



Shoutarou Mizuki

Demon King
DAIMAŌ
ACT 7



Demon King
DAIMAO
ACT 7

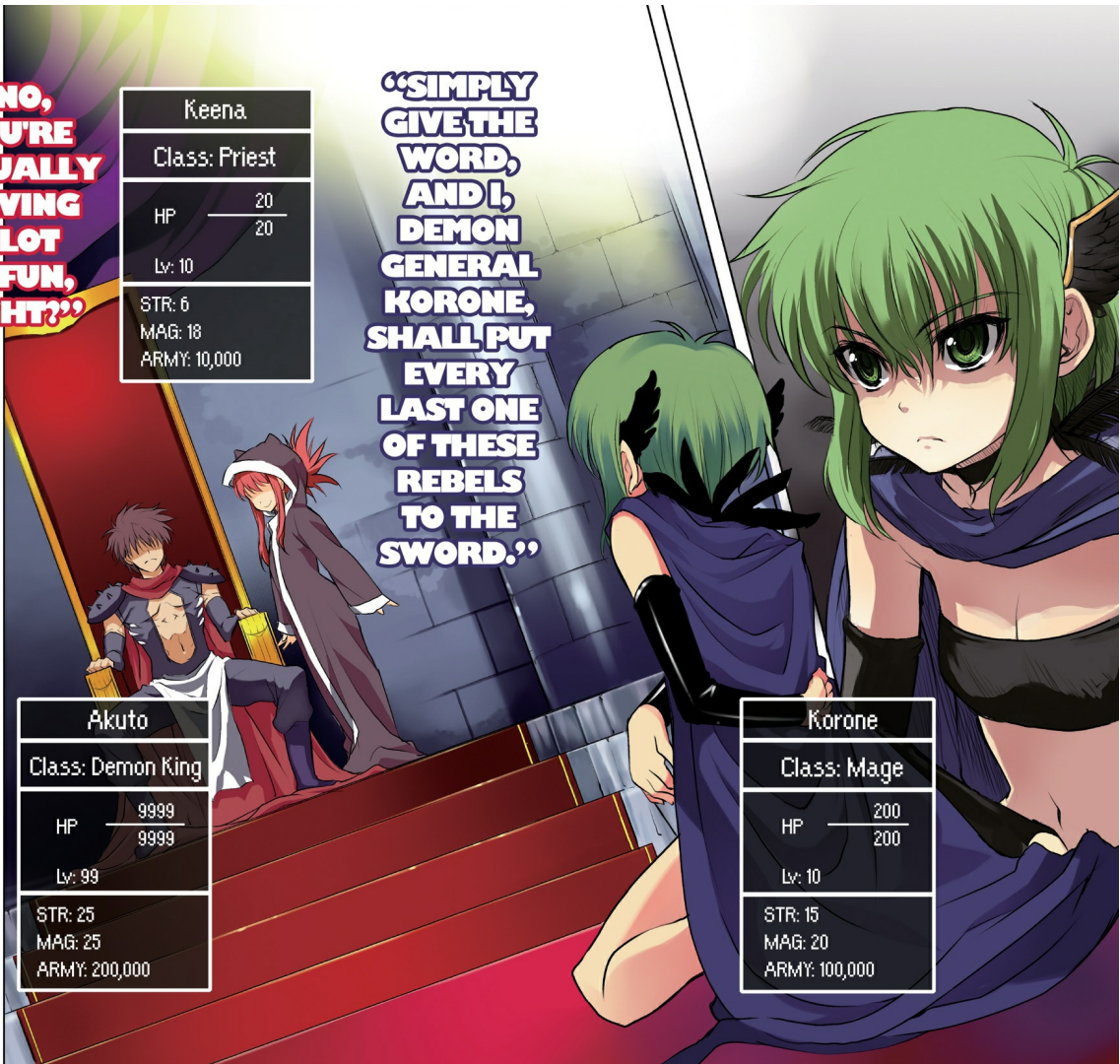


**“NO,
YOU’RE
ACTUALLY
HAVING
A LOT
OF FUN,
RIGHT?”**

Keena	
Class: Priest	
HP	20 / 20
Lv: 10	
STR: 6 MAG: 18 ARMY: 10,000	

**“SIMPLY
GIVE THE
WORD,
AND I,
DEMON
GENERAL
KORONE,
SHALL PUT
EVERY
LAST ONE
OF THESE
REBELS
TO THE
SWORD.”**

Akuto	
Class: Demon King	
HP	9999 / 9999
Lv: 99	
STR: 25 MAG: 25 ARMY: 200,000	



Korone	
Class: Mage	
HP	200 / 200
Lv: 10	
STR: 15 MAG: 20 ARMY: 100,000	



**THE GIRL'S
YOUTHFUL
VOICE RANG
OUT, "NONE
MAY ENTER
THE SEALED
GROUND."**



Character Introduction

KORONE

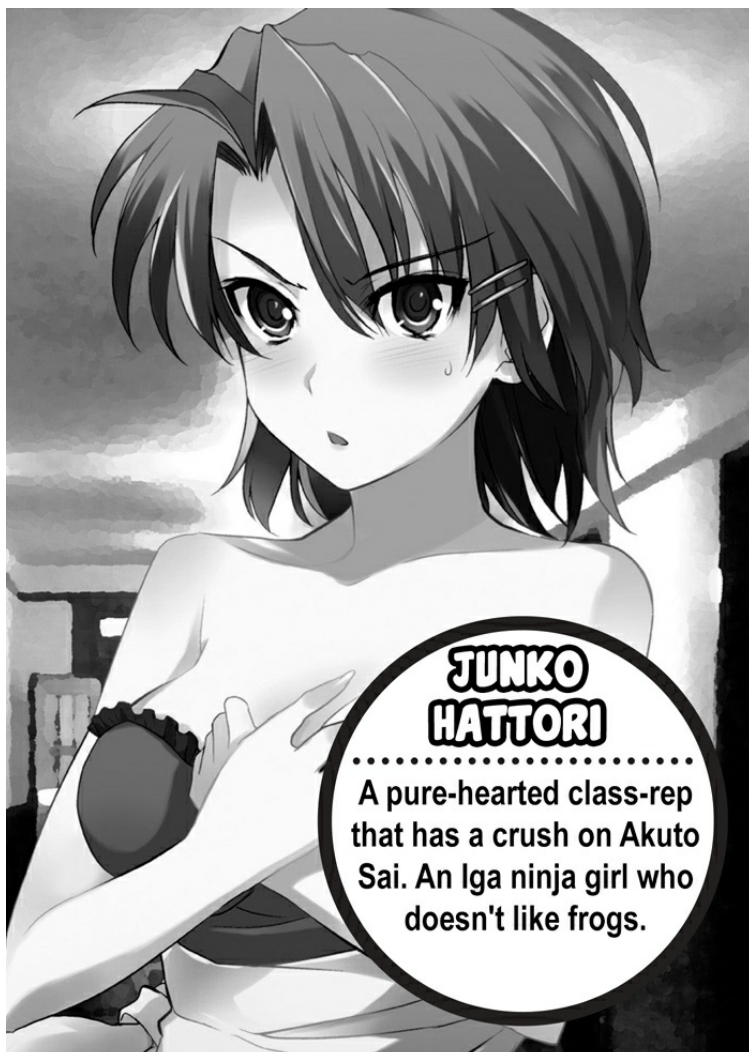
.....
An artificial human tasked with guarding and observing Akuto. Uses secret tools that she conceals in her bag. Loves to tease Akuto.

KEENA SOGA

.....
A ditzy girl who's taken a liking to Akuto. Loves rice. Can't do magic, but is very good at flying and turning herself invisible.

AKUTO SAI

.....
Our "good-hearted" protagonist who has been told (again?) that he's going to become the Demon King. The Demon King's war is over, but his troubles continue.



**JUNKO
HATTORI**

.....
A pure-hearted class-rep
that has a crush on Akuto
Sai. An Iga ninja girl who
doesn't like frogs.



FUJIKO ETO

.....
A black mage and chemist
who's sworn loyalty to Akuto.
On the surface, she's one of
the most beloved girls in the
school, but she actually
loves evil conspiracies.



**LILY
SHIRAISHI**

.....
Student Council President of
Constant Magical Academy.
Wears a trademark cap, and
snaps when ever someone
calls her "small."



HIROSHI MIWA

.....
A troublemaker who calls
Akuto "Boss." He misunder-
stands everything Akuto does,
and only serves to make
him more infamous.

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Prologue

The genius girl didn't think of herself as a genius.

Yoshie Kita spent her days working for her father, the High Priest of the God Megis, and dedicating herself to her hobbies of mathematics and game programming, even though she was only 17 years old.

At age 8, she'd stopped reading fiction, and developed an interest in poetry and mathematics books. But once she'd read all the famous works in those genres, she decided to learn to read poems in multiple languages by studying anything she could get her hands on. When she reached age 10, she'd mastered seven languages.

By the time she was done with that, she'd learned everything that was covered in a standard school curriculum. Since the Empire didn't allow skipping grades, she decided to study overseas. At age 15, she'd come back with a college diploma, hoping to get the job of high priest. But it was only then that she realized the job required a diploma from the magical academy.

She decided, though, that going back to school was a waste of time, so she requested a job as her father's assistant. In her spare time, she devoted herself to bringing about her ideal society, "a place where everyone can live for their hobbies," in a way that didn't involve presenting any plans to the government.

She'd started by posting on political message boards under a false name and starting debates. She knew that most of these debates ended with insults being flung on both sides, but she succeeded in attracting attention.

Online, she used a male name: Yoshihiko.

No matter how advanced communications technology got, a citizen of the Empire never revealed anything about their private life to anyone but the gods. It was considered taboo to expose someone's personal information or upload images of them without their consent, a tradition that Yoshie took full advantage of.

After a year, “Yoshihiko’s” page became politically influential, and “his” claims and research became widely known.

“Yoshihiko” wanted, or so his page claimed, to build “a society where everyone could live without wanting to do anything.” This radical thesis was considered nonsense by most, but the research he was doing to bring it about attracted a great deal of interest.

The research was on “virtual phase space.”

Virtual phase space was a complex enough topic that most people just called it 4D space, and even scientists knew little more than “We don’t know why, but there’s an infinitely vast dimension right next to us.” Staying in VPS (Virtual Phase Space) was considered extremely dangerous, and it was mainly used as a way to teleport from one place to another, or as a sort of panic room when one’s base was under assault.

Yoshie/Yoshihiko, however, thought that it might be possible to control VPS, and made that the subject of her research. In fact, she'd found several pieces of data to indicate that it might be possible to alter the space in response to human will.

For this reason, military, political, economic, and other experts had all taken interest in the research. If real applications could be found for VPS, the possibilities were limitless. But for Yoshie, her research was just a means to an end. She believed that if humanity could live there, we would never have to do anything but sleep, and that the entire country should move inside.

She failed to realize the importance of VPS, and she didn’t think of herself as a genius. Nobody knew that these two factors would come together and later lead her to take very bold action indeed.

On that day, Yoshie was being visited by a government worker. This wasn’t particularly rare in and of itself. In public, she was a worker in Megis’s office who handled minor functions.

She was sitting in a cafe inside the temple of Megis, with a slightly spaced-out look on her face. Her multi-function goggles that she wore for work were pushed up against her messy hair. The interior of the cafe was a mix of Greek, Baroque, and Islamic styles, the greatest common divisor of everything that

most people would consider “religious.” That’s what all Megis temples were like.

In front of Yoshie was a man that could only be described as “a typical salaryman.” Hair parted to the side, and a gray suit. A face that you’d forget as soon as the conversation ended. Yoshie had heard his name, but she’d already forgotten it.

However, the subject he’d started to discuss after brief introductions was anything but forgettable.

“I want you to develop a program to control virtual phase space.”

Yoshie had never made public the fact that she was Yoshihiko. Some of her work involved dealing with the god’s program, yes, but since she’d studied overseas very few knew the full extent of her genius. No one should have been asking her for help writing programs. Unless, of course, they’d found out that she was Yoshihiko.

“Is this an official job for the Megis temple?” she asked, playing dumb.

This meeting was supposed to be about some upcoming work from the government. The natural assumption would be that she wasn’t being asked to do the work, the temple was. Of course, there was no trace of that at all in the man’s tone.

“No. It’s a job for Yoshihiko,” the salaryman said. He evidently intended to get straight to the point.

Yoshie immediately gave up on playing dumb. She was always the type of girl who hated anything that involved effort.

“Hmph. Then you need to separate your official and non-official duties. I thought this was an official request from the government.”

“It is. It’s a request from the government, or more specifically, the cabinet. It is, however, top-secret.”

“Top secret? That word implies a lot of things. What exactly are you getting at?”

“It’s an unofficial government project. And I personally was the one who

realized that you were Yoshihiko. Does that clear things up?" The salaryman grinned.

Yoshie nodded, impressed.

"Ooooh. Amazing. Somebody found me out, huh? So, will you tell me who you are, then? That smile of yours is unnatural. It makes it look like you're hiding something."

Yoshie wasn't the type to hold back what she was thinking. The salaryman's smile deepened, and he formed both hands into two "V" signs. Most people would think he was insulting her, but Yoshie laughed happily.

"Normally when I do this, people get mad," he said. "You're a rare one."

"Nah, it doesn't bother me. It's funny."

"It makes me happy to hear you say that. Nobody's ever reacted like that before. By the way, this is my codename. 2V. That's what they call me."

"2V, with cabinet intelligence. I've heard of you." Yoshie had heard the name in rumors that government employees passed around. But nothing about 2V was known publicly at all.

"That's right. I'm sorry to be using a codename. But well, most people who need to recognize the name will recognize it." 2V's tone was relaxed and informal. Yoshie felt like she'd run into a comrade-in-codenames.

"That's fine. But where did you learn about me?"

"I identified the location you were uploading from. It's a technique that only Cabinet Magical Intelligence can use."

"I see. But if you were willing to do that, it means you need me, right? I can assume there's something interesting for me to do?"

"Of course. It's something a person like you will be very interested in. What normal people would think, I don't know."

"I'm shocked to find out you don't consider me normal."

"Then I apologize. But it's the truth, isn't it? So, this is what I need you to do." 2V slid a mana screen across the table towards her. Yoshie opened it up in front

of her face, and read the words inside.

It was a report coming from a spy inside Constant Magical Academy. Well, maybe “spy” wasn’t the right word. The student had entered through official channels. They were simply passing information to 2V in exchange for an offer of employment after graduation.

“Wow... Would you look at that!” Yoshie gasped in surprise.

Yoshie read the report, which detailed how Keena Soga was used as a catalyst to seal multiple people inside virtual phase space, as well as change the space into a variety of different forms. She understood the implications instantly.

“This is amazing. Really amazing.” She nodded to herself repeatedly.

“It means there’s a way to control VPS. And it’s starting to be understood,” 2V said.

Yoshie’s response was instant. “This Keena Soga girl. She’s putting off some kind of unique wave frequency, huh?”

“So it seems. She seems to have the ability to alter VPS. If her wave frequency can be copied...” 2V said, but Yoshie had already brought the goggles on her head back down onto her eyes, and was lost in thought.

“Woah... This is gonna be fun!” she mumbled to herself. “I’m coming up with all these new ideas! Maybe I can write a program to make a space that just lets everybody stay in bed all day...”

2V shrugged and slid a mana screen with his contact info in front of Yoshie.

“It looks like you’re already interested in this, but just in case, give me a call.” And then 2V left—

No, that wasn’t what happened, specifically. Instead, 2V shifted her mind to another one of the multiple dolls that she was always controlling at any one time.

Controlling multiple dolls — Liradans with no wills of their own — was 2V’s specialty, and her dolls were capable of taking simple actions without her intervention.

2V had moved her mind into a doll that was standing in an imperial university lab. In front of her was a square machine that looked like a white refrigerator, and a small space surrounded by steel racks. A man in a white lab coat was there. She waited for him to speak.

The man in the white coat read some numbers off the refrigerator-like machine's screen, and then spoke without turning around.

"So, 2V. These are the Demon King's cells?"

"That's right. I'm fairly certain it's real. I told you to watch out for that unique frequency, and I meant it," 2V said. This doll's face was like the salaryman's: devoid of anything to make it unique.

The Demon King's cells had been recovered by "Rubbers," a member of C-MID8, the Cabinet Magical Intelligence Department, during the great battle a little while ago. They had been stolen from Akuto Sai, the man believed to be the Demon King.

"The frequency is probably only useful for commanding the demon beasts. But we did learn something interesting," the man in the white coat said, turning around and tossing 2V a mana screen. He was a member of C-MID8 as well. The screen he had tossed had a map and a list of data on it. "I remembered this frequency pattern, and did some poking around."

"So, what's with the map? Do I have to read the data to find out?" 2V asked.

"You're always so lazy. Just read the damn data. Though I guess it's hard to figure out without some explanation. That's where the Demon King was born."

"Born? You mean he's human?"

"That's not what I mean. I mean the very first Demon King."

2V whistled.

"Wow... I suppose it is a hereditary title, after all."

"Don't be imprecise when you're making jokes. It annoys me."

"No, I know. I know. You're telling me that he's a weapon someone made."

"That's right. We don't know if the current Demon King is created by some

kind of genetic bomb, or artificial insemination. But the first monster that was capable of generating that frequency was born in the spot on that map.”

“I see... And are they still there, then? Um... at the place on the map,” 2V asked.

The man in the white lab coat nodded. “Probably. The original Demon King was born there. But well, that’s all we know. There might be more information in the Megis temple’s files.”

“Huh. This is getting interesting.”

“Are you starting to smell money? In the end, that’s all you’re after, right?”

“No, no. Something even more interesting. Either way, give me some time. I think I can do something interesting with this.” 2V grinned.

1 - Candid Camera Checkup

Akuto had no good memories of his physical checkups.

Of course, he still remembered the checkup he'd been given when he transferred to the school, when he'd been told he would become the Demon King.

"It's weird that they'd just announce checkups without any kind of warning," Hiroshi said. They were standing next to each other in the nurse's office, both of them in their underwear.

"Yeah, it's a little weird," Akuto answered.

For some reason, everyone had been told this morning that there'd be an unannounced physical exam. The students didn't know what to make of this, but they were undergoing the exams anyway. The boys were up first, and by now they were about halfway finished.

"Are they taking blood?"

The student in front of Akuto was offering his right arm to the teacher. The teacher had used a needle to take about half a test-tube's worth of blood.

"Boss, do you not like needles?" Hiroshi grinned.

"Of course not. They hurt," Akuto answered, completely serious.

Hiroshi hadn't expected that answer, so he didn't know what to say.

"Boss, you've ripped off your own arm and thrown yourself into a high-temperature plasma ball, right?"

"That still doesn't mean I like pain."

"What?"

And then it was Akuto's turn. He offered his arm to the teacher, who stuck a needle in it. He grimaced.

"D-Does it hurt?" Hiroshi asked.

“It does,” Akuto said calmly.

Except for that one conversation, the boys’ checkups finished without incident.

“Man, I’m glad nothing happened. After all that’s been going on recently, I assumed that there was some kind of plot going on here.” Akuto had put his clothes back on, and was waiting outside with Hiroshi for the girls’ checkups to finish.

“Knowing you, Boss, I think anything could happen. Actually, it feels kind of like a shame that nothing happened.”

“I hate to say it, but I agree...” Akuto shrugged.

And then he saw a suspicious shadow out near the back of the school building. He turned his head towards Hiroshi, who nodded.

“I guess something’s gonna happen after all.”

“I hope not. But we can’t just pretend we didn’t see it.”

The shadow was moving from cover to cover, trying to stay hidden. It was moving from the bushes behind the school towards the building’s pillars. When Akuto looked closer, he saw that the shadow was actually two people.

Akuto and Hiroshi started to move, making sure the two people didn’t see them.

The two seemed to be wearing some kind of camouflage cape to keep themselves hidden. The cape couldn’t completely conceal their presence, but it could detect the surrounding area’s colors and blend in.

“I’ll go around to the other side. Once I scare them, you go ‘boom!’ and take them down,” Hiroshi whispered.

“I’m not sure what ‘boom!’ means, but I guess you mean we should make it so they can’t escape before we talk to them, so yeah, I’ll do that.” Akuto nodded.

Hiroshi headed around to the other side, taking a long detour into the bushes behind the school. Then he nodded at Akuto from a distance, and at the right moment, used magic to create the sound of a siren.

“Uwaaah!”

The pair in the camo cape screamed in surprise, and took off running in the opposite direction of Hiroshi. The cape changed color as they ran, making it possible to see the dim outlines of their position.

The two of them tried to escape, but Akuto stood before them.

“Wait. Don’t run. Who are you?”

The two of them panicked when Akuto appeared out of nowhere and started barking commands. They completely lost control.

“U-Uwah! It’s him!” they screamed, and fired bullets of magical light at Akuto without warning.

“Damn it!” Akuto raised his hand up without thinking.

Akuto was well known for having a bad habit of being unable to control his mana, and he was also the type to respond to an attack not by blocking, but by canceling it out with a bigger attack.

As a result...

There was a huge flash of light, and an explosion echoed throughout the whole area. Akuto’s own light bullet had caused theirs to evaporate, and now it was flying right towards them.

—*Crap!*

Akuto quickly caused the light bullet to explode before it could hit and injure them.

The two of them covered their faces. The bullet’s energy formed a ring around them, passing by them safely before the ring of energy struck the wall of the school and evaporated.

The pair stood frozen with their hands over their faces for a second. When they realized that they didn’t feel any pain, they checked and saw they were uninjured, and then gave out sighs of relief.

Akuto was relieved too. It seemed he hadn’t hurt them.

“I didn’t mean to scare you. But if you’re using a camo cape, that means...”

Akuto said, but then he stopped. He heard a strange sound like an earthquake.

—*Huh? What's that...?*

His question was soon answered.

The wall of the school came crashing down on the two of them. The ring of energy had succeeded in making a beautiful ring-shaped hole in the wall, and the part inside the ring had fallen towards them.

“Uwah!” The two of them jumped away as the wall landed with a crash. Both Akuto and the pair in the cape were shocked into silence, but it wasn't over yet.

Dozens of naked girls appeared in front of Akuto.

Or no, that wasn't right. It took Akuto a moment to figure out that they didn't 'appear,' but that he'd destroyed the wall to the nurse's office where the girls were getting checkups. And it took the naked girls some time to figure out what had happened as well. For a full five seconds they froze, making no effort to conceal their nude bodies.

“So that's it... This was a bad attempt to be a peeping Tom...” Akuto finally realized what the two of them were trying to do. But that wasn't the right thing to say now.

“Kyaaaah! Noooo!”

Dozens of screams shook the air. The girls started to throw objects at Akuto. He blocked them with his hands and tried to apologize, but he was cut off by an even louder voice.

“Akuto Sai! Why do you keep doing this?!” A naked girl wearing nothing but a jacket was pointing a wooden sword at Akuto. It was Junko Hattori.

“Listen, I can explain...”

“How are you going to explain blowing up a wall to see us naked?!”

“Hear me out. I wasn't trying to be a peeping tom...”

“You just said, ‘This was a bad attempt to be a peeping Tom.’ You got so excited to see naked girls you forgot we'd see you instantly if you blew up the wall!”

“Listen, it wasn’t me who...” Akuto looked around. But the pair in the cape, who he’d hoped could explain things, had already fled. Even Hiroshi was gone.

“Huh? They’re gone...”

“Who’s gone? Are you trying to talk your way out of this?”

“I am not. They were right here...”

“No more talking!”

Junko swung her wooden sword, and Akuto couldn’t block. The magically enhanced sword created an explosion that blew Akuto high into the sky.

○

“I thought they’d be suspicious if we drew the blood first, actually,” Yoshie said. She was walking across the schoolyard, dressed as a nurse.

There was a doctor in a white lab coat next to her. Judging by the man’s completely ordinary face, it was probably 2V. Grinning, he tapped on the trunk he was carrying.

“Now we just need to escape, which should be easy enough. We’ve got what we came for, after all.”

