
Shoutarou Mizuki
Demon King
DAIMAO
ACT2


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"VERY WELL, THEN..."
"BUT FOR THE SAKE OF WHAT I BELIEVE IN, I CAN'T LET YOU THROUGH."
WHO STANDS IN AKUTO'S WAY AS HE ATTEMPTS TO DISCOVER THE SECRETS OF THE ACADEMY?


"I DEFINITELY LOOK
LIKE A VILLAIN,
DON'T I?"


Character Introduction
AKUTO SAI
A good, hard-working boy, who was nonetheless told that in the future he would become the Demon King. Our protagonist.
KEENA SOGA
A ditzy screw-up. Takes a liking to Akuto after a mistake.
KORONE
An artificial human sent by the government to observe and protect Akuto.
JUNKO HATTORI
The pure-hearted class representative. Likes Akuto but constantly has misunderstand-ings with him.
FUJIKO ETO
A black mage who controls the school from the shadows. Plans to gain Akuto's power for her own, but...

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Prologue

Her earliest memories were filled with her brother, and little else.

He was much older than her, and so he doted upon his little sister. He was the sort of brother who'd give her anything she wanted. He would do his best to put up with all of her bratty little demands and tantrums, and he always put her needs above his own.

Of course, that alone wouldn't be enough to make the memories so vivid.

When her brother died, she'd only just grown old enough to understand the world around her.

She began to spend a lot of time reminiscing about him, and it wasn't long before every wonderful memory of the past became connected to her brother. She even began to come up with new memories that fit the narrative she'd made in her mind. Eventually, those recollections of her brother began to mix with her ideas about the perfect man, and an image of the strong, cool, and kind brother was born in her mind.

Everyone embellishes their past in this way, and it never causes problems so long as the fantasies stay beneath the surface. But in her case, the delusion was shattered in a brutal fashion when she was still a sensitive young girl.

Her family was an old and noble one. For this reason, she was sent to the prestigious Constant Magical Academy. It was there where the "customs" of her family ensured that she learned the truth about her brother.

"Fujiko, you must become the head of the Eto family. Especially now that your pathetic, useless brother failed and died!"

Her mother's cold words seemed incredibly strange to Fujiko Eto.

—The whole family loved brother, didn't they?

—He got really good grades, but he died in an unfortunate accident, right?

—The rest of the family never talked about him because they were very sad,

right?

She had many questions, but instead of answering them, her mother took her hand wordlessly and brought her down to the basement of the family mansion.

Fujiko had never been inside the basement, because she had always been told it was forbidden. She'd been curious enough to try going down there several times, but the entrance had always been locked.

Her mother took out an old key, and used it to open the basement door. A cold draft came from the gap in the door, but she was surprised to see that there was no sign of dust, indicating that the room had been used recently.

What she saw inside was a horrific sight for a young girl just about to enter middle school.

Inside a glass case laid her brother's corpse. Unlike the brother in her memories, his body looked weak and frail. She had grown up so much since his death that of course he would look that way to her now. But this disillusionment had much more to do with the way she'd let her own fantasy grow out of control, and while she felt no fear, a corpse was still a corpse.

He looked like he was sleeping, but the expression on his face was different than a living human's. Fujiko couldn't bring herself to approach him. Quite simply, at her young and sensitive age, a corpse felt "filthy" to her.

"What I'm about to tell you, you must never repeat to anyone. Ever." Fujiko's mother, who was now standing behind her, began to speak.

Fujiko turned around and looked up, and saw an expression on her mother's face that she'd never seen before. It was somewhere between sadness and anger. In her mother's left hand was a magically-created ball of light, which cast eerie shadows on her face. Fujiko twisted her face in fear, and her mother put her right hand on her shoulder and gripped hard.

"You mustn't cry! You must look at him!"

Fujiko simply trembled, unable to speak. The grip on her shoulder weakened, but her mother continued with her expression unchanged.

"For generations, the Eto family has served as the surveyors of the god

Mureet. A surveyor is a very important position for one who serves Mureet. We are to be adventurers, traveling all over the land and reporting our findings to our god. And yet, *he*...” Her mother turned the hand with the ball of light so that it illuminated the coffin. Even at her young age, Fujiko thought it cruel that her mother refused to say his name.

“When several ruins were discovered at the Academy, he was terrified at what he saw there. He abandoned his duties and fled! I don’t know what it was that he saw, but I’m sure it was just some weak monster, or perhaps a trap that forced him to hallucinate... It was likely nothing more than that. Pathetic... just pathetic... The excavation of the ruins was a failure, in the end... He was forced to take responsibility, and they cast a necromantic spell on him at a public trial. That’s usually the method they use to make criminals confess! Fortunately, we didn’t have to attend the trial, but... it seems it really was just a trap, or something similar. He was always a timid boy... the kind of boy who just wanted to play dolls with you... The last trial will be held when you leave for school, and after that, his body won’t be kept here anymore.” Her mother’s words cut off.

Fujiko looked up and saw that she was crying. As young as she was, she couldn’t understand the complex feelings of an adult. All she felt was fear, cruelty, and insanity.

—My brother was a pathetic man.

—He wasn’t very cool, but...

—He died because he was weak.

—School is a scary place.

—But this is what will happen to me if I lose.

—If you’re weak, terrible things happen to you. But God is wrong to make you do all these terrible things. Brother was kind... pathetic, but just because you’re a pathetic wimp doesn’t mean you should have to die.

—That means that God will betray me, too.

—And if I’m weak, Mom will treat me the same way...

—I have to be strong.

—I have to be... even though I'm a girl.

From that moment on, Fujiko held those confusing feelings deep within her heart.

Once she came to the Academy, she never let the others know her true thoughts. On the outside, she played the role of a pious, ladylike young girl — as she'd grown up in a girl's academy, she believed this was what it meant to be a strong woman. But in secret, she started studying every type of magic she could get her hands on, including black magic.

She learned necromancy, and by stealing a part of her brother's body, she was able to reanimate his head. It was then that she'd learned that her mother's words had been true, but at that point, it no longer bothered her.

And so, Fujiko became the school's Madonna, and its most powerful secret ruler. If nothing else had happened, she would've gone on to become a surveyor, a spy for the black mages, and possibly someone who would change history.

But the appearance of the Demon King at the Academy would change her fate forever.

1 - Is Imprisonment Fun?

Akuto Sai was having a terrible time with the practical section of his elementary magic class.

The class had paired off in the yard, and they were practicing playing catch with balls of mana; the fundamental element of all magic. His problem had nothing to do with the subject matter of the class itself.

His problem, as he stood there in the yard, was that nobody would come near him.

—I guess bad reputations never fade, huh?

Akuto wasn't sure what the right reaction was for a situation like this. He finally settled on a scowl.

He was a handsome boy, with a face like a beautifully carved marble statue. However, he'd been born with a nasty glare which gave him the look of a dangerous villain. He didn't realize it, but that unintentional glare of his was just as much a factor as his own bad reputation.

—It's been like this ever since the prophecy said I'd become the Demon King. I just can't catch a break...

His run of bad luck had started when an artificial spirit that prided itself on its 100% accuracy rating predicted that he would, in the future, become the Demon King. And now, the whole student body had it out for him. Everything he did was misunderstood, and the government had even sent an observer to watch him. Of course, he couldn't have a normal school life that way.

But Akuto did have a friend: Hiroshi Miwa. This tiny classmate of his had the look of a mischievous little boy, and even though they were the same age, he looked up to Akuto as an older brother. But even Hiroshi had abandoned him for the day, saying, "There's no way I could partner up with you, boss..."

—What the heck is that supposed to mean anyway?

But it was probably a sign that he couldn't just depend on Hiroshi's kindness forever, and that it was time to find some new friends.

Akuto decided to be optimistic, and take a look around him. All of the students in the yard turned away. But then he saw two people talking out of the corner of his eye.

It was Junko Hattori, the class representative, talking to their teacher, Mitsuko Torii. Both of them were boisterous people, and they were speaking loud enough that he could hear them from here.

"It's crucial that Akuto Sai learns to control his magic. Do you think you can help him out?" Miss Mitsuko said. She was tall, with oval glasses and messy hair, and she looked like an easy-going person.

"I refuse." Junko was a beautiful girl with a cool, composed air about her, but her slightly narrowed eyes spoke to the stubbornness of her personality.

"But you're the only one I can ask. You're the class representative. And, you know, you're so strong." Miss Mitsuko tried to insist, but Junko didn't give in.

"Yes, but there's limits to what I'm willing to do. Who would voluntarily practice magic with *him*?"

"But he's never done it before. After all, it's something you have to experience, right? Don't you like the idea of being his first time?" Miss Mitsuko grinned mischievously, and Junko's face went beet-red.

"Sh-Show some dignity, ma'am! That's completely inappropriate!"

"Oh jeez, I was talking about the class. What were you thinking about?"

"I know it was about the class. Either way, please stop joking around..." Junko suddenly trailed off, glancing at Akuto. He raised his hand a little in answer. And suddenly Junko became enraged.

"It's wrong to eavesdrop, Akuto Sai!"

—How could I not, when you're that loud...?

At least, that's what he thought, but he knew better than to say it. He lowered his hand.

Junko marched over to him with broad strides, and Akuto was sure she was about to complain more. But instead she pointed a finger in his face and said in a loud voice, “If you were listening, then why aren’t you getting ready? What do you think you’re doing, just standing there?!”

“Huh?”

“I said get ready!” Junko’s gaze was wandering around the yard as she spoke, but Akuto finally understood what she meant.

“Th-Thank you.” Akuto was so grateful that he wrapped both of his hands around hers.

It was only the pathetic sight of a boy with no friends being amazed by the slightest bit of gentleness coming from a girl, but as Akuto towered over Junko, it made him look like he was trying to seduce her.

The other students, who were watching him, even though they tried to pretend they weren’t, started to murmur.

“He really is the Demon King...”

“He’s made the class rep into his slave...”

Junko must have heard them, because she blushed and she slapped his hands away.

“Get away from me, and get ready!”

“Okay, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.” Akuto had heard the whispers too, so he tried to step away and get ready for his practice.

“No, wait,” Junko said.

“What’s wrong?”

“I wanted to make sure you understand something. Listen, this class is about learning to delicately control mana by tossing the mana balls back and forth. It’s the simplest, most fundamental exercise. Everyone finished it in middle school. But if you play around, or lose your concentration, it can become dangerous. And not just dangerous for you, but dangerous for the person you’re practicing with as well. Make sure you don’t forget that,” Junko asserted.

Akuto nodded.

“I’ve got it. Of course, I would never hurt you,” Akuto said earnestly.

Junko’s face went red again.

“I told you to stop doing that!”

—I’m serious, though...

Akuto grumbled inwardly as he walked away. He turned around to face Junko when the two of them were around a dozen meters apart.

“Here I go!” Junko said. She raised her right hand. A ball of light appeared in her hand, about the size of a soccer ball.

Magic was the process of controlling the mana that filled the air. The energy that flowed from the generators in the Imperial City and the capital flowed into the Earth itself, and the mana was made to resonate with that energy. For all intents and purposes, the mana was the energy. Mana also built up inside the bodies of living things, and energy could be drawn from that reserve as well.

The amount of mana an individual could store varies, and the greater the mana inside one’s body, the more influence they could have over the mana in the atmosphere. Human thoughts turn to electrical signals in the brain, and that electricity can control the mana in the body, which then resonates with the mana outside. In other words, what was important in magic was the mana reserve you were born with, and your powers of concentration. The goal of this class was to train that skill.

“Catch it!” Junko flicked her right wrist. The mana flew towards Akuto in a slow arc.

Akuto raised his own right hand. Junko must’ve been used to controlling mana, because he didn’t even need to move his hand. The ball settled softly in his palm and came to a stop.

“The point is to imagine throwing the ball slowly. Now pass it back. Remember, slowly.” Junko held out her hand like she was playing catch.

“I just have to do it like you did it, right?” Akuto asked. Junko nodded.

“Alright...” Akuto raised his right hand.

—Just flick my wrist. Nice and soft.

As you read above, the greater the mana reserve a person has, the greater their influence will be on the mana in the atmosphere.

In other words...

BOOM!

There was a terrible roar as the mana ball ripped through the air. It was like a bullet fired from a rifle, and it was heading straight at Junko.

“Hyah!” Junko gave a brief scream, but she was still possibly the strongest magic-user in the school. She reached both hands in front of her body to block the mana ball. But the ball’s energy was enough that it might not just knock her down — it was strong enough to break her arms.

—Oh no!

Akuto realized that he needed to do something before it hit her.

And that thought was instantly transmitted to the mana ball.

BANG!

The mana ball exploded, flinging Junko’s arms backwards.

The flash of light spread out and enveloped Junko, forming a perfect mushroom cloud that rose up in the middle of the schoolyard.

The other classmates started to mutter.

When the smoke had cleared, there was a small crater in the yard.

And at the center of it lay an exhausted Junko.

“Wha—... Wha—...” Her eyes were wide with surprise and anger, but she was miraculously unscathed. Akuto’s desire not to hurt her must have stopped the mana ball.

“This is why I didn’t want to do this! You have no idea how to control...” Junko stood up and began to point her finger and yell at Akuto.

But then she froze.

She saw her own body, and all her skin flushed bright red.

The uniform she'd been wearing had been torn apart and lay in tatters on the ground.

"Hy-Hyaaaah!" The now-naked Junko wrapped her arms around herself.

"Ooh!" "Look at that!" the other boys said.

"That's really mean!" "You boys are terrible," the girls said.

"I-I'm sorry..." Akuto ran to Junko's side.

"You idiot! Idiot! Stay away from me!" Junko shook her head violently.

"But I can't just leave you like that..." Akuto took off his jacket and put it on her back. It was a big jacket, and covered her completely.

Junko looked up at him in surprise.

"Th-Thank you..." she said, timidly. But then she quickly crossed her arms in front of the jacket, stood up, and glared at Akuto.

"...No, wait. Why on Earth would I thank you?"

"You're right. It's my fault." Akuto hung his head meekly in apology. He wasn't sure if Junko was upset or embarrassed, but her teeth were chattering behind her tightly pursed lips, and her face got even redder.

"Why are you apologizing?!" She couldn't punch him, because that would mean taking her hand off of the jacket. Instead, she gave him a kick.

"Because I feel bad. And I can't control the mana properly..." Akuto kept his head bowed and obediently accepted Junko's kicks.

After about six kicks, his lack of resistance seemed to upset her further, because she only became more angry.

"Why are you letting me kick you?!"

"Because like I said, it's my fault, and..." Akuto pointed at Junko's body. Her kicks had rolled up the hem of the jacket, exposing her shapely legs.

"If I dodge, everybody will see your legs," Akuto said gently. For a few seconds Junko was taken off guard. Then, her cheeks still flushed with embarrassment, she kicked Akuto even more.

“Shut up! How much humiliation are you going to force me to endure?”

“I’m telling you, you really should be staying still...” The rest of the classroom was watching this from a distance. They couldn’t hear what the two of them were saying, so they began to speculate.

“Wow... that’s the Demon King for you. Talk about cruelty. He used the pretense of basic magic training to make her let down her guard, and then blew off her clothes.”

“And then after stripping her nude, he offered her his jacket... He’s just toying with her, isn’t he?”

“And now he’s making her resist, and watching it with a mocking laugh on his face! He must be trying to make the class rep realize how powerless she is. What a terrible fetish...”



“Well, he is the Demon King...”

The male students gulped, while the female students blushed. And afterward, both groups looked at Akuto with hate in their eyes.

“Uhh... Look, they’re saying some weird stuff about us. Hattori, tell them they’re wrong, okay?” Akuto subtly pointed towards the others, and finally Junko seemed to realize that her classmates were talking about her.

“D-Don’t tell me... you’re trying to humiliate me as part of some terrible plot...” Junko’s expression turned to fear. She crossed her arms in front of her and took a step back.

Akuto quickly denied this.

“No, of course not. I’ve told you this before, but I really care about you, and I want to protect you from rumors like that...” Before he could finish, Junko’s face twisted and tears formed in her eyes.

“You idiot! Idiot! It’s the way you act that’s the problem! Make it clear whether you’re a good guy or a bad guy! And if you really care about me, then...” Junko seemed to want to say something else, but she quickly turned away and ran off at incredible speed. There wasn’t time for Akuto to stop her.

“J-Jeez...” Akuto stood there for a moment, not sure what to do. Then he was approached by Hiroshi, the boy who’d refused to practice with him before. He stood by Akuto’s side, nodding as if he was impressed.

“Wow, boss. I’m impressed.”

“Impressed with what?”

“You’re a real mean guy, teasing your woman like that. And you even used a beginner-level class like this to show off your power to the rest of the class. I figured you might do that, which is why I turned down the chance to be your training partner.” Hiroshi didn’t seem to be flattering him. He really was impressed. There was a pure, shining light in his eyes.

“...There’s a lot of things I want to say, but I’m not even sure where to begin,” Akuto sighed. Then, Miss Mitsuko approached them. She had her hand on her hip, and seemed to be chuckling as if she found the whole situation funny.

“You need to learn how to control your mana, okay? You’re packing a ton of firepower to begin with.” Miss Mitsuko adjusted the position of her glasses on her nose, and looked in the direction Junko had run off to.

“She probably won’t be coming to class for a while. She’s a very pure-hearted girl, after all.”

“I’m sorry,” Akuto said, lowering his head apologetically.

“There’s no point in apologizing to me. Instead, train your mind so that this doesn’t happen again.”

“But how? This is the basic class for training your mind, right?” Akuto asked. Miss Mitsuko looked up thoughtfully, as if she wasn’t sure what to say.

“That’s right... Oh, but wait! There is another way. It’s a little dangerous, but it’s worth trying.” Miss Mitsuko patted Akuto on the shoulder, as if pleased at her own idea.

“Why are you so happy?” Akuto asked with confusion as he looked at her shining eyes.

“Nobody at this school has done this type of mental training in years! Supposedly something terrible happened to a bunch of people who tried it, so they had to stop it, I heard!”

“Can I ask a question?”

“Don’t worry. It doesn’t put your body in danger. Something terrible happened, but it wasn’t that big of a deal.”

“That’s not what I was going to ask. Why do you look so happy?”

Miss Mitsuko suddenly gasped and put her hands over her mouth.

“N-No, it’s nothing. Definitely nobody died over it or anything.”

“I hope not...” Akuto looked at her coldly. He was suspicious that his teacher might be looking for a legal way to kill him. She didn’t fear him like the other students did, and she showed a certain degree of understanding about his personality. But she was interested in his Demon King powers and seemed intent on using necromancy on him after his death so that she could experiment on him.

“So what exactly is this training?” Akuto asked. Miss Mitsuko nodded.

“It’s called the Mental Monastery. I think you could say it’s similar to the Zen meditation that believers of Suhara use.”

Hiroshi looked overly surprised when he heard this.

“What?! The famous Constant Magical Academy Mental Monastery?!”

“Is there something dangerous about it?” Akuto asked, and Hiroshi’s face lit up with excitement as if he were about to tell a ghost story.

“There is. They say years ago, a student who went there died-mgwwh!” Hiroshi’s words stopped as Miss Mitsuko put her hand over his mouth.

“Ufufufu, don’t worry. It’s just fine. It’s just fine!” Miss Mitsuko was smiling, but even Akuto wasn’t that dense.

