’s cheeks. Fujiko’s whole body shuddered.

“Oh... Would you like me to give you a love bite then? I’ll kiss your whole body as much as you want. When it’s time to prove who you are, you can take off your shirt and show them that you’re covered in proof of my love. Wouldn’t that be wonderful?” Fujiko brought her lips towards Akuto’s neck.

“That’s a great idea,” Akuto chuckled, and then he moved a hand from her cheeks to her hair, and then the top of her head.

“Hey, if you’re going to ask for my help, you’re going to reward me, right?” She looked down a little again, as if she was embarrassed, and then brought her face right up to his.

“Of course. I was just about to give you a kiss. The rest can wait until after I’ve

crushed the fake..." Akuto wrapped his hand around her head and brought his lips to hers. But...

"Oh? That's not much of a reward at all. I'd want a kiss from Akuto. Not a fake." She grinned like a naughty girl and pushed the doll's body away.

The doll looked surprised.

"How... How can you call me a fake?"

"It's obvious. It's a question of love."

"Love...?"

Fujiko crossed her arms and looked at the doll with contempt.

"It's simple. I can tell. There's something different about you. It's like there's a different person mixed in. It smells like a timid girl's idea of the ideal boy."

"Tch..." The doll Akuto bit his lip.

"I'm going to guess that the one true part of that little story was the fact that you're trying to become Emperor, right? And like most other Liradans, you can't actually hurt anyone. Am I wrong?" Fujiko said confidently. The doll Akuto shook his head in frustration.

"That's right. So what are you going to do? Turn me over to someone?"

"Hmph. I'm not sure. I did get quite a bit of enjoyment out of this until I realized you were a fake. So maybe I'll just forgive you."

"Huh...? Forgive me?"

"That's right. This idea of yours seems pretty entertaining. You're going to go around to the other girls and do the same thing you did to me, and that's how you're going to seduce Keena, right? Go and give it a try." She laughed.

The doll seemed confused, so she continued.

"If the other girls can't tell the difference between you and the real Akuto, it proves that my love for him is the deepest. And if you do succeed in seducing any of them, I'll have the joy of seeing how awkward they are around him. Give it a try. Go after Junko Hattori and Keena Soga."

Since he couldn't use magic, she gave him a simple telepathic phone, as well

as Junko and Keena's contact information.

"You don't have one of these, do you? Here, this will help. I don't expect you to actually succeed, but keep at it until you fail." The doll Akuto frowned as he took the phone, and then waved at her.

"You're wrong. It'll work just fine."

Fujiko, now alone in the room, sighed to herself.

"...Maybe I should've just destroyed him here, because I don't think it's going to work. It takes a little effort, but there are any number of ways to tell the difference between a doll and a human," she said. "Maybe there's a reason he's so desperate?"

○

Junko was very surprised when she got a call from an unlisted number. There weren't a lot of unlisted numbers left these days. But she was doubly surprised when she picked it up and it was Akuto.

"...What's going on? You've got your own phone, don't you?"

"It was stolen."

"Stolen?"

"That's right. Can you meet? I want to talk."

"Sure. Where do you want me to go?"

"Someplace we can be alone. Can we meet at the mountain behind the school?"

"Got it." When she hung up the phone, though, something felt wrong.

"I should be careful, I think. Something's not right. Especially if he wants me to go up the mountain. It could be a trap." Junko grabbed her sword, and took a longer route than usual up the mountain. But despite her caution, she didn't see anything that looked like a trap.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Junko said as she cautiously stood in front of Akuto.

"No, it's fine. We've got a problem to deal with." Akuto said, suddenly

clasping both hands around her left.

“What... Why are you grabbing my hand like that?” Junko looked away and mumbled. But Akuto looked straight at her face.

“I’m sorry. But I’m just worried. There’s a fake version of me walking around.”

“A fake?” Junko turned back to look at him in surprise.

“That’s right. Kita made a doll which can copy humans. And it’s trying to get rid of the real me.” To Junko, Akuto didn’t look like he was lying. But something felt wrong.

“And they stole your student handbook?”

“No, but...”

“I understand that you’re having trouble believing it, but it’s hard to prove that I’m real. And Eto already believes the fake, not me.”

“Eto does?”

“That’s right. She says she loves me, but she can’t tell the difference between the real me and a fake. But you can, right?” Akuto lifted her hand up to his face and begged her.

“W-Wait a minute...” Junko took a small step back. She’d been suspicious of this Akuto from the start, but when she heard that Fujiko had been deceived by the fake, the flames of rivalry had risen within her. If she could tell the difference between the real Akuto and the fake one, that would mean that she loved him more than anybody.

“Don’t worry. Just believe in me. All you have to do is wait until you see two of us, and then believe the one that Eto doesn’t,” he continued.

“W-Wait a minute, though...” Junko shook her head and retreated further. But Akuto didn’t let go. He just took a step forward.

“Do you not like me?”

“T-That’s not the problem!”

“You’re scared, aren’t you? Don’t worry. Just leave it to me and everything will be fine.”

“T-That’s not it... Something’s weird with you.”

“Do you mean you don’t believe me? Then I’ll just have to prove I’m the real me.” He let go of her hand, and then grabbed her jaw with his thumb and index finger, and yanked it upwards.

“W-Wait... What do you mean prove it?” Junko was red right up to her ears, and her voice was tremulous.

“Only the real me could give you what you really want.” Akuto brought his face close to hers.

“S-Stop it, you dummy...” Junko knocked his fingers away and looked down.

“Do you not like that?” he whispered to her.

“T-That’s not the issue.”

“Then you’re just scared, aren’t you? Don’t worry. Just leave everything to me.” He put his hand on her head and gently stroked her hair. Then he lightly put his head on top of hers.

“Oh...” Junko shivered and looked up at him.

“Now, it’s time for you to become mine.” He slowly lifted up her head.

“No, um... well...” Junko shook her head softly, before closing her eyes and softly opening her lips.

“That’s right...” He moved towards her lips...

“T-This is wrong!” She pushed him away. He staggered back before falling to the ground.

“You don’t believe me...?” He asked, saddened. She shook her head violently.

“That’s not it...! It’s not... But... something seems wrong with you today. Maybe you are the fake...”

“How can you say that...?”

“N-No. That’s not. Don’t make that face. But the boy I know wouldn’t do something like this just to get somebody to believe him. That’s all.” Her breathing was shallow, as if she was in pain.

Akuto stood up and shook his head as if he was disappointed.

“No, I understand. But it’s hard to prove I am who I say I am. I’ll have to ask another girl.”

Junko sadly crossed her arms across her chest.

“D-Don’t say that... Don’t talk about other girls. It’s like you’re playing with my heart. It um... well... it hurts.”

“I know it’s wrong. But I’m worried that if I don’t prove I am who I say I am, I might disappear.”

“A-Alright... G-Go see Korone then. We’d have to use some kind of tool to see if you’re a doll or not, but Korone would be able to do it on her own,” Junko said.

Akuto’s eyes went wide with surprise.

“Korone can tell? That’s right... I never thought of that.”

“Yeah. Well, now you know. So stop talking about making other girls believe you, and...” Junko looked away from him.

“I’ll always believe in you. So next time we’re alone, I’ll make sure I’m ready for it...” She looked back at Akuto with the eyes of a maiden. “When that happens, you can finish what you tried to do today... Wait, he’s gone!”

Akuto had already left, and all that was left was the quiet mountain air.

“W-What’s wrong with him?! I don’t care if he’s real or a fake. Next time I see him, he’s going to pay!” Junko threw a tantrum to herself, all alone on the mountain.

○

“I don’t know why, but the Demon King is going around seducing girls.”

“I guess there’s a fake Demon King going around, and he wants them to believe that he’s really who he says he is. He says that whoever the Empress decides is real, is real, so he wants their help.”

“What is he thinking... Are any of the girls actually falling for it?”

“A lot of them. There are a lot of girls who’ve just outright fallen in love.”

“Do girls just want a man who’s strong, and don’t care about anything else? Wait, hasn’t he got enough girls already, like Eto?”

“He goes after them anyway. He’s even seduced girls who already have boyfriends...”

“The boyfriends are probably willing to fight the Demon King then, even if it means risking their lives.”

“Yeah. So he’s just seducing the girls and then punching the boyfriends and running away.”

“That’s awful... What is he trying to accomplish?”

“Who knows? Supposedly he’s heading towards Korone and the Empress...”

The whole school was in an uproar. Everybody knew what Akuto was up to. Some of the students were following him, and some of them were running from him. The real Akuto sighed when he heard this, and looked to Yoshie.

“...What do we do?”

“Well, even if Nozomi’s personality is mixed in with yours, a lot of this is your own fault. If you want to seduce a girl, it’s easy for you.”

“I didn’t ask to be born this way.”

“Don’t get mad, okay? But, where do you think Keena is?” she asked. “We need to find her and protect her.” She crossed her legs as she sat down in a chair. They were in her warehouse lab. The two of them had tried searching for the doll, but after not having any luck, decided to retreat and come up with a plan.

“You can’t just detect his location?” Akuto asked. Every person had a unique mana signature, which could be easily traced.

“No, you need a lot of authority to do that. I could do it via hacking if I wanted to, but I’d rather not take the risk. They’ve been watching me pretty closely since the Empress came,” Yoshie said.

“Could you track Korone then? She should be able to tell if I’m human or not. I’d feel a lot better if I knew she was with Keena.”

“Yeah, she could. I’m sorry, but I never intended to hide the fact that it was a doll.”

“It was just an experiment, after all. But it didn’t really have to copy me, did it?”

“Yeah, about that...” Yoshie spun the chair halfway around and uncrossed her legs, spreading them wide. Then she put both hands between them and leaned forward with a grin.

“Part of the reason I copied your personality was to see how you’d react when we were alone, and I tried to seduce you.”

“Huh...?” Akuto didn’t know what to say.

She rolled the chair across the floor towards him, and then looked up into his eyes.

“It’s not that surprising. Girls can get embarrassed, you know. Sometimes you want to practice before you say something, and sometimes, just practicing is good enough.”

“Does that mean...”

“I wanted to have some fun with somebody who had the same face as you, you know.” She wrapped her arm around his neck.

Akuto was flustered.

“T-There isn’t time for this. We need to find out where Korone is, or Keena will be in danger.”

“That’s the problem... You know how you’re so obsessed with Keena Soga? Sometimes it gives me ideas. It makes me think that it might be fun if I could have you all to myself.” She raised her head up to his until their foreheads were touching.

“I-I never noticed any of this...” Akuto stammered.

“That’s because you’re dense. How could I not fall in love with someone who forgot I was a girl, and treated all my ideas about games, souls, and society seriously?” She looked at him with dewey eyes.

“T-There’s no time for this, though...”

“And that’s why I’m doing it. I actually know where Korone is. She’s not with Keena. So Keena could be in danger.” Her face was smirking in a way he’d rarely seen before.

“...Let me go, then! I have to find her.”

“Nope.”

“If Soga is seduced, I’ll be sad.”

“Come on, it doesn’t have to be for long. Won’t you make me feel wonderful?”

“But that’s...”

“Yes. I know it’s really selfish. But I’m a girl too, you know?” Yoshie pulled him close as she stood up. And then...



While all this was going on, Keena was in the special reception room that had been recently constructed for the Empress. Other than the fact that it had a rice container that was constantly kept full, there was nothing special about it at all. Keena was taking a nap there, but opened her eyes when a sudden visitor arrived.

“Oh, Ackie! What’s up? Want to take a nap with me?”

“That sounds lovely, but there’s no time. There’s a fake version of me that’s after you.”

Akuto knelt down in front of Keena, who was lazily lying on the sofa. Her response, however, was less than concerned.

“Mmhm... Sounds bad.”

“...Can you take this a little more seriously? My fake is trying to win you over to his side, and then take power,” Akuto warned, but she didn’t seem to be fully awake.

“Win me over? What does that mean?”

“Well... he’ll get you to think he’s real, and then... Basically, he’ll stay by your side forever and try to use your powers as Empress.”

“Ooh. Always by my side. I like that. Let’s stay together forever, Ackie.” Keena nodded, still spaced out, and then grabbed Akuto and pulled him on to the sofa.

“H-Hey!” Akuto said, giggling a little.

“We’re just gonna take a nap. Napping feels good, right? Especially if there’s somebody in your arms.” Keena rubbed her cheek against his.

“...That’s what the fake is going to do to try and win you over. You need to be more careful. What if I’m the fake?” Akuto said, a little upset.

“Don’t worry. I haven’t looked, but it’s really you. I rubbed my cheek up against you to check. Now goodnight.” She gave Akuto’s cheek a kiss, still spaced out.

“Uwah... Come on, take this seriously. Did you really mean you can tell if it’s

me?” Akuto asked.