“Keena Soga’s blood, huh?” Yoshie whispered.

“We were lucky that we were able to hold a physical at this time of year. It made things very simple. I’ll be heading back, and then I’ll send you the sample later,” 2V said.

Yoshie nodded, only to look back behind her. She’d heard an explosion.

“What just happened?” she asked, but 2V shook his head.

“Not smart. At times like this, you should only focus on your goal. Though I guess you only wanted to see what Keena Soga looked like, right? You really do like to see things for yourself, don’t you?” 2V thought for a moment, and then nodded and continued, “I’m leaving, but you’re free to do what you like. But please make sure you don’t tell anyone what we’re really here for.”

Yoshie nodded herself, and then walked in the direction of the explosion.

She was an intensely curious girl, which was one of the things that made her

smart. And what she found out back behind the school was more than enough to satiate her curiosity.

A tall boy was lying in the bushes, smoke rising off his body.

“So, what exactly happened here?” she asked as she looked down at him.

Akuto raised his head to look at her.

“...It’s complicated. Just know that I’m alright,” he said, and then stood up. There were dozens of tiny scratches on his body, and a single, picturesque line of blood running down his forehead.

“You call that being ‘alright’? I’m not sure I’m convinced,” Yoshie said. But Akuto shook his head.

“I can understand why you’d feel that way, but my body is actually very tough.”

“Really?” Yoshie ripped off a part of her white lab coat and motioned for him to lean forward.

“There was no need to rip up your clothing...” Akuto said. But Yoshie nodded like nothing had happened.

“Lab coats are just tools. And this isn’t mine, anyway. You don’t need to worry about it.”

“I suppose that does make sense, huh?” Akuto answered. He leaned forward, and for the first time got a good look at Yoshie’s face.

He hadn’t realized it the first time he’d seen her, but her face was actually quite pretty. He’d failed to notice because no particular aspect of it stood out. It was the sort of face that was plain, but if you kept looking at it, you would notice its beauty.

There were goggles pushed up against her hair, which she clearly didn’t take good care of. In a world where mana screens could be deployed anywhere, not many people used display devices like goggles. It felt like it gave him insight into her personality. She was the kind of girl who liked to use things that were customized to her needs. That also explained why she seemed so much like a scientist.

Yoshie used the torn-off strip from the lab coat to wipe off the blood and dirt from his face, and then drew her head close to his.

“Um...” Akuto pulled away without thinking.

“Don’t move, please. I can’t get a good look.”

She grabbed his face with her hands and held it so that she could get a better look at him. She was close enough that he could feel her breath, but she didn’t seem to care at all.



“Wh-What are you...”

Just as he turned red and started to gasp, she shouted “Woaaaaah! Ooh! Your wounds are healing!”

She ran her fingers along his face, tracing out the wounds as they disappeared.

“Wow, is this some kind of standard regen equipment? It’s amazing. Were you born with this?”

“I guess so. I’m just tougher than other people.”

“Wow, this is really interesting!” Yoshie stared into his face with shining eyes.

“You’re making me blush. Can you knock it off...? And what’s ‘regen’?”

“Oooh, I’m sorry. I just got a little excited. How embarrassing. Regen is something you see in video games, where your health comes back. Don’t you play video games?” She moved her face away and smiled at him.

“I never have, no. I’ve been pretty busy. Are they fun?” Akuto asked. She gave him a big nod.

“They sure are! Nobody plays them anymore, though. Games are an important part of our culture, if you ask me. There’s an old phrase, ‘Don’t play games for more than 24 hours in a single day.’ That’s how important they are.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means it’s a shame you can only play 24 hours of video games in a day. Because they’re so fun, you see.”

“I didn’t know that. Maybe I should give them a try.”

“You should. You definitely should!” Yoshie said loudly.

“I’ll remember that.” Akuto nodded. Yoshie nodded back, clearly satisfied.

“You’re the first person to say that, you know. Most people just get freaked out.”

“Freaked out?”

“You know, sometimes boys come up and talk to me. And then I start talking

to them about video games, obviously. And when I do, they start moving away. Really, they just gradually start walking away. The worst are the ones who say things like, 'From the way you look, I didn't think you'd be that kind of girl.'" Yoshie began to describe these embarrassing moments from her past in an impassioned voice. Most people would think she was just talking about how weird she was, and even if they'd been listening to her until now, would try to quickly exit the conversation.

But Akuto nodded firmly.

"I know what you mean. I had the same experience in middle school and when I was working at a part-time job. Girls would come up to me, and then we'd talk for a while and they'd say, 'I didn't think you were like this!'"

"Wooaah! You're the first person who really understands me! Hey, what's your name?" Yoshie leaned forward.

"Akuto Sai," he said, and she grabbed him by the hand.

"I'm Yoshie Kita! We should play an online game soon!"

"Sure, but when?"

"How about we start tomorrow and spend a whole week on it? Don't worry, you can play it at work."

Yoshie was asking for something crazy, but to her, it was completely normal. She always kept a game running in the corner of her screen. But, in this sense at least, Akuto was a normal person.

"No, I think that would be difficult. I've got classes and things to do. By the way, are you in a lab coat because you're a nurse? That's not a job that gives you a lot of free time, right?"

Only after he said that did Yoshie remember why she'd come here. She couldn't tell him that she'd needed Keena Soga's blood to alter virtual phase space. It wasn't exactly legal, and she hadn't bothered to get Keena's permission. But she decided it would be better to tell a half truth about her job instead of lying.

"I've got a temporary job as a nurse, I guess. Normally I work at the Megis

temple.”

Akuto looked back at her, impressed.

“I’m sorry, but you’re about my age, aren’t you?”

“I studied overseas. That’s why I don’t have the certification you need to be a priest, though. Going back to college is too much of a pain.”

“You’re really smart, then.” Akuto opened his eyes wide, truly impressed.

Yoshie blushed and chuckled.

“Stop it. In this country, if you don’t want to go to school, that makes you stupid, not smart. No, I’m probably not that smart outside of the Empire, either. In the end, if you only want to work on the things you like, you’re not welcome anywhere.”

“And what you like is video games?”

“That’s part of it, but I don’t like doing things that take a lot of effort. I don’t like people who are really eager to work, or who are really bossy and annoying,” Yoshie said as she scratched her head.

“I can understand that, I think. Like people who spend all their time or waste all their money on things that don’t matter at all, right?”

Yoshie’s eyes lit up even brighter.

“You really get what I’m talking about! That’s right! I hate it when people get all close with each other for no good reason at all. It’s one thing if there’s a reason, but I just don’t get the type who likes to commit crimes, or pick fights.”

“Come to think of it, in a world like this where nobody wants for anything, if you’re hurting someone it’s because you care about them, and want to see their reaction. I know what you mean.” Akuto nodded, satisfied.

Yoshie began to speak even faster.

“You understand! That’s why even if I’ve got a strong sense of curiosity, I’m terrible at small talk. Once I meet someone and introduce myself, what more is there to say? I mean, it’s one thing if you can talk about politics, but most people who want to be close with you are just ignorant.”

“I get that too. In other words...”

After that, Yoshie and Akuto talked excitedly with one another. Yoshie had never had a conversation like that before, and neither had Akuto. The way they spoke, the two of them seemed liked scientists without a lab, and the way their cheeks were slightly flushed, they seemed like boyfriend and girlfriend who didn't want to say goodbye as they walked home from school.

The two of them seemed to have lost track of time. When the bell finally rang, they quickly looked around, and then looked back at each other and laughed.

“Man, you're great. Call me sometime. I mean it.”

“Thank you. I had fun too. Anyway, I've gotta get going.”

Yoshie and Akuto exchanged a handshake. They each started to walk in a different direction, and only after walking for a while did they realize they hadn't exchanged contact information.

—No, it's probably fine. I have a feeling I'll be seeing him really soon. After all, I've never met a person who's interested me so much. I know we'll see each other again.

Yoshie thought to herself, and nodded, satisfied.

○

“President, I've still got it in mah sights.” A voice with a strange accent came in over the telepathic line.

This was the Student Council President's office at Constant Magical Academy, and of course, it was the Student Council President who was listening to it.

Lily Shiraishi — a small girl wearing a fashionable hat — nodded in front of her mana screen.

“Stay sharp. You're tailing a doll. There's no telling what kind of places it can go to, or what kind of tricks it has up its sleeve.”

“I'm usin' a lot of mah bats as extra eyes. Can't guarantee it'll work, though.”

“Lose sight of it and I kill you,” Lily said in an abrupt, but very serious, tone.

“Please don't...”

She'd been talking to the vice president, Michie Otake. Lily could see her on the mana screen. Right now she appeared to be in a city park. Michie had a pale, sickly complexion that resembled a vampire, and just like her looks implied, she excelled at controlling magical machines shaped like bats.

She'd been ordered by the president to tail 2V. At late evening no one would notice a bat flying in the sky, which made her perfect for the job.

"I don't expect to find 2V's base or anything, but we can at least find some kind of lead," Lily said enthusiastically.

She'd only learned about the plan recently. Lily's father was a priest of Megis, and was in a position to find out about the "plan" that 2V had taken to Yoshie. If 2V wanted to use virtual phase space in the Megis Temple, he would need the temple's cooperation. And without the help of the extremists who wanted to kill the Demon King, the plan itself would be impossible. Working in the shadows was their specialty, but this time, that wasn't a luxury they could afford.

When Lily had learned the plan's details — using the unique frequency generated by Keena's cells to seal Akuto in virtual phase space — she'd quickly set a trap by scheduling an emergency set of physical exams. 2V had fallen for the trap, and come in search of Keena's blood. Lily didn't know what he looked like, but all she had to do was follow whoever took Keena's blood.

As of now, the plan was going splendidly.

"President, he's gone inside a building," Michie reported.

"Can you follow him inside?"

"Ah'll do mah best. Um... It says it's the Imperial City University Research Lab."

"Find out which lab he's going to, even if it kills you!"

"If it kills me...? Well, ah'll do mah best," Michie said, and ended the call.

"Now then... What happened to the other girl?" Lily whispered, and opened up another telepathic line. A girl with a face like a wild animal appeared on the mana screen.

“Oh, President. I tracked the girl who was talking with Akuto Sai to her home without much trouble-gyah.”

It was Kanna Kamiyama. She was one of the three other members of the Student Council, and she had the power to transform into a wolf. Right now she was using her bestial sense of smell to follow Yoshie.

“Good. But she’s not exactly a spy or an underworld agent. All we needed to find her address was to know who she was. Your job was to tell me if she did anything suspicious. What was she talking about with Akuto Sai? Was she trying to find out more about him?”

“It didn’t feel like it-gyah. It felt like they really did just meet each other for the first time-gyah.”

“So you’re saying the whole meeting was a coincidence?”

“I think so-gyah.”

“...Well, he certainly does stand out. And no one would be dumb enough to risk making contact with a target before the operation begins. I’m starting to think Akuto’s just got bad luck with women. I wish it would stop making life hard for me, though... Well, it doesn’t matter to me if he dies. I’m doing this to get my personal revenge,” Lily whispered, and her eyes narrowed.

○

“Is the data enough on its own?” 2V asked.

“I think I can make it work. A human body’s unique frequency is something that no two people share. I can make any adjustments to the machine’s values remotely. It makes way more sense for us not to meet in person, right?” Yoshie said.

She was on a call with 2V, who was now inside a lab with Keena’s blood. The lab contained the devices needed to transfer someone into virtual phase space, and Yoshie was working on setting them up.

“It’s like I’m casting magic through Keena. Her unique magic allows me to change virtual phase space any way I want to, you could say.”

2V could feel something like joy in Yoshie’s voice.

“Can I ask why you’re obsessed with being able to alter VPS?”

“If we can change that world to be anything you want, then we can all just live our lives there, is what I think. Life would be so easy if we did. You’d have to research a way to get nutrients... or energy, I guess you could say. But the odds that that can be automated are very high.” Yoshie ran her fingers across several mana screens she had open on her desk as she answered.

She took a quick break from rewriting the program to gulp down a beverage on her desk. The towel she used to wipe the sweat off her forehead, and the maintenance kit for her goggles, everything she needed was within reach of where she sat. She did her work alone, with the practiced hand of someone who was used to solitude.

“In other words, if we have a space where people can keep the insides of their brains constantly exposed to the outside world, it will actually be possible to create a world where there’s no need to be close to one another. And the way I see it, that might be the way to live that’s most true to who we are as humans. So that’s why.” Yoshie was ostensibly speaking to 2V, but eventually it started to feel like she was talking to herself.

“Really, I’m glad to have the opportunity to do this experiment. Everybody’s always been interested in my research, but most people ignore what I actually have to say. They tell me it’s ‘creepy’ or ‘unhealthy.’ You know, if we can figure out what’s possible in VPS, we can turn our lives into a video game. I’ve already tried giving the space certain laws in order to change it. Whenever somebody enters it, they turn into game data. Game data that’s capable of overwriting itself, though. That means that you’re able to will yourself to grow beyond your physical limits. You can be a character out of a video game! Once people experience that, I think they’ll understand what I’m saying.” Yoshie started to program even faster.

“I see, I see.” 2V smiled to herself.

It was 2V’s own body that was smiling. She was staring at dozens of mana screens, lying alone on the floor of a room that was empty except for rows of standing dolls. Even the rest of CMID-8 didn’t know about this condo, which was where she lived to conceal who she really was.



2V thought to herself that she and Yoshie were similar people. 2V herself was still in her early teens, and her incredible abilities had never been recognized by any authority.

—But it's possible to make your thoughts into reality in this world too, you know. You don't understand that. That's why people say you're unhealthy.

That was where their ideas differed. But the biggest difference of all lay in their ultimate goals.

—If I can have anything I want, I don't want a paradise inside virtual phase space. I want to be in the real world, where I can be the formless king in a world without gods.

2V was about to betray Yoshie. The plan she'd told Yoshie was a lie.

—And the pleasure you get when betraying someone is much, much more exciting in the real world.

2V grinned, and ran her sickly thin fingers across her pale face.

2 - Let's Go to a Game World

"Ackie, fantasy is great, isn't it?" Keena said suddenly.

This statement had come out of nowhere, the reason being that this was Akuto's room. Keena had snuck in at some point, and was now scooping rice from a bowl into her mouth with a ladle.

"I don't follow," Akuto said, sitting up in bed. He didn't seem at all surprised by this sudden red-haired intruder, who was crouching on the floor of his room and eating rice. At this point, he was used to it.

"Fantasy, Ackie. You know, like swords and sorcery!" Keena declared as she scooped up the rice.

"We've already got both of those things," Akuto said with a shrug.

But Keena waved her ladle from side to side.

"Tch-tch-tch. That's not what I mean, Ackie. Fantasy is about heroes from other worlds, and trapped princesses."

"Well, I guess those don't exist in reality," Akuto said, continuing the conversation even though something seemed wrong. But then a voice came down from above.

"Those are the words of someone who doesn't understand how special he is." Korone the Liradan came down from her usual spot in the cabinet above his closet. Her job was to watch Akuto for the government, and so she lived in the same room. But lately it felt like she was ignoring him.

"That's true, but she's probably getting this out of another old book she read or something," Akuto said. But Keena shook her head.

"Nope. There's this really neat video game I just found out about..." Akuto thought to himself that he was hearing a lot about video games lately.

—Come to think of it, I never got her contact info... If I start playing video games, maybe I'll run into her.

“What kind of games are there? I’m interested, but I’ve never tried one.”

“This is the one I played.” Keena pulled up a game on her mana screen. The game’s author was listed as “Yoshihiko.”

“See? It’s interesting, like rice,” Keena said, as she began to play. Games in this era were three-dimensional images, but their stories and gameplay hadn’t evolved in a long time. The sorts of things that humans enjoy don’t change that easily.

“I’m not sure what ‘interesting like rice’ means, but... Does that mean it gets more interesting the more you chew on it?”

“Aww, no. Rice is really interesting!”

“...N-Never mind. What kind of game is it?”

Akuto peered into the mana screen. It was an online fantasy RPG, but what made it special was that you could lead an army to fight wars. There were lots of other soldiers besides the players, and as your character grew you could expand your armies.

“It looks like a war game.”

“Yup. But you don’t have to be the commander. You can be the kidnapped princess, and all you have to do is stay kidnapped and the army will come and rescue you.”

“That’s an amazingly strange concept, but well, it’s a game, I guess. Wait, does that mean that war starts because you’re kidnapped?”

“Yup.”

“And that’s what makes it interesting, huh?” Akuto nodded in understanding.

“It’s also kind of amazing that you’d come here this early to talk about video games,” Korone said. Keena clapped her hands together like she just remembered something.

“Oh, right! The Student Council President says she won’t be in early this morning. So she wants you to take over for her. That’s what I came to tell you.”

“She’s got her trio, right?”

“Well, the trio’s gone too. All of them. Hiroshi’s gone as well. All of them were called out somewhere late last night.”

“I guess I don’t have a choice, then. I’m a little curious what happened, though.” Akuto stood up and was about to tell her to leave so he could change, but then he realized something.

“But why are you coming to tell me this?”

“I was up all night playing video games. So I ran into the Student Council President just as she was about to leave this morning.”

“...I see. You don’t need to sleep?”

“I’m fine. If I eat, I can go a little while without sleep. And if I do get tired, I can just skip class.”

“You’re as much of a free spirit as ever, huh?”

Keena went outside after that, and Akuto took off his pajama top.

Suddenly a voice interrupted him from behind.

“I didn’t expect to be sexually seduced like this.”

“Uwah!” He turned around and Korone was right there.

“Th-That’s right. I forgot to ask you to leave.”

“At this point, it’s like it’s natural for us to be together. We’re like husband and wife, you could say.”

“Don’t be silly... And don’t you always leave on your own when I’m about to change?”

“Yes, but there was something in that conversation that is bothering me.” Korone normally never intervened in his daily life except to tease him, so it was rare for her to say something like this. Akuto’s face suddenly took on a serious expression.

“Something bothering you?”

“Yes. My job has put me in a rather delicate position, but I am able to inform you that you’re the target of a certain plan. However, I am forbidden to tell you what the plan is, or to stop it.”

“That’s... a problem, isn’t it?”

Akuto immediately understood the seriousness of the situation. Korone was a Liradan, who was following the government’s orders. And the government was divided between the extremists, who wanted Akuto dead, and the pacifists who wanted to wait and see what he did. There were probably a lot of places where orders from one faction contradicted those from another.

“Yes. But be careful. I’ll do the best I can to help.”

“Thanks. I get it. So that’s the reason the Student Council President left,” Akuto said. He went to take his pajama bottoms off, but realized that Korone was staring.

“...I almost took them off with you standing right here. Can you leave me alone for a second?”

“No, I can’t leave your side even for a moment,” Korone said, with a completely serious look on her face.

But Akuto had known her long enough to know that she was joking.

“Seriously, don’t make jokes like that...”

○

Lily had woken up early that day, and was staking out the area near the Imperial City University Lab with a bean jam bun in one hand and milk in the other. She was watching the room that Michie had ID’d earlier.

The lights were on inside the room. It was still before sunrise, and that room was the only one with lit windows.

“I’d love to bust my way in there while the place is still empty...” Lily whispered.

“Huh? You got permission first, right? Did you just say bust your way in..?”

Next to her was an extremely doubtful Hiroshi, who she’d forced to come along. He was standing next to Lily, nibbling on a cream bun, and his eyes had gone wide with surprise.

“If I had permission I wouldn’t be hiding. The plan was always to do this the

violent way. My trio is investigating the area around us. Once we've got a good handle on the situation, we're going in."

"G-Going in?"

"Going in, finding the guy inside, and knocking his lights out. It's as simple as that," Lily said.

"W-Wait! Why did you bring me then?" Hiroshi started to panic.

"Oh, right. I never told you, did I?" Lily nodded to herself as if she'd only now remembered.

"I've got information that Boichiro Yamato's servants are plotting something."

"Huh? Boichiro Yamato...?" Hiroshi's words caught in his throat.

The Anti-Demon-King combat suit that Hiroshi had once used was given to him, through a fairly involved process, by Boichiro Yamato.

"That's why I called you. Not because I expect you to fight, but because you might know something, or they might want you for something."

"Huh? I don't know anything."

"I know that. But there's a chance you might remember something. And if it turns out you're important to them and you don't know it, I can use you as a hostage." There was no sign on Lily's face that she was joking, so Hiroshi went pale.

"W-Wait, you're kidding, right?"

"Nope. If I want to kill 2V, I need to be prepared to make some sacrifices." Lily's eyes were dead serious.

"W-Wait, you just have it out for him personally, right? ...R-Right! What's this plan about? We're here to stop it, right?"

"What's wrong with having it out for him personally? We're not here to stop the plan at all."

"Huh...?"

"The plan is to seal Akuto Sai away in Virtual Phase Space. Most likely they want to either lock him away from the outside world, or just kill him inside."

“A-And you’re not going to stop it?”

“Nope. That’s his problem. As long as the majority of the students are safe, it doesn’t matter to me at all,” Lily said, just as a telepathic call came in. It was from the Trio.

“President, we’ve got things secure here. If you move now, nobody will be able to leave.”

“Okay. I’ll tell you when to bust in.” Lily threw her bread and milk carton to the ground. And then she grabbed Hiroshi’s hand and started to walk.

“W-Wait, President, I’m not ready...”

“I’m not waiting for you. If we don’t get going, people are going to notice us, and then we’ll have a real mess on our hands.” Lily dragged Hiroshi by the hand onto the laboratory grounds.

Imperial City University was open to the public since the labs received regular visitors from the outside. Lily was able to head right to the door she was looking for.

There were no traps, and she’d seen no resistance up until this point. She cautiously put her hand up to the doorknob, and flicked her head towards Hiroshi.

Hiroshi assumed he was supposed to respond somehow, but before he could answer, Lily kicked open the door.

“Wh-What the heck, President?”

But Lily didn’t answer. As soon as the door hit the ground, she was already inside. That wasn’t how you opened the door to a university lab, it was how special forces broke into a terrorist hideout, or a gang launched an attack on a rival.

Lily dropped down low, holding her arms out in front of her. Her fighting style involved extending out her arms, and she could fire them off at the speed of bullets. As long as she could see someone, she could knock them flat in an instant. But that only worked if she had a target.

“What...?” Lily’s face tensed up in surprise.

The lights were on in the room, but nobody was there.

There was no place to hide, either. The room was crammed with shelves and research equipment, but there was barely a place for a single person to stand.

“They escaped? How?” Lily contacted the Trio via telepathy, but they sounded as surprised as she was.

“Huh? Ain’t nuthin’ happened out here.”

“Ugah.”

“Yoshie Kita hasn’t moved at all.”

“Look closer! We may be being tricked!” Lily screamed. But just then a single ray of light appeared on the lab’s desk.

Lily tensed up, but it was only the light from a mana screen. The face of a very ordinary man — 2V — appeared on it.

“You!” Lily howled, but the video wasn’t from an open line. A pre-recorded message began to play.

“Glad you could make it, little one. I’m afraid I found out about what you were up to, and made the first move on my own. The plan has already begun. You were just a little too late. I look forward to our next meeting, though! Oh, but I guess there won’t be a next meeting. This room is going to self-destruct...”

Before 2V’s sentence finished, Lily had jumped backwards. She grabbed Hiroshi, who was simply standing there in shock, and leapt outside of the room.

“Or rather, it was going to self-destruct, but that wouldn’t be a nice thing to do to the other researchers, would it? Anyway, have a nice day.” 2V’s mocking voice echoed through the room.

“Y-You bastard!” Lily screamed, as she began to pound her fists into Hiroshi’s head.

“Aah! Stop it! President! Calm down, please!”

○

“Is this really the right way to do it?” Yoshie asked. “Something doesn’t seem right.”

“It’s fine. Well, it’s going well at least,” 2V’s salaryman-like doll answered.

Yoshie and 2V both got started as soon as their preparations were ready. As soon as the VPS-control device was finished, they teleported near the school and hid.

The two of them had beaten Lily because of Yoshie’s incredible programming abilities, and the fact that they’d used teleportation to escape. Teleportation wasn’t cheap. If you wanted to use it, you needed a good reason.