“I think I’ll pass...” But before he could finish, Miss Mitsuko cut him off.

“Oh, you know, remember how I said it was like Suhara Zen meditation? If Hattori finds out that you completed the training, she might forgive you.” Even though she didn’t sound like she really believed that, it was enough to get Akuto to think about changing his mind.

—*Yeah, maybe it would...*

“If you say so...”

o

School ended and Akuto came back to his room. He frowned when he saw a girl lying on his bed.

Soft green hair. A perfectly pretty face, like a doll. She was a beautiful young girl, like a sculpture an artist had made of his ideal woman.

However, she was lying on the bed reading a manga magazine, and chowing down on ningyo-yaki cookies from a bag next to her. Despite her pretty looks, she acted like a middle-aged housewife, or perhaps an unemployed kid.

She was an artificial human called a Liradan. Her name was Korone. While you’d never guess it from looking at her, she was an observer sent by the government. She was living with him in his dorm to observe him, after the

prophecy had announced he'd become the Demon King.

"You're back? It seems nothing out of the ordinary happened, huh?" Korone said without looking at his face.

Even Akuto couldn't help but feel exasperated. Before, she'd been at his side 24/7, but lately there were times when he couldn't find her. As for what she was doing during those times, it was usually this: slacking off. It was a strange thing to do for an artificial human that never got tired.

"Are you sure you were observing me? I'm pretty sure something out of the ordinary happened during class..."

"It's alright. No one was hurt," Korone said confidently.

"You were watching?" Akuto was suspicious, but Korone sounded sure of herself.

"Yes. I can now monitor you from remote locations. And no matter where you are, I can get there instantly," Korone said as she popped another ningyo-yaki into her mouth. For some reason, the cookies caught Akuto's eye.

"Those are ningyo-yaki, right? From Asakusa, in the imperial city."

"Correct. Would you like one?"

"No, I'm fine. I was just wondering if artificial humans eat things."

"We can. A chemical reaction occurs within our body that transforms them into energy. It's an extremely small amount, though."

"So basically, you don't need to eat, right? So why do you?"

"Because they're delicious."

"That's all?"

"Yes. And I don't get fat, no matter how many I eat."

"Well, you're an artificial human. But are you worried about getting fat?"

"I'm not worried, so I don't get fat. That's how it works."

"Huh? What?"

Whenever he talked with Korone, he always got confused. She would always

say things to tease people, while keeping her expression completely blank. Akuto just decided to ignore her and started gathering some things for his mental training.

“What are you doing?” Korone asked. He decided he had no choice but to tell her about Miss Mitsuko’s Mental Monastery idea. When he did, surprisingly, Korone put her ningyo-yaki down.

“I will accompany you.”

“Huh?”

“I’m saying I will go with you, as an observer.”

“Why?”

“Because it sounds interesting.”

“...Even though you usually just slack off?”

“Is that a problem?”

“...No, never mind.”

Akuto got his things together. Of course, these “things“ were just a metal water bottle and a single waterproof bag. Miss Mitsuko had told him to make sure he brought them.

He put the water bottle in his bag, and headed for the spot that Miss Mitsuko had told him about. Korone tagged along behind him.

“This place doesn’t get a lot of use, huh?” Korone was right. The location was on the other side of a lake near the school. It was probably supposed to be a place for students to relax, but the bushes around it were too thick, and the humidity from the lake too strong. It was almost entirely unvisited, and it looked like a poorly maintained garden of an isolated country mansion.

“Yeah, looks like it’s deserted,” Akuto said as he pushed through the bushes and tall grass, arriving at a square building with walls made of plaster. It was just big enough for a person to stand inside and stretch their arms out. There was a small door you’d have to crouch to enter, and once you were inside, you couldn’t do much but sit.

“I see. Mental training’s about everything this could be used for,” Akuto said, impressed. He crouched and put his hand on the door.

The knob began to flash, and an electronic voice spoke.

《Once you pass through this door, it will be locked, and you will be unable to open it for twelve hours. Please secure a method of communication in case of emergencies, and enter at your own risk.》

“So that’s how it works, huh?” Korone said.

“Seems so. Okay, see you in twelve hours. Also, if I send a mana message to your student notebook, it’ll be an emergency. I’m depending on you,” Akuto said, then nodded to Korone and opened the door.

There was a tatami mat on the floor beneath the plaster walls. He went inside, and the air was cold and musty. He closed the door.

“Depending on me for what?”

“Call for help, or open it up, or something,” Akuto said, and then he realized something was wrong. Korone was inside as well, and the door was completely shut.

“What the hell did you come inside for?!”

“I told you, I’m coming with you as an observer.” Korone seemed unconcerned.

Akuto sighed. This was too small a room for two people. He couldn’t get any meditation done like this.

—I was looking forward to having some time to myself, too.

There was no light from outside, just a thin layer of illuminated mana on the ceiling lighting up the dim room. He looked around and saw that the wall across from the door was covered with tiny letters. He looked closer and saw that it was a long document. It was so dark it was difficult to read, but by concentrating his mana along his fingertips, he could make them bright enough to read by. As he went along, he found that he was looking at part of the Imperial Constitution.

—The whole wall’s covered with the prelude to the constitution, huh?

To read in this darkness, you'd have to control the light of the mana as you read. Was that how you were supposed to train your mind?

"I didn't really believe it to begin with, but there's no way you could die from this. You'll get awfully tired, though." Akuto relaxed and sat down on the tatami mat.

"That's right. I do remember some strange rumors, but I'm sure they were all baseless. The Suharans don't practice their mental concentration in such an old-fashioned way these days. At some point this building stopped being used, and it became a legend, most likely," Korone agreed as she sat down herself.

It was a narrow space, so of course, Akuto's knees bumped into Korone's. Korone adjusted her position, but no matter what she did she would still be pressed up against Akuto.

"Listen..."

"Yes?"

"It's really cramped."

"It is, yes."

"...That was me complaining, actually."

"There's no point in complaining. I can't become smaller."

"....."

"Please do not fall silent. Anyway, you're here to train, right? Go on, read the constitution on the wall. I'm sure it's boring, but that's how you have to train," Korone urged him on with a mocking tone in her voice. Of course, she was still completely expressionless.

Akuto reluctantly turned his eyes to the wall, and tried to concentrate on controlling the mana light. But then he realized that Korone was squeezing up against him.

"Listen..."

"Yes?"

"Can you get off me?"

“I’m helping you with your training. Even in this situation, you must continue to train.” Korone pushed herself up against him more firmly. She was an artificial human, but the softness of her skin was the same as a real person’s.

This, Akuto didn’t know how to handle. He looked at Korone, but she simply stared back at him. It was incredibly awkward. Then he looked down and saw that after all the moving she’d done in this tight space, her skirt had flipped up and revealed a flash of her underwear. At this point he was completely baffled.

“You don’t need to help me!” Akuto tried to get away from her by crawling on his knees along the tatami. It was a small room, but he was able to make some space between them. However, when he ran he still found himself feeling the touch of a girl’s body.

“How did you get behind me?” Akuto asked as he turned around. But there was nobody there.

“Huh?” He turned back, confused. Korone was right where she was a second ago.

“I didn’t move behind you.”

“What?” Akuto nervously stretched his hand out into empty space. He touched something soft yet firm, like a leather bag filled with water.

“Kyan?!” A scream echoed through the emptiness.

—Ah, I should have known.

Akuto glared into empty space, now sure of what was going on.

“Keena, what the hell were you thinking, coming in here too?”

After a pause, a voice spoke back.

“I heard you’d be going into a room all by yourself and not coming out for a long time! I thought you’d need something to eat.”

Akuto looked up a little, and saw something floating in the air. It was a wrapped lunchbox.

“But did you really have to come in here?” Akuto sighed.

Speaking to him from empty space was Keena Soga. She was a terrible

student who had no luck with magic, so she'd always skip magic class. But for some reason, she was very good at flight and invisibility magic, spells that would take the average person incredible concentration. And so she'd use her invisibility magic to go wandering around.

"The door shut on its own!" Keena complained as she ended her invisibility spell.

Usually, the first thing you noticed about her was her burning red hair. You'd also see several tufts of hair sticking out from the top of her head like antennae. She had a face that you'd call gentle if you wanted to be nice, or spacey if you wanted to be mean. Just looking at her made you feel like you needed to take a nap.

But the real first thing you'd notice if you looked at her right now was that she wasn't wearing any clothes. Keena's small breasts were floating right in front of Akuto, completely exposed.

"W-Wait a second...!" Akuto began to panic, and Keena realized what was happening.

"Kyaaah!" She folded up her arms and legs to cover herself.

Keena could only make her body invisible. She would get naked and then turn invisible, but sometimes when she came back she'd forget that she was still naked.

"It's dark in here, so I can't see clearly," Akuto said, and looked around. There was nothing he could give to Keena to wear. With nothing else to do, he took off his shirt and pressed it into her hands.

"One of these days I'm going to run out of clothes to give..." Akuto sighed.

"My own uniform is too small," Korone said, and then looked at Akuto and Keena in turn. "It really is cramped in here, isn't it?"

"Don't act so calm. This is a real problem. We're stuck in here for twelve hours." Akuto put his head in his hands. There'd been three of them in here ever since he first came in, but only now was it really starting to feel cramped.

Even so, Korone was still calm.

“It’s not a problem for me.”

“Sure, not for you.” Akuto was starting to sound more and more frustrated.

“Now now,” Keena said, trying to calm him down. “Don’t get mad, Ackie. You know you get mad when you’re hungry.” Keena, who was now wearing his shirt, offered him the lunch box.

“This time, I don’t think hunger has anything to do with it,” Akuto said, but Keena wasn’t listening at all.

“Don’t worry about a thing. Once you’re full, you’ll forget all about it.” Keena smiled.

Akuto fell silent, but it wasn’t because Keena had persuaded him. He realized he could see Keena’s body, bare except for a single shirt, standing out against the darkness. He didn’t know what to say.

“No, um... I’ll eat later.” Akuto looked away.

“You’re here to train. To work on your concentration.” Korone waited for this moment to interrupt him.

“Shut up!” Akuto said angrily. But then he calmed down and changed his mind.

—Well, maybe this is a good chance to practice focusing my mind. Time to start training...

As long as he was thinking about the two bodies around him, he certainly couldn’t do anything. So Akuto decided to focus on the small characters of the constitution in front of him. He summoned a mana light in his fingers, and went to move his face near the wall.

—Alright, time to settle in and start reading. Maybe it’s a good thing that reading is my only escape...

Akuto was able to concentrate on the characters for several minutes. But after those few minutes of concentration, someone began to poke him on the side.

“Oh come on... what is it?”

Of course, it was Keena who was poking him.

“Hey, are you sure you aren’t hungry?”

“I’m sure.”

“...You’re not hungry?”

“I said I’m not hungry.”

“.....You’re not hungry?” Keena tilted her head at him as she spoke.

“Fine. You want me to eat, don’t you?” Akuto sighed and moved his face away from the wall.

For some reason, he had a soft spot for Keena. He wasn’t sure if he was this way with other girls, but he certainly couldn’t resist anything Keena did. No matter what it was, he would quickly forgive her. Akuto thought that maybe this was because he’d met Keena when they were both at the orphanage, and he’d felt a connection with her since then. He didn’t remember much about it, but there was something about Keena that Akuto just couldn’t argue with.

Keena opened the lunchbox. There were several rice balls made from white rice inside.

“What’s this?” Akuto asked as he pointed to one on the end.

“It’s a rice ball!” Keena said cheerfully.

“No, I mean what kind of rice ball is it?”

“I’m so glad you asked! This is a famous brand of rice with more than a millennium of tradition behind it: Akitakomachi!” Keena said fervently.

“I wasn’t asking about the brand of rice. What’s the filling?”

“It’s Akitakomachi.”

“Huh?”

“Akitakomachi rice is the filling. Koshihikari is the rice ball.”

“Hmm... okay.” Akuto lost the will to resist, and took a bite of the rice ball. If you thought of as just a salty ball of rice, it wasn’t that bad.

“The blend of the rice is the most important part! If you change the ratios of

rice you can end up with a something that's a whole different dish! For example..."

He didn't follow a word she said, but Keena began to tell him about the wonders of white rice. This was nothing new coming from her, so Akuto ignored her and went back to the constitution. Strangely, Keena's chattering was like background music that made it easier to concentrate.

—That makes sense. So magical concentration is the same kind of concentration I needed for those part-time jobs I took when I was poor. I'd been overthinking it because it's "magic", but maybe I don't need to think that hard at all...

And then he realized a grain of rice had flown over and stuck on the word he was trying to read. He turned around and saw that Keena had figured out he wasn't listening, and was yelling as she ate her rice ball.

"If it's that important to you, then take better care of your rice," Akuto said as he pinched the grain of rice off the wall with his fingers. The sticky rice was clinging tightly to the wall. It shouldn't have been that difficult to get it off, but then he realized something was wrong. When he pulled at the rice grain, it felt like part of the wall was coming off with it.

"Huh?" He took another look at that part of the wall. It looked like there was a paper stuck on the wall, and the lines of the constitution had been written on the paper to make it blend in with the rest of the wall.

He tore off the paper, and it turned out that it was parchment. This was unusual, as normal paper was readily available these days.

There were words and a map on the parchment, burned into it by magic. It was faster to write it by hand, so the only reason you'd do it this way was to ensure that it would last for years. That meant somebody had put this up here hoping it would last for a long time.

"That's a lot of work for a prank," Akuto said. Keena peeked over his shoulder at the parchment, her eyes shining.

"Hey, this is a treasure map, Ackie!" Keena said excitedly.

"Come on, don't talk like a little kid... huh?" Akuto looked at the words in

surprise. Apparently it really was a treasure map. The map was clearly legible, and the words below it read thus: (A message to the courageous one who reads this map. The sealed treasure will reveal itself when three keys, hidden in the three locations on this map, are gathered together. But do not forget, they who know about the treasure are constantly seeking it. Only seek the treasure if you are selfless, and if you are willing to risk death. Only death awaits those without the right to claim it. This is not a threat, but my dying wish.

K)

"K" was probably the author's name. The writer of the message certainly didn't seem like they were joking around, but they didn't write any other information regarding the quest.

"What exactly is this about?" Akuto said, cocking his head with confusion.

"Oh!" Keena exclaimed. "This is a map of the school!"

"Huh? It is?" Akuto looked at the map again. He wasn't used to this place yet, so he couldn't be immediately sure, but when he took a closer look he saw markings that looked like the school.

"The school grounds are so big that it's hard to tell, but look, if you figure this is the school building, then this is the forest behind it, and this is the mountain you can see from the roof." Keena pointed at different spots on the map. But Akuto had never fully explored the school grounds, so he still couldn't be sure.

And then Korone, who'd been silent until then, chimed in.

"The dimensions of this map aren't very carefully made, but it's forty kilometers from one end of the grounds to the other. An experienced user of flight magic could travel that distance in two hours. If you walked, it would be about a half day."

"I see. How old is this parchment?" Akuto asked.

"If you're asking how long ago the parchment was made, it's rather old. About fifty years. As for when the map was drawn, the magic makes it impossible to tell." Korone's analysis was instant.

"So it was at least within the last fifty years, but that's all we know."

“It could’ve been made yesterday, or fifty years ago. I couldn’t tell you,” Korone said.

“Hmm, then it’s interesting, but it’s got nothing to do with me. Nobody’s used this place in a long time, so maybe it was put up a long time ago, or maybe it’s a prank somebody put here since they knew I was coming today. It could be one of those two,” Akuto said coolly, and moved to put the map back where it was. But Keena grabbed it.

“It’s a treasure map, Ackie!” Her eyes were a million miles away.

“I know that,” Akuto said curtly.

“Treasures are so dreamy... Just imagine! It must be where an ancient pirate hid all the treasures he gathered in his life!” Keena had her hands folded in front of her chest and was staring off into space.

“This area has been dry land for over 4,000 years,” Akuto said, but Keena was ignoring him.

“Oh, if only I were a boy! I’d go face the danger, no matter how great! I’d fight the guardians of the keys, and defeat them one after another! No, I wouldn’t kill them! If you kill them, you lose your right to get the treasure! That’s what made all the other adventurers fail, as they were strong but not kind!”

Akuto had forgotten that once Keena started fantasizing, she didn’t stop. If you played along, she’d go on forever. In fact, the first time they’d met, he’d believed one of her fantasies and it ended up in a terrible mess.

“I hope you’re right,” he said, and tried to go back to his training. But her response was unexpected.

“Ackie...” Keena suddenly quieted down and started to fidget. Akuto turned around, wondering what was bothering her.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. Keena started quivering and, in a voice that sounded like she was about to explode, announced: “I have to pee!”

“You what?!” Akuto had no idea what to do. He looked around, and only saw the waterproof bag and water bottle he’d been told to bring.

“Don’t tell me... was that why?” The water bottle was for water. Twelve hours

without water was dangerous. And if you were locked in here for twelve hours, of course...

“H-Here...” Akuto handed her the bag.

“What? No! That’s embarrassing!” Keena resisted.

“It’s better than wetting yourself, right? I’ll turn the other way!”

“No!”

“I’m just as embarrassed as you are! There’s a good chance I’m gonna have to go too!”

“I don’t want that either! I don’t want to see you peeing!”

Akuto and Keena argued for a moment before Korone suddenly opened her mouth.

“If you need to dispose of your waste, would you prefer that I drink it?”

That was enough to make both Akuto and Keena freeze.

“What?”



“W-Wait a second...”

But Korone was unperturbed.

“Don’t worry. A chemical reaction occurs within our body that transforms it into energy. It’s an extremely small amount, though.”

“That’s not the problem!”

“Uwaaaaan! I don’t wanna! Let me out of here!” Keena started to cry.

Korone saw this, and expressionlessly shrugged her shoulders.

“That was a joke. For one thing, it doesn’t taste good.”

“Either way, that’s not a solution! And how do you know how it tastes...”

Akuto didn’t remember what happened after that. He later told himself that they must have worked something out with magic.

o

The next day, he woke up and took the map he’d found from Korone, who was sleeping inside a cabinet above his closet. He’d decided to give it to Korone, since otherwise Keena would have run off with it. Of course, he wasn’t going to use it. He didn’t want to deal with it, so his plan was just to talk to the student council president about it today.

Before classes started, he tried going to the student council room, since the student council always held a meeting before classes began. The student council president welcomed him.

Akuto was, at least in theory, the head of the disciplinary committee, which meant that he needed to work with the student council often.

“What is it, Sai?” the student council president said cheerfully. She was known for the stylish, pointed hat that she always wore. She was short, and had a youthful face. She looked like a young boy, in fact, but she was a third-year student. And strangely, despite her young looks, she was oddly intimidating. The fact that she was the student council president at a place like this, with its emphasis on strength in battle, meant that even though he’d never heard anyone mention her power, he could assume she was fairly strong.

Akuto showed her the map. When he explained how he'd found it, her eyes widened a little in surprise. But then she looked back and forth from Akuto to the map, slightly annoyed.

"Don't you think it's just some kid's idea of a joke?"

"I do. But if it starts getting spread around, some idiot might decide to go looking for it."

The president laughed at Akuto's words.

"You've got that right. Okay, I'll take this. Keep it a secret, please," she said, and then turned her gaze towards the other three members of the student council. They all gathered around her desk.