“Yup. But whether you’re real or fake, you’re still Ackie. And no matter what happens, I’m on your side. No matter who says you’re a fake, I’ll protect you,” she said, still in a sleep-induced daze.

Akuto laughed a little.

“You’re such a silly girl... But it makes me happy that you feel that way.”

o

Yoshie flipped the switch of the fake Akuto, which was concealed by his hair on the back of his neck. The Akuto doll slumped like the strength had left its body. The mana quickly dissipated from its skin, which returned to the featureless black it had been before.

“I’m sorry for being so selfish. But you know, I’d be way too embarrassed to say that to the real person.” Yoshie called Keisu back in from the other room where she’d been waiting, and had her put the doll away.

“And I know you didn’t want to disappear, either. You may be a copy, but you still have a soul. You needed to have some meaning for your life to be worth anything. That’s why you were so desperate. And anyway, even if you did win over the Empress, it wouldn’t be long at all before someone found out who you were... I’m really sorry I made you for such selfish reasons. I shouldn’t have done it,” Yoshie said to the doll.

“Master, why was Akuto here in the warehouse?” Keisu said, looking up at her confused.

“Because this one was the doll.”

“No, I understand that. But I was sure this was the real Akuto...”

“When we were going around looking for the doll, Akuto split off to look for Keena. And then the doll came back to find me. It was probably worried that Korone would be able to tell what it was. I noticed right away, but I was waiting for the right chance to turn it off, so I decided to pretend it had fooled me.”

“I see. But what was all that complicated stuff you were saying?” Keisu asked. Yoshie shook her head.

“It’s not something you need to understand... There was something I needed to apologize to him for. Oh, but there’s something I need to apologize to the real Akuto for, too.” Yoshie scratched her head.

“What’s that?”

“Well, ’cause indirectly I made it so Akuto’s even more hated at school.” Just as she said that, Akuto left the reception room. He’d been told that the doll had shut down, and had left Keena asleep on the sofa. There was a certain tension in the air, he felt. And not the good kind. He walked through a crowd of students, and only then did he noticed how bad the atmosphere really was.

“Um... Is something bad going on?” The horrible things that happened next are too terrible to relate here.

3 - The Trio's Fun Day Off

As it happens, the Student Council Trio was always busy. Lily Shiraishi always took her job seriously, but she was the type who figured that if she did the bare minimum of what was required, she could ignore the rest. As a result, the smaller jobs were always passed on to the vice-president, the treasurer, and the secretary.

"I need moah tomatoh juice," Michie Ootake said as she stared at her mana screen with vacant eyes. Her white skin and red eyes had an even more unhealthy pallor than usual. She looked extremely sick.

"...There's some tomato juice on the desk, gyah," Kanna Kamiyama said as she pointed at Michie's desk. Kanna was always a tomboy, with a wild look about her. But now she was exhausted. Her hair was a mess. She looked less wild and more like somebody who'd been stranded at sea. Her mana screen was also displaying a huge amount of data.

"Dah tomatoh juice ya bought doesn't have salt in it!" Michie slammed a fist down on the desk. The pack of tomato juice, which had a straw already poked into it, bounced a little.

Kanna looked annoyed.

"You can't put salt into tomato juice, gyah. Only no-salt tomato juice is worth drinking, gyah. It needs to be natural, gyah."

"Can't yah do somethin' about that obsession with all-natural stuff yah've got? When yer tired, yah need salt. Dat's just how it goes."

"Drink your own dried sweat then, gyah."

"...Looks like yer askin' to get those hairs on your body ripped off."

Both Michie and Kanna froze. The two of them were glaring at each other. The third member of the trio must have saw this, because she opened her mouth.

"Gugah."

She was a Liradan, tall, with glasses and long black hair. Like most Liradans,

her facial expression changed rarely, and when she spoke her face remained completely flat. But there was something in her voice that brooked no disagreement... Or at least, maybe there was. It was hard to tell. Both Michie and Kanna slumped back in their chairs.

“Yeah, I know it’s mah fault for bein’ tired.”

“I know I’m in a bad mood too, gyah.”

“Gugah gugah gugah,” the Liradan, Arnoul, said.

Michie laughed. She and Kanna could understand what Arnoul was saying.

“...Ah see. Yer right. We need ta get outta here once in a while.”

“We haven’t had a day off in forever, gyah.”

“And then there was that whole mess with the Zero War... We ain’t had a break in forevah.”

“Cleaning up from that mess was rough, gyah. We got hurt too, but the president doesn’t give us any credit, gyah.”

“What we need is ta have some fun.”

“Agreed, gyah!”

Both Michie and Kanna got excited.

“Gugah.”

“Yup. I’ll pay for your share, Arnoul. It’s our way of saying sorry for punching you when you were controlled by Zero.” Kanna slapped her fist against her chest, proudly.

Michie looked at Kanna, impressed.

“That’s really nice of yah, Kanna.”

“Nope. The two of us are gonna pay for her, gyah.”

“Really? Well, whatevah. Anything for Arnoul!”

For a moment, Michie looked annoyed, but then she grinned. Kanna grinned back, and then her pallid face quickly took on a serious expression.

“But that leaves the President.”

“No way is she gonna let us have a day off.”

“Gugah.”

The three of them crossed their arms in thought, but nobody had any ideas. Eventually, Kanna shook her head.

“Gaah! Enough thinking about it!”

“There ain’t no way she’ll ever give us a day off.”

Michie spread her hands in resignation. But then Arnoul spoke, as if to urge them to do something.

“Gugah gugah.”

Kanna’s eyes flashed, as if Arnoul’s words had moved her.

“So what we’ve gotta do is run, gyah.” Michie nodded with a stern expression.

“The president’s out taking a call right now... If we wanna do it, now’s our only chance.”

Michie and Kanna looked at each other and grinned. They simultaneously leapt out of their chairs and raced towards the door of the student council room. They flung it open and made a break for it, running as fast as they could. Arnoul walked after them, seemingly slowly, yet somehow managing to keep pace. But then the three of them froze at a voice from behind them.

“Oh, perfect timing. I just got a weird call...” They knew without looking that it was Lily Shiraishi, so they didn’t bother turning around. They began to dash once again towards the way out.

“...Hey, wait! You bastards!” Lily stretched out a hand after them, but the three were used to her tricks. In an instant they’d rounded the corner and dodged her attack. Lily was left alone, and completely confused.



“What’s their problem? Bah, I bet I know what it is. The bastards are ducking their work! Well, I’m gonna give them ‘Grannie’s Whuppin,’ a torture so bad they’ll regret ever being born!”

Lily’s face curled into a frown.

“...That was a weird call, though. ‘The Liradan we keep as a servant at home left to go to to the academy, saying it was going to defeat the Demon King. Please capture it.’ What the hell was that about?” She took out her student handbook and looked her contacts.

“Those three probably won’t pick up... So I’ll let the disciplinary committee handle it. It’s basically his fault anyway. Let’s see if he can actually contribute to society for once.” She said as she started to call Akuto.

○

“Well, she’s gonna be pissed, gyah.”

“We’ve made our choice, no sense in thinkin’ about it now.”

Michie and and Kanna frowned at each other, but Arnoul shook her head. The three of them had made it out to the city.

“Gugah.”

“...Dat’s right. For now, let’s forget about it and have some fun.” Michie nodded.

“That’s right,” Kanna said. Her grim mood quickly passed, and she became extremely excited.

“Alright! Let’s have some fun, gyah! First, let’s get some udon, pizza, and then...”

“Whenever ya see tsukimi udon, or pizza, or anything that looks like a full moon, ya know ya transform... And anyway, I’m not that hungry.” Michie sighed, but then she smiled.

“But pizza does sound good. Ya know, there’s a new place dat just opened, where a champion pizza dough-thrower works.”

“Hmm, okay. Let’s get some pizza then. I’ll make sure not to look at it until it’s

cut, gyah. And pizza's got your favorite, tomatoes."

"And I can pour bright red tabasco on it, too. Italian cookin' sure has a lot of red stuff in it, huh?"

"I can't wait, gyah!"

The three of them laughed and started to walk, but suddenly Arnoul spoke.

"Gugah."

"Huh? There's somebody behind us?"

"No, don't turn around, gyah."

Michie and Kanna's voices were tense. Somebody was following them.

"This is our vacation. We don't wanna get caught up in a mess."

"Hmm... That's a Liradan, gyah."

Kanna's nose twitched. She had an exceptionally good sense of smell. The three of them were in charge of a school filled with rowdy students, and they'd been involved in two past wars. They may have looked cute, but they were all strong fighters. They analyzed the fighting capability of the Liradan behind them without even looking.

"They're terrible at hidin', though..."

"Gugah."

"Hmm... Seems to be an agricultural model, not a combat one? I do smell soil, gyah..."

"Which means they're probably not much of a threat, whatever they're doing here, huh?"

"Yeah. If we gotta deal with 'em, we can, gyah. But I don't want them following us. Let's lose them before we get started, gyah. We can meet at the soba stand in the shopping street," Kanna said.

Then the three of them started to run. They split off in three different directions at the corner, and disappeared into the crowd. It would've been tough for a veteran pursuer to follow them, so a non-combat Liradan wouldn't have a chance. Eventually, the three of them showed up one by one at the soba

stand.

“We lost her without any trouble, gyah.”

“Now we can eat our soba in peace... wait, wasn’t it supposed to be Italian?”

“Guga.”

“I just picked a place that was easy to meet up at, gyah. We can start with a little bowl of soba and a drink of sake, then wander around and go clothes shopping for a bit. We’ll be hungry again before too long.”

“Please don’t get any alcohol...” The three of them opened their menus and ordered something light. Soon, some small sweets and bowls of soba were brought to their table.

“You guys put your wasabi on the noodles themselves, or just drop it in the broth?”

“I’ve never thought about it.”

“Gugah.”

“You never eat soba anyway? Oh, I see, gyah...”

The three of them were enjoying their conversation as they ate, when the other customers began speaking excitedly about something.

“Huh...?”

“What’s going on? Are they hungry?”

“Don’t look...!”

The customers were all looking at the same thing: the window the trio was sitting next to.

“...Got a bad feelin’,” Michie said, looking towards the window fearfully.

“Gyah!”

“Gugah.”

Kanna and Arnoul screamed. There was a Liradan pressed up right against the window.

“T-That’s the one that was followin’ us! I thought we ditched it!”

“Gugah.”

“Yer right! It probably just checked every window on the street!”

Past the Liradan, they could see the people in the other shops looking at it worriedly. It must’ve stared into their windows as well. The Liradan looked like a young girl with thin arms and legs. Like most Liradans, it had a pretty face, but it didn’t seem to take care of its skin, and looked like a cheerful country girl.

“So um... what is that, gyah?”

“I-I dunno... No clue, actually.”

Kanna and Michie looked at each other and froze. The Liradan was staring at the three of them like a child who wanted a trumpet, or a kingfisher hovering above the water waiting to grab a fish. From the look on her face, there was some kind of incredible passion burning within it. It was far more expressive than most Liradans.

The Liradan reached a hand behind its back, and pulled out a small sickle. Then it backed away from the window, walked through the automatic door, and came inside. Of course, it headed straight for them.

“W-What do you want, gyah?”

“If there’s somethin’ you wanna say, just calm down and say it.”

The Liradan ignored the two of them and raised its scythe.

“My name is Monami! I’ve come to defeat the Demon King! But first, I’m going to defeat his trio of servants!” The Liradan jumped at Kanna, the nearest one to her.

“Take this!” she screamed, but there was only a very small “thwack” sound. Kana had simply grabbed the blade of the scythe between her thumb and index finger.

“C-Calm down, gyah. How can we be servants of the Demon King when we’re so cute!”

“You’re lying! I can see your uniforms!” Monami tried to struggle, so Kanna lifted her off the ground by her scythe.

“Uniforms?”

“Our school uniforms?”

Kanna and Michie looked at each other.

“Those are the uniforms of the Demon King’s servants! So I’m going to defeat you!” Monami yelled loudly.

“I’m... not following, gyah.” Kanna fell silent, unsure of what to do.

Michie poked her with an elbow.

“L-Let’s just get out of here. We’re bothering the other customers.”

“Y-Yeah... You’re right.” Kanna nodded. Both the customers and staff were staring at them. She took out her wallet with one hand and handed it to Arnoul, gulped down one last bite of soba, and then carried Monami outside.

“Hey! Lemme go, you coward! Fight fair!”

“Sure, sure thing. Got it, gyah.” Kanna said.

“Let’s just go someplace else first.”

“Sorry, folks,” Michie said, bowing to everybody in the soba place before she left. The two of them looked at each other, frowning, uncertain what to do about the still-struggling Monami.

“Gugah.”