“They underestimated how serious we were about this. Even if we’re doing this in secret, it’s still a government project.”

“I suppose I should be grateful that I can have that kind of backup when I’m doing the research I love. But why did we have to come all the way out to the school? We’re just doing a control test for the VPS system, right?”

“I guess I never told you.” 2V laughed. He pointed towards the Constant Magical Academy courtyard, where the morning assembly was being held. 2V and Yoshie were standing in the place where 2V’s tent had been during the huge battle at the school.

“We’re going to seal him away,” 2V said, as he pointed towards a young man standing at the lectern. When Yoshie saw who it was, her eyes went wide with surprise.

“Him? I just talked to him.”

“You talked to him? You didn’t know he was the Demon King?” 2V said calmly.

“Wooaah! I’m really surprised. I had no idea. Hmm? You’re going to seal him away?” Yoshie suddenly raised an eyebrow.

“That’s right. If we seal him in virtual phase space, he’ll have no more power than an ordinary human. There’s a lot of people who’d like to kill him without harming the people around him.” 2V grinned.

“K-Kill him?”

When he saw her panic, 2V tried his best to stifle a laugh.

“That’s right. That’s what this government project is for. I’m sorry I never told you, but you’ll never be prosecuted for this. So don’t worry, and please

continue. I think every human should play a part in a murder plot at least once in their life.”

Yoshie covered her face in shock.

“I-I... I can’t accept that. Listen, can you rethink this?”

“I’m afraid I can’t. I’m not trying to threaten you, but I do need you to do this, so there’s a warrant out for your arrest. Hahaha. Funny, isn’t it? If you don’t do it, you’re a criminal. But if you do, you’ll never be prosecuted. You’ve only really got one choice, don’t you?” 2V couldn’t contain his laughter anymore.

Yoshie bit down on her lip.

—What do I do...? No, maybe there’s a way to fix this. Maybe there’s a way to make this right. Calm down... Just stay calm.

“A-Alright. I don’t want to do it, but I guess I don’t have a choice. I just need to adjust the machine to do that, right?”

“That’s right. Glad to see you’re cooperative.” 2V let out a laugh, satisfied that he’d won.

“Seal him away as a normal person. That’s your order, right?”

“Correct. Don’t get any ideas.”

“Sure, I get it. I’m not going to do anything crazy. I understand.” Yoshie knelt down over the VPS control device.

The device was a 50-centimeter square box, with a control panel, keyboard, and monitor built into the side. Yoshie began to tap at the keyboard.

“How does it feel to help kill someone you’ve spoken to?” 2V asked cruelly.

Yoshie couldn’t help but let her displeasure show on her face, but her answer was calm.

“It hurts. He and I had a lot in common. But I think he’ll probably understand.”

“Hmph. I see. I have no idea what you think he’ll understand, but I suppose if you want to do this, you have to think that. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. Your best option is to work hard, even if it means lying to yourself.”

“I agree. But in the end, humans are made to only be able to do the things

they want to do. I only talked with him a little, but I feel like he and I understand each other. So I think I understand what it is he wants to do too. Which means that I've got a feeling he'll be able to overcome this, as long as he has a chance."

"A chance? What are you talking about?"

"Heheh. I'm talking about this." Yoshie was extremely calm, but passionate, as she spoke. She activated the device of her own will, without 2V's orders.

"Wh-What are you doing?!" For once, 2V began to get scared. Even a brilliant mind like 2V's hadn't seen this coming.

"I'm activating the device. I'm about to send every person and every thing in this area into virtual phase space. Just so we're clear, I did exactly what you told me to," Yoshie said. The VPS control device had come alive, and was giving off a low moan.

"Every person and every thing?!" 2V gasped, and then reached out a hand to grab her.

"It's too late," Yoshie whispered.

2V's hand failed to reach her. Their vision was already blurred. The space around the two of them had started to glow as it sank into the ground.

"I'm teleporting the whole school, me, and this device into Megis's virtual phase space."

"The device itself...? That's insane! You don't know what will happen!"

"True. The device only works properly if it's outside the space. But if I don't take it inside, you'll be able to control it, right? And what's more, I've put in some things you didn't expect. I've used my own game program to define the rules of that world, which means that he can handle the rest. I believe it." Yoshie was calm, even as she sank down into the ground, holding the device in her hands.

"Tch! You thought of all that in this single moment? But... I'm going inside too!" 2V stretched out his right arm, and then grabbed it at the elbow with his left. And then he ripped his right arm out at the elbow. It was the kind of thing

that only a doll could do.

And then he threw his right arm at the device. Yoshie covered it with her hands, but it managed to grip onto her own hand tightly.

“I’m sending my hand with you, at least!” 2V screamed.

And then the whole world around her sunk into “the other side.”

○

Moments before the device activated...

Akuto was standing on the podium, unsure of what he was supposed to say.

He was leading the morning assembly today, in front of the entire student body. The student council president and her trio were both absent, so the job had fallen to him.

At Constant Magical Academy, the principal only led the morning assembly on special occasions. It was up to the student council president to warn the students not to get too out of hand, or tell them when there was something they had to know. But today, that was Akuto’s responsibility.

“Our theme for the week is ‘Keep the school clean,’ but I need you to all understand that this goes beyond simply picking up trash.”

After announcing that he’d be doing the assembly today, that was the first thing Akuto had said. In retrospect, this was a mistake. He’d decided he didn’t just want to read words off a page, but to tell everyone about his own interpretation of the meaning behind them, and hopefully bring about a constructive debate. This, however, was not a good idea. The more he talked, the more his speech started to go in a strange direction. He was having a progressively harder time explaining what he was getting at.

“...Filth builds up in places where things get out of control, like dust building up in the gaps between a tangled mess of cables. If you want to clean it up, you need to unhook and untangle the cables. If you want something to be truly clean, you need to break it down. And ‘keep things clean’ applies not just to the world around us, but to your minds as well. The filth in your minds builds up because they’re out of control. They’re a mess. I’ll go back to the example of

the cables I just gave. Cables are a useful way to transmit information, but they're also a fixed, immobile system. Doesn't that mean that it's important to break down the fixed systems in your minds?"

Akuto was trying to talk about himself, but he'd totally lost control of what he was saying. And his words were starting to freak out the students.

"I don't get it. Is he telling us to doubt what we know?"

"No, he's talking about fixed systems in our minds... So he must be telling us that we need to go insane."

"...I see. I guess it makes sense that the Demon King would give such an abnormal speech."

—*No, that's not what I meant...*

Akuto didn't know what to do.

"What do I mean by 'systems' of the mind? I mean the systems we use to recognize the world around us. In order to reduce the load on our brains, humans are made to have a simple understanding of the world around us. It's this simple understanding of the world that makes you do things like come to school. Going to school is not the same thing as studying. It's just a system. And you need to remember that it's these fixed understandings that connect to the system of society itself."

The students started to panic even worse.

"So he's not talking about madness. He's talking about proactively destroying the systems of society!"

"Anarchism! And during morning assembly, too!"

"And he's only even here as a standin!"

—*What's happening here?*

Akuto wracked his brain to come up with something else to say.

"...No, I'm just saying that our school beautification movement needs to be turned towards these fixed ideas as well. Eventually, these ideas will start to drain the life from us. If we understand that our job is to be pillars of society,

then we need to proactively involve ourselves in difficult battles for the sake of a new era...”

“Wow! He’s turning the morning assembly into a riot!”

“A battle for a new era... That’s just what a rioter would say!”

“We were only listening to you because you were giving the morning assembly speech! But we won’t let you get away with this!”

Now there was no way he could calm them down. They were starting to boo and scream at him.

—*Oh no... I need to come up with some way to talk my way out of this...*

“Be quiet! You can yell, but I’m right! My words are nothing to be ashamed of! You shouldn’t care about who’s saying them, only the words themselves! And if you’re not willing to listen to them, it means this entire school has lost sight of what’s right! And the punishment for that is...”

Only after the words were halfway out of his mouth did Akuto realize what he was saying. His tone gradually began to drop, but the students didn’t notice. Before he was finished speaking, the entire school began to “sink.”

“Wha...?!”

“Kyaaaah! What’s going on?”

“Is it the Demon King’s power?”

“Aaah! Are we going to hell?”

The schoolyard was filled with screams. But even the screams vanished as the school was swallowed up.

—*I know this feeling!*

It was what Akuto had felt when he’d gone inside that book.

—*Does that mean...?*

Instantly, he suspected Keena. But when he picked her out among the crowd of students, she was standing with Korone and looking as shocked as everyone else.

—*What the hell is going on here?*

○

Junko was one of the few other people who understood what had happened.

“This is virtual phase space, isn’t it?” she said to Fujiko Eto.

“No doubt about it. Not that I’ve ever been inside.”

Fujiko was trying her best to keep the girls around her calm. Her personality was much more demonic than Akuto’s, and she was a worshipper of black magic to boot. But the rest of the student body hadn’t figured that out yet. The female students especially looked up to her as an object of admiration.

When she spoke, the sobbing girls raised their heads and turned towards her.

“Do you know what’s happening?” they asked.

“Yes. This is most likely virtual phase space, the space we move through when we teleport. I’ve seen something similar once before.” Fujiko looked around her.

Constant Magical Academy was inside a forest. The school had always been surrounded by nature, but the forests around them hadn’t been near as deep as this. It was like a jungle had grown its way right up to their doorstep. They were clearly someplace they hadn’t been a moment ago. The plants and trees were different from the ones that grew in the island nation of the Empire.

“It seems the whole school was teleported, huh?” Fujiko turned towards Junko. Junko nodded.

“But Fujiko, the school building is...” Junko pointed towards the building.

It was definitely the same school building, but something was different now. One of the other students in the yard was the first to figure it out.

“A fortress... It’s a fortress! This is what the school looked like when it was a fortress!”

The building had very few windows, and those it did have were located high up on its walls. Those windows were thin and narrow, with room to fire a gun out of them and not much more. The walls were flat and unadorned, with no

easy way to climb up them, and the front gate was locked with a heavy door.

“I heard... that the school was made from what was once a fortress during the first Demon King war,” Junko said. The other students around her began to murmur amongst themselves.

“Then does that mean we’ve gone back in time?” one asked. Fujiko shook her head.

“No. If that were the case, then somebody would be inside the fortress. We haven’t traveled through time. We’ve been moved to a world that’s been changed in accordance with some set of rules. And that world is virtual phase space.”

“A world that’s been changed according to a set of rules?” one of the female students asked. This time, Fujiko nodded.

“Yes. In other words, we can assume we’re inside a story, or inside a video game!” Fujiko said, basing her statement on her earlier experience.

And then suddenly, a voice answered her.

“That’s correct. I’ll explain what’s going on here. And also, I’m afraid I need to apologize.”

It was the clear voice of a man. Everyone turned to look at the source.

A young man, with a delicate but noble air about him, had just come out of the jungle. He had long hair, and wore an ancient style of armor.

“My name is Yoshihiko. And I need you to hear me out.”

Yoshie wasn’t surprised at all to find that her body had changed. She was the one who’d set up the virtual phase space so that would happen.

—I’m glad I loaded that game data just in case I needed it...

In order to escape from 2V, she’d set the rules for the VPS to match the game she’d created. It was the fantasy war game that Keena had been playing, an imaginative reinterpretation of the first Demon King war.

—I can remember the exact rules of the game later. The first thing I need to do is figure out what my first move is.

Yoshie calmly went over the best ways to fight back against 2V's plan.

She'd escaped into VPS to protect Akuto. She had the control device, and it couldn't be accessed from the outside. 2V's hand was somewhere in here with her, but she hadn't found it yet. That said, it probably didn't have that much power on its own.

—But if they can alter the game's program, I'll have a big problem on my hands. However, any major changes would put the school's students in danger, which means they would be off-limits.

Even 2V wouldn't want to cause a massacre. The one thing she knew about him was that he was involved with the government somehow.

—So my goal is to get to the Demon King, and if I can get rid of 2V's hand before then, even better. I suppose that's all there is to it.

Once she'd settled on a course of action, Yoshie decided to reveal herself to the students. In the long run, it would be a bad idea to tell them the truth about the plan, but she needed to take responsibility for getting them caught up in this.

—But they should be basically safe. The game's rules are keeping the world stable. And I was the one who designed it, so I know it better than anybody...

"Yes. In other words, we can assume that we're inside a story, or inside a video game!"

As soon as she exited the jungle and came out into the courtyard, she heard a pretty voice speaking.

—Wooaah! Somebody's already figured out what's going on, huh? I heard this school's students were pretty smart, but that's amazing...

Yoshie took a step forward, impressed. And then she realized she had no idea how her male avatar was supposed to talk.

—Oh, crap. I've only ever done text chat with this character. How am I supposed to talk if I want to sound manly? Hmm... I know. I'll talk like one of those boys in an otome game.

An otome game was a game for girls to enjoy a simulated relationship with

handsome young boys. Of course, these games only ever had the most handsome of boys. Yoshie didn't have many samples of boys to choose from, so this was the best she was likely to get.

"That's correct. I'll explain what's going on here. And also, I'm afraid I need to apologize." It was a little weird to be speaking in a man's voice, but Yoshie was satisfied that she did, in fact, sound like an otome game character.

"My name is Yoshihiko. And I need you to hear me out," Yoshie said.

"Explain? Apologize?"

The students began to bombard her with questions. Everyone was staring at her. Normally, Yoshie wasn't good at speaking to others, but she was happy to find that with a different face she was able to do so.

"You are currently inside a virtual phase space control experiment. The experiment was supposed to be done on a smaller scale, but due to an error, you were caught up along with it."

The students began to shout at her in anger and terror. Yoshie's expression clouded with fear.

"Wait. We should hear her out."

One of the students interrupted them. It was a handsome girl with short hair.

"I'm Junko Hattori. Please continue," the girl said. Yoshie nodded and smiled at her.

"Thank you."

But then Junko turned away. It was a little upsetting to find her gratitude ignored, but for now, she needed to continue talking.



“...That’s what I needed to apologize for. But don’t worry. This is a control experiment for a virtual reality game. As long as you keep a few things in mind, there’s no danger at all.”

“A few things?”

“The rules of the game. First: If you can’t get back to the real world within one week of game time, you might really die.”

“What? How is that not dangerous?!”

“I-I’m sorry. I’m just trying to keep you safe. The longest period anyone’s been able to stay in VPS before is a week. This time the area is under my control, so you can probably stay longer, but no food is being brought in from the outside. A week of game time is around twelve hours of real time. Your physical bodies should only be able to endure that level of hunger and thirst.”

“...I see.”

“Second. If you die in the game, you return to the real world. That means you can always get back by dying.”

“What?”

Everyone was surprised to hear that.

“It’s hard to believe that...” they all said, and frowned.

—Yeah, I can see why they wouldn’t believe that. Hmm... What to do? I know!

“Are there any animals around here? Does the school keep any as pets?” Yoshie asked. One of the students pointed towards a corner of the school building. There had been a chicken coop there before, but now it was gone. Instead, there were several chickens wandering around.

“Huh? The coop’s gone, but the chickens are still there...”

“Watch that chicken.” Yoshie took a dagger out of her armor and flung it at the bird. The sharp blade sliced the bird’s head clean off.

“How could you do that?!”

Some of the female students screamed and covered their eyes, but the students that kept watching began to gasp in surprise. The headless chicken

took a few steps forward before blurring and vanishing into thin air.

“Huh?” Everyone began to gasp.

Yoshie smiled to herself.

—Wooah! This really is a game. Normally I couldn't hit anything with a dagger, but this time it worked perfectly. I haven't had time to really think about it, but maybe being inside a video game is more fun than I thought... No, I need to focus on explaining this.

“But any creatures that were born within VPS...” Yoshie picked up the dagger, which was now perfectly clean even after having been covered in chicken blood, and then turned her eyes towards the jungle. She found the animal she was looking for: a rabbit.

“Watch that rabbit.” Yoshie raised her dagger again.

“This one? It's cute! Do you want me to catch it?” One of the female students near the rabbit started to walk towards it. It rounded its red eyes and perked up its ears as it hopped towards her.

“Watch out!” Yoshie shouted.

“Huh?” The girl froze.

And then, the bunny leaped.

This time it wasn't a cute little hop, but a fierce leap towards the girl's throat, clearly intended to kill her.

Hissss! The bunny let out a strange howl, as it bared fangs that looked closer to sharp daggers than teeth.

“Kyah!” The girl covered her face with her hands. But the bunny was aiming for her throat; it was going to bite open an artery and kill her on the spot.

But just before the rabbit struck, Yoshie's dagger sliced off its head.

There were two wet *thud* sounds as the bunny's torso and head hit the ground independently. The blood from the wounds dripped out and spread along the ground. The dagger, now embedded in the ground, was covered with blood as well.

“It’s still here...?” the girl whispered.

“What you just saw is a Head-Hunting Murder Bunny. Now, I assume, you understand that it’s a game, as well as what happens if you die here. This body will disappear too, after a time, but it will remain here far longer than any living thing brought from the outside.”

Junko interrupted her explanation.

“I don’t know about killing ourselves to go home, though... I’m not saying you’re lying, but there’s a chance it won’t work right, and of course, mentally it’s a hard thing to do. Is there a better way?”

A pretty girl with long hair answered before Yoshie could.

“If I remember correctly, the way to escape virtual phase space is to allow the space to complete its purpose.”

It was Fujiko. The same girl who’d made the sharp-witted observation from before, Yoshie remembered.

“Correct. Finishing the game is also a way to escape. So first, I’ll explain the game’s rules. Everyone has been given a different role here, based on your personality. By fighting and winning battles here, you’ll gain experience and level up. And thanks to the fact that we’re in virtual phase space, any combat magic you learn here will remain with you even after returning to reality. This works because your brain remembers the movement patterns. It’s like a bicycle. Once you learn it, you never forget it.”

Some of the smarter students started to shout with joy when they heard this.

“That’s great. If we can keep defeating things like that rabbit for a solid week, we’ll learn all kinds of combat magic that we couldn’t get in the real world, huh?”

—Now they’ll be able to enjoy the game, I bet.

Yoshie nodded happily. “Now, please call up a mana screen, like you would in the real world when you wanted to read the internet,” she instructed them.

All the students used their student notebooks to call up mana screens. The screens listed off a number of stats, as well commands that could be used inside

the game.

“You’ll see your stats there, as well as commands concerning the rules. These may change, so be careful when you’re about to do something. One of the things that makes this game unique is that an individual can command an army of NPCs. Each time your level goes up, your army will grow, so make good use of them.”

Fujiko had a question.

“So how do we beat the game?”

“To beat the game, you need to defeat the Demon King,” Yoshie said. Instantly the atmosphere in the schoolyard changed.

“Defeat...”

“The Demon King...?”

The students began to murmur to one another and look around.

“That’s right. Akuto Sai’s not here.”

“Keena Soga and Korone are gone too.”

—That’s a strange reaction. Do they not like him because he’s the Demon King...?

Your role in the game world was chosen based on your personality, which meant that Akuto was likely the Demon King.

Yoshie could feel that the conversation was going in a strange direction, and the atmosphere in the courtyard was turning more and more dangerous.

“I love it! If we want to get out of here, we just need to defeat the Demon King! This is our chance to get even with him for all the stuff he puts us through! And of course, if we beat him, we’ll get a ton of experience points right?”

“And there’s no risk of us dying, huh? Not that I’m planning on committing suicide.”

The students began to cheer as the news spread through the crowd.

—What? This is getting weird... Um, what do I do? I need to find some way to calm them down...

Yoshie was worried. There was still 2V to think about. He was the wild card here, and there was no telling what he'd do.

—I've still got this armor as a last resort... But it will only work as a reset switch, I bet. I need to find a way to get the students to let me be in charge, and then get everybody home alive...

Yoshie ran her hands down the armor she was wearing. That was the form the VPS control device had now taken.

○

"It seems that the world contains some kind of element that changes in response to human will," Korone said as she looked at her mana screen.

"It was the same last time. We were able to exert a degree of influence over the story." Akuto nodded.

"We've been given roles appropriate for the game world, and by finishing our jobs we can leave. That's the same as last time, too." Korone had thought to use her mana screen early on, and by reading the included manual had learned most of what Yoshie had explained.

"Roles appropriate for the game world, huh..." Akuto sighed.

Akuto, Korone, and Keena were in the hall of a huge castle. They didn't know what castle it was. The room was dimly lit, and near the back of it was a fancy golden throne atop a long red carpet.

Akuto was sitting on the throne, wearing an overly complicated suit of armor, with clawed gauntlets and spikes on the shoulders. He was dressed exactly like you'd expect a final boss to dress.

"Ackie, you look really cool!" Keena was the only one who was excited. She was wearing a robe, and seemed to be some kind of priest.

"I wanted to be a princess, but that would make it weird if you came to save me, since you're the Demon King. I guess this will have to work." Keena pulled up her mana screen and displayed her stats.

Class: Priest Level: 10 HP: 20 STR: 6 MGK: 18 Army: 10,000

"Army?"

“Remember how I said this game gives you your own army?”

Keena snapped her fingers, and rows of soldiers in white capes appeared in the throne room.

“I see. It’s a war game, huh?” Akuto nodded in understanding. But then he realized something unpleasant.

“That means everybody’s going to come try and defeat me, right?”

“Most likely, yes. By the way, doesn’t one normally start a game at Level 1? Are we getting special treatment because we’re the enemy?” Korone asked.

“Maybe we are,” Akuto said as he pulled up his own mana screen.

Class: Demon King Level: 99 HP: 9999 STR: 25 MGK: 25 Army: 200,000

“They’re all maxed out, huh?”

“The manual said that the maximum stats for human strength and magic are 18,” said Korone as she and Keena looked over Akuto’s stats.

Akuto wasn’t sure how to feel about this.

“If I’m this strong, everybody will come to defeat me at once, I bet. But if I just let them beat me, the game will end, right? Isn’t that what we want?”

“Huh? You can’t do that, Ackie! You need to enjoy the game!” Keena complained, but Akuto saw no reason to care.

“If we don’t end this in a week, everyone might be in danger. We need this over as soon as possible. Maybe I should just kill myself here...”

“Wait,” Korone said. There was a serious tone to her voice. No, her voice was always serious, but this time there was an urgency to it.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’ve looked at all the data I can view from the inside, and it seems that there’s a dangerous element here as well.”

“Dangerous?”

“Yes. It seems that there are three elements influencing this world. They’re all interacting with each other, and causing results beyond what the program itself

allows for.”

“Three elements?” Keena asked.

“One is Keena Soga. You.” Korone pointed to Keena.

Keena stood there in shock. “Me?”

“It seems that what happened to this world was only made possible by your mana’s unique frequency. It’s likely that you can change the rules of this world with a thought.”

“Change the rules? I’m not going to do that. I already know this game,” Keena said, and laughed.

But Akuto just nodded and said, “That’s right. When we went inside the book, it was because of Keena’s power. So the reason we were able to get inside this world so easily was because Keena knew the rules from the start?”

“Most likely.”

“But that still means we’re safe, right? Once Keena’s had some fun with the game, we can leave.”

“No. There’s also the second element. The fact that the VPS control device was brought into this world itself.”

“Normally you’d leave something like that on the outside, right?”

“Yes. There must have been some kind of mistake. Now the control device is capable of interfering with itself. If we’re unlucky, we may end up unable to control anything.”

“That sounds serious... But is there more?” Akuto gulped. It felt like the game wouldn’t be as much fun as he’d thought.

“The third element is this: There’s something inside the space that is not obeying the rules.”

“Huh? That can’t be right. The rules are what created this whole place, aren’t they?”

“I don’t know why. But analyzing the data shows that there’s someone who isn’t obeying the rules.”

“Got it. Let’s say you’re right; what problems does that cause?”

“It’s impossible to say for certain. But the biggest problem is that anyone harmed by this person will suffer real damage, not simply damage within the game.”

“That’s... dangerous.” Akuto understood the seriousness of what he was hearing. Someone was lurking out there who didn’t follow the rules, and if that someone killed him or another student, they might die for real, not just in the game.