"Alright, I have to get back to work. Mornings are always so busy," she said as she waved him out.

Akuto lowered his head in a bow and left the student council room. As he left, he could hear the voices of the other three members.

"Ma'am, isn't this a map of the school-gyah?"

"Gugah."

"These marks indicate areas that were abandoned during the great war, right?"

From the way they spoke, he could tell that they had... unique... personalities, but the voices quickly faded away. They seemed to be using some kind of magic to keep their voices from being heard, but Akuto didn't even give it a second thought.

○

Junko hadn't come to class. And as usual, Keena wasn't there either.

—Keena's one thing, but what should I do about Hattori?

Akuto was still stewing with worry by the time first period ended, but he snapped out of it as he realized that there was something going on in the hallway. Since it was rare for any kind of commotion not to involve him, he found himself going outside to see what the fuss was about. There was a crowd

gathered around the wall outside the classroom.

—What's all this about? ...Wait a second!

Akuto approached the wall, and the students parted to let him through like a receding tide. But there was no time to be upset about the fact that they were scared of him. There was a copy of the treasure map on the wall.

—KEENA!

It was the only possibility he could think of. As he stood in shock, Hiroshi quickly walked up to him.

"Boss, what's the deal with this map? Keena's been putting them up everywhere. This isn't some kind of prank you're playing, is it?" Hiroshi asked.

His suspicion had been confirmed. Keena could turn invisible. It would have been easy for her to steal the map, copy it, and put it back.

"It is not a prank!" Akuto said, loudly enough for the others to hear him. And then for some reason, Hiroshi raised his voice too.

"It's not a prank! Then this is a game you've set up, isn't it boss! Let me guess: you hid some treasure and set up maps all over the school! And whoever wins the game will be your servant!" Hiroshi's words made the students around them start to panic, Akuto included. He didn't want any weird rumors going around.

"I haven't done anything of the sort!" he yelled. And then Hiroshi's voice got louder in response.

"Then that means it's a real treasure map that you found, doesn't it?"

"No, I don't know if it's real," Akuto said, but since he didn't know anything, there wasn't much he could say.

"What a mess," he whispered to himself. Now that the rumor had been released, it was too late to stop it. The murmurings of his classmates continued even after class started. It gave him a bad feeling, but he was helpless to stop them.

—Well, I hope it's just a prank...

But then things got weird.

Lunchtime came, and he'd gone with Hiroshi to the cafeteria to get some food. He was heading back to the classroom to eat it when a stretcher carrying a student flew right by him. It was a floating stretcher, the ones the nurse's office used to transport injured students. A lot of people got hurt at this school, so it was only used for people who were too badly injured to move themselves.

It was a male student. He was awake, but his face was deathly pale, and he was whispering, "A monster got me..."

"Don't tell me..." Akuto said, but Hiroshi told him anyway.

"Do you suppose he went to go look for the treasure?" Hiroshi ran off and found one of the student's friends, who'd been following the stretcher, and asked him what had happened. He was really quick about these things.

"It looks like a student who was really good at flying magic went out to look for the treasure, and came back badly hurt! It must be real...!" Hiroshi said excitedly.

—*No, something's not right here.*

Akuto crossed his arms in thought, deciding to think instead of speak. He must've had a serious look on his face, because the students around him fled in terror, and Hiroshi looked satisfied that he'd come to some sort of decision. But Akuto himself noticed none of this.

○

There was one other person besides Akuto who was troubled by the treasure maps.

It was Fujiko Eto.

In public, she was the most beautiful girl in the school, with the best grades, and also the head of the dorm. She was revered by boys and girls alike. But in private, she was a black mage with a thirst for power and control. Not long ago she'd planned to bring Akuto under her control, but her plans had been foiled in a very strange way.

Fujiko had gone down into the basement, making sure nobody knew where

she was. She'd turned one of the rooms of this underground labyrinth, which was used during the great war, into a black magic laboratory. Normally she used it when she wanted to be alone, but her goal today was different.

A living, disembodied head, sealed in glass jar, was always waiting for her in the room. It was her brother, who she'd reanimated using the forbidden magics of necromancy. Normally, her brother was just someone she talked to when she wanted company, but today she was here to demand answers.

In the dim, velvet-lined room, she showed her brother's head a copy of the treasure map.

"You wrote this, didn't you?"

"No, I've never seen it before," he answered immediately.

"That's impossible." Fujiko said, but then she cut herself off. She knew how this worked. Necromancy didn't truly revive the dead. It simply replayed the stored memories of the past, and used them to create the answer that the dead person would have given. In other words, a dead man couldn't lie.

"But this is your handwriting..." There was no way she could mistake the handwriting of someone so close to her. But it was impossible for the dead to lie.

In this country, almost everyone underwent some form of religious baptism. And that baptism meant that a god now controlled you. "God is watching you," wasn't just a simple metaphor. Every action a human took was recorded by the gods via mana.

"So you have no memories of the location on map then, brother?" Fujiko asked a different question.

Her brother said he didn't, of course.

—I know for a fact that brother graduated from this school.

Which meant that it was impossible for him to have no memories of it at all...

Was it possible that someone erased those memories? The gods treated everyone equally. And so it was possible for anyone to accept their blessing (that is, use magic). But what was impossible was for anyone to alter the gods

themselves. The gods were designed to prevent that from happening, or at least they were supposed to be.

“Listen, brother, my head hurts, so I’ll be going.”

Fujiko felt something bothering her, and so she headed back to the surface once more via her secret route. She wasn’t lying about the headache, either. The contradiction she’d felt before was welling up from the bottom of her heart, and it was eating away at her.

Once she made it back to the surface, Fujiko’s demeanor changed to that of the perfect little young lady. The students in the midst of their lunchtime chats turned to her with eyes of admiration. Fujiko lowered her head in greeting, and they all responded with cheerful voices.

This greeting was practically a ritual at this point, but then Fujiko froze when she saw a certain girl. As head of the girl’s dorm, she knew the faces of all the female students. Even if she couldn’t remember their names, she would at least know their faces. This student, however, was unknown to her.

The girl had long hair tied in a ponytail. Her uniform didn’t quite seem to fit, and it made her look a bit disheveled. Her features were clearly defined, and while you might call her beautiful, there was something unsettling about her. After greeting the student, Fujiko realized that it came from the fact that her eyes and face aggressively showed her thoughts and feelings.

“A fine afternoon to you.” Fujiko bowed, and the girl looked at her with wide eyes, as if fascinated by her.

“A fine afternoon? Wow, you’re hilarious!”

“Oh, am I?” Fujiko’s answer was cheerful, but in her heart she felt her guard raising up. There was something about this girl that put her on edge, beyond simple rudeness.

The girl laughed loudly.

“That’s right! I mean, you’re not the type, are you? I can tell by looking what a nasty girl you are. I can tell you this: people like you are beyond help.”

“Y-You’re being very rude!” Fujiko just barely managed to keep her external

composure, but the girl now had the upper hand.

“Hahaha! If you want to lie, you need to tell a lie that won’t make you panic when it’s found out! Otherwise it’s not fun, Fujiko Eto!”

The girl’s voice was cheerful and innocent, and she spread out her hands in glee and spun around right where she stood.

“You’re not a student here, are you?!” Fujiko said, now with certainty, as she prepared to fire a mana ball from her right hand. But before she could, the girl had jumped behind her.

“I’m not a student, but I do have permission to enter the school! Listen, Fujiko Eto, if you keep avoiding the truth, you’re going to make enemies, okay? Like me, for example!”

At this point it was hard for even Fujiko to keep up her act. She stopped herself from launching an attack, and watched the girl leave with a smile. She was running away at a very fast pace.

“Who was that, Fujiko?”

The other students saw the commotion and ran up to her, worried. Fujiko kept her good rich girl act up as she put her hand on her cheek, picking her words so that she’d sound like a victim.

“I don’t know. I’m not sure what’s going on. It seems that someone strange has entered the school. I’ll make sure to tell the teachers.”

It took Fujiko a lot of effort to maintain her composure.

○

At that same moment, Junko was hiding in her dorm room alone after having her clothes blown off by Akuto. Of course, she was embarrassed about losing her clothes in front of everyone, but a full night had already passed, and last night at dinner her friends had come to comfort her. She was calm now, at least about that. But whenever she was alone, she was ruled by feelings that she didn’t understand, and there was nothing she could do about it.

“That idiot! Dumbass! Fool!”

Junko had spent the whole night in her futon, but each time she saw Akuto’s

jacket on top of it, she would start to flail around and throw a tantrum. The obvious solution would be to put it somewhere she couldn't see it, but Junko told herself that it was the only place she had room for it.

—And I have to think about what I'll say when I give it back, too.

She needed to thank him for it, but if she didn't chose her words right she'd sound like an idiot. And then he wouldn't take her seriously. How was she supposed to give it back to him anyway? Was she supposed to wash it first? But if it wasn't dirty, it probably didn't need that...

Junko picked up the jacket and looked for stains on the inside. It had been touching her skin, so if there was some kind of stain on it, that would be mortifying.

—No, wouldn't be problem be the smell?

Suddenly she got worried and pressed her face into the jacket.

—So this is his...

When she realized what she was doing, Junko's face reddened as if it were about to explode, and she moved her face away from the jacket. She spent a moment catching her breath and then got up from the futon.

Junko started to run from one corner of the room to the other, flailing her arms around and smacking everything she could see.

"Soga! Keena Soga! You're not here, right?! You're not spying on me, are you?!"

She'd remembered the time the invisible Keena had been spying on her in her room. After spending ten minutes or so giving her room a thorough search, Junko finally calmed down. Then, after making sure that her doors were locked, she sat down on her knees on the futon.

Then she raised Akuto's jacket with trembling hands, closed her eyes, and held it close to her body, rubbing her face against the inside.

—This feeling...

Suddenly, the buzzer on her student handbook rang.

“Hyaaah!” Junko screamed and jumped a full meter straight up. She quickly looked around to see if anyone had seen her, but of course she was completely alone. She looked down at the handbook and saw that a message had come from her family. She let out her breath in a puff and calmly looked at it.

Junko’s mind cleared instantly. On the surface, the message looked unremarkable. But in a secret code only those of the Hattori clan knew, this is what it said: 《*Someone from the Teruya Clan is on the move. We will meet at the designated point.*》

—Them?

Junko’s eyes narrowed. It was the name of a clan that had been their rivals for many years.

2 - Who's That Girl?

Akuto had a bad feeling. No, it was less a feeling and more a prediction. And of course, his prediction was correct.

As he was relaxing in his dorm at night, he saw one injured person after another being brought to the cafeteria. Evidently the nurse's office was empty except for a single nurse at night, and she couldn't handle the sudden influx of injuries.

Akuto was having some after-dinner tea with Hiroshi and Korone. He watched as one table after another was moved to the side, and male students were placed atop them like fish at a market. If this was a fish market, it would've been a great catch. The number of students kept going up. The students who were worshipers of Ko-Roh, who wanted to be doctors, were busy giving them first aid.

"This is probably because of that treasure hunt thing, isn't it?" Akuto said. Hiroshi nodded.

"That's right, boss."

"Treasure hunting is for kids. There's no reason to go out and get hurt in the process..."

The second the words left Akuto's mouth, the air in the cafeteria froze. The other students must have thought he was insulting them. Eyes filled with anger and hatred stared at Akuto. He'd forgotten that the students here respected recklessness and a love of danger, and considered "dumb fun" a virtue.

—*Crap.*

Oddly enough, Akuto was extremely sensitive to these sorts of changes in a room's atmosphere. He stood up and walked over to where a first-year student was healing an injured second-year, and smiled at him as best he could.

"I'm a worshiper of Ko-Roh too. If you can just teach me how to use healing magic... No, you don't even have to teach me. I'll help," Akuto said, but the two

of them wouldn't have looked more scared if the world's worst doctor had walked over. Their faces went pale and they just kept shaking their heads.

"You don't need to be that scared. I'm not going to do anything." Akuto leaned over, and the first-year screamed and leapt back. The second-year, who only moments before had been badly hurt, suddenly jumped up on the table and started hopping on one foot, screaming, "I'm better! I'm all better!"

"N-No, I'm sorry. I'll leave you alone, okay?"

Akuto left and walked back to his seat.

"Korone, do you think you can help them?" he asked.

"Certainly. My orders are to obey the will of the my observation target."

Korone trotted over to the injured boy. Unlike Akuto, she was extremely popular. When she took her medicines out of her bag, they all started to frantically motion her over.

Akuto watched her treat one student after another, and decided that now it would be easier to talk to them. He picked one of the closer students, and, as cheerfully as he could, asked the question that had been bothering him.

"So something got you, huh?"

The student went pale for an instant, but he must've thought that there was no point staying quiet, because he answered with a sour expression. He was a big guy, probably one of the strongest in the first-year class.

"Yeah. It took me out before I even knew what was going on. It was pretty strong."

"Really?" Akuto said, and every student in the room looked back at him. The awkwardness that had temporarily vanished was back.

—I guess they thought I was implying that they're all weak for losing, huh? Since they said they lost before they even knew what hit them, I was just surprised that something like that even exists.

When he realized what was going on, Akuto coughed and chose his next words carefully.

“Sorry. I just never knew a monster like that even existed. I mean, look at how many of you got hurt. If you all attacked at once, you should be able to take down even a strong monster, right?”

“We didn’t all attack at once. We were split up.” The first-year student sounded annoyed.

“Then all of you guys attacked it on your own?”

“We didn’t attack it.”

“Then it attacked you. But I mean, there’s so many of you. Shouldn’t you have just stayed grouped together?” Akuto was genuinely curious, but the first-year sounded even more frustrated.

“We weren’t all looking for the treasure together. We all went on our own. A few people went in pairs, but that was it.”

“Oh, right!” Akuto sounded as if something had just dawned on him.

“It was a treasure hunt! Of course you’d try to get there before everybody else! I’m sorry, I didn’t realize! If you weren’t so self-interested, there’s no way so many of you would’ve gotten hurt!”

The whole cafeteria went dead silent.

—Whoops. I screwed up again, didn’t I?

Akuto tried to make up for it by saying his next words loud enough for everyone to hear.

“No, I just meant that if you’d worked together, you would’ve had a better result. The students at this school are all really strong, right? With the right leader, you’d be very powerful.”

It seemed that the first-year student was now so irritated that he just didn’t care anymore, because his tone towards Akuto was now brutal.

“Shut up. We don’t have anybody to lead us.”

“No, you’ve got that ranking system, right? If you can just have the most powerful person lead you...”

And then Akuto realized his mistake. He hadn’t noticed until he’d said it.

—Wait. I was the one who defeated the last top-ranked person!

Akuto froze. The people around him were starting to murmur now.

“So you’re saying that if you were in charge, things would go well?”

“You want us to serve you, Demon King?”

“Wait, doesn’t that mean that the Demon King set the whole thing up so that this would happen...?”

“You’re right. He was the one who found the map, and it was his woman who put those copies of it up everywhere.”

This was going in a bad direction. They were all looking at Akuto with a mixture of astonishment and terror.

Akuto shook his head and stood up.

“That’s not true! I wouldn’t get anything out of doing that! I was just pointing out what you did wrong! But I don’t mean to criticize you. I’m just saying we can all work together now! Like maybe if you shared all your information about what it was that attacked you, you might be able to come up with a plan.”

One of Akuto’s flaws was that he always tried to act cooler than he was at times like this. But he had a point, so the wounded began to stir back to life and share information with the people around them.

“They turn into fog and you can’t attack them.”

“That got me too. And it was really dark, so I couldn’t see, but there were lots of insects or something flying around. I couldn’t hit them...”

“That’s right. The bugs were the attack, and the fog was what was controlling them. There’s no way to fight it.”

Akuto could hear them all talking with each other. Eventually, they started to discuss how to defeat it. But as the debate started to heat up, they started to argue about who should do what.

“So the decoy just has to draw the bugs away, you see?”

“Who’s going to be the decoy?!”

“Somebody fast.”

“Idiot. Everybody knows that you have somebody in heavy armor be the decoy.”

“What? Are you saying my opinion is wrong? Who are you calling an idiot?”

“That’s not it. I mean, it changes depending on who’s in charge.”

“That’s right. Who’s going to be in charge? Are we going to have a tournament to find out?”

“If we do that, then it’s just going to end up a fight to see who gets the treasure.”

“Who cares? If we have to fight, we have to fight. At least we’ll know who’s the strongest.”

The mood in the room began to turn dangerous. Akuto realized that it was his fault, in a way. He spoke up, hoping to fix things.

“Hey everyone, we don’t need to get like this! We don’t even know if the treasure exists. And it seems like it’s been left where it is for a long time. So why don’t we just pretend it doesn’t exist? Then everything will go back to normal.”

But that just poured oil on the fire.

“You’re the one who found the map!”

“And we’re fighting the monster to get revenge for injuring us! Not for the treasure!”

They started to shout. The fact that they’d switched their objective to “revenge” angered Akuto. It seemed to him like they were just trying to hide their own weakness.

“Then why don’t you all go out there on your own and lose again? There’s no point in talking to idiots who can’t even accept the fact that they’re weak! Why can’t you cooperate with each other?” Akuto yelled in frustration. His voice was loud enough that everyone stopped moving.

—I did it again.

But at this point, there was no backing down. Using this situation to put a stop to the treasure hunt would be to everybody’s benefit.

“Don’t go off on adventures if you’re too weak to handle them! If you really want to go, at least show that you’re capable of it first! And if you don’t have the guts to do that, don’t try and sneak around selfishly instead of working with other people! That’s all I want to say!”

Akuto ended his speech by slamming his fist down on the table. Inside he was shaking from embarrassment and regret, but if he backed down now after provoking them all, they might try to strangle him in his sleep. He stood up as straight as he could and glared at the people around him, then walked out of the cafeteria with his head held high.

Hiroshi followed after him, his eyes wet with tears.

“That was amazing, boss! You were so cool!”

“No... it just kinda ended up that way.”

“You’re being too humble! I get it! You’re not trying to rule the school by force, you want to make it so the whole school naturally respects you, right? And you’re training them so they’ll have the courage to make decisions on their own! You’re so smart! I’m learning so much from you!”

“Oh, uh... Good,” Akuto whispered, no longer having the strength to correct him. Hiroshi nodded vigorously.

“I’m so glad I joined forces with you, boss! Oh and don’t worry! I used the “speaker” to broadcast that speech throughout the whole dorm!”

“...The boys dorm, and the girl’s dorm?”

“Of course!” Hiroshi said, looking pleased with himself.

—*Things will only get worse, now...*

Akuto was starting to get a headache. In the end, thinking about it would get him nowhere, so he decided to stop thinking.

o

The next day, Akuto was summoned by the student council president. Akuto was an early riser, so he was already awake by the time he got the message. But the president herself still looked half-asleep. Even as she sat at her desk in the student council room, she was using her elbows to prop her head up and her

eyes were drooping.

“Sorry to bring you here this early in the morning. I heard that... speech... yesterday. It was hilarious.”

Akuto couldn’t tell if she was upset or just sleepy, so he didn’t know how to react. She was a girl, but she looked like a strangely intimidating boy, and so it was hard to read her face.

“I’m embarrassed,” said Akuto, lowering his head.