Arnoul, who had finished paying the bill, walked out of the shop and pointed to the other side of the street.

“Dat’s right. Let’s go to the park.”

“It’s better than dealing with it here, gyah.”

Monami struggled the whole way to the park.

“Let me go, you cowards!”

“...All you have to do is let go of your sickle, gyah,” Kanna said when they arrived at the park. Monami was easily convinced.

“Oh yeah. You’re right.” She let go and dropped to the ground, before looking up at Kanna with a confident expression.

“Hahaha! Now that I’m free, you’re mine! Prepare yourself!” she said as she prepared to leap at Kanna again.

“Calm down, gyah.” Kanna waved a hand. She was still holding the scythe between her fingers, and its hilt passed several dozen centimeters in front of Monami’s face. Even this little breeze, though, was enough to knock her back, and she looked up at Monami fearfully.

“Using a weapon like that is cowardly! I get it! You had me let go so you could steal my weapon! How evil! Just what I’d expect of the Demon King’s servants!”

“That’s not what’s going on here, gyah.” Kanna sighed, but Monami was still pissed.

Arnoul stepped in front of her.

“Gugah.”

“Grr... You’re really big!” Monami said, scared.

“Gugah gugah guga.”

“You’re saying you don’t serve the Demon King either?” Monami could tell what Arnoul was saying, too. Arnoul began to use the compressed language of the Liradans.

“Gugahgugahhgugahgugahgugugah.”

“Huh? The Demon King wears this uniform, but he doesn’t actually control the school,? And there are lots of people who want to beat the demon king, but nobody’s succeeded so I shouldn’t even try? Is that it?” Monami repeated back what Arnoul had said.

Arnoul had actually said a whole lot of other things, but that was all Monami had been able to understand. Still, it was more than enough.

“I see...” She frowned and looked down at the ground.

“I just wanted to defeat the Demon King... But I was really rude to you. I’m sorry.” Monami bowed deeply.

“Sigh... Well, as long as you understand. Just don’t try anything stupid like this again. If you see anybody else in our uniforms, don’t attack them.” Kanna said,

and handed back the sickle. Monami hung the sickle on her belt and started to walk away.

Michie frowned as she watched her go.

“It feels like we’ve done somethin’ bad...”

“There’s nothing else we could do though, gyah. What were we supposed to do, gyah? And what kind of Liradan takes the form of a stupid child, anyway?” Kanna frowned.

“Gugah,” Arnoul answered. According to what she said, child Liradans were often made for the elderly, either those who needed care or those who had no children. But since their owners tended to die so often they changed owners constantly. And once they’d spent too long in one place and developed a mind of their own, they found few buyers, and were often sent off to do light agricultural work.

“And you say there’s also a good chance she’s defective somehow?” Michie said glumly.

“Then there should be somebody who’s looking after her, gyah.”

“Gugah.”

“...Even if she does, she may not be able to contact him. Her telepathic phone might be broken, huh?” Michie sighed. There was an awkward silence after that.

“...W-Well, let’s go get our pizza. We didn’t really get a chance to enjoy our soba.” Kanna forced a laugh.

“Gugah.”

“Y-Yer right. Arnoul is telling us we shouldn’t try and get involved...” Michie said, not entirely convinced, but she and Kanna started walking.

“We’re cutting work to do this, so we’d better enjoy it!”

“Let’s go enjoy our day without the President!”

Their attempt to force themselves to have fun failed, though, and they went window shopping with dead eyes and hollow laughter.

“Ahahah. This is so fun, gyah.”

“It sure is!”

“Gugah.”

But the periods of silence got longer and longer. Then, they heard an incredible sound behind them. DOGASSHAN! They turned around, fearing the worst, and of course, it was Monami. She’d leapt at a man sitting at a café terrace, and tripped.

“Gugyahgugyah...”

“What a mess...”

Kanna and Michie sighed. The man was very clearly not in a legitimate line of work. He was wearing a brightly colored suit and strangely colored golden accessories.

“Prepare yourself, servant of the Demon King!” Monami said, even as she lay on the ground. Fortunately, the man was too stunned to be mad. Kanna and Michie looked at each other and chuckled.

“...Wanna do it, gyah?”

“...Oh, fine.” Michie nodded. Both she and Kanna started running at the same time. Kanna quickly leapt in and grabbed Monami, then turned on her heels and bolted. Michie jumped in beside her, picked up the chair that had fallen over, straightened up the tablecloth, and bowed before the man could react.

“We’re very sorry! Farewell!”

Then she ran away, even faster than Kanna.

○

“Sigh... What a mess, gyah.”

“We told yah ta stop...” Once they were away, they started to lecture Monami. But Monami just looked annoyed, and didn’t say a word.

“Gugah.” Arnoul said, but Monami didn’t answer.

“I have to defeat the Demon King,” was all she said.

“We told you to stop, though, gyah.” Monami shook her head.

“I have to defeat the Demon King no matter what.”

“...Listen, you say that, but you keep attacking random people. You don’t even know who the Demon King is, do you?” Kanna asked.

“The Demon King is Akuto Sai, from Constant Magical Academy,” Monami said.

“...If you know, then why are you attacking random people?”

“The Demon King has lots of servants, right? So I need to defeat them and get experience.”

What she said made sense, in a way. Of course, it didn’t seem likely she’d learn anything from her experiences, and she wasn’t even attacking the right people to start with.

“He doesn’t have that many servants. And right now, the Empress controls his power,” Kanna said, but Monami still didn’t believe her.

“His servants are all over the town! And a lot of the students serve him as well!”

“It’s not like that, gyah...” Kanna fell silent, but Michie slapped her hands together as if she’d had an idea.

“We’ll take ya to him, then!”

“Huh?”

Both Kanna and Monami gasped in surprise. Michie whispered into Kanna’s ear.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but she’s just a kid. If we have to, we can bring out Akuto Sai and have him play with her for a while.”

“Smart thinking, gyah,” Kanna agreed. “Fine, gyah. We’ll help you, gyah.”

Kanna put Monami down and brought a hand to her chest.

“Help me?”

“That’s right, gyah. We’ll take you to Akuto Sai. And fight with you, gyah!” Kanna said confidently. They could punch Akuto Sai as hard as they wanted, and it wouldn’t matter. And when she saw the fight, Monami might even be

convinced that the Demon King was defeated. At least, that was what they'd thought, but...

"Let's go, then! Follow me!" Monami started to walk away, as if she was the leader and expected the others to follow her.

"We said we'd show you to him," Kanna said, but Monami was unmoved.

"We have to do this in order, though. I know where his servants are. We just don't need any experience now, cause you guys are really strong," Monami said as she started to lengthen her stride. The trio started to follow her.

"Huh? You know where his servants are?"

"That's right, gyah. Of course, I looked it up! Now follow me, my servants!" Monami began to happily wave her sickle as she walked.

"Wait...where are we going?"

"To the Demon King's servants."

Monami was heading towards an ordinary residential area.

"How'd we end up here?" Michie asked, confused, as Monami stopped in front of what looked like a small apartment.

"What? Is this the place, gyah?" Kanna asked. Monami said nothing as she walked to the front door. She picked up a small brick that was lying on the ground and smashed it into the window. CRASH!

"Gyah!"

"Aaah!"

There was a loud shattering sound, followed by Kanna and Michie shouting in surprise.

"What the hell was that for?" A man in a baggy shirt came to the door. His head was shaved. Even his eyebrows were shaved. He was clearly a man they wanted nothing to do with.

"R-Run, gyah!"

"T-This guy is bad news!" Kanna and Michie started to flee, but before they could, Monami had sprung into action.

“Wooh!” Monami let out a strange shout. The next thing they knew, her sickle was embedded in the head of the skinhead man.

“Gyaah!”

“Aaaah!”

Kanna and Michie screamed again, louder this time. Blood was streaming from the skinhead’s head. The sickle hadn’t dug in very deep, but the blood was flowing freely.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” the skinhead howled. Kanna and Michie looked around to find a place to flee. But Arnoul simply said, “Gugah” and pointed towards the road. There was more bad news waiting. A man was running at them with an angry look. He was the man who Monami had attacked at the café.

“...Are they friends?”

“T-That’s not good, gyah...”

By now, the skinhead had grabbed Monami and lifted her off the ground.

“Lemme go! You jerk!”

“Shaddup, you stupid kid!” The skinhead was incredibly angry. It was clear that if they didn’t intervene, something awful would happen to Monami.

“D-Do we wanna fight, gyah?”

“I-I dunno...”

Sweat was pouring down their foreheads. It wasn’t that they didn’t think they could win. But fighting somebody in the middle of town was something that they hesitated to do, if only for fear of how it would look on their permanent record. But in that quick instant, Arnoul was already on the move.

“Gugah!” She quickly grabbed Monami back, and then knocked away the sickle, which the man had pulled out of his head and was preparing to stick at Monami’s throat.

“Tch! Who the hell are you?” the skinhead yelled as he stuck out his right hand. A light shone within it as a mana ball flashed towards Arnoul.

“Gugah!” Arnoul easily knocked it away, but the fact that he’d used magic was enough to spur Kanna and Michie into action.

“If they attacked in town, they must be black mages, gyah!”

“That means we can do whatever we want, long as we don’t go too wild!”

The two of them nodded, and then broke off, one running right and the other running left.

“DOGYAAAHN!” Kanna turned her right hand into a beast’s paw and blasted the skinhead away with a single strike.

“GOOO!” Michie created a whirlwind that swept the running man off his feet, and then in an instant got behind him, striking him with a chop in the neck. The man passed out instantly and slumped to the floor.

“If they’re black mages...”

“They really were bad news.”

Michie and Kanna looked at one another.

“Gugah,” Arnoul said as she let Monami down to the ground. “Gugah gugah.”

“Huh? What are you trying to say, gyah?”

“What Monami’s saying is, in a way, true?”

“Gugahgugaah.” Arnoul began to summarize what she’d heard from Monami. Everyone on Monami’s list of “servants of the Demon King” was part of a nasty plot to steal land from some farmers.

“And yer sayin’ Monami’s home is one of the ones they’re trying to steal?”

“But all we have to do then is turn them over to the knights, gyah,” Kanna said, relieved.

“Dat’s right. That stuff about the Demon King’s probably just a bluff they used to scare the farmers. If they’ve been breakin’ da law, this is easy. Anyway, we’ve got time now Let’s call the knights, send Monami home, and we should still have time ta grab pizza...”

“Gugah.” Arnoul cut her off.

“Huh? It’s not that easy?”

“Gugahgugaah.”

“The knights are being bribed? And these guys aren’t even real black mages, just a group of criminals?”

“Oh jeez, gyah.”

“I guess we can’t just send ’er to the Knights then, can we? Come to think of it, there actually aren’t any knights in dis town who the President hasn’t punched out.”

“Even without the bribery, they probably wouldn’t be happy to see us, gyah. And the Knights won’t want to go after these guys without at least some preparations... which means...”

Michie and Kanna’s faces began to turn gloomy.

“W-Well, we can at least call the cops, gyah? And then... go home?” Kanna forced herself to smile. But Michie didn’t.

“We can’t do that. They’ll go ta Monami’s house ta get revenge.”

“That’s right, gyah. Which means...”

“We need to handle this ourselves,” Michie sighed.

“Gugah.” Arnoul pointed behind them. The man Michie had defeated had gotten up and was making a telepathic call to someone as he fled.

“This just got a lot worse, gyah. We’re gonna have to hit their base, gyah.”

“Monami, take us to yer home. If you don’t, the bad guys will destroy it.”

○

“So dis is yer home, Monami?”

“It’s... um... I’mma be honest. It’s a dump, gyah.”

“Gugah.” Even Arnoul agreed. The plot of land it was on was pretty big, but the building at the center was a large, single-story house. It must’ve been quite impressive in its day, but that day had come and gone a long time ago. There was a sign near the door that said “Sasahara Inn,” but it looked more like a

haunted mansion than an inn.

“I can see why somebody’d want to steal the land, gyah,” Kanna said as she looked around. The place was in the middle of the city, an oasis of greenery surrounded by grey. It was like having your own big nature park.

“If they forgot about running an inn and opened a restaurant, they could make a ton of money.”

“No matter what they try, it doesn’t work. The only thing they ever get to eat is the vegetables I grow,” Monami pointed out at the side of the mansion. There was a well-tended garden there.

“Why does nothing work, I wonder, gyah?”

“Now’s not da time fer dat. This place is gonna be a pain to defend.”

The three of them were veteran warriors. They knew instantly that this place wasn’t going to be easy to protect. The enemy could hide among the trees, get close, and set fire to the building.

“Yeah, this is gonna be tough, gyah.”

“Gugah.”

As the three of them talked, a friendly looking couple came out of the inn. It was a plump old woman and a frail, thin man. They looked like a perfect couple.