“And this person who’s not following the rules... where are they?”

“I don’t know. It’s impossible to track them. We don’t even know if they mean us harm. There’s a good chance the accident I’m worried about may never happen. But if this person means us harm, the students may die while still believing it’s a game.”

“Got it. Either way, there’s no time to have fun. We need to find a way out of here as soon as possible.”

Akuto went to sit up from his throne, but Korone stopped him.

“You can’t do that. The game’s rules don’t allow the Demon King to commit suicide. If you kill yourself, the program will just make a new NPC to take your place as Demon King. You’ll survive, but the other students will remain in danger.”

“Oh...”

“So either way, the safest way to fix this is for the game to end as soon as possible.”

“So there’s barely anything I can do, then. The most I can do is let them kill me without really struggling.”

“No, there’s a simpler way.”

“A simpler way? That can’t be right,” Akuto said, shaking his head.

But Korone looked at him seriously and said, “Kill them all.”

“Huh?”

“Win by killing them all. If the Demon King attacks the adventurers and wipes them out, the game ends.”

“W-Wait, are you saying...?” Akuto stammered.

“What are you afraid of? The more time passes, the more uncertainty you have to worry about. And as time passes, their levels will go up. The safest way to ensure their survival is to give them all a quick death,” Korone said coldly.

She was right. Absolutely right. There wasn't a single flaw in her argument.

“But...”

“No buts. You need to hunt the adventurers while they're still inexperienced. Bring down a rain of blood on them. No, the most efficient way would be to capture them, gather them all in one place, and bury them alive. What's important is to kill them in the most efficient way possible. That's the final solution.” Korone brought her face right up next to Akuto's. Her eyes were serious. Of course, she was always serious. But this time she was extra-serious.

“...Don't tell me you're excited about killing them? Since this is a game.”

“Not at all. Oh, one option would be to gather them on top of a cliff, and then send a herd of stampeding bulls to knock them off. It would be efficient, and quite the spectacle as well,” Korone said, and then she knelt at Akuto's feet. “Just give the order, and I, Demon General Korone, shall slaughter these rebels down to the last man.”

“...No, you're definitely having fun with this.” Akuto sighed. But Korone's jokes aside (assuming they were just jokes), she was right. It was the safest way.

“Alright. I'll leave it to you.”

“You honor me, sire. I swear I shall bring you victory. Glory to the Demon King! Glory to evil!” Korone raised a fist, and Keena gleefully did the same.

“Glory to evil!”

“Glory to evil!”

More voices began to join in. The hall was now filled with soldiers in black armor and hideous demon beasts. They raised a shout like a hurricane and stomped their feet like an earthquake, swinging their arms up towards the

ceiling.

“Glory to evil! Glory to evil! Glory to evil! Glory to evil!”

—*This is... even if it's a game, it's still pretty crazy.*

Akuto sighed to himself.

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“...I’m lucky the communication unit itself is on the other side. It means I can still communicate. I was right to at least get my arm inside.”

2V had transformed into a snake. Or more specifically, the doll’s arm that she had sent inside had transformed into one. The arm contained a communication unit that allowed it to take action on its own; 2V had added that function to help spy in places that only an arm could reach.

The snake hid in the jungle and watched Yoshie and the students. It was an ordinary-looking green snake, one that blended in well with the rest of the world.

“Looks like the girl made it inside successfully. But there’s something I didn’t tell her. If my information is accurate, someone’s been lurking in this place long before us... The question is, what kind of effect are they going to have on this world? And if I can get to them before anybody else...” 2V whispered.

The being who’d been lurking in this world from the beginning was likely to interfere in ways that were impossible to predict.

“I need to investigate them a little more... Fortunately, none of the Megis priests seem to have noticed,” 2V said to herself, as she moved her mind back to a doll in the real world. It was another doll with an ordinary face, the kind 2V favored. The doll was in the Megis temple’s library right now. The only things in the room were a few dedicated terminals, but there were files that could only be accessed from there.

2V was looking for a file that one of her scientist colleagues had remembered seeing: a file with information on the first Demon King.

It took some time, but 2V was able to find several files related to it, all of them holding amazing information.

“Look at this...! It’s just like I thought... No, even more...!”

“It’s hard for me to ask you to believe me, so just let me tell you what you need to know to stay safe,” Yoshie — Or Yoshihiko, as she was now calling herself — said.

It was hard to tell if the students in the courtyard were listening to her, they were so riled up. Half of it was fear, and half of it was excitement to be playing a game. Either way, they weren’t paying attention.

—Well, this isn’t good. I need to get everyone back safe so that I can find 2V and Akuto Sai...

Yoshie opened her screen to see what was going on. Since she’d created the program that controlled the world, and thus, the world itself, she had special access that allowed her to see what was happening throughout the map. She realized, just like Korone did, that there was someone in the game who wasn’t abiding by its rules.

—2V? No, he was pulled in just like me. So it can’t be him. And he’s just an arm... so he can’t do that much. Does that mean somebody was inside the VPS from the start...? Whatever it is, it’s dangerous. If it makes contact with everyone... they might be killed!

Yoshie was scared. But she couldn’t think of anything to tell the students that they’d believe.

“This isn’t good. Should I just climb up on the podium and start giving orders...?”

She whispered to herself. If she had to, she would do it, but doing something like that required the skills you’d need to lead an army. Honestly, she didn’t think she was up to it.

“I don’t think anybody but you has the knowledge to do it.” Junko must’ve heard Yoshie’s whispering, because she’d leaned over to whisper in Yoshie’s ear.

—Huh?

Yoshie gasped and turned towards her. Junko was smiling and trying to cheer her up.

“B-But I’m an outsider, and I’ve never led anyone. Will they listen to me?”

“If that’s what you’re worried about, I can tell them what you want to say. Either way, I’m going to help you,” Junko said.

—She’s such a nice person. She’s willing to help me. This is a tough situation, so that really makes me happy.

Yoshie smiled, relieved.

—Um, I need to thank her. I’m a man now... so I need to smile like a character in an otome game.

“I’m glad to hear you say that. I suppose that means I have nothing to worry about, then.”

—Does that make me sound cool?

But when Junko saw Yoshie smile, she frowned and looked away.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Junko said, “I’m saying that I don’t trust you.”

—Oh, I guess it didn’t really work... No, there isn’t time to let it get me down.

“Then I’ll speak without reservations. It’s true that I have fewer things to worry about now, after all.”

“I... see. As long as you understand,” Junko mumbled to herself.

Yoshie walked up the podium.

“Everyone, I’d like your attention. I apologize again, as the person responsible for this situation. But I’d like your help. And I’d like you to allow me to speak to you like this. No, I’m not telling you to follow my orders. I want you to know that even if you don’t trust me, if you’re careful, you can safely return to your world while having a good time.”

Everyone turned towards Yoshie. They seemed willing to hear her out, if nothing else.

“Thank you for listening to me. I’ve already explained most of what you need to know. No, if you don’t even believe that, that’s fine. I just hope that you’ll all work together and try to escape from here. And I’d like her to be the one who helps lead you.”

Yoshie pointed to Junko.

The students all gave a shout, and began to voice their agreement.

“Hattori will do just fine, I guess.”

“She was a hero during the war with the Demon King.”

“There’s lots of rumors about her and the Demon King... but she did fight in that war.”

Junko’s mouth opened in surprise. When she saw Yoshie hold out a hand to her, she walked up to the podium. But she didn’t take Yoshie’s hand.

“I agree that the smart thing to do is wait and see if we can really trust this man. But until then, we all need to work together, and be careful, and get as much power and as many experience points as we can!” Junko shouted, and everyone gave a cheer.

Yoshie was very impressed by what she heard.

—*She’s so cool. I could never do something like that, so I’m really impressed.*

“They really trust you, don’t they?” She was so impressed that she whispered into Junko’s ear.

“D-Do they...? I don’t think so...” Junko blushed and stammered.

—*She’s just being humble.*

Yoshie put her left hand on Junko’s shoulder, and then raised her right hand upwards. A huge map appeared in the space above them. It was a map of the world they were in.

“This is a map of this land. Let her be your commander as you explore. Once you’ve got enough experience, you’ll get an army of your own, and be able to explore without doing anything on your own. You can have fun, be safe, and get experience that will help you in the real world! But there’s no telling what will happen, so it’s safer to stay in groups...” Yoshie suddenly fell silent.

She heard a terrible low roar coming from the other side of the jungle. Everyone in the yard turned to look towards it.

A cloud of dust was rising from beyond the jungle, and gradually getting

closer.

“Wh-What’s going on?” Junko asked.

But Yoshie didn’t have any idea herself.

“D-Don’t tell me something’s going on here that you’re not aware of...”

Junko’s eyes went wide in surprise.

—I need to come up with some way to calm everyone down... That dust is probably an army, and the only people who could raise an army are on the Demon King’s side...

“N-No, I was just surprised that they acted so fast.”

“What do you mean?”

“Only someone on the Demon King’s side could command an army that fast. But you’d need to be incredibly decisive in order to take action in just a few short hours. They probably still don’t even know the rules!” Yoshie shouted in surprise.

But more than that, she just didn’t know what to say. As she stood there silently, Junko raised her voice.

“Everyone, prepare for battle! The Demon King’s army is coming!”

Yoshie shook a little when she heard her voice.

—I know it’s a game, but when things feel this real... I’m helpless, aren’t I?

But Yoshie knew now wasn’t the time to feel depressed. She looked around at the students to see how they were doing.

There were about 500 students there in all. Every one was a student of Constant Magical Academy. Of course, they were excellent fighters, and it would take more than something like this to scare them. But as each of them raised their weapons or tried to use their favorite spells, they realized once more that this was a game, not the real world.

“H-Huh? My nightstick...”

“I have a knife... But there’s no mana in it!”

“I can’t use my buff spells!”

Every one of those 500 students ended up standing helplessly in the yard.

“W-We’re sitting ducks out here!” Junko quickly turned towards Yoshie.

Yoshie was desperately trying to think. If the Demon King army was attacking, then maybe Akuto would come here himself. He seemed smart, so perhaps he was trying to get the students out of the game as soon as possible. If that were the case, then she could probably talk with him. And even if all the students died here, in a way, that would also solve the problem. But what bothered her was that there was at least one player in the game that she didn’t know about. Until she knew how they were going to act, she wanted to avoid letting any of the students die.

Yoshie finally decided on a course of action, and then yelled in the loudest voice she could muster.

“Get inside the school building! I’ll handle the army!”

Junko looked at Yoshie and nodded.

“I’ll go with you.” Junko leapt off the podium, and ran through the rows of confused students towards the edge of the yard.

“Right behind you!” Yoshie followed after her. Some of the students followed after her too, holding small knives and other weapons.

The cloud of dust on the other side of the jungle seemed like a giant wall getting closer and closer. The rumbling was loud enough now to make the students want to cover their ears.

As some of them began to run and scatter, and some of them began to follow Yoshie, the jungle split open right in front of their eyes.

A huge rhino appeared, trampling down the jungle trees. It was at least five meters tall. A rhino wasn’t usually a dangerous beast, but there was a nasty-looking red glare in its eyes, and it was charging with the speed of a horse.

“Gwahahahaha! I am the head of the Demon King’s army! Demon General Korone! I have come here by the Demon King’s orders to kill you all!”

A pretty young girl wearing mages’ robes was standing upright on the rhino’s stirrups. The girl — of course, it was Korone — was screaming expressionlessly

about how she was going to kill them all.

The other students who'd been following Yoshie stopped dead in their tracks.

"Uwah!"

"Wh-What is that?"

"That thing is bad news?"

"What kind of game is this? It's impossible!"

The students began to scream, and Yoshie and Junko came to a stop as well.

"Wh-Who's that?" Yoshie asked.

"Korone. A Liradan observer. Her job is to observe Akuto Sai, one of our most famous students," Junko answered.

"Do you know her?"

"Yes."

"Glad to hear it. Maybe you can talk to her."

"Will she listen to me? She's on the other side, right? At times like this she can get really excited," Junko said hesitantly.

She was right, too.

"I'm not here to talk! I'm here to kill you all!" Korone's voice was emotionless, but only more terrifying because of it.

As she stood on the rhino — actually a monster called a Behemoth — she raised her staff and fired a green beam of light. The beam tore past the students as they fled, and a moment later, everything it touched exploded. Several of the students were blown into the air.

"Gyaaah!"

"Aah!"

Two of them turned to dust and disappeared. The game had decided they'd died.

"...The system's still functioning properly, huh?" Yoshie said, relieved.

And then she turned to Korone and yelled.

“Wait! There’s something in this game that’s not playing by the rules!”

Korone’s answer, though, wasn’t what she’d expected. She stopped the Behemoth in front of Yoshie and Junko, and looked down at the two of them.

“I am aware. That’s why I’m trying to kill all the students, to send them back to reality. I’ve looked into the data myself. From the speech you just gave, may I assume that you’re the game’s creator?”

“Correct. So you know that there’s somebody out there that’s not following the game’s rules?” Yoshie was a little relieved.

“Yes. But humans are difficult sometimes, aren’t they? If we kill them, they can go back to the real world, but they’re still trying to resist.”

“No, I think most people would try to run from that rhino...” Junko whispered to herself.

Korone heard her and nodded.

“It helps that they’re running, though. I can kill them more efficiently.”

Korone crossed her arms for a moment, and then gripped her staff again. The monsters behind the behemoth — goblins and orcs — began to run forward. Korone had brought 5,000 troops, half of the ten thousand-strong NPC army she possessed. They spilled into the schoolyard, turning it black like ink spilled across a page.

As the army raced past Yoshie and Junko, the goblins and orcs attacked the fleeing students from behind.

“Uwaaah!”

“No!”

The students screamed and turned to dust, one after another.

“Kill the boys! Rape the girls!” Korone shouted expressionlessly and emotionlessly.



“I always did think there was something wrong with her...” Junko sighed.

“I-Is this part of some kind of plan?” Yoshie asked. Korone nodded.

“Of course. I’m simply trying to bring an end to the game in the most efficient way. If you’ll simply leave it to me, I can bring about a game over by slaughtering them all quickly and efficiently.”

“B-But I’m partially responsible for this myself. I would appreciate it if you could leave this to me,” Yoshie said.

Korone, however, shook her head.

“If that’s how you feel, then it would be better if all the other students except you left. Or if you like, I can always kidnap the two of you.” Korone glanced down at Junko.

“If I kidnap you, you’ll be forced to wear lewd clothing and then go meet Akuto. This game has rules for producing children. If a man and woman spend the night in the same room together, they get a message saying, ‘You had a very special night last night,’ and then...”

Junko’s face turned an explosive shade of red.

“Y-You dummy! I would never...!”

“But you just imagined it, didn’t you?”

“A-Aah! Stop teasing me!”

“Regardless, we’re going to continue the game. If you don’t like it, then we can continue the game with you two as the heroes. You can take a little nap while I get rid of the other students. Once you wake up, head for the Demon King’s castle.”

Korone waved her staff again, and fired another beam of light.

“Watch out!” Yoshie jumped in front of Junko. But the beam of light pierced both of their bodies.

“Wha...?!”

Both of them moaned in pain.

—Even if it's a game, you still feel pain, huh?

And then she understood what Korone had done. It wasn't a fatal blow, it was just to knock them out.

And then, Yoshie and Junko passed out.

○

Let's go a little further back in time.

When Korone attacked, Fujiko was the first inside the school building.

—This may be a game, but I still don't want to die. And something doesn't seem right about that Yoshihiko either. I need to survive a little longer, and do some research of my own...

The layout of the school building hadn't changed, but its contents had. The classrooms had been replaced with mission-planning rooms and armories.

—Armories... That's perfect.

Fujiko shouted as she turned around, "There's weapons here! Everyone, grab them!" She went between the rows of spears and piles of swords, and grabbed the weapon she was most used to from the real world: a whip.

The other students who'd followed her picked up weapons of her own. The room was filled with students picking up weapons, when suddenly there was a cry from the next room.

"There's spell books over here, guys! Anybody whose class can use them, come get one!"

—Come to think of it, I never bothered to check my class.

Fujiko opened her own screen.

Class: Herbalist. Level: 1 HP: 5 STR: 8 MGK: 15 ARMY: 0

—That's right, you get your own army. They never really bothered to explain it, but looking at what Korone had, it's obvious what one of them can do... I need to get my level up as fast as I can, then. This may just be a game, but I need to get as much experience as I can, so that it can help me in the real world... And more than anything, I need Akuto to get stronger.

Fujiko had secretly decided to betray everyone.

—So I need to raise everyone's level and make them more powerful... So that I can have Akuto defeat them. That's the plan I'll use.

Once she'd settled on a plan, Fujiko went next door to the room with the spell books and found herself a Level 1 book that she could use. And when she saw that most of the students had found their weapons, she spoke.

"Everyone, this fortress isn't going to last long! Let's head out the back entrance and split up into the jungle! Then we can raise our levels and gather our armies, and when the time comes to defeat the Demon King, I'll raise the signal for us to reunite!"

Voices were raised in agreement.

"That's right! That's our best move!"

"It'll give us a chance to have some more fun, too."

"This place feels so real, I don't want to get killed."

"We can split into groups of two or three and run."

The students began to leave the room.

"Fujiko! Let's escape together!"

Three of Fujiko's younger admirers said as they ran towards her. Fujiko smiled and nodded.

"Of course. We can leave together. Are you ready?"

They all left the room, and found that the hallways were in chaos. The students had never learned to fight as a group, so they weren't able to seal the entrance in time. And now they had to fight Korone's monster armies. The halls were filled with ear-splitting yells and the clanging of swords.

"Hurry!" One of the girls pulled Fujiko onwards. But even as she ran, Fujiko's mind was on something else.

—If I'm right... this may be easier than I thought.

Fujiko looked at the three girls she was escaping with. The three of them seemed genuinely scared. She could understand why; the place felt extremely

real.

—*Which means that they're not likely to be thinking straight.*

Fujiko grinned to herself. She'd chosen a different route than the others to make her escape. The only people in this hallway were her and the other three. Only a single orc soldier was following them. The three girls seemed to have no interest in trying to fight it.

"You three go on ahead without me!" Fujiko shouted.

The three of them went out without her. They turned back once, looking worried, but when she shouted at them again they turned their backs to run.

Fujiko waited for the instant they weren't looking, and swung her whip at the orc, catching the tip right on the edge of its sword.

"Hahh!" She pulled back on the whip, yanking the sword from its hand. But even after the sword was gone from its hand, she kept pulling, flinging the sword towards the fleeing girls behind her.

"Gyaaah!" The sword embedded itself in one of the girls backs as she fell. She instantly vanished, leaving the sword behind.

—*Just like I thought.*

Fujiko smiled to herself. The other students, and even the girl herself, probably thought that the orc had killed her.

—*You get a lot of experience for killing players!*

Fujiko had already gone up a level. She swung her whip a few times at the defenseless orc to defeat it, and then caught up with the other students like nothing had happened.

"Are you okay, everyone?"

"Yes, but that sword the orc threw got one of us..."

"There's no need to be sad about it. It may have been awful sight to see, but it's still just a game." Fujiko smiled.

○

"I have slain 357 humans, my master." Korone said as she knelt in front of

Akuto at his castle.

“Wow! Great job, Korone!” Keena said, clapping her hands as she leaned up against Akuto on his throne.

“Don’t do that. You’re making us look like an evil army.” Akuto sighed.

“I’m just trying to establish a mood, that’s all,” Korone said, and then she took out a crystal ball to show him. The ball showed the destroyed school building, the trampled yard, and the corpses of the orc soldiers.

“What a mess. I don’t see any students though, I guess.”

“Of course. I was able to keep this within the boundaries of the game.” Korone lowered her crystal ball, and then called up a large screen.

“And here you can see everyone’s complaints.”

“Complaints”? Akuto looked at the screen. It was showing an internet message board.

“Well, as long as everybody’s alive...” Akuto sighed, not sure how to feel about this.

“It looks like we can view the game’s message board in the real world, and people in the real world can also see part of the game.”

“Part of it?”

“They get an overall view of the game, as well as the numerical data. I was able to confirm this on the message board.”

“Just like when we went into the book, huh? Fujiko seemed to be able to do the same thing then. Anyway, I’m glad we’re getting data from the outside.” Akuto nodded.

“Now, on to crush the survivors.” Korone stood up.

“Hey, you’re getting too into character again...”

“Once you’ve started a massacre, it doesn’t end until everyone is dead,” Korone said, clearly enjoying her role a little too much. But Keena stopped her.

“Wait. Something’s not right.”

“Not right?” Akuto turned to look at her.

“I think the game’s changed a little,” Keena said as she motioned for him to look at the screen.

“What’s changed?”

“Um, the goal was supposed to be to beat the Demon King, right? But now it’s to find the Grail.”

Korone followed Keena’s gaze and pointed to a spot on the screen. The goal was written there, just like she had said.

“Somebody’s changed the game... Maybe that’s it. That other player that person was talking about might have started to take action.” Akuto sounded a little worried.

Korone looked at it and nodded.

“Then we must commence the slaughter immediately. We’ll slaughter them all, and not worry about anything else. Let’s just focus on the slaughtering, in fact.”

“I’ve never seen you look so excited...” Akuto sighed.

○

Meanwhile, back in reality...

“What are you doing to my school?” Lily said, plainly upset.

She’d heard what had happened. Lily had come back to find the school empty, but then students started to appear out of nowhere around her. And they were saying strange things about having been sent inside a video game.

“But if we say they were all sent into dat Vii-Pii-Ess thingamabob, that would explain it, raahht?”

“Ugah.”

“I think if anything, it just backs up what we’ve learned-gya. It proves there was a plan to seal the Demon King inside VPS.”

The student council trio said, trying to calm her down.

“If the game and virtual phase space are related, then wouldn’t the fastest thing be to investigate the person who created the game?” Hiroshi said as he looked at his mana screen. At this point, he just didn’t feel like it made sense for him to go home.

“The game’s creator?” Lily said, obviously uninterested. But when she saw the creator’s name, she gasped.

“Yoshihiko? Yoshihiko... Kanna was chasing somebody named Yoshie Kita.”

“That’s right-gya. It seems obvious to me that she’s involved somehow. But all the data’s been deleted, and nobody knows where he is now...”

“That’s because Yoshihiko’s in the game!” Lily stood up. “Okay, I’ve got it.”

“What are you going to do-gya?”

“All we’ve got is circumstantial evidence, but we can get the rest by threatening to beat somebody up! We’ll find somebody who worked on the game and intimidate them into giving us what we want,” she said eagerly.

“We don’t have to go that far, do we?” Hiroshi said, sounding a little worried, but Lily grabbed him tightly by the hand.

“Huh?”

“You come too! You’re already caught up in this.”

“W-Wait! Give me a break, President!”

But Hiroshi’s protests were completely ignored.

○

“Ugh....” Junko opened her eyes.

As soon as she remembered how she’d been knocked out, she jumped up in shock. It was much easier for her to wake up in the game than in the real world. She didn’t have a headache, and her body moved smoothly.

“Oh no...” Junko looked out at the ruined school courtyard. Korone’s army had already left. The school building had collapsed into a pile of rubble, and the students were nowhere to be found.

“Ugh.... So this is what defeat feels like. Even if this is just a game, it’s still not

a good feeling. I don't like having lost the initiative, either."

She woke up Yoshihiko, who was lying on the ground next to her. His handsome face was twisted with a pain that wasn't physical. Junko knew exactly how he felt. He was upset that so many students had died because of him.

"It's not a pleasant feeling, no, but if we don't start to focus, we won't get another chance. It's just a game, though, so maybe we don't need to take it so seriously?" Junko laughed.

Yoshihiko's eyes opened wide as if he was impressed.

"That's amazing. Did you say your name was Hattori? You're really used to war, aren't you?"

"I don't think that's a very good compliment to give a girl." she said, pouting, and Yoshihiko finally smiled.

"I'm sorry. You're right. Let me try again: I was moved by your nobility."

Junko found herself blushing and looking away, not because of Yoshihiko's handsome face, but because it was clear that his words were coming from the heart.