“No, I think it’s fine,” she said with a yawn. “I was feeling bad about the kids getting hurt. That’s why I called you here. I want you, as head of the disciplinary committee, to officially ban treasure-hunting.”

“Officially?”

“Yup. Your powers as head of the disciplinary committee are pretty broad. You can punish people caught violating the rules. It’s kind of a ‘rule by fear’ thing, you see. And from what you said yesterday, you made it sound like if somebody is strong, it’s okay for them to go looking for it, right? You realize how bad that is, don’t you?”

“That’s true. I’m sorry.”

“Nah, it’s fine. If you’re going to apologize for something, apologize for not keeping your mouth shut about the map after I asked you to.”

“I am sorry about that. I wasn’t careful enough.”

“Hmm, well, it’s fine since you apologized. Anyway, it might’ve leaked from our side,” she said with a laugh.


会長
Student
Council
President

Come to think of it, he'd given the map to Korone. She would never be careless with it,which means that Keena must have stolen it from here. But that wasn't worth pointing out.

"I'll take responsibility by issuing an order forbidding searching for the treasure," Akuto said. As he spoke, he happened to look around the room.

"I don't see the other three..."

"Oh, they're out taking care of something. They'll be back in time for morning homeroom," she said. Then she ushered him out, saying she was going to do an emergency morning broadcast to the whole school.

○

An hour later, all the students in the school lined up in the courtyard. It was quite a sight to see all the students from the middle and high schools together. Akuto was standing in front of them, next to the student council president. Artificial life forms called "speakers" were floating in front of the courtyard podium, ready to broadcast the words of the speaker to the student body.

—They're not here...

Akuto looked through the students from his own class, 1-A, and saw that Junko and Keena were missing. He knew that neither of them wanted to see him right now, but it really bothered him that they weren't there.

But before he could think about it more, the student council president had already finished her introduction. He didn't have the time to space out right now. All she'd said was, "Good morning. The head of the disciplinary committee has something to say to all of you," and then she'd stepped down.

Akuto quickly ran up onto the podium. A normal person would be nervous speaking in front of the whole school, but not Akuto. He quickly put together the words he wanted to say and began to give his introduction. But he was interrupted by someone shouting out from the crowd.

"Akuto Sai! We just need to prove to you that we're strong, right? Then I'm going to do it!"

It was a girl's voice. He saw a girl with a long ponytail leap out of the rows of

students. She flew several meters up in the air, her hair flipping in the wind, and then she spun and stretched out her right foot into a kick and headed straight for Akuto.

“Go! Exploding Aerial Three-Horned Kick!” she screamed as the mana gathered at her toes. Her foot was aiming straight at his head.

—Holy sh—

Akuto took a step to the right on the podium. He should have had more than enough time to dodge, but he quickly realized his mistake. Amazingly, she changed direction in mid-air. This meant that despite what it might have looked like, she wasn’t falling. She was flying at him. Her speed was incredible, but she was definitely in control. Sure enough, her foot was aiming for Akuto once more.

—Should I block her with my hands? But no, then my mana will go out of control again.

Akuto didn’t have any good options. He couldn’t let his mana go out of control and explode again, but there was no way he could block it without using mana.

—Then I’ll dodge it once she gets close!

Akuto made his decision instantly. If he moved to the left or right, she’d just change course again. Which meant that his only option was to move just before she hit him.

“Take this! Critical hit!” she yelled, confident in her accuracy.

But Akuto’s reflexes were faster than she anticipated. Just before she hit him, he craned his neck, turning his head away and dodging her shining foot at the last second.

“I missed?!” she screamed.

—I dodged it!

Akuto thought happily. But in the next moment...

Squish

There was a strange noise as something soft landed on Akuto's head. Everything went black. For a moment, he wasn't sure what had happened. Both cheeks were being pinched hard between something soft. It was like there was some kind of soft cloth over his head.

"Kyaah! No!"

It was only when he heard the scream above him that Akuto realized what had happened.

The girl's legs were wrapped around his head. He was still standing, so it was like he was giving her a reverse piggy-back ride.

"Uwaah! Hey!" Akuto couldn't just shake her off, so all he could do was stand there and stomp his feet From the outside, it must have looked ridiculous. No, he knew exactly how it looked. It looked like he was standing in front of the entire student body with his head inside a girl's skirt, rubbing his face against her crotch.

"What are you doing, Akuto Sai?!"

The girl probably couldn't concentrate enough to use her mana again, because she didn't just fly off. Akuto did his best to keep from dropping her.

"You're the one who tried to kick me...!"

"Hyah! Don't talk! It feels weird!"

"Oh, sorr—"

"I said don't talk! Don't move!"

"I'll stop moving, so get off me!"

"Hyaahh! B-But I'm stuck and I can't move! It feels like I'm going to fall backwards!"

"Then just stay still. I'll put you down."

Akuto groped around until he found her hips. He lifted her up, and then moved her legs off his shoulders and lowered her down. She kept her legs wrapped around him as she was gradually lowered to the ground.

But when she got to the point where her face was level with his, she wrapped

her legs around him tightly and stopped moving.

“Get off me,” Akuto said, confused.

She had striking features, and while you might call her beautiful, something seemed off about her. It was because her eyes and her expression showed her feelings too plainly. It was the girl that Fujiko had encountered the other day.

“What’s wrong?” Akuto asked again.

Her face was only a few centimeters away from his. Her breath felt ticklish on his skin.

“Up close, you’re pretty good looking, huh?” she said, and she wrapped her arms around his neck. Her legs were still wrapped around his hips, so it looked like she was hanging from his front.

“Thanks, I guess. Can you get off me?”

Akuto somehow managed to stay calm. This might have been because the situation was so outrageous that he was simply in shock. He didn’t understand it himself. Maybe it was just that it was in his nature to try to act cool no matter what the situation was.

“You’re really interesting! Hey, how’d you dodge my kick like that?”

The girl’s smile reminded him of a child who’d found a new toy. Akuto turned away and answered her question, hoping she’d get off him soon.

“If I had blocked you, my mana would go out of control and cause an explosion. I’m too powerful. And I knew that you were controlling your flight path, so I decided to dodge at the last second. I dodged inwards because if I went the other direction, you’d go right past me and blow yourself up, and I didn’t want that. Now get off me,” he said, but that just interested her more.

“Wow, you’re amazing! You figured all that out in a single instant! You’re only the second guy I’ve ever met who’s like that! Should I be his woman, or yours? What do you think? If you want, we can do it right now!”

She pressed her hips against Akuto. Given that she was lined up right against Akuto’s crotch, this could — no, it certainly did — look like an incredibly obscene act.

“Get off me, please.” This was enough to fluster even Akuto, and so he tried to get the girl’s arms off his neck. But she had strong legs, it seemed, so she held onto him anyway. And the instant she got the chance, she moved her arms back around his neck.

—*What is up with this girl...?*

Akuto looked around in search of help. The student council president was chuckling in a strange way, and spinning her finger in a circle to encourage him to wrap it up. The teachers were too stunned to do anything, and the students were all pointing and murmuring.

“Hey, what’s going on here...?”

“I can’t believe he’s going to do it in front of the whole student body!”

“No, he may already be doing it!”

“I can’t see from here. Do you think maybe she’s not wearing anything under her skirt?”

“N-No, even if he’s the Demon King, he can’t... And he looks weirdly calm, right?”

“No, villains always do it with girls without changing their expression, right?”

“Th-That’s true... But seeing it done right in front of me actually makes me feel like a loser by comparison...”

“In front of the whole school... that’s crazy...”

—*What the hell is going on here?!*

But even now, Akuto couldn’t bring himself to get angry at a girl. He cleared his throat calmly, and said in as loud a voice as he could muster, “Everyone, be quiet!”

His voice was amplified by the “speakers,” and echoed throughout the courtyard with a terrible feedback noise. The students covered their ears. He cleared his throat again, and the whole school fell silent and turned their attention towards him.

“Everyone, I told you yesterday that if you wanted to go treasure-hunting, you

needed to show your strength! She seems to have believed me, and tried to challenge me, but I want you to understand that this is a futile act!”

Akuto gave up on prying the girl off of him, and continued to speak while she held onto him. The students started to murmur again.

“I see... He’s saying he’ll defeat us, just like he did her...”

“He must’ve used some magic to seduce her...”

“It must’ve been when he shoved his face into her crotch... He must’ve done something then...”

The students’ voices began to rise in terror.

—You’ve got it all wrong, guys! No, I can’t blame you for thinking that. This girl is just crazy! You’ve gotta understand that!

Akuto wanted to scream these thoughts out loud, but he knew it wouldn’t help. The only option he had now was to do his job and get off the podium as soon as possible.

“By my authority as head of the disciplinary committee, I am putting a ban on searching for the treasure! Anyone who defies me will be punished! That is all I —...”

But the students started booing before he could finish. Clearly they weren’t happy about the ban.

—Any other day I’d be able to put things in a way that wouldn’t make them so mad, but they won’t believe anything I say with this girl hanging off me...

And then the girl spoke. She was talking loud enough that the “speakers” could hear her.

“You’re taking back what you said last night? That’s not very manly of you. If you don’t want the weaker students going, then why don’t you go yourself?”

The students started to cheer.

“That’s right! You go out and put yourself at risk!”

“If you think we’re weak, then take responsibility!”

“Don’t hog all the treasure, though!”

Akuto looked towards the student council president, unsure of how to handle this uproar. She was giving him an “I don’t care, just wrap this up,” gesture.

—I guess the important thing is that the students don’t get hurt...

Akuto gave up.

“Alright. I’ll go. But no other students will be allowed within a one kilometer radius of the spots on the map.”

And then he got down from the podium. It was only then that the girl finally got off him. He looked at the student council president with a “who is this girl?” gesture, but she just shrugged.

“Who are you?” Akuto asked, and the girl turned back towards him, her ponytail flailing behind her.

“Eiko Teruya. I was just going to tease you a little, but I think our relationship is going to be a long one, so remember my name, understand?”

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“The weekend starts tomorrow, so just get it wrapped up before next week. If you can’t find the treasure, then just lie and say you did.”

The student council president wasn’t happy about Akuto going treasure hunting. After that speech, she’d called him to the student council room and started to lecture him “I’m sorry. Somebody needs to find out what that monster is, though, right? So I’ll just find that out and then come back,” he said.

He’d noticed the other three (treasurer, secretary, and vice-president) were looking at him with hatred in their eyes. This was his attempt at calming them down, but it didn’t work.

All of them were oddly imposing. The treasurer was a wild-looking girl with very thick eyebrows. The secretary was tall for a girl, and expressionless. And the vice-president was thin and pretty, but her skin was so pale she looked unhealthy.

Akuto sensed that the three of them would make dangerous enemies, and wanted to avoid making them mad, but that seemed impossible right now.

“Don’t worry. I won’t cause any trouble,” he assured them.

The student council president seemed to want to say something.

“Um, listen. If you... fail... I won’t tell anyone... so you can just come on back, okay? Yeah... Yeah, that’s the best thing to do.” She nodded at Akuto.

“It sounds like you want me to fail.” Akuto tilted his head, confused. She nodded.

“You can feel free to interpret things that way. I just want to pretend this whole thing never happened, you see.”

“Then you should’ve done something back there. You didn’t do anything about that weird girl, remember?” Akuto said, a little angrily.

“No, well... that’s true, but... I didn’t want to bother you when you were enjoying yourself,” she mumbled.

“I was *not* enjoying myself! What were you thinking? And who is that girl, anyway? She just vanished right after that.” Akuto pressed her for an explanation.

Suddenly the student council president’s cheeks twitched a little. She put her finger on the rim of her hat. Akuto didn’t know what that meant, but he could feel the three girls behind him stepping back in fear.

—Huh?

But then she quickly took her finger off her hat. She tapped her fingers on her desk, her cheeks still twitching.

“That girl isn’t one of our students. She was wearing our uniform, but that’s all. I can’t say anything more than that. Because of my job, there are some things I can’t say. But... I’m not sure if this is a warning I’m giving you, or a favor I’m asking for, but please don’t let her do whatever she wants. Also, take a damn hint for once. There are some truths that are better left buried.”

The way she was acting, and the words she was saying made no sense to Akuto. But after she put it like that, he had no choice but to obey.

“Understood.”

With that, Akuto left the student council room. But he couldn’t help but feel suspicious about what she’d said.

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—I have to get ready, but...

Akuto had opened up the backpack he'd borrowed from the school to get ready for his journey, and put it on the floor of his dorm room. But before he could figure out what to put in it, he had to decide what to do with the two people standing next to it.

Those two people were Korone and Hiroshi. They both insisted on going, and wouldn't listen to him when he told them no. Korone was one thing. She was his observer, and when he needed help, she'd be there to provide it. The problem was Hiroshi.

"I'm coming with you, boss! I'm prepared to lay down my life for you..."

Hiroshi went on and on about how dedicated he was, but Akuto wasn't listening.

—He's probably going to come no matter what I say, so there's no point in telling him no. But there's too many weird things going on, including that Eiko Teruya girl... Hiroshi can be helpful sometimes, but I'm not confident that I could keep him safe in a monster fight. I might be getting Hiroshi in over his head...

Akuto thought for a moment, and made a decision.

"Can you pack my bags? I have something else to get ready," he said.

Hiroshi seemed overjoyed to have been given a job to do, and he was almost crying as he headed for the cafeteria to get provisions.

—Now then...

This was going to take some courage, but Akuto took out his student handbook and sent a telepathic call.

And half an hour later, he was waiting for someone in a certain room in the underground labyrinth beneath the school, a room he'd been to before. It had once been used as a planning room, and it was separated by just a single wall from Fujiko's secret lair.

"You've got guts, I'll give you that. What on earth are you thinking, coming to me?" Fujiko appeared in front of Akuto, looking angry.

“I couldn’t blame if you if you didn’t show up, so thank you for coming.” Akuto stood up and bowed.

All the students’ memories had been wiped after what had happened, so only Akuto and Keena knew who Fujiko really was. Of course, this is why Fujiko had come to meet him.

“Don’t tell me you’re planning on blackmailing me.”

“No. It wouldn’t work, would it? And even if I did tell everyone who you really were, nobody would believe me,” Akuto said quickly.

“Then what are you doing? I still haven’t given up on making you mine, you know,” Fujiko said, looking strained.

“I know. But I think we’re better off with a normal relationship, like that of an underclassman and upperclassman.”

“Listen...” Fujiko crossed her arms in an exasperated fashion and looked down at Akuto. “I’ll ask you not to insult my ambitions as a black mage. To black mages, the Demon King is a symbol of liberation, but I want to surpass him.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t even want to be the Demon King.”

Fujiko didn’t seem to know how to handle this.

“Th-Then what do you want? You ruined all my plans, and then set a trap for me instead...”

Akuto didn’t tell her that this was only thanks to Keena’s shenanigans. He just held her gaze steadily.

“Wh-What is it?!”

“I want you to teach me how to fight with magic. I’m still letting my mana go out of control, and I don’t know how to use it properly. I can’t afford to wait until I learn in class.”

Akuto’s tone was completely serious. Fujiko looked shocked.

“And so you came to me?”

“That’s right. I wanted to ask the best fighter I knew.”

Fujiko smiled wickedly.

“I might try to set a trap for you.”

“I think you will, but still, you’re the best person I can learn from.”

Fujiko could tell he meant it, and she had no idea how to react.

“Y-You’re really naive, you know that? Or is this some kind of attempt to show me what a good person you are?”

“No, I don’t think I’m really a good person. Sometimes I get mad and take it out on other people, for one thing. But I think it’s safe to say that I have faith in you.”

“And that’s why you’re naive.”

“No, that’s not true. You have a nasty personality, right? You’re self-interested, you worship power, and you try to turn other people’s power to your advantage. The problem is that you don’t believe in other people. That’s why you end up getting scared and doing things in secret.”

“Wha—...?” Fujiko’s jaw dropped.

—Did I say too much? But it is true, after all...

Akuto kept talking despite worrying that he’d already gone too far.

“Like I said before, I have faith in you. You know, even if there’s somebody you can’t trust at all, you can trust them to work to their own advantage, right? So I’ll give you something in exchange. It’s not exactly a trade, but maybe I can make you a promise. If you teach me magic, I promise that I won’t interfere with your activities. How about that? Knowing how much you love to scheme, I think you’ll accept.”

Fujiko angrily slammed her palms against the table in front of him.

“You think you know everything about me, don’t you?”

—You claim to be a villain, so I was trying to give you a compliment a villain would like... And isn’t it normal to do a little research before deciding to associate with someone, anyway?

He crossed his arms and frowned, but since he realized he was getting nowhere, he lowered his head.

“I apologize if I was rude. But I’m here, knowing the risks. And you’re the one who wanted to make me your servant, right? So if you can have me as your student...”

“Wh-What is your problem?!” Fujiko screamed. She was slamming her fists onto the table again. “Fine! You want me to teach you to fight, I will! I’ll do it right now! But don’t blame me if you end up regretting this later! You demon! Demon King!”

—Well, I got what I wanted, but now she’s mad at me for some reason...

Akuto slumped his shoulders.

“Um... there’s one more thing...”

“What now?!”

“Could you... stop calling me Demon King?”

“I refuse! I don’t want to admit it, but you’ve got the talent for it!” Fujiko slammed her fists in the table a third time.

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Fujiko told him to open his student handbook and take notes in it.

“Magic is the art of using the mana in your body to cause a reaction with the mana in the air. You know that, right? And the mana in the body acts in response to electrical signals in the brain. Everyone knows that, too. Now, what decides how the mana itself behaves? The gods. ‘Energy’ is what is produced by the central generator and is released into the earth itself, so it wouldn’t be the right term to use here. It’s better to call it a kind of ‘mana program.’”

That, Akuto knew. But he only vaguely knew about the information that followed.

“The behavior of mana is decided by the gods. Mana may seem omnipotent, but in this way, it’s actually limited. And so the question here is, what are the gods? The gods are beings that constantly monitor and log human brain activity via mana. That’s the simplest way to put it. Some people think of them as computers while others consider them entities worthy of worship. It depends on the individual. If your emotions are being monitored, that means that the

gods can give you more or less of their blessing based on your behavior. The logs themselves are never made public, but this means that humans are, in effect, forced to be good because of their desire for the convenience that magic offers."

"Philanthropy is a virtue according to the god Ko-Roh, while Suhara prefers bravery. And so they each make their own type of magic easier to use. Normal people just worship the gods as divine beings, but at the upper levels it's much more systematic. The truth about what the gods are isn't kept a secret or anything. It's just that most people don't want to think about it too hard. All those involved in academics are aware of this. Even among those who aren't, most intelligent people simply 'choose' to act as if it's a religion. Doing so allows magic to make your life much more convenient, and there's a great advantage to it."

"So the ultimate goal of this academy's graduates is to become priests; who are capable of influencing the inner workings of the gods themselves. But the black mages are opposed to this. In other words, we oppose this system, and want to see a revival of humanity's old ways. At least, the organized black mages do. I won't deny that many of them are just people who enjoy committing crimes."

Akuto interrupted.

"So what's a Demon King then?"

"You don't know anything about yourself, do you? No, I suppose nobody's tried to tell you. Children born in this country are baptized, right? That's a contract with a god, and without it, you can't use magic. But this means that those who are left out of this system cannot live regular lives as humans. It's said that the last Demon King was someone who doubted this system. This information isn't particularly classified either. It's just that nobody cares."