“Monami!” The woman ran towards them.

“Oh, um, ’bout dis...” Michie opened her mouth, but before she could, the woman bowed.

“Yes, thank you. You’re with the Academy, right? You brought her back like we asked. I don’t know what got into her. She just ran off and said she was going to defeat the Demon King...” The woman seemed to know what had happened to her Liradan. But she probably didn’t know everything.

“Um, well, about that, gyah...”

“Yes?”

“Um, those servants of the Demon King that Monami went after... Well, they’re not really that, but um... she kind of ticked them off,” Kanna said

hesitantly. The woman didn't seem to understand though.

"Hmm... I see."

"It's um... kind of a big problem... Basically, some bad people are coming, and they're gonna burn your house down, gyah." When Kanna said it that bluntly, even the old woman was able to understand.

"What? W-W-What do we do?"

"We're gonna have to fight, gyah. We'll handle it, but we need you to hide somewhere in your home, and keep Monami with you. If you don't keep an eye on her, she'll try and join the fight," Kanna said, handing Monami over to the woman. The woman bowed as Monami grabbed her and clung to her waist.

"I... I don't know what to say."

"You can thank us later. For now, get inside da house," Michie said. The couple started to walk inside, taking Monami by the hand and bringing her with them.

"Now... Let's see what they do."

"Gugah."

"Yeah. They'll figure it's faster to destroy the house than try to threaten the family, gyah."

"No matter whose fault it really was, da fact is that we hit them first. Dey'll be willing to go pretty far. And dey might figure that the knights won't come after them over one arson."

"But they've seen our faces, gyah. If revenge is their priority, they'll pick a fight with us before they try to burn the house down, gyah."

"Gugah."

"They might try to set fire to the house to lure us out, huh? It's dangerous, but we're gonna have to stay stationed around da house..." The three made their decision. Just as they did, they felt a powerful presence among the trees.

"They're here, gyah."

"Split up!"

“Gugah.”

The three of them each ran off in different directions. The sun was just beginning to set. A shot from an incantation gun marked the beginning of the battle. Kanna, who was at the rear gate of the mansion, was the target.

“Explosion magic!” Kanna was caught off guard. She was able to dodge the bullet itself, but was caught up in the ensuing explosion. A shockwave ripped through the air as the smoke enveloped her. The black mage who’d fired the shot walked out of the trees, holding the gun at his side, to see what effects his shot had had. But when the smoke cleared, he didn’t see Kanna lying on the ground. Instead he saw a huge, four-legged wolf creature.

“What the hell?” The black mage let out a cry of surprise.

“...If that’s how you wanna play this, then I’ll go full power from the start, gyaah!” Kanna howled and quickly leapt at the mage, knocking him over and sending his gun flying. But when the other black mages saw this, they changed their strategy. They began to circle around her, firing mana balls and incantation guns from the trees.

“Gyah gyah... I know it ain’t easy to kill an academy student, but that doesn’t make it okay to use weapons that would put us out of the game for good, gyah...” Kanna sighed, then speedily jumped off one tree trunk and landed on another, taking down three black mages in mid-air with a single strike. But the attacks on her didn’t let up.

“...Looks like their goal is to take us out first, gyah.” Michie was feeling the same as Kanna.

“The President must’ve come after these guys before...” The knights and criminals in the city all called Lily Shiraishi the long-armed demon. She’d gotten the name from her habit of stretching out her arms and punching anybody she didn’t like. Of course, both the knights and criminals hated her, and it was no stretch of the imagination to assume that they hated her trio of flunkies as well.

Just like Kanna, Michie was having a rough time of it too. Her mechanical bats should have given her a powerful advantage in conditions like these, but some of the black mages had more combat experience than she’d expected. They’d

noticed the bats' weakness and began to fire off magical supersonic jamming waves. Now Michie could only control the bats in her field of vision.

"If I bring the bats back, I can protect myself and the house, but..." Michie herself was hiding behind the mansion's incinerator. She wasn't under attack herself, but it didn't make much difference. The enemy had more people than they did. If this dragged out, it was going to get worse. "Dis ain't good..."

Arnoul was struggling, too. She'd been forced to go head to head against some heavy equipment the black mages had brought: a power excavator.

"Gugahgah." Arnoul had wrapped her arms around the excavator's shovel to keep it from going further, but even with all her strength that was all she could do. And more black mages had surrounded her from a distance, and were firing at her with mana balls and incantation guns. She was using a defense field to protect herself, but the mana was draining fast, and she couldn't block all the shots.

"Gugahgahgah... Gugah!" Arnoul screamed. The excavator began to flail its shovel to the left and right. With so much of her mana going to defense, Arnoul couldn't stop it. The shovel picked her up off the ground and flung her into the air.

"Gugah!"

When she hit the ground, though, she landed on something soft. She looked around to see that Kanna and Michie had been thrown to the same spot.

"Ugh... T-This ain't good, gyah."

"Mebbe... mebbe we better just focus on survivin'..."

"Gugah..."

The three of them looked at each other with muddy faces. But before they could do anything, they were surrounded by nasty looking black mages.

"You're gonna regret getting involved in this, girlies." A man with a white suit and a pompadour, who seemed to be their leader, walked to the front. When the three of them said nothing, he continued.

"I don't want to make this too big of a deal, but you are gonna have to pay for

this. We won't kill you, but we will get some screams out of you at least." He jerked his head towards his men. Three of them walked forward and grabbed the girls by the hair, yanking them to their feet.

"They may have brought help. Break down the door to the inn and search the inside."

Several of the men started to kick the door.

"S-Stop..." Kanna moaned, but another of the men punched her in the stomach to shut her up.

"Gwaah..."

The humiliation hurt worse than the pain.

"Shut up. We're not going to kill you. But you know, I thought the President would be here, so I brought enough men to fight a war. I'm glad she wasn't. Even if you called her now, it's too late," the man in the white suit said, just as the door was broken down with a final kick.

"Ugh... We should've called the President when we came here, gyah."

"We couldn't, we were skippin' work..."

"Sob... To think all this happened because we wanted to eat a pizza..."

The three of them were crying, but nobody was listening. Except one person.

"Well, this isn't good. No matter what I do, I'm not going to feel good about it." The black mages turned around to see who had spoken.

"Don't be such a pussy!" The man in white yelled, thinking it was one of his men, but when he turned around, he froze.

"W-What... It's the real one!"

"The real one...?"

The black mages began to panic. The person he was referring to frowned.

"If it's that big of a surprise to you, I would've preferred you never used my name to begin with."

"Huh? Then..."

The black mages began to back away from him.

“Y-You morons! Don’t let him scare you, or we’ll have no hope at all!” The man in the white suit pointed at the boy — Akuto Sai — and then made a motion with his hand for the other mages to take the girls hostage. The black mages pointed their guns at the girls’ heads.

Akuto frowned again. “Like I said, I’m not gonna be happy no matter what happens...”

In the next instant, the men’s arms began to flail out to the sides, like their bodies had started moving on their own.

“H-Hey... What the hell are you doing?” The man in the white suit was scared now.

“I-I dunno... it’s like somethin’ grabbed our arms!”

The man in the white suit turned back to look at Akuto. He nodded with a dark look on his face.

“I’m doing it. I don’t want to, but I am. Well, I don’t think you’re interested in my feelings, so I’m just going to go ahead and do it instead of talk.”

“W-What are you saying..? H-Huh?” The man in the white suit went to fire off a spell, and froze. His hands spread wide on their own, until it looked like he was hanging on a cross.

“T-This is impossible... Nobody’s got the strength to paralyze that many people at once!” He yelled, now beginning to worry. But there was no look of terror on his face, yet.

Akuto sighed when he saw this.

“You know that nobody can do what I’m doing, and you’re not even bothering to think? Shouldn’t you be thinking something like, ‘How do I get this guy to forgive me?’” he said.

The black mages finally began to understand what was going on. Their faces grew thin smiles as they apologized.

“W-We’re sorry. For using your name. B-But you know, you’re famous. Hey, let’s make a deal. Let us serve you. We can...” Akuto cut the man in the white

suit off with a shake of his head.

“No. That’s not what I want to hear.” There was no anger in his voice, but the moment he spoke, the man in white began screaming. His right arm was twisted in an unnatural direction, and the sound of something snapping could be heard.

“Gyaaaah! I’m Sorry! I’m sorry! That wasn’t what I meant to say... We’ll leave this place alone... So...”

“That’s not it either,” Akuto said, in a voice like you’d use to scold a child, and then turned his gaze to the man’s left hand. This time it was that hand which began to bend and twist. Another scream echoed through the woods.

“You’re apologizing to the wrong person. If this is that hard for you to understand...” Akuto waved a hand.

The black mages all floated up into the air, and their bodies lined up in a row before him. As they floated there frozen in terror, he took on the voice of a teacher.

“Now, who can tell me the right answer?”

But nobody said a word. He shook his head in disgust.

“You need to say you’re sorry to the three of them.” Akuto waved a hand. The five closest to him began to scream as their arms twisted. Those whose arms were still intact quickly began to apologize.

“We’re sorry! W-We’re sorry!”

But Akuto cut them off. “Don’t say you’re sorry just because I made you!”

Another five limbs snapped. The black mages flopped to the ground, squirming like invertebrates.

“Now, who here can tell me what you need to do?” he asked again. But once again nobody answered him. He repeated himself again, and again, and by the time he was done, at least 30 black mages were lying on the ground, screaming and flailing helplessly.

“T-This is terrifying, gyah.”

“H-He’s worse than they are...”

“Gugah...”

The trio could do nothing but huddle together and shiver.

“Why don’t you get it? All you need to do is apologize, and then say you’re going to go straight...” Akuto shook his head, frowning.

“W-We swear... we swear...” The man in the white suit moaned. But Akuto shook his head.

“I told you... Don’t say that just because I told you to,” Akuto said. He went to snap another one of the man’s limbs, but he realized there were no more bones left to break.

“Well, whatever. What’s important is that you understand this for yourself. That’s what I’m trying to say here,” Akuto whispered, and the men went floating into the air. Mana began to flow into their broken limbs, which rapidly repaired themselves. The blood returned to their faces. They smiled in relief, as tears of regret flowed down their faces.

“T-Thank you... We understand. We’ll go straight...” The man in white got on his knees and bowed in front of Akuto. An unhappy light gleamed in Akuto’s eyes.

“I told you. You’re apologizing to the wrong person. Now you’re just making it look like you’re apologizing because I hurt you!” he yelled. This time he snapped every bone in the man in white’s body.

“Gyaaah!”

The black mages could do nothing but shudder. Even the trio couldn’t speak. Akuto looked down at the men coldly.

“Now, we’re going to do the ‘snap your bones and then heal them’ thing until every one of you understands. And if even one of you doesn’t get it, I’m going to do it to all of you. Are we clear?” None of the black mages had the strength left to say a word.

“I think I’ve seen this before somewhere, gyah...”

“It reminds me of my elementary school P.E. teacher.”

All Kanna and Michie could do was shiver as they watched the scene unfold. It was like a scene out of hell, as bones were continually shattered and rebuilt. By the time of this third cycle of destruction and recreation, the old couple of the house had sensed something going on and peeked out of their broken front door.

“Aaaah!”

“Uwaaah!”

The two of them were too frightened to stand. In front of them they saw the Demon King, standing coldly, surrounded by the broken bodies of tough-looking men that were squirming in puddles of their own blood. Not many people could stay sane, faced with a sight like that.

“It’s the real Demon King!”

“P-Please don’t kill us...!”

The two of them screamed, and passed out. When he saw this, a glimmer of remorse came into his eyes. He walked over to the trio and scratched his head.

“Sorry. I forgot where I was.”

“...N-No, it was a lot worse than that, gyah.”

“Y-You um... ya went a little too far...”

“Gugah.”

The three of them shook their heads. Then a rock came flying at them. It almost hit Kanna, before Akuto knocked it away with his hand.

“Monami...”

“Uwaaaahhn! I knew you were all with the Demon King! That’s why you hurt all these people in front of my house, and knocked out my masters! The place is a mess! Leave! Leave!” Monami screamed and cried as she threw rocks at them.

“Actually...” Kanna went to say something, but Michie stopped her.

“Well... It’s fine, ya know. It’s all over now.”

“Gugah...” Arnoul stood up and motioned at the two of them. Kanna nodded and stood up too. She walked a little bit away and looked back at Monami, but

all she got was another rock thrown at her.

“Oh... I’m sorry. I don’t... I don’t know what to say. I’m gonna clean up.” Akuto frowned, and then began to load the black mages up into the excavator’s shovel. Then he picked the excavator up with one hand, flung it over his shoulder, and walked off in the opposite direction.

Kanna chuckled a little as she watched him go.