—*This is the second time I've ever liked a boy...*

Junko suddenly thought, but then she shook her head to keep the thought from appearing on her face.

"Th-Thank you. Oh, right. How many people made it out?"

Yoshihiko opened his screen.

"...We lost quite a few. About three hundred. They got us good. That's about as efficient as the game will let you be. Some of this goes beyond just the game parameters; the player was just that good of a commander."

"That's amazing." Junko sounded impressed. She knew that Korone was a Liradan, but she still admired her skills as a commander.

"But this isn't a problem," said Yoshihiko. "If that Liradan is that good, we can count on her to get the students back to reality safely."

“The school’s students are skilled fighters as well, though. They split up and headed into the jungle. They’ll want to beat the game by defeating the Demon King.”

“Then let’s get going ourselves.” Yoshihiko stood up.

“Go? Go where?” Junko asked.

Yoshihiko nodded and explained.

“To the jungle. It’s the only place we can hide. If we want to be able to fight, we need to spend some time leveling up. And monsters sometimes drop weapons, too. We need to get ourselves some equipment. Just like that Liradan named Korone said, there’s someone out there that’s not playing by the rules, so until we know what they’re up to, we’re limited in how much we can do. So we need experience and items if we’re going to explore the world freely,” Yoshihiko said, and then started to walk into the jungle.

Junko hesitated.

“Huh...? Wait...”

“What’s wrong?”

“D-Does this mean it’ll be just the two of us?”

“There’s not a lot we can do about it, is there? We need to work together, and I respect you. So it will be just fine.” Yoshihiko smiled innocently.

“Th-That’s right. You’re right. Okay, got it. You’re right.” Junko stammered.

—It’s good that he looks so innocent, but... Doesn’t he understand that we’re a boy and girl heading off alone together? Or does he just think it’s a game? Or...

Of course, Junko didn’t know that Yoshihiko was actually Yoshie.

—Forget it! Now’s not the time to be nervous! He’s obviously a gentleman.

Junko followed after Yoshihiko. And until sunset, Yoshihiko showed her how to hunt.

“Haah!” Junko sliced into a giant bat with a short sword she’d borrowed from Yoshihiko. The giant bat gave a high-pitched screech and died. Its corpse would

eventually disappear, but unlike the bodies of players, monster corpses remained a little while before vanishing. And sometimes, items would appear next to them when they died.

“A knife, huh? But it’s still something I earned for myself. You can have your own blade back.” Junko held the knife in an underhand grip.

“This feels more like what I’m used to, anyway.”

“You’re a ninja, after all. Ideally we should try and get you a katana like the ones Suhara followers use. Let’s hunt a few more monsters until you’re leveled up enough to use scrolls.”

After that, Junko kept leveling up under Yoshihiko’s instruction. Before too much longer, the sun set.

“A day in the game is about an hour in the real world,” Yoshihiko explained as they made camp. He tossed something that looked like a miniature model into the air, and a tent and campfire appeared in a clearing in the jungle.

“That’s convenient,” Junko said as she sat next to the campfire. She sounded impressed. “By the way, besides level up, what will we be doing tomorrow?”

Yoshihiko opened his screen and pointed to the center.

“There’s a powerful weapon here. The monster that protects it is strong, but there’s a way to defeat it even if you’re at a low level. Let’s go there... Huh?”

“What’s wrong?”

Yoshihiko had a serious look on his face, like something wasn’t right.

“The goal of the game has changed. It says it’s to... find the Grail?”

“Is it possible to change the game?”

“Of course it is. But now that I’m on the inside, I can’t do it. Only somebody on the outside can. But obviously, it’s protected by security. If it wasn’t someone from the outside... Maybe it’s the other player I mentioned before.” Yoshihiko put his hand to his chin in thought.

“We just need to be careful then, right? It’s not that big a deal. And it doesn’t look like there’ve been any accidents so far, either,” Junko said to try and cheer

him up.

“Your gallantry gives me courage. I’m truly glad that we were able to meet each other,” Yoshihiko said in a soft voice.

“Y-You’re giving me too much credit. I already told you that.” Junko pouted and looked away.

“No, it’s true. I’m not that good at opening up to people. I always try my best to be honest with others, but I don’t have a lot of friends.”

“Don’t say stuff like that. I don’t know how to answer it. ...Fine. We’re going to be stuck with each other for a while. I’ll try my best to hear what you have to say,” Junko said, blushing at Yoshihiko’s openness.

“Thanks. The whole reason I invented this technology was that so you could do all of your communication in virtual phase space.”

“All of your communication?”

“That’s right. Pure communication. I thought that perhaps in a world free of physical bodies, where you can do whatever you want, it would be easier for people to live.”

“I’m sorry, I’ll just come out and say it. I’m not good with anything complicated.” Junko chuckled and shook her head.

Yoshihiko smiled sadly.

“I’m basically just complaining, that’s all. Sorry for wasting your time. Let’s go to bed.” Yoshihiko moved away from the campfire and opened the tent flap.

“Wait...” Junko turned red and waved her hand. “...Are we sleeping in the same tent?”

Yoshihiko looked confused.

“Do you want to sleep together?”

“Y-You dummy! Of course not!” Junko yelled, a little louder than she meant to.

Yoshihiko looked even more confused.

“Of course not. There’s not a lot of room. ...Oh!” He clapped his hands

together. “You’ve got a camp in your equipment too.”

“Huh?” Junko patted down her pockets. Just like Yoshihiko said, there was a small model tent like the one he’d thrown. If she did the same, could she create another campfire?

—What could be he thinking about me now...?

Junko felt an unpleasant sensation, like her heart was skipping a beat.

“I’m going to sleep,” Junko said as she deployed her own tent and went inside. She got inside her sleeping bag and stared at the tent’s plain ceiling.

—Ugh... This is really frustrating. This feeling... It’s like the one he gives me.

She thought of Akuto, and then curled both herself and her sleeping bag up into a ball.

—You know, the two of them are kind of alike... Do I just have a weakness for that type?

Junko spent the whole night thinking about it.

○

—I’m not the type to get excited when I’m doing something dangerous, sadly.

2V laughed a little to herself. She was the type who didn’t take chances at all. It was more than a policy, it was sheer habit.

She’d leave any dangerous tasks to her dolls, and if she was ever in danger of being found out, she’d order the doll in question to self-destruct. She even used dolls to buy her dolls, and since she mostly bought ones that were easily available on the market, there was no way for anyone to track her.

But now, she felt the slightest bit of fear as she tapped at the terminal. She had to hack into the highest level of security. And to do it, she needed to use her own personal mana frequency — in other words, she had to do it herself. She needed to prove that she was 2V, a member of CMID-8, in order to get access to the deepest level of the god.

—CMID-8’s access privileges can’t get me down to the level that high priests can access. To go any further, I’ll need to hack it.

There was a reason she needed to get down that far.

“Even the high priest probably hasn’t noticed that record. There’s no obvious reason it’s important, after all. But if it’s true...” 2V whispered to herself as she fiddled with her mana screen.

The real 2V was a pale young girl. Her frail arms and legs were covered with badly fitting white clothes. In the dimly lit room, with nothing around her but her dolls and her terminal, she had a certain kind of beauty.

—I’ve never taken anything seriously in my life, and now here I am, tapping at a screen like a geek. Hilarious. My hands hurt, and so do my eyes. I never thought that this, of all things, would be what excites me.

Words displayed on the screen in front of 2V. She’d reached the lowest levels of the god Megis.

“The high priest only comes down here when he’s rewriting the program...” 2V whispered.

“User identified as high priest. Please select operation.”

She heard the voice of a Liradan, speaking the words of the god. Her deception seemed to have worked.

“I want to access the sealed data on the Demon King.”

“Command received. This data is read-only. It will be automatically deleted from your terminal.”

“One look is all I need.”

2V’s eyes desperately tracked the information pouring across her mana screen as she tried to memorize it. And once she’d learned all there was to know, she instantly cut the connection and tried her best to hide all her tracks.

Once she was done, she started to laugh, as if she couldn’t hold back anymore.

“Heh... heheh... Hahaha! Well, I certainly didn’t expect THAT! This is great. All of my ideals, in one place. I never thought for a moment I’d have such luck. And who could’ve thought it would be so easy... In a way, it’s almost disappointing that this was all it took.”

2V's voice was calm, but there were traces of excitement in it. Her pale cheeks had flushed an almost eerie pink as she opened up the mana screen again. This time, she broke through the security on Yoshie's game.

"But... this, I think, will work. He's inside. And that means I'll take all the risks I have to. After all this time, I'm finally starting to figure out why normal people are able to enjoy their lives. They're able to get excited over stupid things. Sheesh... What a bunch of idiots."

2V smiled as she began to change the program and insert her trap.

"The first Demon King... a being created to destroy the original world's system... And it's still usable too!"

o

Hiroshi gulped when he realized where Lily had taken him. It was the Megis temple.

There were exceptions, but even the temples themselves had halls that were open to visitors. Some of them even had entertainment facilities inside, and it was common for small downtown areas to build up around them.

But still, the area Lily had brought them into was off-limits. It was a place only for employees of the temple and priests.

"A-Are we allowed to be here?" Hiroshi stammered, but Lily shook her head.

"It's fine. I've made an appointment to discuss something in secret."

"Oh, well that's good."

"He wasn't happy about it, but I made him change his mind," Lily added.

"Wait, what does that mean?" Hiroshi asked, but Lily ignored him.

"I sent a message saying to stay in the room he's in now."

"Is that all?"

"What else would I need to say?"

"...No, I guess you're right. But who are we meeting?"

"The high priest."

“Uwah! Come on, please don’t drag me into this!”

“Why do you have to be scared just because you’re meeting somebody important?” Lily laughed. But there were two guards outside the entrance that led to the special area on the top floors.

“You need permission to pass,” one of them said.

“I-I’ll just be going then...” Hiroshi started to say, but Lily calmly walked up to them and grinned.

“I’m the daughter of Shiraishi.”

“The priest...” The guard looked surprised for a moment, but he immediately resumed the emotionally blank look that security guards were expected to have and held up his right hand.

“Even if you’re Shiraishi’s daughter, you’ll need permission. At least a temporary guest pass, if nothing else.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Lily said coldly. She made a fist with her right hand and rubbed it with her left.

The two guards twitched as a tension filled the air. But a voice interrupted them before anything could happen.

“It’s fine. Let them pass.”

It was a low, gentle voice, coming from beyond the door.

“High Priest...” The guards froze in a salute.

It was Hidehiko Kita who came out. He was an honest-looking man with greying hair, set back with gel. But if you looked carefully, you could see something terrifying in his eyes, a strong light that almost seemed like madness.

“I’m glad to hear you understand.” Lily bowed forward, giving him the proper, official greeting. She was a girl, so she didn’t technically need to remove her hat to be polite. But given how obnoxiously big the hat was, not to mention her attitude before, she seemed extremely disrespectful.



But Hidehiko led both her and Hiroshi inside. And when he was far enough inside that the guards couldn't hear, he spoke.

"I heard about my daughter's mistake. But it would take somebody related to Shiraishi to try and threaten me with it."

"I don't want to chalk it up to blood. My father's still willing to fight me when I ask him."

"A father's job is to worry about his daughter. Not that you'd understand at your age."

"I'm afraid I'm not old enough to start worrying about an heir." Lily's attitude was making Hiroshi sweat. Hidehiko was laughing, for now, but who knew how long that would last?

They went inside the High Priest's office, and Hidehiko sat behind his desk, gesturing for the two of them to sit in chairs. Then he opened a mana screen and motioned for Lily to speak.

"Operation Birdcage," was all Lily said to begin with.

It was effective enough that Hidehiko raised an eyebrow.

"You're saying Yoshie's involved in it?"

"Correct. And so is the game she made. How exactly this came about, I don't know." Lily opened a mana screen of her own and slid it across the desk towards Hidehiko. It contained the information she'd gathered so far, along with her hypotheses.

Operation Birdcage was the name of the plan to seal the Demon King inside virtual phase space. The VPS it was going to use was the one that Megis used for its defense. Yoshie's research was involved as well. To make matters worse, the Academy had gotten caught up in it.

"I had Yoshie tailed personally. I couldn't get any proof, but there's no doubt she's involved in this. The fact that she's inside is all the proof I need." Lily called up game footage on the screen. It was showing "Yoshihiko's" data.

"A little investigation is all you'd need to show that Yoshie and Yoshihiko are the same person. Just check your own temple's communication data. I know

you can do that from where you're sitting," Lily said. Hidehiko shook his head. There was no need.

"I won't even bother. I already knew, to a certain degree."

"To a certain degree?"

"I knew my daughter was doing research online."

"And her involvement in the plan?"

"I knew about that as well. This is the first I'm hearing about her involving the Academy, though. If you've come to let me know, it means you want to make a deal. Let's hear it." Hidehiko's face was expressionless. Either he'd resigned himself to the idea, or he had some other plan.

Lily grinned.

"I want information on the person who came up with Project Birdcage. As long as I've got that, we can deal with everything ourselves."

"You mean Codename 2V... Alright. I'll do everything I can."

"I didn't expect it to be this easy. It makes me a little suspicious that you're plotting something."

"Well, you're wrong. I never liked it... The plan, that is. That's why I'm so willing to cooperate... Oh, look." Hidehiko slid a mana screen towards Lily. It was a log from Yoshie's terminal, showing that it was currently in use.

"Someone's using her terminal..." Lily gasped.

"It's not Yoshie. The access is coming from a different point. She's being hacked," Hidehiko said.

"Which means... it's 2V!" Lily's expression changed.

Hidehiko looked at her and nodded.

"You're likely correct. I'm doing this for my daughter's sake, so you don't need to worry about me backing out of our deal. Give me a way to contact you, and I'll make sure you're given constant updates. You want to go to that terminal's location, right?"

"...Thank you!" Lily bowed, and then was out of the room in a flash.

Junko spent the next day continuing to level up.

“I think I’m starting to get the hang of this, maybe.” She was back to using a katana now. Yoshihiko had gone up several levels as well, and now they were able to defeat even strong monsters by working together.

“We could probably head to the center of the map now,” Yoshihiko said after they’d defeated several bugbears at once.

“Is that the place where you said there’s a powerful weapon?”

“That’s right. It will help you defeat the Demon King. It’s the strongest weapon in the game.”

“Then won’t everybody else be after it?”

“The monster that’s protecting it is very strong. It’s hard to defeat it if you don’t know the trick. It’s a shame that we had to split up before I got a chance to tell everyone.”

“Knowing our students, they would’ve fought each other for it,” Junko said, and Yoshihiko laughed.

“Hahaha. I’m not sure if it’s a sad thing that they’re bringing conflict into the game, or a good thing that people are enjoying that conflict.”

“I was taught that a job of a warrior is to limit conflict,” Junko said, not really meaning anything by it, but Yoshihiko was extremely impressed.

“I see. That’s something the other sects need to learn as well. It’s an opinion that should get a wider hearing. Or perhaps it’s just that you yourself have this wonderful idea.”

“Y-You keep saying that stuff like you mean it...” Junko said jokingly, but she still turned away and blushed, smiling.

Over the course of just two days, the two had gotten close enough to converse naturally.

“I do mean it, though.”

“E-Enough. Let’s focus on this weapon...” Junko said. Yoshihiko pointed in

front of him.

“To tell you the truth, we’ve already been heading there. That’s it.”

There was a rocky mountain in front of them.

“It’s at the top, then?” Junko looked up.

When they approached the base, they saw what looked like a path leading up. When you got closer to the top, there were parts that were steep enough you needed to hold onto a chain to keep from falling over.

“We’re going to get attacked walking up this thing? That will be tough,” Junko whispered, but Yoshihiko laughed and said it would be okay.

“There’s a volcano caldera at the top. When you get there, there’s a narrow path, which you can lure the enemy into to trap them. That’s the trick.

“I see. It’s like a cheat code,” Junko said, satisfied, and began to walk upwards.

The path was steep, and as they approached the summit, any kind of foothold was practically non-existent. But Junko wasn’t scared of heights. She helped Yoshihiko up when he struggled, and soon they made it to the top.

“The path around the caldera goes in a circle, and part of it is narrow. Look, it’s over there.”

When they reached a point where they could see the whole path running around the caldera, Yoshihiko pointed at a certain spot. It was just wide enough for a single person to pass through.

“There’s a sword inside the caldera. If you follow the path down towards it, you’ll encounter the guardian monster,” Yoshihiko explained, and Junko nodded.

“And then you run back up the path and lure it into that narrow spot?”

“That’s right. Run up the left side. As long as you don’t mess that up, you’re fine,” Yoshihiko assured her.

The two of them began to walk down the caldera. Once they’d descended a few dozen meters, they reached the edge of a lake of lava.

“I can feel the heat coming off it... How do we get inside the lava? And where’s the sword?” Junko asked as she looked at the bright-red lava beneath them. Yoshihiko gestured for her to get ready to run.

“The lava will disappear once we defeat the guardian. Now, here it comes.”

Just as he finished his sentence, the lava bubbled up like a fountain, was bursting beneath it. The fountain of molten rock spewed into the air, quickly becoming over ten meters tall.

“The lava...! Something’s coming out from under it!”

“That’s an Ifrit. It’s going to follow us.”

Yoshihiko started to run, and Junko followed him.

As they ran, she turned back and saw what looked like a man, over ten meters tall, inside the lava. It was walking towards them. The man looked like a black, burnt silhouette. Molten lava clung to him, and he was spitting fire with each breath.

“Even if you know it’s a game, that’s still quite a sight...” Junko said, impressed.

It was a flaming genie over ten meters tall. Certainly an impressive sight.

The Ifrit slowly approached them. No, it was moving slowly, but its steps were far wider than theirs. Junko was running, but it wasn’t long at all before the Ifrit had caught up.

“Let’s hurry,” Yoshihiko said calmly, then he moved aside so Junko could get ahead of him. They were heading upwards now, so their speed was the same as the Ifrit’s, but once they got out to the level path around the caldera they’d be able to get a small lead on it.

Junko ran towards the path, keeping her distance from the monster. Then she made a ninety degree turn and ran more.

But...

“That’s not it! The other way! I said left...” Yoshihiko shouted.

“Huh?” Junko froze. She turned around and saw that he’d fallen a little

behind, and the Ifrit was already between them.

“Oh no...!” She realized she’d forgotten which way “left” was. Junko might have looked smart, but she was actually a ditz.

And the Ifrit was heading towards her now.

“Uwah!” Now her only choice was to run forwards.

“Don’t go that way. The path is too uneven for you to run. He’ll catch up with you,” Yoshihiko said, but now there was nothing else for her to do.

“Wh-What am I supposed to do now?” Junko asked, panicking.

“I can support you from behind... but the Ifrit is programmed to only go after its target. You’ll have to fight it somehow,” Yoshihiko said, still extremely calm despite what was happening.

“S-Somehow... right.”

Junko turned around and leapt at the charging Ifrit, using her momentum to slash across its chest with her katana.

“I hit it!”

She jumped backwards, and then looked up at the Ifrit to see the effect of her attack.

“...What?”

But it didn’t seem to be enough to stop the Ifrit’s advance. Its huge body, covered in lava and flames, was still heading towards her as fast as ever.

“It’s so slow that its terrible at dodging, but it’s got a ton of hit points. And...”

Yoshihiko started to say something — but before he could, the Ifrit spread its hands wide, stuck out its chest, and howled into the sky. Little bubbles began to appear on its chest.

“What?” Junko didn’t know what was happening.

“...It shoots large numbers of bullets at you. They’re very hard to dodge.”

By the time Yoshihiko had finished explaining, large numbers of lava bullets were already falling down onto Junko.

“Uwah!” She jumped left and right to dodge them, but there were too many.

“Come on... Why are there so many?!” she screamed.

One of them hit her head on. She was blown backwards, only to be hit with more rocks and knocked into the ground. Only then did the rain of burning rocks stop.

“Oh no...” Yoshihiko used his healing magic, and Junko stood up instantly, but the situation hadn’t improved.

“Wh-What do I do?” Junko asked. Again, he answered in a calm voice.

“I’ll keep attacking him from behind, but you’re going to have to make it through five more of those attacks before he goes down. And unless you’re at full health, you won’t survive a single hit. But I can only use my healing magic three more times.”

“I understand. So I need to keep dodging, then.”

“Correct. But it’s not just a matter of reflexes. The game also makes difficult too. If your stats aren’t high enough, the lava rocks will hit you anyway.”

“So I’m doomed?” Junko asked, afraid.

The Ifrit was reading its next volley already.

“No... There’s one way!” Yoshihiko said. He sounded relieved, like he’d just come up with a solution.

“What is it?” Junko asked hopefully.

But...

“Take off your clothes! All of them!”

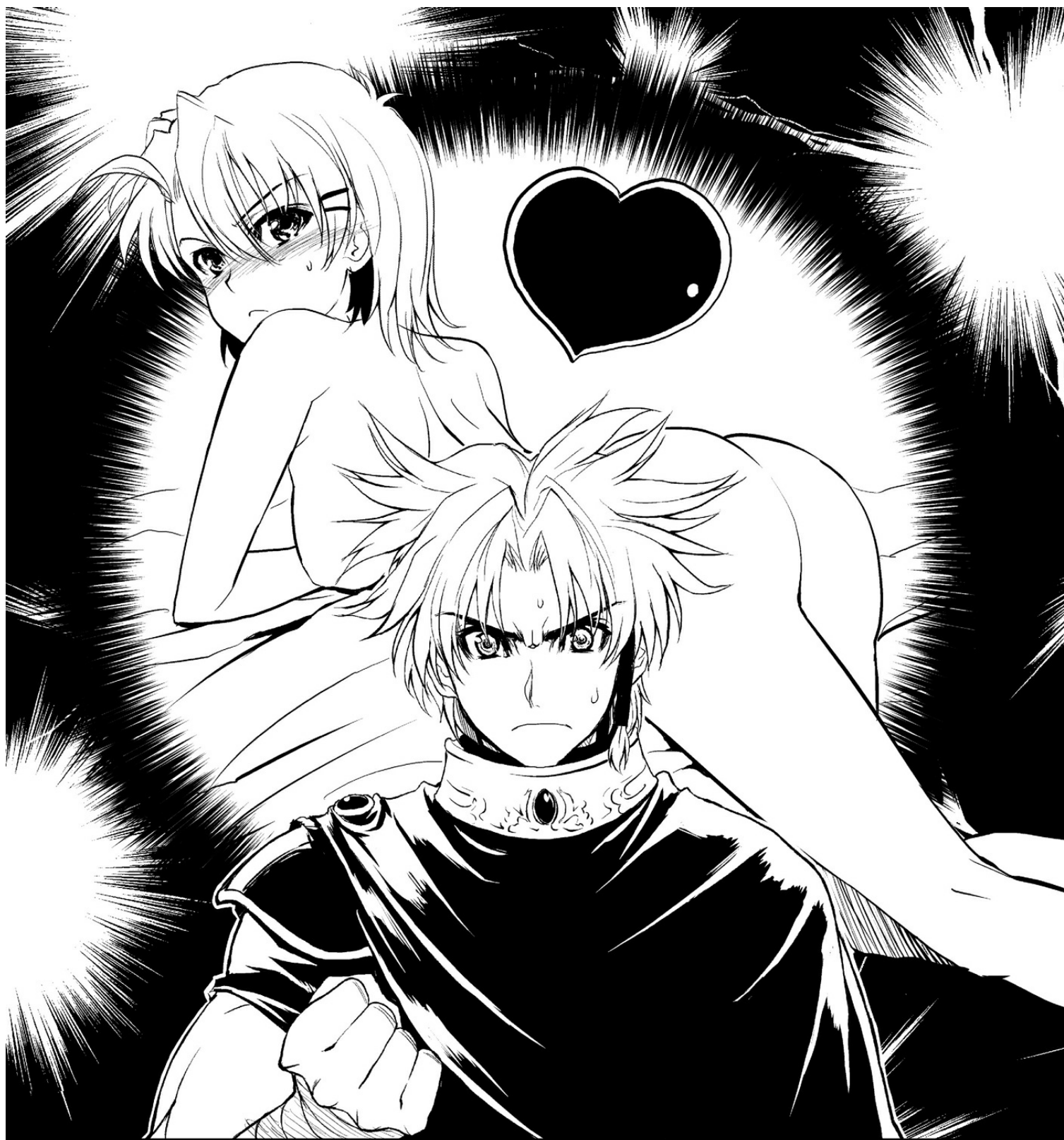
“Huh...?”