"So what does this have to do with using magic?"

"Certain types of magic require special rights to use them, and using them is considered a crime. But you're aware that just because it's a crime doesn't mean it's impossible, right? For example, you're supposed to need a license to use flight magic, but everyone here at the academy practices it. The same can

be said of ‘forbidden magic.’ You can’t use it unless you have the required rights. But if you can deceive the gods into thinking you do, it’s possible to use it. You could say that black mages are people who do that. But the use of ‘forbidden magic’ is monitored by the gods. You can trick the gods into thinking you have the right to use it, but that doesn’t stop them from penalizing you. So the more you use black magic, the weaker you become.”

“Then there’s no point in being a black mage, is there?”

“Correct. That’s why the black mages sought their own god. A god of freedom. A god who would forbid nothing.”

“And what happened to that god?”

“It’s gone now. It was destroyed in the last war. Recreating it is the dream of all black mages. That’s why some black mages are trying their best to get the High Priest to turn. Only the High Priest, and those around him, has the knowledge required to create a god.”

“I see,” said Akuto, nodding. Fujiko had covered most of what he’d learned in his first-year classes.

—But it seems to me like the black mages are just being selfish... I guess if we see things that differently, I couldn’t become the Demon King, huh?

Fujiko finally got to the point.

“So, we were talking about fighting. The reason I told you all that was to explain that the god that baptized you, as well as the layout of your psyche, determine what types of magic you’ll be good at.”

Fujiko stretched out her hand over Akuto’s student handbook and drew a diagram. Four lines intersected to form a star shape. She’d drawn an eight-pointed matrix. And at each point of the star, she wrote these words, in this order.

“Illusion,” “Healing,” “Telekinesis,” “Destruction,” “Spirits,” “Artifacts,” “Religion,” “Transformation.”

“These are the eight magic specialties, determined by your psyche. As the diagram suggests, nobody has both one specialty and its opposite. People who

are good at illusion magic are terrible at spirit magic. Recognizing this is the key to improvement."

"What's your specialty?"

"In my case, it's transformation, using mana to change the structure of matter. That means I can make medicines, or transform the body itself. In my case, I'm specialized in making medicines. What's important is to realize that that means I'm bad at destruction magic. You learn them all in class, but in a fight, it's best to just give up on the ones you aren't good at. It's not efficient. In your case, you're very clearly my opposite. It's obvious that your specialty is destruction magic."

"Which means that's what I should focus on, right?"

"Right. Once you know that, you have to learn the rest through practice, but we don't have time for that, so..."

Fujiko put something that definitely looked like a gun on the table.

Akuto gave her a confused look.

"What's this?"

"An incantation gun, which uses mana bullets. The bullets come pre-loaded with mana, and the spell takes effect after you fire it. Everybody is capable of using it, but someone who can control their mana can tune the bullets to do different things."

Fujiko lined up the bullets in front of him.

"You always carry this with you?"

"Yes. Is that a problem?"

"Isn't that illegal?"

"Not necessarily, at the Academy. Everybody here can already use dangerous magic."

Fujiko opened the revolver's chamber and gave him a simple demonstration of how to use it.

Then there was a brief pause in their conversation, and Akuto suddenly

remembered something that had been bothering him.

“Hey, you’re the dorm head, right?”

“That’s correct.”

“Do you know a girl named Eiko Teruya then?”

“No, I don’t... Is that the strange girl who was doing filthy things with you this morning?” asked Fujiko, her face tensing up.

“Do you know anything about her? The student council president said she didn’t, but it felt like she was hiding something. And she even told me to be careful around her...”

Fujiko seemed to think for a moment.

“She seemed to have it out for me, so I was wondering about her too,” she said.

“Did she attack you?”

“No, just gave me a bit of a hard time. If there’s something both you and I have in common, it’s probably that treasure map...”

Fujiko quickly put her hand over her mouth, realizing her mistake. But Akuto didn’t miss it.

“What does that mean? Do you know something about the map?”

Fujiko’s expression clouded.

“N-No... I just think it might’ve been something my late brother made.”

“Then...”

“N-No. My brother said he didn’t.”

“Huh? Wasn’t he dead?”

“Necromancy. Did you forget? I’m a black mage.”

Fujiko looked like she was trying to seem stronger than she really felt. A shadow had fallen on her normally arrogant attitude.

“I think I remember hearing that when you use necromancy on someone, they can’t tell lies, right? Sorry. It must’ve been painful, having to use

necromancy to talk to your brother.”

Akuto was trying to apologize after seeing the look on her face, but she just started to shout frantically.

“Not at all! He’s a terrible man! He shamed our family! I remember being with him all the time when I was young, but that must just be because he was an awful lolicon! If he was still alive today, he’d be a sex offender!”

—If you’re worried about shaming your family, why’d you become a black mage?

Akuto decided to keep his thoughts to himself.

“Either way, I’m worried about that Eiko Teruya girl. But I just don’t know how to be forceful around women...”

Fujiko stared at him with fury in her eyes.

“You’re pretty forceful around me, don’t you think?”

“Well, sure... but... you’re evil, right? And I doubt you’d want me to suddenly start being gentle with you after all we’ve been through,” said Akuto without thinking. Fujiko pointed the incantation gun at him, her voice shaking.

“I hate men who disobey me, and even if they do obey me, I hate men who are weak!”

“Sorry about that...” Akuto reached forward with both hands and respectfully took the gun from her.

○

Akuto put the gun through its paces in the woods behind the school building, and it seemed to work well. He could immediately blow up a soda can that he’d placed a good distance away from him. He could control the bullet’s path, and the timing of when it blew up, so it was pretty easy to use. And unlike when he used his own mana, the bullet’s power was limited. He was relieved to finally have a weapon he could control.

Before long, Hiroshi showed up with a huge backpack. It seemed that he had finished packing, and Korone had come along with him.

“Boss, I packed you enough stuff to camp out for a week!”

“Thanks... But wouldn’t it be better to pack two bags?”

“I can’t let you carry our things, boss! Leave it to me!”

“Okay, but it doesn’t do me any good if you start wasting energy.”

“Don’t worry! I’m always wasting energy!”

“I see... Okay then. I guess it’s time to go,” Akuto said.

“It’s evening now. We’re not leaving tomorrow?” Korone asked.

“Let’s leave earlier than planned. I want to get started before anyone sees us going. It would be bad if we were spotted,” Akuto said, only to be answered by a voice above him.

“Spotted by who, Akuto Sai?”

He looked up in shock. Eiko Teruya was standing on a branch above him. She was puffing out her chest and standing with her legs apart, seemingly oblivious to the fact that he could see her underwear. Or maybe she wanted him to see it.

“You’re...”

But before he could continue, Akuto was astonished to see the underwear coming towards him. Eiko had leaped. She spun in mid-air, and landed directly on his shoulders with her legs around his head.

“Hey, you promised to take me with you!” said Eiko excitedly.

“I didn’t promise...”

“I’m going with you whether you promised or not. It’s okay, right?” Eiko rubbed her crotch up against the back of his head.

“Hey...” Akuto was stammering as he tried to speak, but Hiroshi complained violently in his place.

“Get off the boss, you whore!”

“You shouldn’t use ugly words like ‘whore!’ And anyway, it’s my business whose shoulders I ride on!”

“It is not! Boss is mine!”

“Are you gay? But he isn’t. Look, when I do this, his face gets all hot. See? See?”

She pressed harder against the back of Akuto’s head. With two soft thighs pressed hard against his ears, even Akuto couldn’t stop his cheeks from turning red.

“S-Stop it, please...”

But Akuto still couldn’t bring himself to protest strongly. And at the same time, Hiroshi just whined, and didn’t try to touch her.

“Take me!” Eiko insisted. “Even if you tell me you don’t want to, I’m going with you anyway.”

“No way!” Hiroshi said.

“Please don’t... Come on, it’s probably dangerous,” Akuto protested.

“I’m coming with you no matter what!”

Several fruitless minutes passed like this, before finally Korone spoke up.

“Arguing isn’t going to change anything. More importantly, the sun has already set. Why don’t we camp here for tonight?”

And so that’s what they did.

—Wait. Why am I camping in the woods out behind the school?

The question only occurred to Akuto after he was lying down in his tent.

At some point, Eiko vanished. So he decided to try leaving the tent and sneaking away in the dead of night. But Eiko quickly popped out from behind a tree, so he gave up.

—I guess that means she’s watching me. She doesn’t seem like an artificial human, so she’s probably trained so she doesn’t have to sleep. Who the hell is this girl, anyway?

At this point, Akuto decided to just give up and go to sleep.

○

Hiroshi woke Akuto early in the morning, and he quickly broke camp. He decided he looked so stupid camping in the woods behind school that he didn't want the other students seeing him.

At the same time Akuto was leaving, Junko had returned home from meeting with her father. He had told her that Eiko Teruya had snuck into the Academy in order to complete some kind of mission. What the mission was, or who her employer was, he didn't know.

The Hattori and Teruya clans had a long and complicated history. They were both believers in Suhara, but they had different interpretations of the god's teachings and they'd fought over them for many, many years. The Hattori had chosen to involve themselves in politics during peacetime to advance the nation's defense, but the Teruya saw this as a sign of weakness. They preferred to devote their lives to mastering the arts of combat.

—If someone like that is here at the school, it's probably because of...

Of course, the first thing Junko thought of was Akuto. Without even waiting for the morning's flying bus service to begin, the first thing she'd done when she got back was head to the window outside Akuto's room. But a single glance told her he wasn't there. The curtain was open, and the bed was neatly made.

"He left? This early?"

Junko headed back for the girl's dorm, where she knocked on Keena's door. There was no answer, but the door wasn't locked, and it opened when she turned the knob.

Junko went inside. The room was filled with stuffed animals and empty food containers. Keena was sleeping in her bed, oblivious to the noise.

"Sorry to bother you this early..."

Junko shook Keena by the shoulders and she started to mumble in her sleep.

"I can't eat any more Koshihikari..."

"Why Koshihikari?"

"But I can eat more Milky Queen..."

"Stop talking nonsense and wake up!"

It was only when Junko started to shake her violently that Keena woke up and rubbed her eyes.

“Is it morning? Night?”

“It’s early morning. I’m sorry, but this is an emergency. Where did Akuto Sai go?”

“Hmm? Ackie left.”

“Where?”

“He went treasure-hunting.”

“He’s doing WHAT? Is he five years old?” Junko said. She hadn’t seen the whole fuss from before.

“No. It’s real. There’s a pirate treasure here in the school. Only a truly courageous adventurer can gain it...”

“Enough of this nonsense! Tell me the truth!”

“It’s true, though... It must be Captain Kid’s treasure. His great voyage ended here at this school 50 years ago, but the treasure was never found...”

“We’re miles inland!” Junko yelled. Asking Keena was a mistake. She decided to go find someone she could trust more. But it took until breakfast to find out anything useful.



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“That idiot decided to take responsibility by going to find the treasure himself.”

“He was with some weird girl. Not Keena, but a girl with long hair. One I’d never seen before. I don’t know if there’s any student like that at this school. Was she a graduate?”

“Who cares? She was on top of him the whole time.”

“I mean, during that homeroom speech they were... hehehe! Aww, it’s too embarrassing to say...”

“Tell her! Tell her exactly what they were doing!”

“And this was during homeroom! I mean, can you believe it?”

Since there were only girls around, none of them bothered to hold back. And what they told her was almost enough to make Junko pass out for a moment.

—What? What are you thinking, Akuto Sai? And don’t tell me that girl you were with was Eiko...

By the time Junko got her own copy of the map and gathered her things, it was well into the afternoon. Then she secretly set out in direct defiance of the disciplinary committee head’s order.

3 - The Three Keys

The reason all the students had gone to the same place was that only one spot on the map was immediately identifiable: the underground crypt.

“So the other two places are marked, but the mark covers such a wide area that you’re not sure where they are?” Akuto asked.

“That’s right,” Hiroshi said. “This one’s a forest, and this is an old town.”

Akuto looked down at the map he was holding while comparing it with the aerial photo of the academy in his student handbook.

“But this crypt is big, so you were able to ID it. If we’re gonna have to look for the other two locations, we might have a mess on our hands.”

Akuto pointed at the crypt with a finger. There was a tiny park above it. In the park was an entrance to the underground; which was probably used for memorial ceremonies for the people who died during the Great War.

“And then there’s this text.”

《For Boichiro Yamato》

That’s what it said in tiny letters under the mark on the map. There was nothing written beneath the other two marks, so the only choice was to head here.

“Do you suppose this Boichiro Yamato guy is one of the people who died in the war?”

“There’s graves that hold people’s ashes there. If there are names there, it’ll probably give us some kind of hint,” Hiroshi said with a nod, only to be interrupted by a high laugh from his side. It was Eiko.

“You’re so stupid. If you thought about it for a second, you could figure it out.”

“We won’t know until we look!” Hiroshi yelled.

They'd been like this the whole time. Akuto's head was starting to hurt.

"Hey, but what if Boichiro isn't dead, huh?"

"Don't be stupid. If his bones aren't there, we just have to assume that the hint means something else."

Eiko and Hiroshi were probably going to keep at it all day if he didn't interrupt, so Akuto pointed and said, "Look, there it is. The park."

They'd been able to reach their first destination before noon.

They went through the gate. The place didn't look like it had been maintained very well. There were weeds breaking through the bricks on the path, and the tree branches had been left to grow wild, giving the whole area a dark ambiance. Akuto saw what looked like a rest area, with benches under a roof, but it looked so dilapidated that he didn't feel like going in.

"I guess they only clean it when it's time for a ceremony," said Hiroshi.

"It's been over a century since the war, so I guess that makes sense," Akuto said.

Now it was Hiroshi's turn to point forward. He was pointing at a building which still looked neglected, but was slightly cleaner than the rest. "Great War Memorial Building," read the sign, and through the windows he could see a display of paintings and uniforms from the period. This place seemed like it was cleaned once a year.

"There's an entrance in there to the underground crypt."

Hiroshi must have participated in a ceremony before, because he took the lead and opened the door. The display room was on the right side past the entrance, and straight ahead was a large door.

"The stairs are past the door," Hiroshi said.

"Then we might get jumped any second now, huh? Let's be careful."

Akuto told Hiroshi to put down their bags, and looked towards Eiko to tell her to stay here. But before he could, she wrapped herself around his arm.

"Of course I'm going with you!" she said.

With her clinging to him like this, he couldn't exactly tell her to stay here.

"...Fine. Just get off me. There's a good chance this is going to get dangerous."

—But I can't let a girl get hurt...

Akuto gripped the handle of his Incantation Gun. With his other hand, he opened the door.

The stairs were big enough for five or six people to stand on at once, and there were lights at regular intervals. It felt less like going underground than the labyrinth beneath the school. But the stairs stretched on for a long way, and they probably went a good distance underground.

Once they reached the bottom of the stairs, it opened up into a fairly wide area, large enough to fit an entire soccer stadium. The ceiling was quite high, too, enough to fit a five story building. There were lights there as well, but they weren't bright enough to clearly illuminate the whole place. The opposite side of the room was dimly lit and hard to make out. The floor looked like it was made of blue artificial turf. There were rows of square boxes lined up upon the ground, and the room was devoid of anything else.

When they stepped onto the artificial turf, they realized that the boxes were plastic graves. Each one was about 30 square centimeters, which would mean that the remains of many people were resting here. Each box had a name on it, and it seemed like they were in alphabetical order.

"There's a lot of them, but if it's alphabetical we should be able to find what we're looking for fast," Akuto said as he started to look for the name "Yamato." The "A's" were near the entrance, so the "Y's" were probably on the other side.

"If someone's waiting to ambush us, they're probably hiding further inside," Akuto said, motioning for Eiko and Hiroshi to get behind him.

After a bit of walking, they saw stains and scratches on the floor. That was proof that a battle had occurred here. There were tiny scraps on the ground, little pieces of cloth with blood on them.

"Oh jeez, they made a mess. Don't they know how to behave around the dead?" Akuto whispered. Eiko let out a low gasp, sounding genuinely confused.

“Why do you care? You’re the Demon King, aren’t you?”

“I’m not the Demon King, and I’m never going to be,” Akuto said immediately, but Eiko shook her head.

“But what fun is that? You know what your problem is? You don’t try to have fun. Why do you always try to make things so boring?”

“I don’t like the school of thought that says you need to live in the moment,” Akuto said. He felt like he was being blamed for something he didn’t entirely understand, and he didn’t like it.

“That’s no good, though. If you don’t change, I’m not going to be able to stay in love with you, okay? If you don’t make things more fun, I’m going to betray you!”

Eiko leapt forward and spun around in a circle, stretching her lips out in a pout. She looked so serious, like a little girl throwing a tantrum, that Akuto wasn’t sure what to do.

—Betray me? You were never on my side to begin with... But even if she’s playing me all along, what am I supposed to do about it?

“Why are you hanging around me all the time, anyway?” Akuto asked, and suddenly Eiko became angry.

“I told you, because I fell in love with you!”

Even Akuto was stunned by this.

“Hold on. We’ve never even really met each other, have we?”

“That’s true! The first time we met was during that homeroom speech! But what’s wrong with that? You know, sometimes you can tell a lot about somebody from just a single glance!”

“Yes, I know that you can do that sometimes, but this still doesn’t seem right.”

“You know what your problem is? You keep talking about what’s wrong and what’s right, when it doesn’t even matter! Why are you like that?”

“Because it’s important to put daily effort into making sure everybody can live

peacefully, of course. If something's causing problems for other people, it's wrong," Akuto said, his tone making it clear that he was serious. But that only made Eiko's tantrum bigger.

"That's wrong! That's totally wrong! I'm here because you're supposed to be the Demon King! Why are you so boring?"

Eiko continued to yell, but Akuto didn't say anything. He'd seen a shadow moving behind Eiko.

"Behind her! It's behind her, boss!" Hiroshi pointed behind Eiko, but she was still throwing a tantrum.

"Don't you need me on your side? I've spent my whole life thinking of nothing but offering my life to a strong man! And I'm telling you that I'm willing to fall in love with you!"

"Tell me about it later," Akuto said as he pulled out his Incantation Gun.

There was a shadow in the shape of a human getting closer and close to her. It was thin, and moving slowly. That's all he could tell.

"Move, and I'll shoot," Akuto said, and when he saw that it only accelerated, he fired.

There was a loud bang. The shadow tried to dodge, but he maneuvered the bullet to follow after it. When it made contact, he caused an explosion big enough to blow them away.

There was a flash of light the size of a basketball. The impact should've been hard enough to knock the target down.

But the shadow just dispersed around the ball. When the light disappeared, the shadow still had a hole in it, like you'd thrown a ball clean through something soft. But the hole quickly filled. The shadow seemed to be made of countless tiny beads, which would change their shape when you threw something at it.

—So it's just like everybody said, huh? I'd hoped an explosion could take it out.

Akuto loaded the next round as he tried to come up with a plan, but Eiko jumped between them.

“You’re annoying me!” she yelled as she quickly pulled a dagger out of her jacket. She held it an underhand grip, making a shallow swipe at her target.

The blade cut through the shadow just like Akuto’s bullet, but it just flew backwards and reformed a few feet away.