“That’s crazy...”

“I feel stupid for taking this seriously...”

“Gugah...”

The three of them began to walk home through the night, pausing once in a while to look back at the inn.

“That was one hell of a day off, gyah...”

“It wasn’t much of a day off, actually...”

“Gugah.”

“Yeah. We skipped work... and wait, we’re out past curfew!”

“Aaah! Dat’s right!”

“Gugahaaahgugahgugah!”

“Don’t panic, Arnoul! Oh, but... the President’s gonna punish us!”

“Sigh...And all I wanted was to eat some pizza...”

○

“Normally, I’d be giving you ‘Grannie’s Whuppin,’ a punishment so bad you’ll regret being born, but... Your punishment is that you have to sleep outside tonight,” Lily Shiraishi said to them when they got back home. She had a look on her face like there was an itch she couldn’t scratch.

“S-Sleep outside...?”

“That’s right. In other words, no dinner, no beds, no going out to have fun. Sleep on the mountain behind the school. That’s all.”

“Um... is that really all?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself! Or maybe you want a real punishment?” Lily yelled. The three of them decided that discretion was the better part of valor, and fled. They found a relatively flat piece of ground on the mountain, and the three of them all huddled together and looked at the stars.

“How did this happen to us?” Kanna sighed as she set down. Michie frowned.

“Complaining will just make us hungry. And anyway, a wild animal like you doesn’t care if it gets dirty, but I do.”

“You’re already dirty from all the fighting, gyah. Don’t let it bug you, gyah.”

“Man... It pisses me off we lost that fight, too. What a crappy day...”

“Gugah.”

“Yeah, that’s right. All that fighting made me hungry, too.” Michie lay down on the ground, no longer caring that it would mess up her cape. And then she sighed.

“I want a pizza so bad... Mozzarella, gouda... Tomato, paprika, salami...”

“Shut up, gyah. You’re making me hungry.”

“I can’t help it!” Michie flailed her limbs against the ground. Then they heard a voice.

“Um...”

“Hmm?”

The three of them looked over to see Akuto climbing up the mountain, holding a large sack.

“W-What do you want, gyah?” Kanna said, turning her gaze away. It was nobody’s fault, but what had happened had left them feeling pretty awkward.

“I took care of things. I also went and bent the arms of some of the knights, too. No, forget about that. Um... I heard what you were saying.” He sounded like he felt awkward, too.

“What we were saying?” Michie asked. Akuto put down the sack and began to gather up rocks.

“Yeah. You wanted pizza, right? And the President punished you by taking

away your food.”

“What’s that got to do with gathering rocks?”

“You can bake it in a makeshift oven. So I was going to make you some pizza. I brought dough and ingredients.” Akuto laid out the stones in the shape of a makeshift heart, and opened the sack for them to see.

“Ooh!”

“Aaah!”

“Gugah!”

The three of them gasped, their eyes shining.

“Wow, gyah! So this is how you seduced all those women!”

“You seduced ’em with pizza!”

“...Um, I don’t have to make this for you, you know.”

“It was a joke, gyah! My way of saying I’m in love with you, gyah!”

“Dat’s right! Now, let’s see it! The red food! The red food!”

“...Why red? Well, whatever. Go get me some kindling.”

“Gugah.”

“Then I’ll stuff some earth in between the stones...”

And then, the 4 of them began to make pizza. In a few minutes, they had a big, round, crispy pizza, all waiting for them.

“Gyah! Gyah!”

“Oooh!”

“Gugah!”

The three of them stared excitedly at the pizza. Kanna even turned into a beast when she saw how round it was. They swarmed the pizza like hungry children. By the time they were done, they’d eaten three whole pies.



“Alright, I’m gonna head back. I want to sleep on a bed.” After having several slices of pizza himself, Akuto stood up to go.

“Aww, stay here and sleep with us!”

“That’s right! Have your way with us!”

Kanna and Michie pleaded jokingly. But after he left, they immediately got tired. Kanna turned into a beast and curled up in a ball, while Michie and Arnoul slept on her stomach.

“Oh, you know... I was just thinking,” Michie said as she looked at the sky.

“What’s that, gyah?”

“It was probably Akuto Sai who got the president not to punish us so hard...”

When Kanna heard this, she was silent for a moment, before letting out a small sigh of admiration.

“Oh, you may be right, gyah. But... A good guy wouldn’t break people’s bones when he lectured them like that, gyah.”

“You may be right... Well, forget it. Just go to sleep...”

“Gugah.”

“I’m a little worried about Monami, though, gyah...”

“She’s still got da wrong idea about us... But there’s no sense in thinkin’ bout it...”

And then the three of them went to sleep. But in the morning, someone came to wake them up.

“Get up.”

It was Nozomi Sasahara, the maid/janitor who was fast becoming famous at the school.

“Mhph...”

“W-Why are you coming to wake us up?”

They looked up, confused, to see Nozomi handing them her work handbook.

“I got this message, and sent it to the Student Council President. And she said to just show it to you guys directly. She said to wake you up, while we were at it.” Nozomi showed them an image on her handbook’s display. It was a letter, written in terrible handwriting.

“I’m sorry. A message came to my masters. Thank you guys. You weren’t with the Demon King. Sorry again. Thank you — Monami.”

“The President must have told her...”

“...Whew. That’s a relief.”

“Gugah.”

The three of them smiled, a little embarrassed, but very relieved.

“Why does a letter from this idiot make you so happy? She doesn’t know how to send messages herself, so she wrote it out on paper and had mom take a picture and send that. That’s how stupid she is. All she’s good for is digging up yams,” Nozomi said, confused.

Michie’s eyes went wide.

“Huh? Mom? Oh... that’s right! That run-down old inn’s name was “Sasahara!”

“That’s because it’s my house. And I’m sorry you think it’s ‘run-down.’ But well, that won’t be a problem for long. With my genius alchemy, I’m going to turn the place into a brand spanking new building. I’ve already got everything ready. There’s these nasty guys who claim the Demon King is backing them. I told them to go after the place, and then I told him. The two of them are going to run into each other, and the Demon King will win. Once word gets out out that the Demon King defended the place personally, it’ll be famous and worth a ton. Then we can sell a bit of it and rake in the dough... Hmm?”

Nozomi sensed something was wrong, and looked at the trio. They had looks on their faces like a man who’d spent 10 years tracking down his parents’ killer, and finally found him.

“...So it was yer doin’.”

“...I think it’s time for ‘Grandma’s Whuppin.’”

“Gugah.”

“...Huh? What’s going on? Why are you mad?” Nozomi began to back away from them as they drew closer.

Nozomi never said what happened next, and neither did the three of them.

4 - Welcome to the Ghost Inn

“Perfect...! My plan is perfect! Perfect! Amazing! Wonderful! The whole world will be mine!” Nozomi smiled to herself in the janitor’s room. On her notebook were the words “Final Empress Project” In other words, her final project to become empress.

“This is my final plan... Bringing the Empress to my house! And then, I can use the unique nature of my home to confuse her mind, and make her give me the throne!” she shouted to the empty room. Her beautiful forehead reflected the light from the room’s ceiling.

“What do you mean, ‘the unique nature of your home?’”

“I mean the ghost! Sasahara is haunted by a ghost! Wait... uwah!” Nozomi noticed a person behind her and screamed. She wasn’t alone in the room. Korone was standing behind her.

“W-What are you doing here?”

“That’s a strange question. You sent a letter to the Empress with tickets to your inn, correct?” Korone dangled the letter in front of her.

“T-That’s the letter I sent! Why is the first step of my plan here, instead of with the Empress?”

“You’re very stupid, aren’t you? I am the Empress’s servant. I read all her mail.”

“I-I didn’t realize it worked that way...! So, why are you here?”

“I’ve done my research on your inn. And I think we’re going to go.”

“Oh no! My plan’s failed already! And it was perfect, too... Huh? You’re going to go? Go where?” Halfway through her sentence, Nozomi realized what Korone had just said, and looked up at her face.

“We’re going to spend the night at Sasahara. Just like the ticket says.”

“Huh? You are? Why?”

“If you’re asking why, does that mean you don’t want us to stay?”

“No, of course I do...”

“Then it’s settled. Oh, one more thing. The ticket says we’ll get a discount, but I would prefer we got to stay for free.”

“F-Free...!”

“You don’t want us to stay?”

“W-Well... maybe just the Empress could stay for free?” Nozomi stammered. Korone nodded.

“Very well. There are others who are likely to want to come as well... But I’m sure you’ll be more than willing to accomodate them.”

“U-Um...” Nozomi called out to Korone as she turned to leave.

“What is it?”

“It’s just um... why are you going along with this, when you know my plan?” Korone’s answer was immediate.

“Because it sounds fun.”

“Huh?”

Korone quickly followed up as Nozomi’s mouth dropped open.

“That was a joke. Well, half of a joke.”

“H-Half...? Then what’s the other half?” Nozomi asked, but Korone didn’t answer.

“It’s a secret.”

“A secret...” Nozomi didn’t know what to say, so Korone simply left the room.

“Aww... Now I’m curious. But wait, this is my chance. I can come up with an even more amazing plan!” Now that she was fired up, Nozomi began to think of an even more ridiculous plan.

○

“I’ve got tickets to a hot springs! Let’s go!” Keena said, happily waving the tickets around.

“I see. That’s great,” Akuto said without looking up from the book he was reading on his screen. Like always, Keena was inside Akuto’s room, chowing down on candied rice. Akuto’s response was nothing new for him, but Keena frowned.

“That’s not what I meant. You’re coming with me.”

“Huh?” Akuto turned around as Keena spread out three tickets like a fan. “Three tickets... So you, me, and Korone?”

“That’s right! It’ll be fun. It’s free! Rice at an inn tastes different than usual rice!” Keena said excitedly, but Akuto thought deeply for a moment.

“But won’t you cause a commotion if you stay at a place like that? And I don’t know if it’s okay for us to go alone...” Akuto said, but Korone quickly came down from the ceiling and intervened.

“All steps to ensure our security and keep the paparazzi away have been completed. All that’s required now is for you to not attempt to molest the Empress.”

“That’s right! Korone knows what I’m talking about. I’m so exhausted from this whole Empress thing, and I really need a break!”

“But you don’t actually do any work... No, I guess that doesn’t matter. It feels like something else is going on—” Korone shot him a glance to shut him up before he could continue that line of thought. Akuto returned her glance, and took a ticket.

“Alright, let’s go, then. We’re in different rooms, right?”

“Correct. We leave tomorrow. It’s not that far, so we’ll just walk there.”

“I’m kind of disappointed it’s so close, but I guess that’s fine. It’ll be fun! See you tomorrow!” Keena handed Korone the ticket and left through the window. Akuto watched her go, and then turned to Korone.

“So, what’s actually going on here?”

“Look at the ticket. The name of the inn is ‘Sasahara.’ It’s the same as that janitor. This is her family home.”

“Oh, I was just there.”

“Yes. As you know, Nozomi Sasahara claims to have imperial blood, and has been causing all manner of trouble. But our investigations have revealed that her claim might be true.”

“Huh? Really?”

“There’s a possibility, that’s all. Records were found indicating that treasure of the Imperial Family was given to her clan. The Royal Guard has already gone to look, and ascertained that the treasure is real.”

“And what is it, exactly?”

“An imperial seal. What effects it has, exactly, are unknown, but there’s a possibility that it’s built to trigger in response to royal blood.”

“...The imperial seal. The symbol of the imperial family is sitting in that inn?”

“Correct. The loss of the seal is the reason that the title of Empress or Emperor is instead given to the one who can use the family’s unique magics,” Korone said. “Normally, the royal seal identifies the heir.”

“And that’s why Keena herself needs to go there?”

“Yes. The Royal Guard will be providing security incognito. The inn staff will be operating their business as normal. They don’t know about this.”

“But won’t it cause a bit of a commotion if the Empress goes there?”

“Nozomi Sasahara herself was the one who proposed it. I’m sure the inn is ready. What, exactly, they’re ready for, is another question, but they’re ready. We’ve imposed a media blackout to keep attention to a minimum. There will likely be rumors, of course, but we’re only staying a single night. By the time the rest of the world finds out, we’ll already be gone.”

Akuto nodded.

“Then it’s my job to keep Nozomi from putting whatever plot she has into action. I hope there’s not too much trouble. Her parent seem like good people.” He seemed to lose himself in thought for a moment. “But... why do we still need to maintain the system of an Empress? I know I’m probably not one to talk, after everything I’ve done, but wouldn’t it be better if there was nobody to serve as the cause of all this trouble?”

“We artificial intelligences understand that humans find trouble pleasant,” Korone said.

“Yeah, I’m sure you and God both feel the same way. Even war and slaughter can seem pleasant as long as you’re not actually part of it.” Akuto shrugged.