“I said take off your clothes! Strip naked!” Yoshihiko repeated.

“Wha— Don’t you understand the situation we’re in?” Junko yelled.

But Yoshihiko nodded, completely serious.

“Take off your clothes. Please, do what I tell you!”



“Do you know what you’re... gyah!”

She couldn’t finish her sentence. Two of the lava rocks from the next volley had struck her, and she’d fallen to the ground.

“Just get your clothes off. You can’t even be wearing underwear,” Yoshihiko said as he used his healing magic.

“Wh-What are you talking about...” she protested as she slowly stood up. But the answer she got was, horribly enough, a sensible one.

“Ninjas get better at dodging the less armor they’re wearing. Their stat goes up three times if they’re naked!”

“You liar!” she yelled, but he didn’t look like he was lying.

Yoshihiko didn’t back down.

“I’m just telling you the most efficient way. If you’re naked, you’ll be able to dodge his attacks, and I can defeat him!”

Yoshihiko (Yoshie) was, of course, the type to put efficiency above feelings. And in this case, she’d totally forgotten that she looked like a man to Junko. She thought Junko was just refusing to strip because she was extremely shy, and she thought it was stupid to choose defeat because you were embarrassed. And that’s why what Yoshihiko was shouting seemed so stupid to Junko.

“Strip! There’s nothing to be embarrassed about! I’m the only one here! No, if you’re that embarrassed, just take off a little and you’ll be able to feel the difference! You’ll feel so much more free.”

“What kind of nudist camp is this?” Junko said, but then another rock hit her in the head. “Ugh!”

“I told you! I’ve only got one heal left!”

“Uugh... Fine! Fine, I’ll take my clothes off! But you need to look the other way!” Junko screamed as she stood up. But her resolve was met with a complete lack of consideration for her feelings.

“I can’t beat the Ifrit if I turn the other way!”

“Okay, just one piece of clothing, then!” she complained, as she ripped off her

shirt. She was wearing chainmail underneath.

“It’s mostly the chainmail you need to be rid of!”

“J-Just shut up!”

But doing it once made it easier to do it the second time, and so Junko took off her chainmail as well. Now there was only a tight cloth wrapped around her breasts.

“Th-This is good enough, right...? W-Wait... Huh?” Junko stammered. She’d complained, but now she really did feel more free.

“This is...!” It wasn’t three times faster, but now she was able to dodge the falling lava rocks by concentrating. They even seemed to be falling slower now.

“That’s good enough. But if you want to be certain, you need to be totally naked...!”

“Shut up! I’m dodging them fine already!” Junko yelled.

Yoshihiko, however, shook his head.

“But when the Ifrit gets low on HP, it’ll fire off more rocks in all directions!”

And soon he was proven right. The Ifrit’s body was getting smaller, but that was because he was shooting even more burning lava rocks off his body. The sky seemed to be filled with falling, flaming rocks.

“You dummy!” Junko sobbed as she put her hand on her skirt.

And then...

The Ifrit was defeated.

But it was only possible because Junko was willing to strip naked and cover herself with her hands.

“Ngh... How embarrassing...”

Yoshihiko walked up and handed her her clothes.

“I’m sorry. I know that must have been embarrassing, but you did great...”

“You dummy! Don’t you have any delicacy at all?” Junko yelled as she snatched the clothes from his hand.

Yoshihiko froze in surprise at her reaction.

“I-I’m sorry. I know I’m not the most sensitive person. Um... will you forgive me? I guess I took the game a little too seriously.” Yoshihiko’s response was so earnest and heartfelt that Junko decided she had to give up.

—There’s no point in being mad. That’s just who he is.

“N-Next time... Think about how the other person feels more.”

Yoshihiko looked the other way as Junko got dressed.

“I’m really sorry. This is the same as when I got the school caught up in this mess,” Yoshihiko said, still turning away.

“I get it. Don’t let it bother you too much,” Junko said when she was finished dressing, but Yoshihiko shook his head.

“I’m just talking to myself, mostly. I started my VPS research because I thought direct communication with other people was important, but I realize that I still don’t know how other people feel about things, and it frustrates me. No, maybe the real reason I started this research is because I don’t understand. Maybe I was looking for somebody who would really understand me, and whom I would really understand.” Yoshihiko turned around and smiled at Junko.

“Some day I’ll be someone you can accept. When that happens, I hope you’ll like me.”

“What...?” Junko froze and turned red.

—Did he just ask me out? Maybe...

“Wh-What are you saying?”

Yoshihiko shook his head sadly, when he saw her confusion.

“No, I guess I’ve still got a long ways to go.”

“Th-That’s not true... No, wait. What am I saying? That’s not what I meant. Just, um... well...” Junko started to stammer and fidget.

But Yoshihiko ignored her and began to walk off. Junko didn’t know what to do.

—It would be weird to ask what he meant now. No, maybe I should just forget it ever happened.

Yoshihiko pointed forward, towards the path leading down into the caldera. The lake of magma at the bottom had receded, revealing black rock beneath.

“The magma disappeared when the Ifrit vanished,” Yoshihiko explained, and then told her to take a look at the center.

“The sword...”

At the very center of the caldera was a sword embedded in the ground.

“Let’s go.” Yoshihiko started to walk down.

Junko followed him, but after a moment she stopped.

“Wait. I sense a presence.”

“A presence?” Yoshihiko turned around. Junko nodded.

“The presence of a person. Maybe a student followed us.”

“Excellent. Once we got the sword, I was planning on heading towards the Demon Ki—”

But he didn’t get to finish his sentence. Someone appeared above them on the path.

The first thing they heard was the sound of crunching gravel, and something being dragged. And then they saw a short girl.

“Who is that? I don’t recognize them. They’re not from our class.” Junko readied herself for battle.

The short girl tensed up in response as well. There was something very strange, very unbalanced, about the girl. She herself looked normal, but even though she was only 120cm at most, she was carrying a 180cm sword on her back. And her hair was woven into a ponytail so long that it almost touched the ground. There seemed to be something unusual about it too.

But her face, and her body, both looked just fine. If anything, they were too perfect. Her face had a doll-like beauty, and it was easy to imagine her graceful limbs moving with incredible ability.

“None may enter the sealed ground,” the girl said. Her voice sounded young. But the tone was loud and haughty, like a much older speaker. This was unbalanced too.

“The sealed ground? Do you protect this place, then?” Junko asked.

“Indeed,” the girl answered, again in a loud voice. “I have protected this land for eons.”

“A guardian... But we defeated the Ifrit. Is she the true guardian?” Junko turned to ask Yoshihiko. But he shook his head.

“This character isn’t in the game.”

“Are you... sure?” Junko’s voice was tense. She’d been told the game might change, but wasn’t it a big deal for a new sentient character to appear?

“Wait. She sounds like she’s from a video game. She’s talking about a sealed ground, which describes this area too.” She was right, but Yoshihiko still shook his head.

“You’re right, but you’re also wrong. This character isn’t in the game. She’s dangerous.”

“Is this the other player you were talking about, then...?”

“I think so...” Yoshihiko whispered tensely.

But the short girl didn’t seem to like that they were talking to each other.

“I dislike secret conversations! You leave me no choice but to...”

The short girl put her hand on her sword. Junko was ready for a fight, but then she realized that there was no way for the short girl to draw her sword. Her arm could only reach so far, and the blade was longer than she was tall.

The short girl reached as far up as she could, but the blade had barely left its sheath.

“Normally you’d be able to figure that out...” Junko sighed, but in the next moment, she realized that the girl did, in fact, know that already.

“I am Keisu. I bear no grudge against you, but my duty requires that you die!”

The short girl named Keisu yanked down hard on the blade, and used the

momentum to draw it from its sheath. No, it was less a draw, and more a throw. As soon as it was clear of the sheath, she let go of the hilt and let it fly through the air.

“Aah!”

Junko watched as the white blade flew up into the sky, and Keisu, the sheath once more on her back, jumped after it. She grabbed the blade in mid-air, rolled herself into a ball, and began to spin, her long hair flapping in the wind behind her. She’d become a dangerous ball with a sword sticking out of it, coming down towards Junko from above.

“Watch out!”

Yoshihiko jumped in front of Junko. He drew his sword to block Keisu’s incoming blade, which struck with incredible force.

There was a loud clanging, like two bulldozers slamming into each other. The horrific impact from Keisu’s strike sent him flying backwards.

“Yoshihiko!” Junko yelled out his name.

But even in mid-air, he still hadn’t lost his balance.

“It’s fine. I can still fight.” He smiled at her.

“...! H-How stupid do you have to be to try and show off at a time like this?” Junko yelled.

“However, this isn’t part of the game. We don’t know what will happen. I have to take responsibility here,” Yoshihiko said calmly.

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about! All of you, stop making fun of me!”

Keisu was still bouncing around like a ball, flailing her sword around her. Either she was very light, or the blade was very heavy, because it seemed like she was having trouble controlling it. But still, every time she wanted to attack, her aim was dead on. And while she could only strike once at a time, she could keep spinning around as long as she wanted.

If they weren’t fighting on the downward slope of a volcano, Yoshihiko would have been easily overwhelmed. It was all he could do to deflect her attacks.

“Yoshihiko!” Junko tried to find an opening to attack, but Keisu’s body was constantly surrounded by her flailing silver blade.

“You said you’re protecting this land. What are you protecting?!” Yoshihiko asked as he blocked her.

Surprisingly, Keisu was willing to answer.

“What I’m protecting is a secret, but the only thing anyone ever protects is a secret!”

It was kind of her to answer, but maybe Keisu wasn’t very bright.

“Are you protecting that sword?”

“No! I’m protecting the Grail so the Demon King can’t get it! ...Huh? I think I just said the secret...” Keisu shook her head.

“Wait! We’re on the same side, then...!” Yoshihiko said, but Keisu didn’t stop attacking.

“Even if you are, a mission’s a mission. I can’t stop attacking until I lose!”

“Do you stop attacking if you lose?”

“A samurai never goes back on her word! Actually, if you lose, you die! Everybody knows that!”

“If that’s what you think, then...” Yoshihiko stuck out his sword and froze.

“Gotcha!” The instant he stopped moving, Keisu was on him.

“Yoshihiko!” Junko screamed. Keisu’s blade was on course to slice off his head.

Her tiny body quickly passed by him — the blade had passed through his neck.

“Aah!” Junko let out a sharp scream. She knew that Yoshihiko didn’t know how to use a sword. Inside the game he was stronger than her, but only because it was a game. He was able to fight because he knew the rules perfectly. But as soon as he had to fight someone from outside the game, there was no way for him to win. Keisu was strong enough that in the real world, even Junko might have trouble with her.

Yoshihiko’s body was frozen, and about to disappear. If you died in the game,

you just turned to dust. But the way he was disappearing was different. It was like a video turning blurry. Yoshihiko was as still as a statue, but the space around him was blurring, like someone had censored it.

“No, he can’t have...” ...really died, she wanted to say. But the words didn’t come out of her mouth. She didn’t want to say them.

Keisu seemed to think the battle was already won.

“For a samurai, dying in battle is a great honor. There’s nothing to be sad about.” Keisu turned to Junko and lifted up her sword.

There was no time to be sentimental. Yoshihiko was frozen, his sword pointing forward, about to disappear. She had to survive herself before she worried about him.

“Come!” Keisu readied her sword to spin around again, lifting the blade high above her head.

But...

Suddenly her body floated into the air. She hadn’t jumped upwards; instead, she was hanging down from her sword.

“Wh-What are you doing? No, who are you?” she said, flailing about as she clung to the sword’s hilt. When she turned around and saw who was there, she screamed. “How?!”

“Aah!” Junko yelled, also in shock.

Yoshihiko was clasping the blade in gauntlet-covered hands, holding it high enough that Keisu was lifted off the ground. The fading image of him was still there, a few feet away.

“I knew I couldn’t beat you, so I used a graphics bug,” Yoshihiko said.

“What do you mean bug? There aren’t any bugs! Gaah! Let me down!” Keisu kept struggling, but Yoshihiko swung the sword and her grip slipped, sending her flying.

“Oooh nooo!” Keisu yelled dramatically as she landed on the ground and rolled.

“A bug?” Junko ran over to Yoshihiko, and pointed to the copy of him that was still frozen.

Yoshihiko nodded.

“If you take a certain series of actions, your character will freeze. You’ll come back a few steps away after a moment or two, but the frozen character remains for a little while.”

“You dummy... Don’t scare me like that.” Junko pouted.

And then they heard a loud voice.

“I lost! I’m about to slit my stomach open, so watch carefully!” Keisu knelt on the ground and opened her kimono.

“H-Hey, wait! You don’t have to do that!” Junko shouted, but Keisu was stubborn.

“Don’t stop me! This is how a samurai dies...” She raised up her right hand as she put her left up against her stomach.

And...

“...I’m sorry, can I borrow a katana?”

“No. You may not.” Junko sighed.

“I’m a daikatana wielder, so I don’t carry any smaller blades. Please, can you help me out?” Keisu bowed.

“Samurai don’t do that sort of thing anymore.”

“Well, I’m old-fashioned.”

“If you’re old-fashioned, then go get your own katana.”

“I’ve never killed myself before, so I don’t know how it’s done.”

“Nobody’s ever killed themselves before! How is that old-fashioned?”

“Fine, then I’m not old-fashioned,” Keisu said.

The conversation was already starting to go off the rails, and it was clearly Keisu’s fault. Maybe he didn’t want to watch her kill herself, or maybe he was just a little weird, because Yoshihiko offered to help.

“Then entrust me with your life. I need your help.”

“My help?” Keisu stood up.

“No, just tell me who you are,” Yoshihiko said. Keisu crossed her arms.

“Is that all you want?”

“That’s right.”

“I gave you my name. It’s Keisu. I’ve sealed the Grail so that the Demon King can’t get it.”

“I’ve got that part. Where did you come from?”

“I was born to be here. That’s all I know,” Keisu said. She didn’t seem to know the answer herself.

“But the Demon King is Akuto Sai. Wait, does something bad happen in the game if the Demon King gets the Grail?” Junko asked Yoshihiko.

He shrugged.

“No, I don’t know. This Grail wasn’t a part of the original game. Which means... maybe something dangerous happens if he gets it,” Yoshihiko said. He and Junko looked at each other.

“What are you talking about? The Grail contains the Demon King’s power,” Keisu said. “You can’t defeat the Demon King. That’s why we sealed him.”

“Did the story change...? No, is she talking about the real world?” Junko whispered to herself. She turned to Yoshihiko with a tense expression.

“You may not know this, but we’ve been involved in a lot of trouble over the Demon King in the past. If she’s talking about the real one, not the one in the game, we may be facing a huge conspiracy...” Yoshihiko went pale. “Then... what do we do?”

“We need to tell Akuto about the Grail... Maybe it’s best if we have her come with us,” Junko said as she looked at Keisu.

Yoshihiko nodded.

“...Will you come with us?” Yoshihiko said as he handed her sword back. She knelt down and took it.

“My life is in your hands.”

“I’m sorry. I really don’t know what’s going on here... But I do know that we have to do something, even if I don’t know what. I’ve never felt this way before, so it’s a little scary, but... Let’s go meet him. And then once we’re back in reality, we have to face the real battle,” Yoshihiko said. His voice wasn’t the affected, gentlemanly tone he’d been using before. Junko felt like she’d caught a glimpse of his real face. He wasn’t someone who was used to battle.

“I’ll help too. You don’t need to worry.” Junko smiled at him.

Yoshihiko smiled back. And then, with Keisu in tow, they started to walk towards the center of the caldera.

It was still there — the sword that was supposed to be able to defeat the Demon King was embedded in a dais. It was a two-handed sword with jewels embedded on the bottom of the hilt, and engraved with the design of a beautiful woman. If this wasn’t a game, you’d never be able to use it in battle.

“This is the ‘Evil Slayer.’ The strongest weapon in the game.” Yoshihiko grabbed the hilt with both hands and pulled hard. The sword slid out of the scabbard.

“Ooh!” Junko gasped in shock. The second the sword was out of the dais, the ground began to shake.

“This wasn’t part of the game...” Yoshihiko said as he clasped the sword. He turned towards Junko.

“Then there’s something else...?”

“The Demon King must have awoken,” Keisu said.

“Huh?” Junko said, surprised. Akuto was already awake, and playing the game.

But Keisu explained.

“The Demon King’s sealing takes place in two stages. The world itself has changed, so I don’t know where he is, but I do know that the Demon King himself was sealed, and his power was sealed in the Grail. I don’t know where the Demon King is, but I do know that he’s just awoken.”

“What does that mean...? Are there two Demon Kings?”

Yoshihiko started to say more, but the ground began to shake even more strongly. The black rock that formed the base of the caldera split, and a crack several hundred meters long began to stretch out towards the horizon.

“Let’s get out of here!” Yoshihiko pointed towards the path they’d come from.

The three of them started to run.

As they ran, the crack raced towards the end of the caldera and the rocks around it began to fall in.

A huge hole was forming in the caldera’s base.

“Is it going to erupt?” Junko asked. When they were all the way up the path, and she turned around — and she was faced with an astonishing sight.

“Oh!” Yoshihiko gasped.

“What could that be? I’ve never seen anything like it!” Keisu yelled.

The crack had formed a giant hole, several hundred meters wide, and inside it there was only blackness. Something big was revealing itself from within.

They could feel a pressure, like the air around them had changed. The huge object had come out of the hole, and was now filling up the sky.

It looked like a giant octopus. Its skin was slimy, and its arms were lifting its bag-shaped torso up into the air. But beyond its arms, it also had the body of a four-legged beast. It was a monster, like a cross between a lion and an octopus, shaking its body as it rose and howling into the sky.

“What is that...?” was all Yoshihiko said, before falling silent.

And then the monster started to move. It crawled up the caldera, pushed its bulk over the edge, and then headed north, half of its colossal body sticking out of the jungle.

The north was where the Demon King’s castle was.

“That’s the Demon King Keisu talked about...? Is it looking for the Grail?” Junko whispered in terror.

Lily ran towards the spot on her mana screen, watching the information as it came in. Hiroshi followed after her, panting and wheezing.

“Is 2V there?”

“If he’s not, we’ll have wasted our time! Well, whoever’s there, they’re getting a beating regardless!” Lily was already excited.

The spot on the map was an old condo in a crowded area of town. The people in that part of town didn’t make much money, so most people didn’t stay there long, and nobody cared about their neighbors. It was the perfect place to hide.

When they arrived, Lily was calm. She circled around the condo to check that there were only two entrances. When she was sure, she told Hiroshi to go in from one of them and wait on the 2nd floor.

“If somebody comes, talk to them to slow them down. If they run, chase them. You don’t need to fight. Just stay close to them,” she said, as she went into the condo from the other side. Her goal was the second floor.

She walked up the stairs, running her hand along the holes in the walls. She’d already pushed the button to send the elevator to the highest floor. If she was quick about getting inside, they wouldn’t be able to use the elevator to escape.

“If I’m quick... that is,” she whispered to herself. When she arrived at the door she was looking at, she immediately punched it as hard as she could.

SMASH!

With a loud noise, a dent formed in the door as it came off its hinges. Lily immediately kicked it down, not even bothering to check for traps. The door slammed into the ground, making an unpleasant noise, and she stepped over the door and went inside.

The room was filled with dolls. There was nothing else there.

The sleeping girl inside sat up. She was thin, and wearing ragged clothes. Her long hair was unwashed and her cheeks were sallow.

The way she looked made Lily hesitate to immediately punch her.

And that instant's hesitation was fatal. Maybe 2V had predicted it would happen.

"I've got hostages, you know," the girl said in a hoarse voice. It had the strange, unnatural tone of someone who hadn't spoken in a long time.

The girl — 2V — called up an image on the mana screen next to her face.

"That game?" Lily readied herself for a punch. And then she understood what 2V meant by hostages.

"That's right. I can delete the people inside," 2V said.

She could tell from the girl's tone that she was definitely 2V. Lily once again regretted not attacking when she saw her.

"I should've known that it would be a girl who liked to play with dolls. Not that saying that now helps... I didn't think you'd be such a sickly little girl, though."

"You shouldn't talk about my appearance. Didn't you learn not to insult others based on their looks? Anyway, if you don't want your students deleted, then don't try anything," 2V said quickly.

Lily knew instantly that 2V wasn't used to being in personal danger.

"I'd like to think you're not the kind of petty woman who'd slaughter students over an insult. Heh. it doesn't matter. You're finished either way. Keep your hostages. I just need to wait long enough and the students will come out on their own. It's just a game, in the end. And the instant you kill one of them, I kill you," Lily said, keeping her anger in check as she spoke. She was only able to do so because she thought she had the advantage.

But looking at 2V, she seemed to think she had the advantage as well, despite the danger she was in.

—Does she still have something up her sleeve?

Lily looked around the room cautiously, and 2V noticed what she was doing.

"Then why don't we both wait here for a while? I'm okay with that if you are," 2V quipped.

“You little... Why were you willing to take the risk of hacking when it meant your location could be tracked down? Is that your trump card?”

“I’m not telling. But you could find out with a little research what I was looking at, so I’ll just tell you that to save you some time. The VPS I used for my plan... I’ll tell you what was originally there.”

Lily was shocked by what 2V said.

“What was originally in that VPS?”

“That’s right.” 2V grinned a sickly grin.

“What is it?! You used Megis’s VPS! Some of the people behind Project Birdcage were Megis clerics. Do they know what it is?” Lily spoke quickly, but 2V held up a hand to stop her.

“The clerics didn’t know. It’s from a long, long time ago. No, it’s better to say that the documents themselves were hidden very deep, so that it could be forgotten. And there they were abandoned.”

“So... what is it that’s down there?” Lily asked.

2V giggled.

“Heheh... I should’ve just come out and told you. It was the first Demon King.”

“What... did you say?” Lily gasped.

“It’s down there? You’re kidding me! That’s so dangerous...”

“That’s why they trapped it in VPS. People were no different then than they are now. And I’ve told it to wake up. Now it’s inside the game, in the form of a monster. That’s what I did when I reprogrammed the game.”

“Is that why you hacked it?”

“There’s a monster inside the game that doesn’t play by the rules. If it kills you, I bet you die in real life too.” 2V laughed.

“Tch! How could you do that?” Lily quickly opened her own mana screen, and opened the game’s message board. Any message she sent here could be seen inside the game.

“I’ve cut off the inside from getting messages. You can’t use the message

board anymore.”

“So they’ll have to deal with it themselves...” Lily bit her lip.

“They’ll solve it in the next few days, from their perception of time. For us, that’s just a few hours. Why don’t we just wait? We can see what’s going on inside the game from here. I can’t wait to see who wins in the end...” 2V grinned.

4 - A Relatively Great War

The view from the castle terrace wasn't bad. It was mostly jungles and mountains, but the sky was so clear that you had a great view of the surrounding nature — or rather, something made to look like nature — and it relaxed the mind to look at it.

Akuto stood on the terrace, a wine glass in his hand.

"You know... being the last boss of a video game is pretty boring."

"You don't think about that when you play the game, though," Keena said. She was standing next to him eating rice. It was very strange to see someone holding chopsticks and a rice bowl in a European-style castle.

Since they couldn't access the outside, the only things they had to look at were the game's manual and in-game information. Once he'd read all that, since Akuto couldn't program, there was nothing for him to do.

"We know the Grail is deep inside the castle now too," Akuto sighed. He'd confirmed that the game's last goal, the Grail, was safely at the bottom of his castle. When he'd picked it up, nothing had happened. It was probably a goal for the players. Which meant that if he was defeated, and somebody grabbed it, the game was over. Not, of course, that Akuto would have minded.