Akuto gasped, more surprised by Eiko’s movements than the shadow’s regeneration.

—*I guess she really is something special after all.*

But that didn’t mean he could let Eiko do the fighting. He wasn’t sure whether to tell her to fall back or not. In the end he decided that she wouldn’t listen, and ran forward himself.

He could see now what the shadow was. It was a thin person, clad in black. He couldn’t tell if it was a man or a woman — their face was covered with a white mask. They looked like a human, probably. And when he got close to them, they spoke.

“Leave this place, and forget about this. If you don’t, I can’t guarantee your life.”

“I’m glad we can talk about this. Honestly, I’d love to go home,” Akuto said, entirely serious. The shadow’s shoulders slumped in confusion.

“Then leave. And never come back...” The shadow tried to continue, but it was cut off by a yell.

“Die!”

Eiko jumped up and brought her dagger down hard on he shadow’s head.

Akuto thought the mask might break, but he saw it turn into fog. Was that part of its body too? Or was it capable of turning everything in its immediate vicinity into fog? Or maybe was he just seeing an illusion?

—*There’s no sense in thinking about it. I need to stop her, now...*

“Stop! Get back!”

“No way!”

Eiko ignored him as she launched another flurry of attacks. It didn’t seem to

hurt the shadow, but maybe its foggy body could feel exhaustion, because it fell back, seemingly irritated.

—Does that mean it's not an illusion, and it's turning itself and the things around it into fog? That means it must be burning mana...

That was Akuto's guess.

—Then when the shadow gets tired, it will switch to attack instead of defense!

"Watch out! Get back!" he yelled, but of course, Eiko ignored him.

"What makes you think you can tell me what to do?! Nobody who isn't in love with me gets to give me orders!"

—What's this girl's problem?

And then Akuto's fears were realized.

The shadow's arm turned into fog, and instantly reformed as a sharp silver blade. Eiko must have been caught off-guard by this, because she failed to completely dodge the weapon.

"Gyaaah!"

She was blown backwards and landed on the ground. She'd held out her dagger to dodge the worst of it, but there was a red cut along her arm.

"I'm telling you to leave," the shadow said in a low voice, then it rushed towards her. Again and again it attacked with the silver blade.

Eiko rolled and blocked with her dagger, just barely managing to protect herself.

—If it can't turn into fog when it attacks...!

Akuto tried firing at the shadow when it attacked Eiko, but the shadow either quickly blocked with its blade, or turned a portion of itself into fog.

"If that's how you want to play this, then fine," Akuto said to himself as he quickly chambered another round. This bullet carried a spell that would cause a small tornado. He fired it at the shadow just as it struck at Eiko again.

The shadow thought it was the same type of bullet as before, and tried to turn into fog to avoid being hit. But when the bullet burst, it created a

whirlwind that dragged the fog inside it. And then Akuto used his power to make the whirlwind stronger. Instantly, the whirlwind grew to two times the shadow's height, blasting it away.

—It's not that powerful on its own, but with proper control, it really worked out, huh?

Akuto ran over to Eiko.

"You okay?"

He reached down to help her up, but immediately regretted it. Eiko was looking up at him with reddened cheeks. He'd seen that look on girls in middle school many times before. And each time, it meant something bad was going to happen.

—Now what do I do? I don't know why, but whenever I'm dealing with this type of girl, and I try to explain things so they don't get the wrong idea, they always get really mad and start to cry...

"You saved me! You saved me, didn't you!"

Eiko's voice was full of excitement.

"Anybody would've saved you. It doesn't mean what you think it does."

Akuto tried to pull back his hand, but Eiko grabbed it before he could.

"Don't be so embarrassed! I know what it means!"

Eiko was now extremely happy. Akuto turned away and called out to Korone, who was watching from a far distance away.

"Hey, can you patch her up?"

Korone wordlessly pointed behind him.

"Huh?"

Akuto looked back and saw that the shadow had reformed itself. It looked like it was pissed. He wasn't sure if the thing was human, or if he'd just unconsciously decided to treat it as human.

—Either way, I don't want it coming after us hard.

Akuto loaded another whirlwind bullet, but instead of running away, or running towards them, the shadow simply spread out its hands.

He had a bad feeling. His hunch was right.

Akuto heard the sound of wings from above. He looked up and saw what looked like black clouds.

The clouds were rumbling and roaring. He couldn't tell if the wings belonged to birds or insects, but there were countless numbers of them, overlapping into a low bass sound.

"You're kidding me..." Akuto said.

He had once seen a bird migration. There'd been hundreds of birds, all traveling together in a giant flock. He didn't know if was birds or insects above him, but there were just as many now as there had been in that flock.

Akuto finally realized what it was that had taken out the other students. There was no question that the flock was being controlled by the shadow.

"We're getting out of here!" Akuto yelled to Eiko.

But Eiko's response was stubborn.

"No! My Akuto Sai would never run away!"

Eiko held her dagger in an underground grip. It looked like she was insisting on fighting the shadow.

—*Why is this so important to her?*

He felt something strong in her, something that definitely wasn't madness. Akuto had already realized that there was more going on with this treasure map than meets the eye, and this probably meant Eiko knew what it was. But he didn't have time to think about it.

The black clouds fell down from the air. It was a horde of bats. Sinister black shapes were flitting across his vision, one after the other. The sound of their wings filled the air.

Akuto fired several shots from his Incantation Gun, but no matter how carefully he controlled the bullet's path, it could only take out one or two of the

bats at most. And when he was firing at one, another one would attack from an angle he couldn't see.

"Damn it!"

Each attack did little damage. But there were so many of them. His clothes were ripped open, and little spots of blood began to appear on his skin. The longer he stayed here, the deeper they would start wearing into his flesh.

Eiko and Hiroshi were experiencing the same thing. Eiko was taking down every bat she could see with precise strikes, but there were far too many of them. And all Hiroshi could do was curl up into a ball.

"Korone!" Akuto screamed.

"Yes? Please don't ask me to help you. This situation is clearly your own fault, so helping you would not be in accord with observing you to see if you'll become the Demon King, and keeping you safe from unnecessary harm," Korone answered calmly. She was standing alone, far away from any bats.

"That's not it! Take Hiroshi and get out of here!"

"That, I can do," Korone said, and she began to rummage through her bag.

She took out a pair of shoes with small tires attached, and for some reason held them up high before she put them on her feet. They were basically roller skates with engines, and when she crouched down and activated them, they flung her forward at incredible speed, bridging the distance between her and Hiroshi in an instant. Korone forcefully grabbed Hiroshi by the neck, turned, and quickly sped away, leaving behind the smell of burning rubber. It was all over in seconds.



—I feel like I should compliment her on her skills, but for some reason, I just don't feel like it. Why is that, I wonder...?

Once he saw that Korone had made it to safety, Akuto turned back towards his opponent. His opponent, of course, was the shadow, as it was obvious that it was controlling the bats. Each individual bat was an artificial life form — when he looked down at their corpses on the ground, he could tell. They were very simple devices, but that made it hard to seize control of them. You could say that the shadow had tamed these artificial creatures. Moreover, creatures like these could be mass-produced. If the shadow was human, it had to be incredibly talented, and it wouldn't be easy to defeat.

But he knew at the same time that if he ran away, the shadow wouldn't follow. And it felt like it was trying to avoid dealing him a fatal blow. But since Eiko had no intention of retreating, of course, she was being attacked without mercy. Things were just getting worse and worse. Even now he could see the number of tiny cuts and scrapes on her body growing in number. There was a chance she might eventually die.

"This isn't good at all. There's something wrong with me..." Akuto whispered. It was a bad habit of his to always think calmly and clearly in situations like these.

He had an idea of how to end this. It would be difficult, but for some reason, he felt like he could do it.

In the end, being around Eiko was starting to have an effect on him. She was trying to accomplish something, even at the cost of her own life. Whether that came from trust in him, or from the importance of her goal, he didn't know, but he had a feeling that he needed to see this treasure.

Of course, it was dangerous to help Eiko in her goals. It was clear she was planning something. But instead of being used, and not knowing why, he would rather know the reason and choose his path for himself.

Akuto shouted towards the shadow.

"Sorry, I've changed my mind! I've decided I'm going to look at what you're protecting! I'm not going to do anything really terrible to you, so please don't

hate me!”

The shadow seemed surprised for a moment, but then the bats started to attack him with greater intensity. But Akuto was calm.

—I’ll use this...

He took one of the whirlwind bullets that he’d used a moment ago, and snapped it in two with his fingers. The magical signal activated, and a small whirlwind appeared in his hands.

—I was able to control this mana. Which means that my own mana must be so powerful that I can’t control any magic that’s physically close to me... And if that’s the case...

Akuto strengthened the whirlwind in his hands. The sound of the wind was like the sound of an explosion now — it was like a typhoon had suddenly sprang up in the room. The spiraling torrent of winds spread out in a circle around Akuto.

The wind caught up all the bats as it traveled, and the artificial turf on the floor was ripped off the ground and flew upwards. The plastic graves went too, scattering the bone ash from the pots inside.

“Aaaah!”

The shadow let out a very human-sounding scream.

Just like he thought it would, the whirlwind around him had gone out of Akuto’s control, and it was tearing up everything in its path. It was now strong enough that it reached the very corners of the room, and the shadow could no longer escape it by turning into fog. It was lifted up and blown about in the air.

—I guess that’s enough...

Akuto tried to lessen the power of the mana, but a moment later, he realized he’d failed. He heard an awful creaking noise amidst the howling winds. He looked up and saw that there was a crack in the ceiling. He didn’t even have time to panic before it started to cave in.

There was a loud rumble as the earth began to roar. Rocks and display items from the museum above fell downward, and were caught up in the whirlwind.

A few minutes later, Akuto finally managed to calm the wind. But by that time, the Great War Memorial building had been completely destroyed. Akuto and Eiko had been at the eye of the whirlwind, and so were unharmed, but a spiral of rubble spread out from them in all directions. The ceiling was now totally gone, and he could see the sunlight pouring in.

—When I said to myself that I thought I could do it, this isn't what I meant...

Akuto regretted his choice, but at this point there was nothing he could do about it.

He heard a chipper voice next to him. Eiko had gotten up.

"Wow! Amazing! You did it!"

"I'm not happy about it. What's fun about breaking things?" Akuto answered, annoyed.

"It's fun! And it's not like you need a reason."

Eiko didn't seem to be concerned about her wounds, because she smiled with her face covered in blood.

"...So, what's the point of making me do all this?" Akuto said. In his mind, this had gone far beyond a joke, and his face was stern.

Eiko tried to answer with a smile, but his stern expression remained unchanged. When she saw this, her smile vanished too.

"What do you mean, 'What's the point?'" she said, pouting.

"You're hiding something, aren't you?"

"Sure I am. But this is for your sake..."

"I don't care. You want me to go looking for this treasure no matter what it takes. Until now, I thought it might've been some kind of prank, but you could've gotten killed back there. What's going on here? What is that treasure?" Akuto asked, and Eiko silently averted her gaze.

But before she could answer, she dropped to her knees. She had too many wounds.

Akuto wordlessly put his hands on Eiko's body. He tried using magic like the

first year students had been doing in the cafeteria yesterday. He was just working off memory, but this time, his mana didn't go out of control. Healing magic was probably one of the types of magic that wasn't his specialty. But it worked well for exactly that reason.

Eiko looked surprised for a moment, but suddenly she spoke to him in an upbeat voice.

"Hey, how about we make a deal? If I tell you, will you fall in love with me?"

"If you ever turn sane," Akuto answered as he looked at her wounds. Eiko's face suddenly brightened.

"Oh, you don't need to worry about that. I'm perfectly sane."

"You are not," Akuto answered immediately, and her face clouded.

"Then I just have to be sane from now on, right?"

"That's right." Akuto nodded.

Once he was satisfied with what he saw, he took his hand off of Eiko. She looked a little disappointed. And then, as she began to check her wounds herself, she started to speak calmly. As calm as she was, though, what she said was terrifying.

"The treasure is something belonging to the last Demon King."

"Is that true? Where did you hear that?" Akuto was surprised at this.

"I can't tell you. But I want you to get it and become a real man."

"How does getting something from the last Demon King make me into a real man? That's a stupid way of thinking. Are you a black mage?"

"Please don't compare me with those people. I'm not one of those types who can never think outside the box."

"Then why...?"

"You're destined to get your hands on it. That's all I was told."

"Destined?"

"That's right. The person I swore my loyalty to told me that. Something about

how either they or you will be destroyed, and the survivor will control the fate of the world."

"That sounds like some kind of joke to me."

"It's not a joke. I've never seen them be wrong about anything. And what's more, they're like you. That's why I fell in love with them."

"I see. At least I know what's going on now, and what some random person thinks of me, too." Akuto sounded annoyed, but Eiko laughed sweetly.

"Don't be so mean to me. I'm telling you, I'm serious!"

"If you're serious, then why do you keep talking like you're comparing me with another guy? And anyway, if I'm really destined to get this thing, you shouldn't have to do anything."

Eiko's expression suddenly darkened.

"That's just how a girl's heart works. Any man who doesn't know that is pathetic."

"I know that. I guess I'm just not good with women."

Akuto decided to just get away from this conversation, and began to walk away from Eiko, kicking aside the rubble as he moved. But Eiko followed him anyway.

"Hey, how about I teach you about women?"

"I'll pass. Once I know the situation, you're going to be nothing but a nuisance to me."

"Aww, knock it off. You don't have to be so cold."

Just as Eiko said those words in a pouty voice, Akuto found what he'd been looking for beneath his feet.

"Boichiro Yamato..."

That's what the name plate read. By the time he realized he'd said it aloud, it was too late to regret it. Eiko was already crouched at his feet.

"It's inside here, right?!"

She'd already opened the grave marked with that plate.

There was no pot of ashes inside. Instead, there was an old figurine of some character. It was just about the size that would fit into a palm.

"A figurine...?"

Eiko picked it up. It looked like it had been torn from a keychain.

"There's a button on the back side."

Eiko flipped it over and pushed the button. On its back, there was a hole that looked like it was for a speaker. It began to speak.

"The shelf in the back of the Knight Equipment Research Lab... When all three are ready, play the audio..."

That was all Akuto could make out. It was followed by what sounded like high-pitched static. Eiko handed it to Akuto.

"A keychain recorder for children, huh? That last sound..."

Suddenly he heard an explanation from behind him.

"It's part of the language used for programming artificial intelligences. A mage with the right knowledge can create that noise with his voice."

He turned around and Korone was there.

"You scared me. You should've said something if you were there."

"I was too busy running away when the ceiling started to cave in. Was that your doing?"

"Umm... well... It was the result of legitimate self-defense," Akuto said. He decided to ask her about the keychain so she'd drop the subject.

"So somebody recorded this message and put the keychain here?"

"Obviously. Regardless, I'm willing to admit that this was self-defense, but I can guarantee everyone else is going to think that you desecrated the graves of the victims of the Great War."

"That's... yeah..."

—*This is probably going to lead to even more weird rumors.*

Akuto looked up at the sky and tried to figure out what he should do next.

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Fujiko was in her secret room looking into a crystal ball, her mouth agape at what she was seeing.

—*That keychain!*

She was looking down at Akuto and the others from above. Fujiko had placed a transmitter in the Incantation Gun she'd given Akuto, and she'd been using it to track him with a small flying relay device called a "Monitor."

"This is impossible... But this time, you won't be able to deny it!"

Fujiko grabbed the jar that held her brother's head and showed him the footage in the crystal ball.

"I don't know what to tell you," he said, "I really don't remember. But that keychain is definitely ours. We used to use that to leave messages for one another all the time. Mother told me that when I was gone for a long time, you preferred messages recorded with that to video letters..."

"Don't lie to me! If you remember that much, then why don't you remember recording the message? Your memories are lies too, right? There's no way I could ever have looked up to you! I'm starting to understand that!"

Fujiko's hair was flailing about as she shook her head in confusion. Her brother furrowed his brow, but all he did was attempt to console her.

"Don't get mad, Fujiko. It's my fault."

"How can you say that stuff when you know you don't mean it!"

"Because I can only give you pre-determined answers," he responded. Dead spirits were honest creatures.

"That's not what I'm talking about! Can't you tell how disturbing this is for me? If your past is different than what I believed, then everything I've believed in..."

Fujiko was frantic, but her brother was unmoved.

"Don't cry, Fujiko."

“Aren’t you supposed to be weak and pathetic? The guy who ran away from his work without a trace of shame? But if that message was yours, then...”

“Fujiko, I’m pathetic, and weak, and shameless, and I ran away from my work. I’m also a lolicon.”

“Enough! What’s really going on here...”

“Kyaaah!”

Clatter-clang!

There was suddenly a scream and the sound of something falling behind her. Fujiko turned around in surprise and saw Keena, who had tripped and been covered with books from the bookshelf.

“Keena Soga!” Fujiko yelled. Keena stood up with an awkward laugh.

“How did you get in here?! When did you get in here?!” Fujiko yelled louder, and Keena flinched. But her eyes quickly welled up with tears, and she kneeled before Fujiko, begging.

“I’m sorry! My rice ball fell in a hole, and I ran after it and it came out here! I didn’t mean to bother you, but...”

Fujiko face-palmed in exasperation.

“You can’t honestly expect me to believe...”

But in the next moment, Fujiko saw a dirty rice ball in the corner of her vision. It was covered with dust that it had clearly accumulated during its fall down the stairs. When she saw that, Fujiko decided that it would be stupid to get mad.

“...Well, whatever. I’d forgotten that you knew about this place. Now get out of here. I’m busy...”

Fujiko tried to wave her away, but Keena quickly leapt on the crystal ball.

“Oh, it’s Ackie! Hello!”

“Get off that thing!”

“B-Big sister...” Keena suddenly looked up at Fujiko.

“Wh-What is it? And wait, ‘big sister?’”

“That’s right! Please let me call you big sister! Oh, I know it might be rude, but I keep meaning to apologize for what happened earlier!” Keena said, her eyes strangely serious.

Fujiko couldn’t keep up with Keena’s rapid changes of pace.

“W-Wait a second...”

“I-It’s okay! You don’t have to forgive me! But please forgive Ackie! If you’re watching him like this, it means you really hate him, right?”

“W-Well... yes, I do. Of course I do.”

“Yes, of course! Maybe you can’t forgive him. But Ackie doesn’t mean any harm. So why don’t we go chase after him together!”

“Ch-Chase after him...?” The idea hadn’t occurred to Fujiko.

“That’s right! Let’s go, big sister!”

Keena said it again. What Keena was saying didn’t make any sense, but Fujiko found herself wavering. She’d been wanting to go on her own. And the way Keena was begging her made it hard to turn down.

“Y-Yes, if you think that’s for the best...” Fujiko said softly. Keena clapped her hands together with a loud “slap!”

“Hooray! Let’s get ready! I’ll bring us plenty of rice and things to eat! So just wait for me at the Tree of Confessions in the woods behind the school! Oh, I’m so happy! Now maybe we can find out about your brother, too!”

—Huh? Wait...

Fujiko tried to ask Keena what she meant, but by that time Keena was already gone.

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“I said I’m not going, and I meant it. I’m going back to the Academy and telling the student council,” Akuto said stubbornly.

He was sipping tea from a kettle heated by an outdoor stove. The tent had already been pitched and he was relaxing by it.