“You’re closer to us than you are to humanity,” Korone said calmly, “And to answer your question, the reason it’s better to have an Empress is that it’s convenient.”

“I understand that. But I just don’t like it. I don’t want to start a war, but there are some systems I’d like to dispose of.”

“That’s a very dangerous statement to make. But before you start talking about national politics, you should deal with the more pressing issue that’s close at hand.” Korone pointed outside the window.

“What?” Akuto looked outside to see that Nozomi was selling tickets.

“Come one, come all! Get your tickets while they’re hot! The Empress and the Demon King are staying at an inn, and you can be there the same night. Who knows what will happen, but you’ll be there to see! They’re super cheap!” She was yelling and waving around fistfuls of tickets. She had a mask and sunglasses on, and a sign made from cardboard was hanging from her neck.

“...Uwah.” Akuto just sighed sadly, unable to speak.

“I did tell her that she was free to advertise her business. But don’t worry. Nobody will be stupid enough to actually buy... Oh, someone just did,” Korone said. Fujiko had run up to Nozomi.

“Is this true? Akuto is staying at an inn with Keena?”

“Yes. It’s true. Absolutely true!”

“Not happening! I’m going there too! How much?”

“They’re super cheap at just 20,000 yen a night!”

“That’s expensive!”

“Then don’t buy it!”

Nozomi insisted on yelling loudly during the whole conversation, but finally,

Fujiko was able to haggle her down to 14,500 yen.

“Oh... I don’t know where she heard about it, but Yoshie Kita bought one too. She’s called Hattori, as well. Hattori is feigning reluctance, but she’s bought one.” Korone calmly commented on the unfolding situation.

“You don’t need to tell me...” Akuto had already given up on watching and was quietly sighing to himself.

○

“Welcome, and thank you for coming.” The old couple looked nervous when they saw Akuto. He knew why, so he tried his best to make a soft smile. They’d been informed afterwards that it was all a big misunderstanding, but after what they saw, they were still frightened of him. Perhaps they were relieved when they saw how kind he was in person, or perhaps Fujiko’s best efforts at being charming paid off, because they were polite the whole time.

In the end, Akuto, Keena, Korone, Junko, Fujiko, and Yoshie had all gotten tickets. The girls would all stay in one big room, while Akuto stayed in a smaller one. As for Nozomi, the girl who’d come up with this plan, she was welcoming them in the front hall with a smile.

—*Tonight, you’re all going to see the Empress hand over the throne to me, she thought to herself, as she bowed politely.*

“Welcome.”

“Uwah... This place is amazing. I love places like this,” Keena said happily as she craned her head to look around the lobby.

“You do? Well... It certainly does have an atmosphere,” Fujiko said, frowning a little.

The carpet on the lobby was worn down. The leather on the sofas was thin and torn in places, and the glass on the table was cloudy. There were countless small cuts on the big wooden pillars that supported the ceiling, and their surfaces were cracked and worn down.”

“At least they’re keeping the place clean, I guess...” Yoshie said, in her usual brusque tone. The place felt like it was falling apart, but there wasn’t a speck of

dust to be seen. Everything was clean, it was just so old that cleaning didn't help.

"No, you're not supposed to say that..." Junko said, but since Yoshie was right, she trailed off.

Nozomi, who was taking them to their rooms, would normally have complained. But this time, she planned to use the place's age to her advantage. So she said nothing.

"It's old, but it's got a lot of history. For instance, that rattan chair that's hanging from the ceiling..." Nozomi pointed to a rattan chair which was tied to the ceiling with wire in a corner of the lobby.

Of course, it was too high up to sit in, so it seemed to be some kind of interior decoration, but...

"Everyone who ever sat in it died within a week of doing so. Anybody who tried to throw it away died too, for some reason, so we ended up just hanging it on the wall." Unfortunately, she wasn't bluffing. She was telling the truth.

"Um... there's no such thing as curses, right?" Junko said, worried, as she tugged on Akuto's sleeve. But nobody except Junko was scared, and Fujiko whacked her hand away, saying "Of course not."

"A lot of people think that curses are a part of black magic, but since they use mana to function, they're no different than any other spell. If it's got a spell on it which can interfere with the mana in your body and kill you, it should be pretty easy to sense."

"It's also possible that it's all just a series of coincidences. But life's no fun without coincidences like that, don't you think? Maybe it's better to just write it off as a mystery." Yoshie's words could be taken either way, but if nothing else, it was clear that she wasn't scared. As for Keena, the girl whose opinion was most important...

"Wow, isn't that amazing, Ackie? It's so scary!" She said it was scary, but she had a giant grin on her face.

"Well, it's probably one of those things that's more fun if you believe in it." Akuto nodded, disinterested.

—*It didn't work... But I'm just getting started!* Nozomi bit her lip, but on the surface she remained bright and cheerful.

“It's popular with our guests, you know. But some people say that just looking at it makes them feel sick. Now, I'll show you to your room.” Nozomi led them deeper into the inn. As they walked down the hallway, she would stop to point out empty rooms and explain their histories.

“About a century ago, three people hung themselves in this room. You'll all be staying next to each other, so you don't have anything to worry about, but sometimes you can hear the boards in the ceiling creak at night. It's the sound of the ropes in the next room, the ones they used to hang themselves.” Nozomi's forehead glistened slickly in the light as she spoke.

“H-Hey... Cut it out!” Junko's voice was quavering again. But the others' responses weren't any different from before.

“If the dead are haunting that room, I can talk to them with necromancy.”

“It's probably just the boards shrinking when it gets cold at night.”

“It's so scary, huh Ackie?”

“Yes. Suicide is a very sad thing.”

—*Crap. They say it's hard for modern people to believe in ghosts... but maybe that goes double for students at the academy?* Nozomi began to get worried.

“And here's the room for the girls. It's a big room, but watch out for the mirror in the corner. Sometimes a woman in white will come out of it. I'm told that sometimes, she'll drag you into the mirror, too,” Nozomi said as they entered the room.

“D-Do you die if she drags you in?” Junko's voice quavered.

“You do,” Nozomi said firmly.

“Aaaah!” Junko screamed, but Akuto put a hand on her shoulder.

“If somebody died like that, there'd definitely be records of it. I understand that you're trying to entertain us, Sasahara, but if you take it too far you'll spoil the fun.”

“No, it’s the truth. I just wanted to warn you.”

“Right, right.” Akuto waved her off. But then Fujiko jumped at Akuto and grabbed his arm, pressing herself tightly against it.

“Kyaaaah! How scary! The evil spirit in the mirror is going to try and kill me! If that happens, will you protect me, Akuto?” She looked up at him pleadingly, but he just furrowed his brow.

“I’m sorry, even I can tell you’re faking that.”

“Tch!” Fujiko said.

○

Afterwards, Nozomi went to show Akuto his room, while the others stayed behind. Akuto and Korone followed her.

“You’re not going to stay with the others?”

“I want see what your room is like, just in case something happens,” Korone said.

Nozomi told him all about the terrible things that had happened in the room’s past, but he mostly ignored her. Her next words, though, got his attention.

“There’s another room behind yours which is locked up tight. There was a terrible massacre right after the inn was opened, and it’s been sealed ever since.”

Akuto looked at Korone. “And there’s something hidden there, or something?”

“Heheh. I knew you’d ask that. There’s said to be a legendary pot in there, with an evil spirit sealed inside. This pot is actually...” Nozomi continued, but Akuto threw a glance at Korone. She nodded and whispered in his ear.

“The thing you’re thinking of is in the basement. But the investigation was never able to reveal if it was real or not. We’re going to have to look into this room, as well.”

“Let’s do it,” Akuto said.

“Huh? Why are you whispering to each other? Are you scared? Well, have a

good night!” Nozomi grinned, though she had no idea what they were talking about. And when Akuto was putting his things away, Nozomi walked over and whispered in Korone’s ear.

“What do you think about my perfect plan? I’m going to scare the Empress until she can’t think straight!”

“I see. Now, everything you told us so far is true as far as you know, right?” Korone asked.

“Huh? Of course it’s true!”

“Understood. Good luck with your plan, then.” As Nozomi walked out of the room, confused, Korone went over to Akuto.

“I hate to say this, but we may have a problem. Be careful.”

“...You don’t look like you’re just trying to scare me. But there’s no such thing as ghosts, right?”

“Perhaps we can’t be so sure about that,” Korone said with a serious expression. Of course, she always had a serious expression, so it lacked the effect it might otherwise have.

“You are just trying to scare me after all, aren’t you?”

“No... Oh, we’ll be eating dinner with the rest of the girls in the large room. Until then, we’ve been told we can take a bath. We’ll do our investigation once night falls. For now, our goal is to search the inn and find the imperial seal by morning. And then tomorrow, we can have the Empress take a look at it.”

“Got it. Let’s relax until evening, then.”

○

The sun set, and Akuto headed alone to the inn’s large bath. The girls were busy changing, but since the mens’ and womens’ baths were separate, there was no need for him to worry about running into them.

Akuto opened the door to the changing room, feeling peaceful and relaxed at the prospect of spending some time alone. The changing room was clean, but it was old. The basket for holding his clothes was falling apart. Akuto didn’t believe in ghosts, but the atmosphere felt gloomy in here.

“...Well, I hate to say it, but I don’t think I have to worry about any other customers,” Akuto whispered as he opened the door to the bath. It was an open-air bath, and a pretty big one, too. The inn was surrounded by trees, so even in the center of the city it still felt isolated.

“Gloomy or not, I still haven’t felt this relaxed in a long time...” Akuto sank into the bath and let out a big sigh. He could feel his exhaustion draining from his body as the heat surrounded him. Right above him, in the trees, however, was a lurking shadow. Of course, it was Nozomi.

“Hehehe... I can play my tricks from the men’s side of the bath without those girls finding me...”

She straddled herself on a large branch as she took out a bottle from her pocket. It was filled with a red powder that dissolved in water. If she spread it into the girls’ bath, it would turn into what looked like a lake of blood.

“And a few minutes later, the water goes back to clear! They’ll all scream and run away, and then when they come back, they won’t know if they hallucinated it, or if it was a real ghost that did it!” Nozomi looked away from Akuto’s naked body, and waited excitedly for the girls to come into the bath. But when she heard a voice from below she looked back down at Akuto.

“F-Fujiko! What are you doing here?” Akuto was screaming, and there was no wonder why. Fujiko was there, completely naked, and pushing herself up against his back.

“Because I just wanted to see you so badly,” she said in a seductive voice.

“But this is the men’s bath.”

“There’s nobody else here in the inn. I just walked right through the front.”

“But... you know...”

“Oh, you don’t want me here? I ran out before everybody else came, so we don’t have much time. Come on, let’s do this quickly.”

“D-Do what quickly?”

Nozomi gulped as she looked down at them. Of course, she’d never seen anything like this before, and she was so stunned that she thought her heart

might burst out of her chest. She knew she shouldn't watch, but she couldn't help it.

"Aww, you know..."

"No, I've told you before, this isn't right..."

"Oh? If you're talking about some sort of religious thing, that doesn't matter to you anymore. And of course, ethically, there's no problem at all. I plan on giving birth to a very healthy child." Fujiko began to rub Akuto's chest with one hand as she rubbed her own with the other.

"A child?! No, wait... I mean... hey!"

"Ooh, you're so strong all the time, but you're so cute when I do this... I love it..." Akuto and Fujiko began to squirm inside the bathtub. Nozomi was now completely focused on them, her eyes bloodshot as she let out short, panting breaths.



—*A-Aah... This is amazing... It's amazing now, but what if it gets more amazing? Huh? I feel something on my face.. Oh, my nose is bleeding...* She gasped and put her hand over her face, but it was too late. A drop of blood was already falling on top of the two.

“W-Wait, Fujiko. Something just fell on me...”

“Heheh... Don't try and change the subject. Or are you just embarrassed about how big you are down here? Huh? Blood?”

—*Crap!* Nozomi went to run away. But she didn't have to worry.

“STOP IT!” She heard a scream, and then the sound of something being sliced. She looked over just in time to see the bamboo wall separating the mens' and womens' baths being sliced open by a katana. With a powerful kick, Junko knocked a hole in it and came bursting in.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?” Junko yelled, but the response was surprisingly calm.

“Wait... this is blood...”

“T-The whole pool turned red...” Akuto and Fujiko were gasping.

“You can't try and change the subject... W-Wait... AAAH!” Junko began to loudly scream.

—*Huh? It was just a nosebleed...* Nozomi turned her gaze from Junko back to the bathtub. The water was beginning to turn red.

—*Wait, don't tell me I dropped the bottle...* She checked, but the bottle was still there, and still firmly sealed. It hadn't cracked, and it wasn't leaking.

“T-Then what is that...?” she whispered.