"But somebody's changing the story, right?" Keena asked.

"It's clear that there's a multitude of factors at work. But until we know what they are, it's better not to do anything. ...By the way, where'd you get that rice?"

"It was right over there. Castles are great, huh? There's rice whenever you want it. There's probably a lot of invisible maids or something."

"How come we don't run into them when we're walking in the hallways, then?"

"They're fast, and they get out of our way, maybe."

“Fast, invisible maids. I don’t think I like that idea...” Akuto chuckled. Then he heard a voice from behind.

“Demon King, Demon General Korone is here to report.”

He turned around and saw Korone kneeling.

“Can you cut it with the act?”

“No. Ending this game is the key to escaping this world.”

“But still... Anyway, what’s up?”

“Two things. One, it seems the program has been altered from the outside, slightly.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?”

“Yes. But only the wills and actions of the people inside a VPS are capable of altering it. The only changes that can be made from the outside are extremely minor... adding additional enemies, for instance. We don’t know what will happen, however. Be careful around any enemies that aren’t in the manual.”

It seemed like there were a lot of things to worry about.

“It might be dangerous if one of them kills us, right?” Akuto confirmed with a nod.

“Correct, so be careful. And one more thing. While I was wiping out the survivors, I received word that the enemy is gathering.”

“Gathering?”

“Yes. They’d split up to raise their levels and wait for a chance to attack. Their plan was to raise armies when the time came and bring them to our castle to defeat you.”

“That’s good news. It means the game’s almost over.” Akuto looked relieved.

“No, we need to end the game by murdering them all.”

“...If you want to do that, go for it. I’m sure they all hate me now, anyway.”

“I will head for a fortress between us and them, then. ...Look. They’ve started to move.” Korone pointed out over the terrace.

Akuto turned and saw a single smoke signal rising out of the jungle.

“Oh, smoke!” Keena shouted innocently.

Identical signals began to rise up all over the jungle.

“There’s more of them left than I thought.”

“Don’t worry. There’s only around 30 of them left. And each of them only has 10,000 soldiers. I will take our forces, and with my army of 200,000, I shall wait at Fort Korone to crush them!”

“When did you make that...?” Akuto sighed, but at least Korone was working to get them out of this mess. He nodded. It was safe to trust her.

“Off I go to battle, then. Enjoy your dancing and music, my liege. The invisible maids will see to your needs,” Korone said.

“Dancing and music, huh?” Akuto sighed, but Keena interrupted.

“Dancing and music! That’s right! Those are important things to do at a castle! There’s so few people here that I’d forgotten!” Keena’s eyes were shining.

“Farewell, then.” Korone left.

And then music began to play from the floor.

“Huh?”

“Wow! Come on, Ackie! Let’s dance!” Keena grabbed Akuto by the hand.

○

Yoshihiko nodded when he saw the smoke signals rise.

“Oh dear. Looks like everybody’s leveled up and started their attack on the Demon King’s castle,” he said.

Junko nodded with a bitter expression. The octopus beast creature was still in front of them, stomping northwards.

“They haven’t seen that monster, huh?”

The monster was several dozen meters tall. It was easily visible from a distance, but not from elsewhere in the world.

“Even if they did see it, most of them aren’t going to realize it wasn’t

originally in the game... I guess we'll have to defeat it," Yoshihiko said as he looked at Junko and Keisu.

Junko was hesitant, but Keisu nodded strongly.

"I think we should defeat it. That's the Demon King... or it might be. If it gets the Grail, something bad will happen."

"The Grail is in the Demon King's castle... in the game, at least. And that's where that monster is heading. To make things worse, we lost contact with the outside when it appeared." Yoshihiko checked the message board again by calling a screen up in the air.

And then he nodded.

"If we can stop this thing somehow, we have to try. Let's hurry. We're very far from the Demon King's castle." Yoshihiko started to walk after the octopus monster.

"By the way, what happens if the Demon King gets the Grail?" Junko asked Keisu.

Her response was terrifying.

"The Demon King will become complete," Keisu said casually.

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"The time has come for us to show them our power!" Fujiko shouted to the crowd. The female students, as well as the NPC armies they commanded, let out a cheer. The armies were all composed entirely of women as well.

"That's..."

"Fujiko Eto's Amazon Army!"

Leading the charge towards the Demon King's Castle was Fujiko on her Cerberus, holding a giant banner with her last name emblazoned on it. Fujiko and several of the female students had formed an alliance, which had managed to become the most powerful of the student groups, primarily by preying on the male students.

The whole thing had started when one of the boys had tried to sneak into the

girls' tent. The boy had figured that since it was a game, it wouldn't be a problem if he went peeping. The girls disagreed, violently.

In order to keep the fight from getting out of hand, Fujiko had suggested they split into groups. Fujiko was well-respected, and everywhere she went, more girls joined her. But as more girls became a part of the group, their ideology became more strident. Since it was a game, they decided, it was okay to kill any boys that got in their way.

Of course, Fujiko had worked behind the scenes to ensure this outcome. She was the one who'd first realized that you could get loads of XP by killing a fellow player. She'd subtly hinted that the way to make the rest of the group stronger was to go boy-hunting.

"Fujiko's so nice..."

"If it weren't for those girls around her..."

Even the surviving boys felt that way, a testament to Fujiko's skill at being evil.

Now the surviving players were starting to gather around Fujiko's 70,000 strong army. Every mile they traveled, more students came out of hiding to join them, all with their own NPC armies in tow. By the time there was no one else to meet up with, an army of 320,000 was charging down the path.

Their destination was Fort Korone: a fortress built at a chokepoint where the road narrowed. There were high cliffs on either side of the path, making it resemble a huge, dried-up riverbed. The cliffs were at least a few dozen meters high, so the only thing you could do if you climbed up them was rain boulders down on an enemy. If they wanted to take down the fortress, they'd have to do it from the front.

"It's time."

The students' excited murmurs rose to the sky. As they approached the cliffs, their horses and riders and the sound of their hooves turned into a black flood that seemed to sweep down the dried riverbed. The flood was heading towards a huge wall which stood at the end like a dam. And at the top of the wall was the flag of the Demon King.

“It’s the Demon King’s army!”

“They’re not leaving their fort!”

“Bring the battering rams! If we can break down their gate we’ve as good as won!”

The army kept charging forward without slowing down. The only one who slowed down was Fujiko.

—Heheh. When the time is right, I’ll offer up all these XP-fattened students to Akuto. It’s the perfect plan! And when it’s all over, I’ll offer up my own body to him... Oh! How happy I’ll be to let Akuto kill me! Just thinking about it makes me feel all naughty!

When she was done fantasizing, she fell back further in the army’s ranks to conceal herself. Then she surrounded herself with other female students to feel safer. It was a cowardly thing to do, but amazingly enough, she was so natural about it that no one suspected a thing.

The student who’d taken the lead from Fujiko had reached the fort. He and his army had a battering ram at the ready, but suddenly a rain of arrows fell down on them. Korone’s orcs, who had been hiding on top of the fortress, had waited for just the right moment to begin their attack.

“Uwaah!”

The battering ram’s bearers fell to the ground. The rain of arrows was the signal that a fierce attack was about to begin. The soldiers at the vanguard held their shields above their heads as they clung to the wall, desperately setting up ladders against it. And then the soldiers behind them started to climb.

More arrows rained down. The soldiers on the ladders became arrow pincushions as they fell down on the ones beneath them.

But the soldiers kept holding their shields and climbing upwards. More ladders were placed up against the fortress wall, dividing the spots where the archers stood. The soldiers began to get further and further up the ladder.

“Now! The battering rams!” one of the students screamed. A huge battering ram made from a giant log with wheels was drawn up to the fortress gate and

slammed against it. The whole gate shook.

Some of the archers on the walls started to fire at the ram, which meant fewer arrows going to the men on the ladders. The first soldier reached the top of the wall just when the battering ram busted through the gate.

“Now! Charge!” someone yelled, sure that the tide had turned. The other soldiers screamed as they swarmed the gate. The soldiers on top of the wall drew their swords to attack the orc archers, even further decreasing the number of falling arrows.

The soldiers who made it through the gate charged into a horde of goblin spearmen that was waiting for them on the other side. The Demon King’s army made a new wall with spears and shields, but this time there were only a few hundred of them. They could stab the soldiers at the front, but they couldn’t stop the onrushing wave of soldiers.

The center of their line was broken and the goblin spearmen began to shatter. When the rain of arrows stopped, the cavalry swept in, killing the goblin spearmen one after another with their bows and arrows.

“We can win this!”

Cries came up from all over as the students began to become sure of their victory.

But there was one of them who wasn’t sure. It was Fujiko, who was still standing in the back and watching the whole thing.

—This doesn’t make sense. Korone should be leading the troops. But I don’t see her. And there’s only 20,000 soldiers here... There’s not a lot of room for an army in this fort, but it’s safe to assume she’s hiding her forces in reserve somewhere...

Fujiko’s goal was to give Akuto her experience points, so she wanted to avoid letting Korone wipe them out. And honestly, if she got the chance, she wanted to kill Korone herself.

—But the only place to hide any forces is above the cliffs.

Fujiko looked upwards. The tallest of the cliffs was a hundred meters high,

and most were a few dozen meters. You could drop rocks down below, if you wanted, but there was no sign that Korone had gathered that many rocks. And you couldn't drop a rock big enough to close the pass entirely, so an army could just ignore you and keep going. Anyway, if dropping rocks was Korone's goal, she would've done it when they were trying to batter down the gate.

—If she wants to attack our army, she'd want to do it when our forces are stretched out in a line as we pass through the gate. But there's no sign of her hiding anywhere...

Just as Fujiko had that thought, it happened.

"Gwahahaha! We meet again! Demon General Korone has arrived!" Korone's voice echoed through the canyon from above the cliffs. She must have been waiting for the army to stretch out as it passed through the broken gate.

"Don't worry! She can't hit us with arrows from that distance!"

"Just run! She can't have that many rocks!"

The male students yelled things like that. which was the same thing Fujiko had thought.

—But she's got to have more up her sleeve...

Fujiko ordered the female students to stay back. And then Korone took action.

"Everyone's gonna die!" she screamed as she ordered her army to charge. Goblins and orcs began to leap off the cliffs.

"What?!"

The students below gasped. There was no flying in this world, which meant that the orcs were going to fall.

"Advance! Advance!" But Korone expressionlessly ordered them to advance. More and more of them began to leap.

"Wh...What's going on?"

No one could say anything. But Fujiko alone knew what they were planning.

"We've lost this war. No... if we don't want to lose, we need to close the

gate!”

Fujiko ordered the female students to stay back. The female students were still on the other side of the wall, but they began to close the gate they'd worked so hard to open. They began to take the ladders down too.

“Wh-What are you doing?” the male students panicked. But they didn't have time to pay attention to the gate. “Wh-What's happening?”

Their eyes went wide in shock. There were corpses piling up in front of the cliffs. Of course, the corpses belonged to the enemy army's orcs. And now, Korone's best troops were racing down the slopes formed by their bodies.

“This can't be happening!” the male students screamed as they began to run.

It was the sort of plan that a human being might have thought twice about. No, maybe you could do it in a video game. But in a game this real, only someone like Korone could form a plan like this.

“Take their heads! No prisoners!”

Korone's ace troops tore a swath through the students' armies. Their overstretched line was cut into tiny pieces, and the isolated troops were easily surrounded and defeated. Korone's strategy was to aim directly for the commanders. The game rules said that when a commander died, his troops would instantly disappear.

A single ray blast from Korone wiped out several thousand soldiers. The male students beyond the gate had no choice but to run. Korone kept attacking, mowing them down with her rays.

“Damn you, Akuto Sai... How could you make cute little Korone do something like this?”

“I guess that's why he's the Demon King...”

As they died, the boys never doubted for a second that Akuto had given Korone those orders.

Korone went on to wipe out everyone there. In the end, the sacrifice of a few thousand soldiers needed to build the slope had cost the enemy the lives of several tens of thousands.

“Damn you! You monster!” Fujiko shouted at the fort. Only the Amazon Army, 70,000 strong, was left.

○

“Ackie, they’re having a war. Scary, huh?” Keena said. She was clinging to Akuto’s arms, wearing a dress, while elegant music played. From the terrace, they could see the battle at “Fort Korone” in the distance.

“Don’t worry. It’s just a game. But even if it is just a game, it still makes you think, doesn’t it? War is a sad, empty thing. All it does is cost money,” Akuto said. He was wearing a white suit as well.

“You’re right. War’s bad, isn’t it? But...” Keena turned towards a table that was loaded with fancy food. There were salted rice balls, white rice, fried rice, rice pilaf, paella, dry curry, rice cakes, and rice pudding. She was holding a glass of sweet white rice wine.

“...We sound like hypocrites, wearing these fancy clothes and eating fancy food while we say stuff like this.”

“...Yeah, but... We’re the villains here. Well, I don’t agree that the food’s good, though. How did we end up like this?” Akuto sighed. Just then, he saw that something strange had happened at the battle in the distance.

“Oh...!”

“What happened?”

“Look...” Akuto pointed to a spot beyond the battlefield. Something huge was stomping towards them from beyond the jungle. Keena screamed when she saw it.

“Kyah! A-Ackie... you need to stay away from that...” Keena was scared.

“Is that the thing Korone was talking about, that wasn’t part of the game...?”

Akuto held Keena close as he watched it. It was like a four-legged beast whose head had turned into an octopus. A horrible sight, to be sure.

“I feel a nasty aura coming from that direction. It’s kind of worrying.”

He could feel Keena’s body shake. That worried him more than anything.

Keena was always relaxed and easygoing, but now she was scared.

“A nasty aura?”

“It’s like you, Ackie, but it’s different. I don’t like it...”

“Don’t worry. And don’t move from this spot,” Akuto said, and then pushed Keena away.

“No, don’t go.”

“I don’t think I have a choice. It looks like it’s heading straight for us.”

Just like he said, the monster was slowly, at a pace befitting its massive bulk, moving towards them.

“And if its aura does feel like mine, then that means I definitely have to go, right?” Akuto said. Only then did Keena seem satisfied.

“But... be careful, okay?”

“I know.” Akuto nodded and started to run.

○

“Gwahahaha! Kneel before me, Amazon Army!” Korone yelled loudly.

The gate was sealed from both sides. In the end, students had failed to break through it, and lost a significant portion of their numbers. All they had left were the 70,000 strong Amazon Army.

Fujiko didn’t have any grand ideas about bringing down Korone from the fortress walls. But if she tried to retreat, they’d be pursued and wiped out.

“What do we do?!” one of the students asked.

“I’m not sure... We could just say it’s a game and admit we lost... But that would be frustrating, wouldn’t it?” Fujiko looked upwards, as if she’d made up her mind about something. She moved forward and said, “Demon General Korone! I challenge you to a duel!”

There was no reason whatsoever for Korone to agree, but she did.

“Do you think that you, a mere human, can defeat me?” Korone opened the gate and came out alone.

“When you say that, it’s really hard to tell if you’re joking...” Fujiko whispered.

—Either way, if I want Akuto to grow, eventually I’m going to have to fight Korone for real. It’s not a bad idea to learn how she fights while I still have the chance...

Fujiko spurred her Cerberus onwards quickly. Korone was a spellcaster, so if she could get in close, she’d have the advantage from her mounted position. If she charged, she would only have to take two attacks before she reached Korone.

“Beam! Beam!” Korone fired twice, just like she thought she would. Of course, both hits landed on Fujiko.

“Gah!”

But Fujiko survived them with only a few hit points left. She swallowed enough of the healing potions she’d made to survive a melee battle, then swung out her whip at Korone.

“Did you think that the game’s rules said that melee battles were decided only by stats?” Korone raised her staff to block the whip. The whip’s end wrapped around it.



“I’m not interested in comparing stats. I want to see how you fight. In person, not with your tactics.” Fujiko pulled on the whip, freezing Korone in place. If she let go of her staff, she’d lose her weapon. Normally, the two of them would struggle to see who got the weapon.

But...

“Sorry.” Korone swung the staff and charged forward. A normal human would instinctively resist when someone tried to restrict their actions, but Korone seemed to lack those reflexes.

“Oops—” Fujiko took a hit from the staff. It was a hit from a mage, and so did little damage, but the psychological shock was immense. “As I thought, you’re incredibly decisive in combat.”

“I’ve been told that all the best human warriors have that trait. And Liradan combat programs were made to imitate all those masters, with the exception of the most bizarre ones,” Korone said calmly as she rained down a flurry of staff blows.

—Ouch... If I ever have to fight Korone in the real world, I’ll make sure to start by pinning her...

Fujiko regretted her course of action. But her pride wouldn’t let her admit defeat.

—If I can just throw down a smoke bomb and wait for another chance...

Just when Fujiko was thinking that, she heard an awful scream come from behind.

Fujiko was so focused on Korone that she was reluctant to turn around. But when Korone backed off and pointed behind her, and then she felt a shadow fall on her, she slowly turned around.

“Aah!”

There was a monster there. It had slick, moist skin, and walked on four legs, and it had the head of an octopus. And it was several dozen meters tall.

“Wh-What the heck is that?” Fujiko said in a voice like a scream, but Korone’s voice was calm.

“That monster isn’t in the game. It seems to be attacking people. For now, let’s retreat and see what happens.” Korone began to move back beyond the gate.

“Y-You’re right. It’s unfortunate that we won’t be able to finish our battle, but I suppose we don’t have a choice. Everyone, get inside the fortress!” Fujiko yelled as she began to run without waiting for any of them.

But the beast moved faster than they thought, and it caught up to the female students before they could reach the gate. It didn’t attack them, though. As it advanced, its tentacles flung out to clear away anything in its path. The female students were simply removed.

“Kyah!” They screamed as they were flung up into the air, then turned into dust and vanished.

“It seems the creature follows the rules of the game,” Korone said.

“That’s one good thing, I guess.”

Fujiko looked up at the monster beyond the gate in terror. It kept charging forward, never stopping for an instant. The female students were all flung aside or trampled, and soon it began to slam into fortress wall.

There was a low earth-shaking rumble. The fortress shook, and rocks fell down from above.

“What is that thing?!”

“It seems to have been created by external hacking... It was probably given some kind of goal. All of its actions are probably performed to further that goal.”

“Then if we run, it won’t bother us?”

“Most likely, that is correct.”

“Then I think we should...”

Fujiko started to run, but then she saw a change take place in the monster. It stopped its advance and rose up on its back legs. It was like a building being lifted up by a crane, or the ground suddenly bursting upwards.

“Aah!” Fujiko knew it was a game, but she still couldn’t shake the feeling of terror. She turned to run, but then she realized why the monster had done what it did.

“A-Akuto!”

The monster had obviously reacted to Akuto’s arrival. Its emotionless eyes were fixed on Akuto as he walked towards the fort.

“It’s strange that it would be after the Demon King,” Korone whispered.

Then a loud voice came from behind the monster.

“That’s the sealed Demon King!”

It was Junko’s voice.

○

The monster was faster than they were, so they were only able to catch up to it when it reached the fort. They could look through its legs to see Korone and Fujiko standing at the fortress gate.

“That’s the sealed Demon King!” Junko yelled.

“The Demon King? What are you talking about?” Fujiko’s voice called out to them.

“There was something sealed inside this space before we came here. And someone from the outside let it out!” Junko explained.

“Sealed?”

“And someone who was here before we got here told us it’s the Demon King. It might be the Demon King from several generations ago.”

“Really?” Fujiko looked down for a moment in thought, but then she looked at the monster again and shouted. “No, from the way it acted when it saw Akuto, you might be right.”

“Akuto is here?” Junko asked. Fujiko nodded.

“He just arrived!”

“And that’s what made it react?” Junko looked at Yoshihiko, a little confused.

But Yoshihiko didn't seem concerned.

"Does that matter? No... for now, we just need to talk to him. If we can defeat that thing and get through..."

"I don't think we can defeat the Demon King," Keisu said. "That's why it was sealed."

But Junko shook her head.

"But you saw the students disappear, right? Fortunately, it looks like the monster is obeying the rules of the game. Which means we can defeat it."

Junko flung her shurikens at the monster. The monster didn't seem to notice, but wounds did appear on its back.

"We can do this. Am I wrong?" She grinned. Yoshihiko nodded.

"Let's try it."

The two of them struck at the monster's back legs. Their attack was enough to make it stagger. Until they struck, it hadn't even noticed them. But when its legs were injured, it stomped its feet like it was trying to get rid of a stinging insect.

"I shall join in as well..."

Keisu went to draw her sword. But her arm suddenly stopped. There was a snake wrapped around the sheathe, waiting for her to put her hand in striking range.

"What?!"

By the time Keisu realized, it was too late. The snake bit her hand. The color in her eyes disappeared and she froze. Neither Yoshihiko nor Junko noticed.

—*Yes! It worked!*

The snake smiled to itself. It was, of course, the one that 2V had transformed into. It had clung to the monster as it moved, then dropped off just as it arrived at the fortress and concealed itself in the nearby bushes. And then it had waited for this chance.

—*I'm lucky I took the form of a snake. The poison makes what I'm about to do possible...!*

2V moved away from Keisu's hand, slipping inside her sleeve. And then 2V used her favorite skill. With a bit of concentration, her puppetmaster skill could affect Liradans as well. By rewriting the game's control routine, she was able to give herself the same power within the game as well.

The snake completely disappeared within Keisu's clothes, and then finally Keisu began to move again.

But the color didn't come back to her eyes. Keisu threw the sheath up in the air and drew her sword, then grabbed it in mid-air and landed. But it was done under 2V's control.

o

Korone explained most of what had happened to Akuto. He nodded.

"So that's a character that's not in the game, huh?"

"So it seems."

"But it's following the game's rules. What does that mean?"

"Either something from the outside changed it, or it was present in this space before the game began, and was affected by it. With no evidence on either side, it's tough to say."

"I see... But we're going to have a mess on our hands until we defeat that thing. If it's following the game's rules, then we can beat it using the game."

Realizing that, Akuto gave Korone an order:

"Reform the NPC armies. And the instant the fortress falls, order the attack. We need to throw that monster off balance."

Korone nodded, and said, "As you wish, my liege."

She gave her orders to the orcs and goblins, but Fujiko interrupted her.

"Gaah! I wanted to do that!"

"I see... That's a shame," Korone said coldly. Fujiko pouted.

"...You're not going to volunteer to let me take over?"

"You need a ticket to change classes. Tickets are available for purchase in the

online store,” Korone answered mechanically.

“...That’s the trouble with these free to play things,” Fujiko sighed.

The monster began to flail about violently. It began to slam itself against the wall even harder, seemingly at random. Junko and Yoshihiko’s attacks were having an effect.

“It looks like it’s working. That weapon in particular seems to be incredibly powerful.” Korone pointed to the monster’s feet as she reorganized the armies.

Yoshihiko’s two-handed sword, “Evil Slayer,” seemed to be a very powerful magic sword. The huge monster was flailing around to stop the attacks on its back legs, and it was using all its tentacles just to keep Yoshihiko away.

The monster’s attempts to tear down the fortress and escape only succeeded after Korone had finished getting her army in formation. There was a cracking sound as the fortress wall began to shatter, and then fall down on top of them.

“It’s collapsing!” Fujiko shouted a warning.

Akuto gave the order.

“Have the troops charge. He’ll climb on top on the rubble. Have the troops cling to his back when he does. That way, when it tries to get up, you can keep attacking.”

The Demon King’s soldiers and demon beasts charged in a straight line through the pouring-down rocks and collapsing wall. Of course, many of them were crushed by it, dying horrible deaths beneath the rubble.

“Ooh! Such a cold command! I’m in love!” Fujiko squirmed.

Even if they weren’t human, they still looked incredibly realistic. Akuto’s willingness to sacrifice them indicated that he wasn’t quite normal.

The plan worked. The beast tried to rise up, but the orcs clung to it like blood-sucking fleas. It roared and flung its tentacles around, and slammed them into its own body to try and get rid of the orcs. Many of them were shaken off, but the others kept plunging their swords into it, dealing constant damage.