Eiko didn’t look like she’d given up, but when Akuto had started to threaten

her, she finally fell completely silent with a pout on her face.

Before long it was dark outside, and time to sleep. Akuto called Korone over and told her to watch Eiko during the night, then went into his tent. They'd pitched three small tents. One for Akuto, one for Hiroshi, and one for Korone and Eiko.

—I just don't know how to handle girls like her...

He grumbled inwardly as he fell asleep.

But when he woke up in the morning, he noticed that it was strangely silent. He left his tent, and saw that Hiroshi's tent had disappeared.

—Don't tell me...!

Eiko's tent was still up. He went inside and saw Korone standing there with her arms crossed, as if she were embracing someone. But Korone was alone, and completely motionless. She looked like some kind of surreal statue.

"She got me..."

Korone had been shut down. That much was obvious. Eiko must have persuaded Korone to give her a hug, and then pulled on the tail that was the power switch for artificial humans.

Akuto wrapped his arms around the frozen Korone so she wouldn't fall over when she was reactivated, and then plunged his hand under her skirt and searched around for her tail.

—I hate doing this. I feel so embarrassed...

He somehow managed to stretch his hands behind her hips, trying as best he could to avoid touching her soft behind, and then touched her round tail. When he pulled it, he heard a low whir, and the light returned to Korone's eyes.

"Now quickly, give me that special ningyo-yaki... huh? You're not Eiko Teruya, are you?" Korone voiced her surprise expressionlessly.

"You were shut down."

"Oh dear. So this wasn't an attempt to use magic to change places with her, and then play with my body."

“...Where did you get that idea? We don’t have time for your jokes.” Akuto pulled Korone off of him.

“So she must have...” Korone looked around the tent.

There was a letter placed on top of a small backpack. Akuto picked it up and saw that it was from Hiroshi.

《I realized that you’re only saying you’re going home to test us, boss. I promise you we’ll find the treasure on our own.》

Akuto put his head in his hands.

“Eiko completely conned him...”

“He’s an idiot, isn’t he?” Korone said.

Now Hiroshi was practically her hostage. Akuto opened the backpack and saw his share of the food and water. He put it on his back and started to fold up the tents.

“Are you going after them?” Korone asked. Akuto nodded.

“...Yeah, whatever. Their next stop was the Knight Equipment Research Lab, right? Do you know where that is?”

“Its location is recorded in the old files.”

“Then let’s go.”

Akuto started to walk. They had a head start on him, and he couldn’t imagine that he moved that much faster than they did, so he’d be arriving several hours after them.

“There must be something else protecting the treasure, right?”

“Most likely, yes.”

“That girl wants me to be the Demon King no matter what it takes, I guess. She was saying something about how it was fate.”

“It’s another sign that that everyone is expecting a lot from you.”

“Stop joking around.”

Korone’s tone was the same as ever, so he thought it was a joke, but Korone

denied it.

“No, it’s not a joke. People expect this of you.”

“I don’t want to be the Demon King, though.”

“Sometimes it doesn’t matter what you want. It’s a problem of the ego, I suppose.”

“I don’t want you making this more complicated than it has to be. I want to make the world a peaceful place, and right now I think that’s going well.”

“Many humans would say the same thing. But even so, it doesn’t always go well. That’s what it means to be human. We artificial humans are all jealous of that.”

“That it doesn’t go well?”

“Indeed. Something like that.”

“Huh...”

For a fairly long time after that, the two of them walked in silence. They traveled down an unmaintained mountain road, and at the end of it they found an abandoned town. It had been destroyed in the war, and no one had ever bothered to repair it. Akuto had never seen an entire town in ruins before, and it was eerie enough that he was a little hesitant to go inside.

“Why didn’t they repair the damage to the town?” he asked.

“It appears that they didn’t have the funds. It’s on Academy grounds, so in theory, the Academy would need to fund the repairs.”

“And so they just left it like this, huh?”

Akuto started to walk down the city’s main street. The damage was horrendous, but he felt better when he realized that there were no signs of casualties.

“Two armies collided here after the residents were evacuated,” Korone explained. “The Demon King’s army was after the knights’ lab in this city, so the knights evacuated the residents and used the building we’re heading towards as a base.”

“I see,” Akuto said.

But just as the words left his mouth, there was a shaking like an earthquake and a low noise reverberated through his body.

“Looks like my bad feeling was right.”

Akuto put his pack down and started to run. Korone followed him and explained where they were going.

“I’m sure you already noticed, but the sound’s location matches that of the Knight Equipment Lab.”

“I know that.”

He turned the corner and emerged onto a large street. In the center of a plaza a little further down, he saw a half-destroyed five-story building. It was an old building made from concrete, which was a rare and valuable material now. The roof over the entrance had collapsed, and past it he could see a wide space that was probably the front hall.

There was a monster there.

—You’ve got to be kidding me, right...?

Akuto could see what looked like an iron giant. The humanoid figure must have been at least three meters tall, and it was wearing immense full-body armor. There were flashes of light appearing on its body, and when he heard Eiko’s shouts, he realized that they were her attacks.

With each strike there was a metallic clang, and sparks flew along the armor’s surface. He caught glimpses of Eiko as she moved — she seemed to be dashing around the giant, attacking it with her dagger.

—She’s not even scratching it.

Akuto was struck by the realization that he had no idea what to do. He couldn’t come up with any kind of plan at all. But he knew he had to save her.

“What am I supposed to do against a monster like that?” he complained to nobody in particular as he readied his incantation gun.

Suddenly the giant froze.

—Huh?

Akuto couldn't imagine that it had heard him from out here, but he was fairly certain that the giant had noticed him. It spun around and began to walk towards the collapsed entrance. The opening was too small for it, so its shoulders smashed right through the rubble as it came outside. It ignored the falling concrete pieces, kicking up dust as it walked.

Even Akuto couldn't help but feel fear at the sight of the colossal giant shaking the earth with each step it took.

It was three meters tall, fully covered in armor, and the gauntlet on its right hand was massive. It held an axe the size of a full-grown person.

—No way. I'm not fighting a monster like this! Maybe I can just stun it for a minute and give them time to get away...!

Akuto fired the Incantation Gun. Of course, he aimed for the chinks in the armor. There was a gap on the backside of the knee to give it space to bend. It was too dark to see past the giant's face guard, so he couldn't tell what was inside. But whether it was human or machine, it was sure to take damage from an attack to the back of its knee.

He controlled the bullet's flight path to make it strike there. But just when it looked like it would hit, the giant moved its knee the side and blocked it with the armored front plate.

"What!?"

Akuto couldn't believe that thing was capable of something so fast and precise.

—How could that huge body's senses be so sharp?

He remembered that it had just heard his tiny whisper, too. It would be harder than he thought to break through its defenses.

Then he heard another shout. Eiko had jumped out from the building and tried to attack the giant from behind. But of course, the giant could sense this. Eiko was aiming for the gaps in the armor too, but it dodged out of the way at the last second once more.

The giant swung the axe at her as if it was swatting a fly. Eiko dodged it easily. The giant didn't seem like it could be that precise in battle — it kept trying to swing its axe at Eiko, but she leapt from one spot to the next before it could hit her.

Since dodging was so easy, the idea of running didn't seem to occur to Eiko. At this point, Akuto was ready to knock her out and run, but he quickly realized that this would do no good. Someone else had run out from the building.

It was Hiroshi. Akuto had no idea why, but he was holding an electrified baton like the ones modern knights used when patrolling the town, and trying to attack the giant.

"Hiyaaah!"

—Well, damn... Hiroshi's not going to run either, huh?

Akuto finally decided that the best course of action was to keep firing his gun at the giant to distract it. It was either annoyed by the bullets, or decided that Hiroshi wasn't a threat, because it turned its face towards Akuto just like he'd hoped.

But the giant started to walk in broad strides, moving much faster than before. Akuto tried to run, but given the length of its stride, there was no way he could outrun it. Now it was Akuto who was in trouble.

—Man, this isn't funny at all.

The giant was almost on top of him. But even as Akuto panicked, he was able to come up with a plan. The giant's only weapon was its axe. Eiko was dodging it easily, but even if the giant was slow, it was only slow until it actually started to bring down the axe. Once it started to come down, it came down fast, and it was too big to dodge by jumping out of the way. Akuto just wasn't fast enough to try.

—So I'll just have to...

Akuto loaded the most powerful explosive bullet into his Incantation Gun. If he manipulated the mana to make the biggest explosion he could, he should be able to blast away the giant.

He readied the gun, and didn't bother to aim. He knew the enemy would try to block it with its armor.

The giant raised its axe as it charged. Akuto could hear the sound of it ripping through the air.

—Now!

Akuto pulled the trigger.

At the Academy, this bullet was only used by students brawling with each other. But the instant the bullet hit, Akuto filled it with mana from the surrounding air. The explosion quickly swelled up to ten times its normal size.

A ball of light swelled up with a roar at the impact point on the giant's chest.

The light engulfed the giant and kept spreading.

The shock wave raced through the whole town, momentarily shaking the surrounding rubble.

After he'd blown up the classroom last time, Akuto had investigated the force of the explosion he'd caused as part of an effort to keep it from happening again. The result, he'd found, was that it was between five and seven kilos of force per square centimeter. Without something to protect you, the explosive pressure alone could just about kill you. Even as the explosion was dispersed through the air, this direct hit to the chest should still be enough to take down the giant... or so he'd thought.

—Wha—!?

Akuto was astonished.

The ball of light faded away. And the giant was unharmed. The only sign that it had been hit at all was the steam coming off the heated metal.

"No way..." Akuto said.

The giant raised its axe again.

It was too late to get away.

The axe started to come down, aiming straight for Akuto.

It sliced through the air straight towards him.

And then there was the awful wet sound of metal slicing through meat.

“Boss!” Hiroshi screamed as he ran towards the giant’s back.

“Kyaah!”

Even Eiko screamed as she looked up at the giant’s back.

But—

—Oh, I see. So that’s the trick. This is what it means to be good at some things, and bad at others. I guess it was a good idea I went to talk to Fujiko.

Akuto now realized how valuable that information was.

He’d thrown the Incantation Gun down at his feet. And with his now-free hands, he’d grabbed the giant axe that was as big as he was. He’d grabbed it just before it hit his forehead, and was trapping it with his palms.

—Damn it. I’m the reserved type, so I never would’ve thought I’d be good at something as risky as this.

His muscles were bulging up so much, you could see them clearly through his clothes. He’d filled his muscles with mana, and now he was many times stronger than before.

—And unlike other magic, I can tell the power’s completely under my control!

Akuto looked up.

The giant was clearly uncertain of how to deal with this. It couldn’t push the axe or pull it, so it was just shaking its body violently. No matter how strong Akuto was now, his weight hadn’t changed. This meant all the giant would have to do is lift Akuto up in the air, but Akuto had dug his feet into the ground, and was using the strength of his legs to stay there.

“Don’t resist, please...!” Akuto said as he twisted the axe.

The giant pulled harder to get it back. It was a test of strength between Akuto and the giant.

But the battle was over quickly. Since the giant refused to let go, its arms twisted with the axe, and finally its whole body was flung to the side.

The ground shook once more. Hiroshi and the others even jumped a little.

Akuto took the axe out of the giant's hand. He tossed it up in the air, let it spin once, and grabbed by the hilt, then began to swing it around as if it were a quarter the size it really was.

The giant didn't speak, but it began to crawl away from Akuto with sluggish movements. Then it stood up, turned, and began to walk away. Its movements felt less like fleeing than an admission of defeat.

—*Why do all the guardians of the treasure have such distinct personalities?*

Akuto wondered. But Hiroshi ran up and yelled, as if trying to interrupt his thoughts.

"Wow! Way to go, boss!"

Akuto tossed the axe aside. This time Hiroshi had done something he couldn't just shrug off.

"Don't even start. What were you thinking, going someplace so dangerous?"

Hiroshi didn't seem to understand what he was saying.

"Huh? I figured that as your first student, boss, I had to get stronger."

"Why? It's not like there's ever any real point in fighting. Did this last fight actually get you anywhere?"

"You can only say that because you're strong, boss! You need to think about how we, the weak, feel!"

—*Suddenly* he's *the one who's mad at* me*?*

This didn't seem fair to Akuto, but since Hiroshi seem excessively mad, he decided not to say anything.

"Okay, I get it. But I'm telling you, I don't really understand who's weak and who's strong either."

Akuto shrugged his shoulders and turned to look for Eiko. She was looking at Akuto with even more excitement than Hiroshi.

"You really did come! I knew it!"

Eiko ran up to him expectantly, but he walked straight past her towards the lab.

“You’re going to try and force me to get involved in this no matter what, right? So I’m willing to play along and see where this goes. Just don’t forget that this is because you’re holding my conscience hostage.”

“Aww, why are you acting like such a goodie-goodie? I know you’re not!” Eiko said angrily.

—I just don’t know how to deal with girls like her...

Akuto went inside the ruins of the lab. He was a little curious about what they’d been researching there, but it had been totally stripped clean. He checked each of the rooms that led off the front hall, but all of them were empty. The only one with any furnishings at all was the room in the far back.

—Come to think of it, the message only mentioned the back shelf.

The only furnishings in the room were some steel shelves. He opened all the drawers on the shelves, but all he found was a tablet about the size of a notebook. He picked it up and saw that it was an old electronic toy. You could take photos with it, which would then appear on the screen. Then you could draw or make notes on them with an attached pen.

—Another toy, huh?

Akuto turned on the tablet, feeling a little confused. The stored picture was a scene of a cave entrance surrounded by trees. There were words written on the side.

《Behind the shrine in the back. If all three are gathered, use this tablet to photograph your palm as identification.》

Akuto put the device in his pocket.

—I don’t know why, but... something seems terribly sad. It feels like this is more than just a treasure hunt.

○

“The ‘Finding Groundwater!’ device!” Korone said as she held up the two bent-metal rods she’d taken out of her bag. “Now we can track the flow of the underground water.”

Korone held the rods in both hands and started to walk, the rest of the group

following behind her. At first the rods swung randomly from left to right, but after they'd walked for a while, both of them turned in the same direction. Korone said she was using them to detect mana, but Akuto wasn't sure he believed her.

"We've been wandering the woods for a pretty long time now. Are you sure about this?" he asked, worried. Korone nodded.

"It's just fine. We just have to follow the flow of the underground water."

Nobody had seen the cave in the picture before, but Hiroshi had suggested it might be the limestone cave in the back of the forest, which he'd heard rumors about before.

"Limestone caves are only formed when there's a source of underground water, so if we find one in the area marked by the map, it will lead us there," Hiroshi had suggested.

"Why are there rumors about this cave?"

"They say there's a hot spring there. Sometimes when people go to look for it, they can't find it. So the rumor is that it's some kind of phantom hot spring."

"They should just have the people who did find it tell them where it was. Or maybe it's not someplace you want to go more than once?"

"Probably not. But I haven't heard any rumors about a monster. It's possible that the forest itself is more dangerous."

"There may not be monsters, but I bet there's a guardian now."

"Why do you say that, boss?"

"Think about it. Why do you think there was a guardian in the underground cemetery?"

"That's right... So the guardians appeared only after the map was discovered..." Hiroshi's expression clouded.

"Either way, something's going on that has nothing to do with me... And yet I'm sure my actions will be held against me again," Akuto muttered.

"Oh!" Korone interjected.

“What is it?”

“I found it.”

Akuto looked in the direction she was pointing and saw the cave from the photograph. It was half-buried by the surrounding trees.

“I didn’t honestly think we’d find it,” Akuto said. Korone shoved the two metal rods in front of his face.

“The ‘Finding Groundwater’ device is a very reliable magical tool. Plumbers use it in their work.”

“Oh, I see...” said Akuto, mostly uninterested, as he put down his bags.

He called Hiroshi and had him light a mana torch in his hands. Then he looked at Eiko. Of course, she was eager to go inside, and Akuto had already given up on stopping her.

“Let’s go,” he said, and he led them into the limestone cave.

The entrance was low enough that he had to duck to get in, but once he was inside there was plenty of space. The stones beneath his feet were slick and damp. It was humid inside, and it seemed that there was water flowing somewhere nearby.

“This is quite a sight, huh?” Hiroshi said, impressed.

His light was shining on a tunnel that was big enough for a bus to pass through. The tunnel walls were glistening with a strange light as water trickled down them from the ceiling. At the bottom there was a mound of melted rock, like ice cream dropped on the side of a road.

“There’s only one path, huh?”

They went in further. The path seemed to be tilting downwards slightly. At the end, there was a dark hole where the light wouldn’t reach. When they arrived, they saw that it was an opening to a vast hall.

Hiroshi made the light stronger so they could see the whole thing. It was the size of a school gym. There were several limestone stalactites pointing down from the ceiling, and anthill-like stalagmites of varying sizes dotted the floor. In the far back were several depressions in the floor that looked like unfinished

bowls. All of them were filled with water. It was like someone had lined up a bunch of small swimming pools.

They followed the walls around the hall. There were small depressions in the wall, but no tunnels leading anywhere else. The limestone cave seemed to come to a dead end, here in this hall.

—Is this really a dead end? But I don't see a shrine... Wait, these pools are pretty deep. Maybe they lead somewhere.

Akuto went to the furthest pool in the back and knelt down. Just like he'd thought, the far wall wasn't a dead end at all. The pool continued below it, and there was a gap between the wall and water of a few dozen centimeters. If he went in the pool, he could go deeper into the cave.

Akuto put his hand in the water. It was warm — this must have been the hot spring he'd heard the rumor about.

"I guess we'll have to swim, huh?" Akuto said. Hiroshi looked scared.

"To tell you the truth, boss, I'm a little scared to get in the water."

"Yeah... It's definitely dangerous. Okay, why don't you wait here with Korone?"

Akuto stripped down to his underwear and took the ball of light from Hiroshi. If he said the wrong thing, Hiroshi might start talking about how he "needed to become stronger" again, so he said nothing as he got inside the pool.

The water was surprisingly shallow. He was able to crouch down and go forward with his head sticking out of it. It didn't go very far back, either. After a few meters, it suddenly opened up into another hall.

This hall was considerably bigger than the one before. And there was a light shining down from the ceiling. Part of the roof seemed to have completely melted, and the forest was visible above him.

Akuto was still crouching on the limestone, but some of the rocks in the pool were rough instead of smooth. It felt more like a typical forest hot spring now. There were probably several different hot springs here, connected together at the source but separated by the rocks. He could imagine animals coming here

to heal their wounds.

—It's kind of relaxing. Not that I've got time to relax...

He was about to stand up to look for the treasure when suddenly someone grabbed him from behind.

"Uwah!"

It was Eiko who'd attacked him. It wasn't that Akuto had been careless — part of the reason he'd let her get so close was that she was good at moving quietly, but mainly it was that he was trying his best to ignore everything she did.

Akuto could feel something soft pressed up against his back. He was naked from the waist up, so he could feel the sensation of skin pressing against skin.

"Hey..." Akuto tried to run, but she held him tightly from behind.

"We're finally alone, you know. It wouldn't kill you to relax a bit."

Eiko wrapped her arm firmly around Akuto's body. She pulled him towards the water, like a ghost trying to drag its victim to their doom.

"Fine, I'll calm down, so get off me."

"No way. If I do, you'll run away."