Akuto and Fujiko had wrapped towels around themselves and fled the bath. It wasn't that big, but it was still ten times the size of an ordinary household tub. And now, half of it was giving off an eerie red steam.

“W-What is that...? Is that a real curse?” Nozomi's voice was quavering in shock.

“This is human blood,” Korone said after she finished her analysis.

After they’d fled from the bath, she’d gotten permission from the owners to run a test for anything unusual, and learned two things: First, it was human blood.

Second, the blood hadn’t come from the faucet. It had been splashed from outside the tub.

“Do you think it’s those guys who attacked the place earlier?” Akuto asked, but Korone shook her head.

“That would be difficult.”

Akuto remembered that the royal guards were currently watching the inn.

“Sheesh... Hey, let me just make sure. This isn’t your doing, right?”

“I can understand why you’d think that, but this time, it wasn’t me. Of course, I am giving Nozomi free reign.”

“Then it could’ve been her?” Akuto frowned, but Nozomi was nowhere to be seen.

In the end, everybody had taken turns using the bath in their rooms, and changed into yukatas to eat dinner. The owners had cooked them an elaborate meal, but what should have been a fun experience instead turned into a discussion of the supernatural.

“Hey... You’re sure there really wasn’t anything there?” Junko asked, worried.

“You’re just too gullible. There’s a possibility that Nozomi had a lot of human blood, after all,” Fujiko said. But there wasn’t that much energy in her voice, either.

“That’s even more scary than a ghost. But if it’s real human blood, then it must belong to somebody, right? Can’t you use mana detection to find out who?” Yoshie looked at Korone.

“My attempt failed. I can’t see a mana canceller being involved in this, however, so I’m not certain why.”

Everyone fell silent.

“I’m sorry... There was an incident in the bath once where someone’s head was split open with a rock...” the owner said, apologetically. The gloom in the dining room deepened even further.

“Um, well... Let’s just assume that it was a human, not a ghost, who was behind this. Korone and I will look for Nozomi. Everybody else, stay together in your room. We’re all fine with that, right?” Akuto proposed. Everyone nodded. Dinner finished, the owner gave one last apologetic bow, and Korone began to make tea.

Akuto chose his words carefully to try and make everyone feel better.

“Um... Guys, I’m sure it was just a prank. Yeah.”

“I hope so...” Junko said, her voice gloomy.

“It has to be. Everyone else is worried about a potential enemy. You’re the only one who’s worried about a ghost. In the modern era, we’ve solved almost all the mysteries of nature, so why would there be a ghost...”

Junko frowned as she interrupted Fujiko.

“My family’s sect is also responsible for performing the ancient rites. And part of that job means believing in mysterious powers.”

“But when you start getting mixed up between the gods, who are just a system, and those strange powers, is when things start going wrong. That’s what Akuto didn’t like, right? The God Suhara was the first one he destroyed.”

“But...!” Akuto tried to cut them off before they could argue further.

“Come on, let’s not talk about this...”

But then Yoshie interrupted too. “No, no. I have a bit of a different opinion.”

“What is it?”

“We’ve solved most of the world’s mysteries, but the problem of the soul remains unsolved. The fact that we have a soul separate from our bodies, like I was able to prove, is now certain. But we don’t know where that soul comes from. You all remember that Zero had a soul, right?”

Yoshie continued to elaborate.

“We say that Liradans develop ‘selves’ if they spend enough time with humans, right? If the soul and the self are the same thing, then that means the soul is transmissible. We may live in a far stranger world than we think we do.”

“Yes, I feel like I might be forced to admit that.” Fujiko was there to see it for herself, so there were no grounds for her to disagree.

“Which means that a soul can see another soul. Maybe it’s possible for us to see a ghost.”

But when Yoshie said that, Fujiko spoke up.

“But that’s got nothing to do with what happened here. That human blood was a real, physical object, right?”

“That’s right. You can make it with mana, but you still need chemical elements and human DNA to do it. We can assume that the blood came from someone. But what I’m trying to say is that I don’t think Junko is wrong. And isn’t it a little cute when she gets scared? Don’t you think?”

Yoshie winked at Akuto.

“Oh, um... maybe,” Akuto mumbled.

“Oh...” Junko blushed.

Fujiko, however, demurred.

“She is not cute!”



“Alright, let’s go.” Akuto said as he left the room with Korone. The girls who were left behind were terrified. Well, Junko was, at least.

“T-They’ll be okay, right?” Junko was clinging to Yoshie. She must not have realized what she was doing, because when Yoshie patted her head, she jumped.

“Ooh, you really are cute, Junko. There, there.”

“H-Hey, stop it...”

“You’re the one who grabbed on to me, though!”

Yoshie stroked Junko under the chin like a cat. Junko was too scared to move, and all she could do was complain that it tickled.

“Stop it! Hey, stop!”

“Hehehe... I think you need to be tickled!”

Junko was almost in tears, but Yoshie was just having fun. Keena joined in too, when she saw them. “I want to play too!” she yelled as she wrapped her arms around Keena and began to pat her down.

“S-Stop it... That really tickles!” Junko squirmed, and the three of them fell over. All of them were wearing yukata, which were beginning to roll up and reveal more than they wanted to show.

Fujiko chuckled and told them to stop.

“That’s enough, girls. Hattori’s calmed down, it looks like.”

“Huh?” Junko looked at Fujiko.

“Aww, when you say it like that, it makes it sound like I did it deliberately!” Yoshie chuckled too.

“I thought we were doing it because it was fun,” Keena said, her arms still wrapped around Junko. And then...

Creak...

Creak...

There was a low, heavy sound.

“Huh...?” Everyone froze and looked up at the ceiling. The boards above them were creaking.

Creak...

Creak...

It sounded like something heavy was hanging in the next room.

“A hanged man in the next room...” Junko grabbed on to Yoshie again. And this time, Yoshie didn’t seem to feel like messing with her.

“That sound is real, right? So...”

“It’s faster to assume someone’s playing a trick!” Fujiko turned and ran out of the room, the hem of her yukata flailing up behind her. She ran a short distance down the hallway, before pressing her back up against the wall and cautiously peering into the next room. And then, for an instant, she froze.

There was a woman in the room, looking away from her, with long black hair. There was something that looked like a white rope around her neck, and her legs were floating off the ground. Her whole body was floating left and right, like a pendulum, as the boards above her creaked.

“You’re not scaring anyone!” Fujiko said, completely unafraid, as she fired a mana ball at the hanging woman. She limited the power of her strike, to avoid damaging the room. Fujiko was more interested in finding out who this was. There was a small explosion of light, blinding her for a moment.

“I know I hit her...”

But the blow didn’t seem to have the impact she expected.

“...There was something here, right?” Keena, who’d followed from the other room, said as she peeked over Fujiko’s shoulder.

“I saw it too. It looked like a hanging corpse, I guess.” Yoshie walked up to them as well. She was holding Junko tight to her chest.

“S-Stop it... Are you sure you saw them?”

“I was... but they disappeared.”

Fujiko shook her head.

After the explosion was over, the room was quiet. The only sound was the sound of the clock, ticking like nothing had happened.

“T-Then that... was a real ghost...” Junko said, scared.

“You shouldn’t say something’s real just because you can’t prove it wasn’t. Look, there’s any number of ways in and out of this room.” Fujiko pointed up at the ceiling. The tiles were loose, and any could be easily removed. It was probably easy to escape up to the attic.

“We should probably just stay in our room until Akuto gets back,” Fujiko said. But when they got back, they just sat there in silence.

“S-Somebody say something...” Junko said with a shaking voice.

“Yeah, it’s a little too gloomy in here... Not that I’m feeling cheerful myself, exactly.” Yoshie crossed her arms.

“If somebody is attacking us, then it’s safest to stay here until they try attacking this room. We need to make sure we’ve got an escape route, but this place is so old that if we have to, we can break a window and jump out of it. Until then, let’s just have some tea and relax,” Fujiko said calmly.

“Then we’re safer if it really was a ghost, huh?” Keena said innocently.

Junko shook her head violently. “No! Absolutely not!”

“No, I vote for ‘ghost’ too. If this is an assassination plot on Keena, it’s a little beyond our ability to deal with. Or rather, I don’t want to take responsibility for dealing with it.”

“Yeah, I wasn’t going to come out and say it, but you’re right. But whether our enemy is physical or spiritual, we’re in a really weird place. Mana doesn’t work like it’s supposed to here. Most of the time when you hear about places like this, it’s just rumors, but some people call them ‘mystery zones.’ They’re places where gravity works funny, or things happen that make people go insane.”

“That’s not important right now. We need to talk about what we’ll do if there’s trouble. We’ll have to run and keep Keena safe. If something happens, we leave the mystery zone. That should be our priority.”

Both Fujiko and Yoshie were starting to take the situation seriously.

“B-But they’re not going to put a curse on us, are they?” Junko was still clinging to Yoshie.

“If they do, it’s not like there’s anything we can do about it. Which means there’s no sense in worrying.”

“It would be so much fun if it were a ghost, though!” Keena said.

“Hey, ghosts disappear, and make weird sounds, and threaten people, right?”

“Those are things you do too,” Fujiko said with a sigh.

“Aww, come on!” Keena pouted. “Don’t talk about me like I’m a ghost... Oops.” Keena leaned forward to complain, but when she did, she knocked her now-empty teacup off the table.

“...Oops! I dropped it!” Keena reached out for the fallen teacup. A pale white hand came out from under the table, picked up the cup, and handed it to her.

“Oh, thanks.”

She put it back on the table. “So anyway...” she continued.

Everyone froze. They all looked down at their hands.

And then, as Junko began to scream, they all raced out of the room.

“KYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

○

“It’s difficult to detect, but the sound and vibrations indicate that there are multiple people in the house,” Korone said. She and Akuto were searching the inn. They hadn’t found Nozomi yet.

“That’s impossible though, right?”

“The only people here are Nozomi, her parents, and one Liradan servant. Nobody else. Her parents were at the front desk, and the Liradan was in the garden.”

“We’re supposed to get a report if somebody comes from the outside, right?”

“Yes. But I can’t contact the guards. The mana here is unstable. That said, if

there was any danger, the royal guard would come to warn us directly.”

“That’s weird, too. What’s going on here?” Akuto looked down at the box in his hand, which held the royal seal. He’d brought it up from the basement, but right now it was nothing more than a box with an antique in it.

“We’ve searched every place Nozomi could be. Except this one. The sealed room.” Korone pointed in front of her. Akuto put a hand on the door.

It wasn’t locked.

“...It doesn’t seem very sealed to me.”

“The knights did a search of this place in secret, and they didn’t mention any sealed rooms, either.”

“Then if we don’t find Nozomi here, let’s go back to the girls’ room.” Akuto went inside.

The room appeared to be a storeroom, with shelves on both walls. The shelves were lined with antiques, none of which seemed to be interesting except a single large pot in the back. There was a chance that if they looked at each one, they might find something surprising, but it didn’t seem likely.

“So this is that pot she was talking about?” Akuto headed towards the back.

The pot was as tall as a child, and was painted white with complicated blue patterns. Akuto looked inside, and gasped. Nozomi was in it.

“What are you doing here?”

“Aaah! It’s here! Don’t hurt me! Please, don’t hurt me!” Nozomi was screaming.

“You’re fine, just calm down...” But just as he said that, there was a distant explosion. It was the one caused by Fujiko’s mana ball, but of course, Akuto had no way of knowing that.

“We can worry about her later. We need to hurry back,” Akuto said to Korone as he turned to leave. But Nozomi grabbed on to his arm.

“Oh, good! You’re human! Don’t go! T-There’s a ghost! A real ghost! I need you to save me! It’s scary! So scary!”

“H-Hey, let me go. You heard that explosion, right!”

“That’s why I need you! There’s a monster! A real monster!” Nozomi was screaming and crying. Akuto glanced at Korone. She put her hands to her ears for a second, and shook her head.

“I hear the girls. They’re talking normally. It appears they’re fine.”

“Hmm...? Don’t tell me they blew something up while they were playing around...”

“From the conversation, it appears they saw something.”

“A ghost or a monster, then...?”

Akuto looked at Nozomi. She was crying and grabbing on to him.

“It’s real! I saw a hairy monster! Oh, I’m so sorry! I was lying about everything! But everything I said was true! You might not believe me, but there’s a monster!”

Nozomi wasn’t making any sense, but it was clear that she’d seen something she hadn’t expected. Akuto wasn’t sure what to do.

“Hmm... Well, it’s clear something’s going on here. For now, let’s get her out of here. We’ve got the seal, so we can call the guard and...” Akuto lifted Nozomi out of the pot and helped her to her feet, then left the room and looked around. The room was at the end of an L-shaped hallway. When he looked at the corner, Akuto felt his blood run cold for a moment.