Junko and Yoshihiko had backed off as the fortress collapsed, but when it was done, they resumed their assault. Yoshihiko’s Evil Slayer began to deal even

more damage to it.

“This is going to work.” Fujiko smiled.

“You seem quite happy for someone who’s doing nothing,” Korone said, but Fujiko ignored her.

“I am providing psychological support for Akuto,” she said, but her smile had frozen.

Whether it just wanted to avoid the Evil Slayer, or whether it knew it was dying and wanted to launch one last, desperate attack, the monster let loose a howl and charged toward Akuto.

“Akuto!” Fujiko screamed.

Akuto tensed up for battle.

“Don’t worry. I’ve been hit by a carrie—”

But he couldn’t finish his sentence. The tentacles slammed Akuto to the side. He tried to block it, but he was helpless. The tentacles wrapped around his body and flung him aside like a doll, and he flew more than a dozen meters before slamming into a rock wall.

“Gah...!” His body was almost completely buried in rubble.

“Akuto!” Fujiko shouted, worried, but Akuto brushed her off.

“I’m fine. It looks like the damage is still being treated as part of the game. If I don’t take a second hit, I won’t die,” Akuto said, but then a worried voice overlapped his. It was Junko, who was still attacking the monster from behind.

“That thing’s not after you, it’s after the Grail in the castle! We don’t know what will happen if it gets it! It may have an effect on the real world! Even if this is a game, if you lose, we may have no way to stop it!” Akuto was mildly surprised. But he thought for a moment and decided that what she was saying made sense.

—Come to think of it, the change to the game’s rules involved the Grail. And the Demon King was supposed to get the Grail, but when I picked it up, nothing happened... If this is the Demon King, not me...!

“Tch...” Akuto stood up and tried to retreat to his castle. But the monster had readied itself for another charge.

“I need to use healing magic...” Akuto tried to use healing magic, only to realize he couldn’t.

“The Demon King has self-regeneration, but can’t heal! It’s because he doesn’t lose MP even if he uses magic!” Yoshihiko explained.

“That’s... not good.” Akuto prepared for death.

Despite Junko and Yoshihiko’s best efforts, the monster didn’t stop. Its tentacles attacked Akuto again. He tried to use defensive magic, but compared to the amount of damage he’d just taken, it was obvious it wasn’t going to help at all.

“Damn...” Akuto cursed his own arrogance. He’d jumped in, ignoring the game’s rules, confident that things would work out somehow.

The tentacles got closer.

He closed his eyes, then heard the sound of something huge slamming into the rock.

“I’m glad it was a game. Next time I’ll make sure to...” he whispered, but there was no pain, just the sensation of something wrapping around his body.

—Huh? I thought you felt pain in the game...

He opened his eyes and realized he was still in the game.

“...? Huh?”

And he was floating, too. This was a war game. Flying wasn’t allowed. There was no way to do it in-game.

—Which means...

“Aww, silly Ackie. You can’t do anything without me,” Keena said teasingly.

“I told you to stay back at the castle. ...But you saved me,” he said, relieved. Keena had flown in and grabbed him. He remembered that Keena was the one person who could ignore the game’s rules.

“But it’s dangerous. You need to head back,” Akuto said as he looked below.

The monster had slammed its head into the rock wall.

“Now put me down. I need to defeat him.”

But Keena shook her head.

“I’m not going to do that. Ackie, you’ve got a bad habit of trying to do everything yourself. He’s only after you, right? So just give orders and have them do it.” Keena’s words struck him deeply, since he’d just tried to solve things on his own and failed.

“You’re right... I tried to do this myself, and it didn’t work...” He sighed, shook his head, and called out to the people below.

“Fujiko! Once I give the order, blind him!”

“Okay, Akuto!” She nodded happily.

“The two of you in the back, when it’s blinded, attack its legs to take away its sense of direction!”

“Got it!” Junko and Yoshihiko looked at each other and nodded.

“Korone, use the surviving soldiers to open its mouth!”

“Roger.”

And then, in the next instant, Akuto gave the signal to Fujiko.

“Fujiko!”

“I’m on it!” she answered. And then she stood up and flung a vial of a blinding smoke chemical into the monster’s eyes before it could ready another attack.

Since it hadn’t stood all the way up yet, the vial struck it right on the face. The monster was surrounded by white smoke, but still it rose up to try and attack Akuto. It was probably going to jump at where it remembered Akuto being before it had been blinded.

But then Junko and Yoshihiko struck from behind. The beast’s legs were torn open and it lost its balance.

“Korone!” Akuto yelled, and Korone moved. She had the soldiers still clinging to its body move towards its head, and then blasted them with lightning magic. The soldiers were hit head-on by the lightning and fell backwards. But the

lightning traveled through their swords and into the monster's body as well.

It roared in pain, and opened its jaw — and its tentacle covered mouth — upwards.

“Keena!” Akuto had Keena drop him directly over the monster's mouth.



As he fell, he fired the game's strongest spell.

"Fallout!"

A nuclear explosion went off in the beast's mouth, and it collapsed as its octopus head exploded in an incredible burst of flame and light.

○

Lily watched on the mana screen, letting out a cheer as the beast collapsed.

"Haha! Looks like you lose. Your 'first Demon King' just blew up!"

But 2V's expression didn't change. The smile on Lily's face gradually vanished; 2V's face told her that she clearly had a plan.

"...What are you plotting?"

"No, you see. It's not over. It's not over at all."

"What's not over?"

"If you think that monster is the Demon King... that is, the first Demon King, the one that was sealed within VPS, then you're really stupid." 2V chuckled.

Lily gasped.

"Then the first Demon King is still in there? And to awaken it, you need the Grail?"

"That's right. The Grail is a program chip saved within VPS. The chip was caught up in the game's rules and became the Grail. But what it actually is, is a fragment of the first Demon King."

"Then that monster..."

"Was a bluff. A way to keep your eyes off the real Demon King. And reviving the first Demon King is what I'm trying to do. My original plan was to seal away the current Demon King, but when I saw the first one was trapped within, I changed my mind. I changed the plan so that they would bring the first Demon King to me. Of course, if someone died during the process, that was their problem, not mine."

"Wh-What...?! Then the first Demon King is..." Lily fell silent before she could

finish.

The scene on the mana screen was still unfolding.

○

“So the game’s over now, huh?” Akuto confirmed that the beast was dead, and waited for its corpse to disappear.

Yoshihiko walked up to him to apologize.

“Sorry to get you caught up in this mess.”

“So you’re the person who’s behind all this, huh?” Akuto looked at him suspiciously, and Yoshihiko shook his head apologetically.

“In a way, I guess. I was the one who got you trapped in VPS. But now the only threat that’s left is 2V.”

“2V? The guy who works for CMID-8?” Akuto asked.

Yoshihiko nodded.

“That’s right. This plan was 2V’s idea. The government’s, as well. However... I don’t want to make excuses, but I didn’t know that this plan had anything to do with the Demon King. I found out just before it went into effect, and decided I didn’t want to help. I turned this world into a video game so that nobody inside would die, and I would be able to talk with you.”

“...I guess you saved me then. You’ve got nothing to apologize for. Thank you. By the way, what’s this about another Demon King trapped in here?” Akuto tilted his head in the direction of the beast, whose corpse was still lying on the ground.

“This VPS was originally intended as a way to protect the god Megis. But an ancient Demon King was sealed here as well. No, maybe what actually happened was that the VPS was created to seal it, but everyone forgot,” Yoshihiko explained.

“I see. The first Demon King... It’s hard for me to believe, but if we can get out of here safely, I’ll have ways of finding out if it’s true or not, I’m sure. Now that I know that 2V is my enemy, I can deal with him once I’m outside. By the way, there’s someone else with you I don’t recognize...” Akuto pointed to Keisu, who

was standing behind Yoshihiko.

“She’s been here since the VPS first existed, she said. Apparently she was watching over the Demon King to keep it from reviving,” Yoshihiko explained as he called Keisu over.

Just then, the monster disappeared. Enough time had passed since its death that the game no longer rendered it. At the same moment, Keena seemed to feel something. She shouted suddenly.

“Wait!”

Akuto was about to walk towards Keisu, but he stopped and turned around.

“What’s wrong?”

“The bad feeling... it isn’t gone yet. It’s like you, but it’s different, and it feels awful,” Keena said, shaking.

“Then this wasn’t the Demon King... Is that what you’re saying?” Akuto pointed towards the spot where the beast had been.

“I think so... But I know it’s close...” Keena nodded.

“So that explains why we were able to beat it using the game’s rules. But what do we do now?” Akuto looked around.

“Even if the Demon King is here, the Grail’s in the castle, right?” Fujiko said. “If we end the game here, we win. All we have to do is keep him from getting it.”

“No... As long as there’s one player who’s alive, the game won’t end until they get the Grail. And to make matters worse, the reason we’ve been so focused on clearing the game’s rules is that if somebody’s here who isn’t a part of the game, any damage they do will be fed back to a player’s real body,” Yoshihiko said. He looked at Akuto. “2V seemed to know there was something hidden here. He probably planned to use it to kill you here, where you’re weaker than you are in reality.”

“I understand. Either way, if I win the game, it ends. But 2V is still in here. 2V might be you, for all I know. I’m sorry, but I can’t fully trust you two.” Akuto looked back at Yoshihiko.

Junko hurried between them.

“Wait. I um... He was with me the whole time. I think you can trust him.”

But Yoshihiko waved her off.

“No. It’s natural that he wouldn’t trust me. As I said before, I think it’s my duty to humbly accept any criticism. However, it’s not the case that we’ve never met before — I’m surprised to say it, but you and I have kept our promise to play a game together.” Yoshihiko winked at Akuto.

Akuto immediately realized what that wink meant. His eyes opened wide in surprise, and then he nodded.

“Oh, you look different in the game, huh? I guess that makes sense, since you made the rules.”

“That’s right. But I can see why you wouldn’t trust me. I’m the one at fault for this, and looking back, I can see that I still had a lot to learn. I’d underestimated the importance of physicality, you see. Of communicating using your body. She’s the one who made me realize this,” he added, smiling at Junko. “She’s a very kind and noble girl.”

Junko quickly shook her head.

“No, stop it. That’s not true...” Junko said, but she couldn’t help but look at Akuto’s face as she spoke. Yoshihiko was making it sound like something had happened when the two of them were alone. Well, something had happened, but they weren’t dating or something. He’d said, “I hope you’ll like me,” but maybe that didn’t mean anything.

However, she was interested to see how Akuto would react to the hint that there was something going on between them. Honestly, she hoped he’d looked shocked.

But...

“Yeah. I hope that when we get back to reality, you and her can spend a lot of time together,” Akuto said.

Junko felt the whole world going dark. She almost fainted.

“Oh dear... are you okay?” Yoshihiko grabbed her.

Everyone was looking at her.

And just then...

Keisu moved fast. She dropped low to the ground and ran forward, quickly pulling Yoshihiko's "Evil Slayer" from its sheath and charging towards Akuto.

The magic sword's blade was aimed right at his throat. She was going so fast that a hit from it would be devastating.

But Akuto had seen it coming.

"I'm afraid that won't work. Of course I realized that you were the one person here who wasn't a player in the game." Akuto had kept his eyes on her the whole time. He dodged to the side to avoid the sword, and slammed a fist into Keisu's stomach.

"Gwah!" Keisu collapsed to the ground in pain.

○

"You're not going to tell me there's still more, right?" Lily cracked her knuckles.

This was probably 2V's last card she had to play.

"So that Keisu girl is the Demon King? Well, it looks like your plan to kill Akuto failed. Can I just beat the shit out of you already? I'm getting tired of waiting."

"I'm afraid not..." 2V remained unperturbed. "There's more to come, I'm afraid. I haven't failed yet. There's still more tricks I've set up in the system... And Zero is still alive too."

"Zero...? Is that the first Demon King's name?"

"That's right. Zero will grant my wish."

"Your wish? What's your wish?"

"Control — I want to control everything. And I have the perfect way to make that wish come true: Zero. The first Demon King — that is, the prototype — was born with enough power to destroy the world that the earliest gods ruled."

"Wh-What are you talking about? What does that mean?"

“Don’t you understand? It has the power to control AI, and make it go insane. The first gods were very similar to our present Liradans, you see.”

2V’s words shocked Lily.

“What...? And you want to bring him back?!”

“Yes. Just watch. There’s more to come. A lot more, in fact...!” 2V laughed.

○

“She’s the only one here who’s not a player in the game,” Akuto said as he looked down at Keisu.

He held out his hand towards her and used a spell.

“Lightning.”

It was the lightning spell in the game. A blast of thunder fell from the sky and landed on Keisu. A snake crawled out from her clothing and died, then turned to dust and disappeared.

“What’s that snake?” Fujiko asked.

“It’s 2V’s arm. It’s all he could get inside the system,” Yoshihiko answered. “So even if that arm turned into a snake...”

“2V uses dolls to do everything. It’s possible he could use that snake to control a Liradan,” Fujiko said. Yoshihiko clapped his hands, impressed.

“Keisu is probably a Liradan. That means it’s not her fault.”

“So now we’ve got nothing to worry about, I guess?” Akuto asked, looking at Yoshihiko, who nodded.

“You’re probably right. Your punch seemed to temporarily shut her down, but when she wakes up we can hear what she has to say. I doubt she knows much of anything, though. Once that’s done, we can end the game.”

“I see. Then...”

Just as Akuto went to kneel down over Keisu—

“Watch out!” Keena yelled and pushed Akuto away.

“Huh?” Akuto felt something strange and cold in his chest.

“Kyaah!”

“Akuto!”

Everyone around him was staring.

“What...?”

The Evil Slayer was embedded deep in his stomach. The sensation he felt was different than when he took damage in the game. He shivered. His stomach was cold, but when he put his hand to it, it felt warm.

“How...?”

“The sword... the sword moved on its own!” Fujiko screamed.

“Correct. The sword moved on its own. It was like it had been waiting for this moment,” Korone said as she readied herself for battle.

“Then this sword is the first Demon King? No... I need to focus on healing first. I’ll gather the mana within me...” Akuto tried to heal the damage he’d taken like he always did, but he couldn’t. Every time he tried to put mana into the wound, it throbbed with pain.

“Ackie!” Keena ran up to him and cast a healing spell from the game, but it did nothing at all to Akuto.

“We’ll have to get him back to reality before he really dies. We can heal him there,” Korone said calmly as she raised her staff.

“Wh-What are you doing...?” Fujiko stammered, but Korone ignored her and blasted Akuto with a magic murder beam.

It went right through Akuto’s head. His body twitched a few times, and then he closed his eyes. The game decided that he had died, and turned him to dust.

All that was left was the Evil Slayer.

Everyone’s eyes went wide with surprise — the sword that had been embedded into Akuto’s stomach was now floating in the air.

“We were wrong! 2V only created the monster and took over Keisu to trick us...!” shouted Fujiko, who knew more about evil plans than anyone else. “If the First Demon King was actually the strongest sword in the game, then the

players would be sure to take it on their journey to the Grail...! So that was the plan!”

“Be careful! We don’t know what will happen next...!” Junko shouted a warning.

“But the sword may only have limited power. It’s possible that it can only move a short distance on its own... Otherwise, there’s no reason it would’ve waited for someone to carry it,” Yoshihiko said.

“The Grail is inside the castle. It’s dangerous, but we have to stop the sword from getting there!” Junko turned to look at the castle.

But...

“Oh... The Grail... Oh no... I thought it was important, so I brought it with me,” Keena said as she took the Grail out from her robe.

It looked like a small cup, shining with a golden light.

“You idiot!” Fujiko yelled, but it was too late.

The Evil Slayer — or rather, Zero — flew towards Keena. She dodged, but she couldn’t stop Zero from touching the Grail. When the sword and Grail collided, both of them burst into a thin mist.

“Oh!” Keena shouted in surprise.

“Oh no... We don’t know what the First Demon King is... But now the game is over. We’ll be sent back to our own world...!” Yoshihiko shouted.

“Th-Then the First Demon King will come back to life in the real world!” Junko cried. She picked Keisu up off the ground and woke the small girl up to ask a question. “Tell me. What happens if the first Demon King revives...?”

Keisu’s eyes opened as she was shaken. “Zero is...”

But before she could finish — the game ended.

5 - The Beginning of The Dream

A cold chill ran down Hiroshi's back. He looked around, not knowing what it was. It took a moment, but he realized it was because of the town around him.

He was watching the second story of the condo, just as Lily had told him to. Of course, he'd been looking outside too, but it took time to see what had changed.

There were small sounds of destruction coming from across the town. The cars on the road weren't moving.

"What's going on...? Don't tell me... something dangerous?" Hiroshi looked up when he heard sounds above him. A flying bus was crash landing on the other side of the city. "...What?!"

The bus slammed into the ground and burst into flames, and several houses seemed to be caught in the blaze. There was no need to say that this was a major disaster. He'd never seen accidents of this scale happen in the city.

"U-Uwah..." Hiroshi wasn't sure if he should follow Lily's orders or go find her. But when he saw the rest of the building's occupants coming out of their rooms, he hurried to Lily's location. When he opened the door, he came upon the student council president fighting several dolls.

"If you're here, then help!" Lily yelled.

"Wh... What's going on?"

The answer came from a pale, sickly-looking girl on the other side of a broken window, who was being carried by a doll.

"I've won."

Even Hiroshi could tell that it was 2V. But what he couldn't understand was why Lily was having problems with the dolls.

"President, just knock their lights out!" he said, but even when she punched the dolls, they just got back up.

“They’re different than before...! They’re stronger...!” Lily yelled. She kept knocking the dolls back with her combat techniques, but the dolls seemed to be somehow moving their fragile joints out of the path of each punch she tried to land.

“2V! Since when were you this good at combat?” Lily howled at 2V. But the girl just laughed in response.

“Hah! You didn’t notice, did you? It’s not what you think it is. I’m not controlling them at all.”

“What?”

“What if there was somebody who was better at controlling dolls than me? What if they could control multiple dolls at the same time?”

“Shut up! That’s impossible... No... You can’t mean...” Lily’s jaw fell open in astonishment.

“Hahaha! That’s right! I told you... Zero, the first Demon King, can control all Liradans! Any autonomous AI! Zero was a program that was sealed in VPS. He was the first Demon King, and I gave Zero a body! I’m his master now!”

2V’s laugh echoed through the room, and Hiroshi went pale.

“Then what I saw outside...!”

“What? There’s something happening outside?” Lily turned around as she punched a doll.

“Outside... the cars stopped, and the air buses fell from the sky... And I kept hearing the sounds of things breaking...” Hiroshi said.

Lily fixed an intense glare on 2V.

“You bitch... You used the Liradans to destroy the city...!”

“Hahaha! It wasn’t me! I can control him, but Zero’s a little crazy! But I’ll be going now.”

“Wait...!”

“Does anybody ever wait when they hear someone say that?”

The doll carrying 2V went to jump off the veranda to the ground below, but

suddenly it stopped. 2V turned back.

“Oh, right. I told you I had the students hostage. But that was a lie. You can’t alter the program like that from the outside. Remember that.”

“You stupid bitch!” Lily raged. “I’ll get you for this, damn it!”

“I never want to see you again. Good luck surviving! No, maybe it’s better if you don’t. You might end up with a world where Liradans rule.” The doll holding 2V vanished as she dropped below.

“2V!” Lily screamed, but she was surrounded and unable to move. She turned to Hiroshi with a pained look on her face.

“Do something! You’re a man, right?”

“B-But...” Hiroshi stepped back as one of the dolls started moving towards him. “O-Oh no...”

Before he could run, though, he felt a sudden pain in his wrist.

“Huh...?” He looked down at it. It was bracelet he wore as a good luck charm. The device he’d once used to summon the anti-Demon King suit, which no longer worked.

—H-How? Don’t tell me I can use it again...!

“B-Brave...” He whispered the activation keyword.

○

Akuto was back in the courtyard where he’d first vanished. The students around him were amazed to see him covered in blood.

“Uwah!”

“Why is he covered in blood?”

None of them liked him, but they couldn’t just let him lie there, wounded.

“Can anybody here heal?”

“No way... I thought he was immortal!”

The students began to murmur.

A moment later, Keena and the others appeared in the yard as well.

“Ackie!” Keena ran straight up to him and cradled his head in her hands.

“The mana in my body started to heal me as soon as I got back... I think I’ll be alright,” he said in a pained voice.

“We need to use healing on you... We could use a Liradan’s healing tools, right?” Fujiko looked around. The only ones who appeared when the game ended were Akuto, Keena, Junko, and Korone.

Keena was still talking to Akuto, Junko was standing over him with a pale face, and Korone was frozen.

“Korone, are you listening?” Fujiko said to her. “You need to heal him.”

As always, Korone was expressionless. She must have heard Fujiko, however, because she jammed a hand into her pouch.

“That’s right. Get your medkit out,” Fujiko said. Then she turned her gaze back to Akuto. “Hurry up and heal him...”

Clack-clack.

Fujiko heard an ominous sound behind her.

“Clack-clack?” she repeated, and turned around.

Korone was holding a huge weapon at her hip. It was a beam weapon that fired mana.

“Th-That’s not a medkit!” Fujiko said, but Korone clearly wasn’t listening. “I never could figure out what you were thinking, but this is going a little too far...”

Korone was pointing the weapon at Akuto.

“Watch out!” Fujiko yelled as she fired a mana ball at Korone to try to stop her. “Th-This can’t be happening!”

But Korone continued to ignore her — and she fired the weapon.

Junko turned around at the sound of the mana ball firing and Fujiko’s voice, but she was an instant too late. The beam from the weapon tore through Akuto’s body.

“Gwah!” he screamed.

“Ackie!”

“Akuto!”

Keena and Junko’s screams overlapped.

The mana ball hit Korone clean in the face, but she just staggered for a moment before aiming the weapon again.

“Wh-What are you doing, Korone?!”

“Stop it, Korone!”

Junko and Keena yelled.

But Korone’s expression didn’t change. Behind her, they could see smoke rising up from the city below.



Afterword

Thanks for reading! It's me, Shoutarou Mizuki.

This is Volume 7. It's the start of a new chapter, and a multi-book story. I'm not sure yet if it'll be just two books, or if it will keep going. I think it's fun to let the characters just do whatever it is they feel like, so my style of writing is just let them be the ones who drive the story. I hope you'll treat it like a serial and enjoy it.

As for other stuff, there's a second drama CD coming out from Beatnicks on September 30th 2009. This time, Akemi Kanda is playing the role of Lily Shiraishi, and Satomi Sato is Eiko Teruya. All of you readers know what Eiko Teruya is like, so I'm looking forward to seeing how it turns out.

Souichi Itou's manga adaption has a volume on sale too. It's running in Champion RED right now. I got a chance to hear what he's got planned during a meeting with him, and it's really amazing! Both of our versions end up at the same place, but they take different routes to get there, so I hope you'll give it a try.

Now, on to some small talk.

A while ago I received some *motsunabe*, which is offal stew. It was really good, but what I'm not sure about is when you're supposed to swallow the white offal.

I can guarantee I'm faster than most people. I probably only need 3/4ths the amount of chewing that most people need. But if I don't swallow it quickly, I always end up chewing it for a long, long time. If only there were some rule, like, "Chew the white offal X number of times!" I wouldn't have this problem. Or perhaps a way to be sure you could bite cleanly through the offal.

I'll be waiting for answers from white offal fans all over Japan, whether they like the offal fried or in a stew.

Lastly, some thank yous.

Thank you Souichi Itou, my illustrator. Thanks for coming over to celebrate my move. I hope we'll get another chance to hang out soon.

Ohashi, my editor. I feel like I've grown as an author because I only missed my deadline a little. But I'm sure it's just my imagination, so I'll try to go even faster next time.

Also, I want to thank everyone else who's helped with this work, especially those who did the drama CD. I'm going to keep doing my best, and I hope you will too.

See in you Volume 8! It will pick up where this story left off. There's lots more fun to be had!



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Demon King Daimaou: Volume 7

by Shoutarou Mizuki

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