There were two kids standing at the end of the hallway, with short cropped hair and faded kimonos. The two kimonos were identical, except for their differing colors, and the identical hairstyles and identical faces made it clear that they were twins. They were silently standing there, looking at him.

A moment later, Akuto recovered from his shock and readied for a fight. However... the twins seemed to float around the corner and disappear.

“What was that?” He turned to ask Korone, but then he saw the girls running towards him, screaming.

“Uwaaah! Help me, Akuto! It’s going to kill me!” Junko jumped into his arms.

“C-Calm down! Nobody’s going to kill you!” Akuto held her shoulders and tried to calm her.

“She’s too scared to think. And right when we need to plan, too.” Fujiko said, as she pressed herself up against Akuto, though in a less obvious manner.

“Hey, Ackie, it feels weird in here! Like something’s crawling on my skin!” Keena grabbed his arm. Keena was acting different from usual, which didn’t make him feel any better, but before he could answer, Yoshie jumped on his back.

“Oh, sorry... I just felt like joining in.”

“S-Stop that... A-Anyway, calm down everybody. I get it. If we can see them, we can deal with them. Don’t worry.” Akuto said to all of them.

“All of them” referred to the girls clinging to his body. Junko was grabbing on to him from the front. Fujiko his right arm, and Keena his left. Yoshie was on his back, and Nozomi and Korone had each grabbed on to a leg.

“I get the feeling that Korone’s just doing it as a joke, but... Come on, everyone. Get off. Look, there’s nothing there...” Akuto said as he pointed at the hallway. But...

Something was there.

It was a tall woman. Her hair was so long it almost touched the floor. Her bangs drooped over her face, completely concealing it. She was thin, and wearing a plain-looking dress. What was strange, however, was the way she moved. Her limbs were bent strangely at the joints, and she was walking on the ground like a crab or a spider.

And what was even stranger was the way her abdomen was slithering like a snake as she moved. Her shoulder bones, ribs, and pelvis seemed to slide independently to the left and right with each step she took. And she was coming towards them.

Akuto froze in shock, and the others turned to look at what he was seeing. And then, they saw it too.

“Uwaah!”

This was enough for even Fujiko and Yoshie to scream. Only Korone was unimpressed. Junko, especially, was panicking.

“Noo! It’s going to curse us and kill us! That’s a legendary spirit! My grandma told me about it! It’s the manifestation of a curse, and it’ll kill you if it touches you!”

“C-Come on, it’s fine. You’re a strong girl. You can kill anything if you put your mind to it. So just get off me for a second...” Akuto was a little hesitant after seeing his foe’s strange appearance, but he knew it was an enemy, and he was ready to deal with it. But...

“What? Is that how you think about me?!” Junko said in shock. Akuto hurriedly added,

“No, I didn’t mean that. You’re actually a very delicate girl who can be very cute. I know that. I just mean that now is a time when you need to be strong.”

“Thank you. I’m glad I got to hear that in my last moments.”

“W-Wait, your last moments?”

“Everybody’s going to die here, right?”

“No, we’re not...” Akuto said, but Junko was no longer listening at all.

“I love how you’re so kind, the way you always try to keep me from worrying. I can finally tell you the truth. I know only a coward would say something like this before she dies, but now I can tell you how I really feel. I love you. From the bottom of my heart. Hold me until the moment of my death!” Junko was grabbing on to him as tightly as she could.

“Hey... Um...” Akuto blushed, not sure of what to say. It was very clear that she wasn’t messing around.

“At least... At least tell me before I die... Tell me that you love me!” Junko shouted as she looked up to Akuto, pleadingly. Of course, Fujiko wasn’t just going to ignore this.

“Stop messing around! You’re not the only one who loves Akuto! Tell me, Akuto, why don’t you love me like I love you? We’re all going to die, so I want to hear it. Akuto, who is it you love?” Fujiko looked up at him demandingly.

“T-This isn’t the time...”

“It’s the right time if I say it is! This is important!”

“Oh, um... If this is what we’re doing now, can you put me on your list of candidates, too?” Yoshie said.

“Ackie, I’m feeling kind of jealous. Come on, answer them!” Keena seemed a little desperate too as she clung to Akuto.

Akuto wasn’t sure how to answer, so instead he just looked at the monster. By now, it was almost on top of them.

“Gogagagagugegiagagigogogoro...” It was making strange sounds, like its throat had been crushed.

“Fine! Fine, I’ll tell you!” Akuto said.

“It’s not just me being indecisive. As you know, I’m different from other people. The only person who could normally be my partner is Keena.”

Everyone froze in shock.

“But I’ll tell you how I really feel. I love all of you. The story that you can love only one person is just another illusion. I want to love all of you the way you love me. I’m still an unstable being. I haven’t decided what my future will be. But when the time comes when I know how I’m going to live, I promise I’ll live for all of your sakes. That’s my answer.”

“He’s not indecisive...”

“He just wants us all, huh?”

“Oh? I’m fine with that.”

“Ackie, I still feel really weird.” Somehow, his words had drained the tension from everyone. They all whispered to themselves.

“All I did was tell you how I really felt.” Akuto wasn’t sure how to take their reactions. And it wasn’t just the girls who were confused.

“Guga...” The monster was blushing too. It had lifted up its face to reveal that it was Arnoul.

“I did nah expect this to get so romantic,” Michie Ootake said as she walked

into the hallway. She was blushing too.

“Sigh... This is what we get for scaring innocents.” Kanna Kamiyama walked down the hallway towards them as well. All three members of the student council trio were there.

“Wh... wh... wha?” Junko was looking rapidly between them, confused. The others were all surprised, too, to a greater or lesser degree.

“Was this all your doing...?” Akuto asked. Michie nodded.

“Yup. I’ll say, though, that we didn’t know you were here. When we made our plan, we didn’t know you were coming.”

“Huh? What does that mean?”

“After last time, we got to be friends with Monami the Liradan, and we came to play with her. And that’s when we heard Nozomi was up to something, and decided to scare her,” Kanna said.

“Then that blood in the baths was...” Fujiko asked, and Michie blushed and put a hand to her cheek.

“That was me. I was hiding, and I saw what you two were up to and got a nosebleed...”

“There was an awful lot of blood, though.”

“Well, I’m a little different than most people. As long as I’ve got the nutrients I can create infinite blood... It means I have to eat a lot of red stuff, though.”

“You have to be kidding me...” Fujiko sighed.

“Then the hanging woman and that thing we just saw...” Yoshie asked, and Arnoul nodded.

“Gugah.”

“And the hand?” Akuto asked, and a voice came from further down the hall.

“I heard what they were up to, and decided I had to join in the fun. It was worth it, too! I got to see your big romantic moment.” Lily Shiraishi appeared, grinning. Next to her were the “twins,” Monami and Keisu.

“Now Nozomi won’t be able to boss me around!”

“Look, master! I made a friend who owns a kimono!”

Monami and Keisu were happily waving at them.

“But how did you get past the royal guard?” Akuto asked. Lily shrugged.

“They were pretty bossy, and didn’t know who I was. So I just knocked a few of them out. If they’re friends of yours, you should’ve warned them about me.”

“They’re not friends, they were the elite royal guard...”

“Who cares? Anyway, why not go take a bath? It looks like you’ve got plenty of girls who’d want to wash your back.” Lily grinned. And then Junko, who’d been strangely silent, began to moan.

“I... I...”

“Hey, are you okay?” Akuto put a hand on her shoulder, worried. But Junko brushed it off.

“I-I told you I liked you...” Her voice was quavering. And then she screamed.

“I told you I liked you! In front of everybody!” She turned bright red and began to yell, but no one around seemed impressed.

“Are you stupid? Everyone already knew that.”

“But who cares? It worked, right?”

“You should be thanking us, not getting mad,” Lily said.

“Uwaah! I’m so embarrassed! This is your fault!”

Junko tried to hit Akuto, but she was so distraught she simply staggered and collapsed in a random direction.

“Oh, watch out!” Akuto tried to grab her, but she’d fallen onto one of the shelves of antiques in the sealed room. There was a loud clatter, and then an awkward silence.

“Well... That ruined the fun.”

“Jeez, what’s wrong with that girl? The Student Council isn’t paying for that.” Fujiko and Lily sighed. But then Korone spoke up, seemingly after realizing something.

“But there’s something we haven’t figured out yet. The problems with the mana.”

“Is there something going on with it?” Akuto asked. Korone nodded and pointed to the end of the hall. Everyone looked. There was a woman in white standing there. She was thin, with long hair, just like Arnoul, but she had a strange, noble aura about her.

But the biggest difference was...

“Hey, whose dat?”

“No idea, gyah.”

“Do you guys know?” Lily asked.

Akuto shook his head.

“Which means that’s...?”

“Not human,” Korone said.

“I don’t hear the sound of a heartbeat, or the sound of motors.” Lily snorted when she heard Korone’s words.

“Stop right there. That body is probably made out of mana, but...” Lily stretched out a hand to grab the woman’s shoulder, but her hand passed through empty space.

“Huh?” Lily’s hand was going right through the woman’s body. This was enough to shock even her.

“That’s not mana...” She reached out a hand again and again. But the woman was drawing closer, as if her hand wasn’t even there. No, it was hard to tell if she was even getting closer. Her legs weren’t moving. She seemed to be motionless as she glided across the floor.

“Is that a real...” Junko stammered. She must’ve been too scared to stand, because she’d crawled back to Akuto and wrapped her arms around his legs. Akuto put a hand on her head.

“It doesn’t look like she wants to hurt us, though.” As the woman got closer, they could tell that he was right. Her narrowed eyes had a light in them, as if

she wanted to say something. Korone suddenly spoke.

“When she manifested I was able to pinpoint the center of the mana disturbance. It’s one of the antiques that Hattori knocked over, I believe.”

“It is?” Junko stood up in surprise and looked back at the antiques. One of them was a wooden box that had fallen open. There was a small branch from a tree inside that was shining with a golden light. It seemed to be just an ordinary decoration, but the light it was giving off wasn’t mana. It was the same light that was coming from the woman.

“Is that...?” Akuto gasped in surprise. The same light began to pour out from the small box he was holding. It was the same light as the imperial seal.

“W-What’s going on?” Junko looked towards Korone for an explanation. Korone shook her head.

“I don’t know. It’s probably some secret hidden by the ancient imperial family.” She took Nozomi, who’d been clinging in terror to Akuto’s legs, and helped her up.

“Huh? W-What’s going on?” Her forehead reflected the light from the branch and the seal.

“Your family does not have royal blood. But you’ve followed the royal family’s orders for generations. The strange disasters at your inn may have been caused by the branch and the seal, to delay their being found.” Nozomi’s eyes went wide.

“Then my family served the Emperor...” Nozomi’s voice was shaking. Huge tears rolled down her face, as if all the worries she’d kept bottled up were pouring out of her.

“Well... all’s well that ends well, I guess? But that means she...” Akuto turned to Keena.

“I don’t really know for sure but... I think her job is to welcome me,” Keena said. And then, the shining woman opened her mouth and spoke.

“You have the right to bear the royal seal. Preparations have been made. Return the jeweled branch to its rightful place, so that the true empire may be

born.”

Nobody said a word. But Keena tugged on Akuto’s sleeve and pouted.

“Hey, Ackie, I told you I felt weird.”

Afterword

Thanks as always for buying my book.

It's me, Shoutarou Mizuki. This is volume 10, so we're now in the 2 digit range. This time it was an anthology of short stories, and I hope you enjoyed it. It's meant to stand on its own, so if somebody out there says, "I learned about this series from the anime, but I don't want to buy 10 volumes," then you can enjoy this one on its own.

You can see for yourself what happens in it... Though I suppose I should explain a little. This is the first volume where the student council trio are the stars. When I saw them come to life in the anime, I felt like I had to give them a story of their own.

Anyway, on to the anime. It's over now, and it was quite popular. It was true to the story, but also very daring in a lot of ways. The voice actors all did a great job and had a great time.

The DVD and Blu-rays are available now.

I hope that those of you who watched the anime and those of you who missed it will buy all of the volumes. If you've read this far, you're sure to enjoy it. Now, there's a reason I talked about the anime before I talked about this book, and that's because I contributed several ideas to the bonus for the DVDs, "Another Extra Demon King," and I used a bit of those ideas in this volume.

You can enjoy the gags both in written and anime form. I was there for the voice recording of the mini-anime, and the voice actors were having a great time and made it a lot of fun. I hope you'll watch it too.

Thank you to everyone who helped with this volume, and of course, the readers too. As you saw from the plot in this volume, there's a little more to go. How much more, you'll have to wait and find out. I hope you'll stick around to see.

There's lots more fun to come!



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Demon King **DAIMAŌ** ACT 10



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