"Of course I will. You're not wearing any clothes."

"Nobody wears clothes inside a hot spring."

"So what, you took your clothes off and chased after me back there?"

"I'm pretty fast, you know. Your friend didn't even notice. I've been waiting for this chance for a long time," she said in an alluring voice.

"Chance? You're trying to kill me...?"



“No! Man, you really don’t understand anything, do you?”

“Anything about what?”

“I keep telling you I’m in love with you, right? So of course I’m going to do things like this.”

Eiko leaned into Akuto’s body and grabbed his hands from behind. She guided them towards her own body.

“L-Like what...?” Akuto’s voice was shaking.

“You know, you shouldn’t make a girl say things like that.”

She pressed her breasts into Akuto’s hands.

Akuto’s hands went rigid as she began to pull them further down. They went past her stomach, and even further below...

○

—It’s important to train the mind.

Junko was now more keenly aware of this than ever. She’d been able to follow their tracks from the cemetery to the abandoned town, but once she’d gone inside the forest she’d lost Akuto and his group.

—This is something a first-rate shinobi should be able to do easily. Maybe I’m just too distracted to focus...

The “distraction” she was referring to was her own mind, which was constantly questioning whether Akuto was doing naughty things with the mysterious girl he’d been traveling with. She was fine as long as she maintained her focus, but whenever she let her guard down, even for a moment, the thoughts had come rushing to the forefront. A few times it had been so bad she’d screamed. And after screaming, she’d found herself looking around to make sure nobody had heard her.

—Gah! Calm down, Junko Hattori! What’s important here is that if that girl is Eiko Teruya, Akuto might be in danger.

“But now that I’ve lost them, I’m not sure what I can do...”

At this point, Junko was just wandering the forest blindly. But just when she’d

thought about leaving it entirely to try and pick up the trail again, she found a spring. When she dipped her finger in the water to see if it was drinkable, it was warm.

—Come to think of it, I haven't taken a bath in three days. Maybe I'll take a break and calm myself down.

She put down her pack, checked around her to make sure no one was watching, and began to remove her clothes. Each time she removed an item of clothing, she would fold it up and place it on her head. Then she tied the bundle of clothes to her head, along with her katana sheathe, to her head with a string called a sageo. It was an old habit she'd picked up that would let her quickly react if she was attacked by the enemy.

Since nobody was watching, she stretched and let out a huge yawn as she stepped into the water.

"Whew..."

She ran her hands over her body as her cheeks began to flush from the heat.

—All the physical training I've done has made my body all muscly. Maybe I'd be more attractive if my body was softer, like Keena's...

She quickly shook her head.

—No, no. This isn't good at all. I must keep my body toned at all times, so that no one will mock my family for choosing politics over war!

"But still..."

Junko had lowered her face under the waterline to the point where her words were coming out as bubbles, when suddenly she sensed someone's presence. She poked her head out from the water without a sound, and began to look around her.

Then she heard a scream, and the sound of splashing water.

—Two people?

Junko silently moved in the direction of the noise, which was past the rocks. She could hear voices.

“We’re finally alone, you know. It wouldn’t kill you to relax a bit.”

—*What?*

The sweet tone of the voice was enough to tell even Junko that it was a man and a woman in the throes of intimacy.

—*Maybe I should leave then...*

Junko’s face was now bright red, and not from the steam. She turned to go, but for some reason she found herself staying to hear what happened next.

“Fine, I’ll calm down, so get off me.”

“No way. If I do, you’ll run away.”

“Of course I will. You’re not wearing any clothes.”

—*That serious, yet blunt tone... That voice...!*

Junko couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She drew her sword and poked the end of the blade just a bit past one of the rocks, so she could use it as a mirror to see what was going on.

Akuto was mostly naked, and a girl was embracing him from behind. He was struggling to get free, but the girl was rubbing herself up against him hard.

Junko’s mind was clouded by a mix of embarrassment, confusion, and anger. She pulled the blade back and pointed it straight upwards, and within an instant she was leaping into the air.

“Noooo!”

o

Akuto could probably get her off of him if he tried, but he wasn’t sure he could control his power. If he wasn’t careful, he might send Eiko flying. And once he calmed down a bit, an even bigger concern was that he might piss her off, and somehow end up with more of a mess to deal with.

— I*f I keep playing along, maybe I can learn something... But I don’t have that much experience, so I won’t be able to keep calm... and I can’t go all the way...*

He didn’t want to do anything that would give her any encouragement, so he just kept his hands pressed up against her stomach where she was holding

them. His only choice was to keep the conversation going.

“Hang on. Weren’t you saying something about choosing between me and your master?”

“So maybe I end up with both of you. Who cares?”

“What if I care?”

“Aww, don’t be such a wimp.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. I want to know more about this other guy. I want to know how much of a man he is.”

Akuto personally didn’t think his own words were convincing, but they were good enough for Eiko.

“Oh, that I can understand! He’s...”

Before she could continue, however, a voice came down from above.

“Noooo!”

Akuto looked up.

Junko was leaping down at him, totally naked with her clothes tied to her head. Her sword was raised and her legs were open.

“Why aren’t you wearing any clothes?!” Akuto screamed without thinking.

It was only then that Junko seemed to realize how she was dressed.

“N-Nooo!”

Still in mid-air, she folded her arms and legs up to hide herself, and then crashed right next to Eiko and Akuto in the water. There was a huge splash. Akuto and Eiko let go of each other and moved away.

“H-Hattori... What are you doing here?” Akuto asked. Junko poked her head and sword up from beneath the water. Her face was a brilliant red, but her voice was sharp and clear.

“That’s not what’s important here! That’s Eiko Teruya! She’s a government spy!”

“A spy?”

Akuto looked at Eiko. She was standing tall, and making no effort to conceal herself. He looked away, and she chuckled.

“That’s right. I’m sure you knew it was something like that, right?”

“Yeah. I figured it was something like that, but I wasn’t able to figure out that you worked for the government. So some government big shot is involved here?”

“That’s right! He wanted to know if you’re a man who can stand up to your fate. And I was sent to help him figure that out. But you know, you’re standing at a very dangerous crossroad right now. If I don’t help you, you might die when you get your hands on that treasure.”

“Die?”

“That’s right. You need to be worthy to possess it, and right now, you aren’t. At least, if you ask me.”

“I’m really not interested in being tested for my ‘worthiness,’ so I don’t care.”

“Stop talking like that!” Eiko yelled. “Okay, do you want me to make this simple? Choose me. If you fall in love with me, I’ll make you a man.”

“Wait!” Junko interrupted. “I don’t know what Eiko’s talking about, but she works for the Imperial Public Safety Committee! They’re in charge of the knights, but they’re a bunch of extremists who want to wipe out black magic and black mages!”

Eiko’s temper flared in response.

“Extremists? Hah! If we let everybody use any kind of magic they want, the whole empire will collapse! Why can’t you understand that?”

“That’s what makes you extremists!” Junko yelled back. “You Teruya are always reckless! And all you care about is learning how to murder people!”

“And the Hattori are just a bunch of wimps who chose to serve the Imperial Cabinet instead of fighting!”

“Shut up! And anyway, the government’s laws say that Akuto Sai is only to be observed. What are you thinking, trying to interfere and lead him to the treasure of the last Demon King?”

“The Public Safety Committee’s following the law too! And Akuto Sai came here of his own free will! I can tell you that for sure!”

“Then leave! Stay away from him!”

When Eiko heard this, a superior smile spread across her face.

“Oh, so that’s it. If that’s what you want...”

She wrapped herself around Akuto again.

“Hey, are you going to choose her? Or choose me?”

“What?!”

Akuto had no idea what to say to that.

“Girls like us work for the benefit of our master. Right now, Junko’s trying to help you, but if you accept me and reject her, she’ll lose the right to complain about anything I do.”

Eiko brought her lips close to Akuto’s ear, but she was speaking loudly enough that Junko could hear her. What Eiko was saying didn’t make a lot of sense, but from looking at Junko’s reaction, Akuto could tell she was telling the truth. She was watching Akuto with a bitter look and biting into her lips.

—I don’t know what’s going on here, but this is a problem... Hattori’s really mad at me, for one thing. There’s no way I could be her master.

Junko, however, was unwilling to wait for an answer. She screamed and ran at Eiko with her sword.

“Enough talking! This is our problem, not yours!”

But when she came out from beneath the surface of the water, Eiko just turned Akuto’s head towards her.

“No!” Junko gasped and dropped back in the water again.

Akuto realized that she was too worried about being seen to come out from the water, so he spoke to her in a timid voice.

“I-It’s okay. I won’t look, so go ahead and do it without holding back.”

“You’re lying! You totally saw me! And when you say ‘do it’ it sounds like you

mean something naughty!”

“This is no time to be stubborn!”

“Then get out of here!”

“Sorry, you’re right... No, wait! There’s a reason I can’t move!”

Akuto had just realized something. But at this point, neither Eiko nor Junko were listening.

“This is perfect! I’ve been waiting years for this!”

Eiko ran at Junko. Junko fought back, but she couldn’t match Eiko’s fast movements while trying to cover her body. In the space of a moment Eiko had broken past her guard, struck her wrist, and knocked her sword from her hand.

“Damn it!”

“Ahaha! It’s hard being a shy girl, huh?”

Eiko’s body began to flicker and waver. Clones of her appeared on either side. It was the same skill that was Junko’s specialty.

“Once a girl loses her shame, she’s finished!” Junko yelled back, and cloned herself as well.

Several clones of Eiko and Junko began to scream and punch at one another.

“I taught you that skill when I was little!” yelled Eiko.

“I don’t think so! Everybody in the village knows it!” Junko shot back.

“I covered your ass when Master got mad at you!”

“That’s because you slipped poison in his food and blamed it on me!”

“Shut up, virgin!”

“Shut up, slut!”

It was a petty argument to witness, but with all these Eikos and Junkos leaping around the hot springs, Akuto couldn’t move. And since they were all naked, even if the Junkos were doing an admirable job of covering their privates, it was still really awkward.

But the real reason that Akuto couldn’t move was something else entirely.

There were two eyes that had been staring at them for a while now. They weren't human. And they were looking down from a tree. He couldn't tell if they were canine or feline, but they were sharp and wild.

It was a four-legged beast, and a big one. It didn't seem like the one from before that had caused the mana abnormality. When he tried to manipulate the mana in its body, he felt a power resisting it.

—So that's the guardian of this place, huh? It doesn't look like it's has a human-like mind, though...

The other two guardians had both had something resembling personalities. But this one was pure wild instinct. Because of that, he had no idea what it would do.

Junko and Eiko didn't seem to notice, and they were continuing their battle. Both were evenly matched for now, but it looked like Junko was being slightly pushed to the defensive...

—What should I do here?

He looked around the vicinity of the beast, being careful to keep an eye on it at all times, and saw a tiny shrine beneath it. It had been buried in leaves so he hadn't noticed it until he'd looked. That was probably why no one else had found it either.

—So it'll attack anybody who gets close to that shrine, huh?

That was Akuto's best guess. Just then, a pair of Eikos and Junkos moved their fight towards a spot near the shrine.

"Watch out!"

Akuto started to run. He could see the beast move out of the corner of his eye. He leapt between Junko and Eiko.

"What are you doing?!"

"Don't interfere!"

Junko and Eiko yelled, but their voices quickly faltered. A beast, twice the size of a man, pounced down on Akuto.

Akuto grabbed the beast and threw it off of him. It was far stronger than an average animal, but it was no match for his strength. And yet, the beast simply spun in midair and landed on a rock. It didn’t seem to have taken any damage.



“A wolf?” Junko yelled.

“It’s dangerous, so get—...”

The beast didn’t give Akuto time to finish his sentence. It leapt just an instant after it landed, its claws heading straight for Akuto’s face.

“Yikes!”

Akuto just barely managed to dodge it. When the beast landed on the rocks behind him, it spun nimbly and pounced at him once more.

This time, Akuto wasn’t fast enough. The beast’s claw took a chunk of skin off his shoulder.

“Aah!”

Akuto dropped to his knees, clutching his shoulder. But the beast didn’t wait to see how effective its attack had been. It came leaping at Akuto with its claws for a third time.

All of the Eiko and Teruya clones leapt at the beast at once.

“Hiyaah!”

“Kyeeeh!”

They surrounded the beast as they landed, but then they lost sight of their target.

Confusion appeared on dozens of faces. And then all of them were blown back at once. The beast was right in front of Akuto.

By the time Junko and Eiko realized that it had dashed past all their clones and blown them all away, most of their strength was gone and they were gasping for breath on the ground next to Akuto. Damage to a clone was fed back to its creator as damage to their total energy. Both of them were exhausted after just one attack.

—I guess there’s not going to be any kind of miracle this time, huh?

Akuto prepared himself for death. The other guardians were only interested in driving him away, and had avoided any attacks that could prove fatal, but this one was a wild beast. It wasn’t going to hold back at all. If it weren’t for that

first attack, he could've hit it with a full-powered punch that might've killed them both. But now that he was wounded he couldn't do that either.

The beast attacked again.

Junko and Eiko huddled up against him, terrified.

Akuto lowered his face. Acting on pure instinct, he threw himself on top of them to protect them.

He grit his teeth and waited for the pain of claws ripping through his flesh.

But—

Nothing happened.

The only sound was the sound of the water.

He looked up fearfully and saw the beast floating on the surface of the water. It seemed to be asleep.

—I'm safe, I guess...

Akuto slowly stood up, unable to believe what he was seeing. He realized that he was holding Junko in his arms. She was shaking and clinging to him.

"Hey," Akuto said, and Junko opened her eyes.

She looked at him, and then at the floating beast, and instantly relaxed.

"W-Whew..."

The strength drained from her body, and she slumped onto Akuto's chest.

"W-Wait, what are you..."

When Akuto started to panic, she finally realized her situation. She let out an incoherent scream, jumped back, and sunk beneath the waters of the hot springs.

"So that's it..."

He heard an upset voice. It was Eiko. She was behind Akuto, a little bit away. She had just stood up from the ground.

"What you do without even thinking shows how you really feel, doesn't it? Junko, it looks like Akuto Sai chose you!" Eiko yelled. And then an evil smile

filled her face as she continued. “Then why don’t you just die? Sure, you’ll get your hands on that treasure! And when you do, I hope it kills you!”

Eiko walked through the water towards the shrine, stuck her hand inside it, and pulled out something that she threw at Akuto.

Akuto caught it. It was a key, just small enough to fit into his palm.

—A key?

Eiko then threw herself into the hot springs without a word. Akuto could see her swimming through the water back to where he’d come from.

—Damn it. What the hell’s going on here?

Finally, he felt a sharp pain in his shoulder.

“Owww...” He dropped to the ground as he clutched it. Junko ran up to him.

“Are you okay?”

“It won’t kill me,” Akuto said as he looked away from her.

“I’m sorry. We’ve ended up in such a weird situation...”

When he apologized, Junko’s face turned red as she shook her head.

“I-It doesn’t bother me. If only I’d realized Eiko was here sooner... No, wait, that’s because I wasn’t leaving my room, and the reason I wasn’t leaving my room was that you stripped me naked during class!”

Halfway through her speech, Junko had switched from apologizing to blaming him.

“Sorry. Yeah, you’re right.”

Akuto apologized, and then asked something he’d been wondering for a while.

“Have you known her for a long time?”

“We’ve been rivals for years. You heard her. She’s the kind of girl who never thinks about anything except what she’s feeling in the moment.”

“I got that sense, definitely. That’s how she was around me,” said Akuto, nodding. Junko looked astonished.

“What happened?! I mean, not in a weird way...”

“It was fine. She caused a lot of trouble, though.”

“That’s good, at least. Anyway, she’ll change her whole life to revolve around her man. And her whole idea of ‘serving’ someone is just wrong. So, well, you know. Just be careful, because when she talks about you being her master, it’s all one big fantasy. Also, she said something about you choosing me, but I mean, it’s not like you did that, right?”

Junko became more and more flustered as she spoke.

Akuto thought for a moment before he opened his mouth.

“No, I mean I guess if I had to choose someone, it would be you. But...”

Junko didn’t listen to what came after his “but.” She started to flail her arms in panic and splash hot water everywhere.

And Akuto didn’t get to finish, either. A ditzy-sounding voice from above cut him off.

“Ackie, Junko!”

It was Keena.

He looked up and saw Keena flying down from the sky. She was facing down, with her arms and legs drooping. Bizarrely, Fujiko was on her back, sitting sidesaddle.

“Why are you two just sitting there talking? Didn’t you find it strange that that beast suddenly fell asleep? And what were you going to do if I didn’t show up? You left your gun behind, didn’t you? It was really hard to track you down!”

Fujiko was playing with a vial of medicine in her hands. She must have used it to put the creature to sleep.

“Ackie, you’re really hurt!”

Keena floated down towards him.

“I’m fine. I just need to have Korone patch up my wounds and then get dressed... Um, so does Hattori.”

“I-I don’t need you looking out for me!” Junko yelled back at him.

4 - The Rage of the Student Council President

After Akuto's wounds were healed, everyone gathered in a corner of the forest, unsure of what to do next. Nobody had any idea about what was going on. According to Korone and Hiroshi, Eiko had come back, put on her clothes, and ran off somewhere angrily. Now there was no one left who knew the real story, and so their discussions were getting them nowhere.

Akuto wanted to go back to the school, and Fujiko was insistent that they activate the keys right there. The others couldn't decide which of them was right. However, Keena seemed to behave like she was on a picnic.

Fujiko's behavior seemed especially unusual to Akuto.

"...And so that's what happened there. Next..."

Midway through his explanation of the events so far, Fujiko had begun to fidget and bite at her nails repeatedly. When he was done talking, Fujiko spoke up.

"Can I see these 'key' things?"

Akuto was a little worried about her activating them on her own, but then he remembered something.

—Come to think of it, her brother's supposed to be involved in this, right?

More out of pity than any logical reason, Akuto handed her the three keys.

The doll-shaped keychain with a recording function.

The notebook-sized tablet, where you could take photographs and scribble on them.

And an object shaped just like the key to a door.

Fujiko gathered the three of them in front of her, lifting each one to her face and carefully examining it.

Both of her identities, the "perfect student" and the "evil queen," had

vanished. She was just a young girl trying her hardest to search her memories.

“So these really do belong to you?” Akuto asked. But Fujiko didn’t answer.

The way she held the keychain and plate in her hands, as if she knew them well, told him all he needed to know however.

“You said your brother was an awful man. What did he do wrong?”

He tried another question, but Fujiko shook her head.

“I don’t know. But I feel like I have to find out...”

Fujiko began to play with the key in her hand. When she twisted it, there was a loud click.

The key began to tremble and glow.

“Look!”

Everyone stared at the key.

It began to draw a magical circle, five meters in diameter, around it in the air.

“This is teleportation magic,” Korone said.

Keena looked confused.

“So what does that mean?”

“If the person who goes inside the circle wants to go, it will teleport them to a pre-determined point. It twists open a hole in space and drops them through it. Since it doesn’t disassemble the subject and transfer them electronically, it’s one of the safer forms of teleportation,” Korone explained.

“If they want to? Does that mean...”

Akuto realized something, and started to speak. A second later he found out that he was right.

Fujiko had disappeared. She had all the keys.

“W-Wait! What happens if the keys disappear?!” Akuto asked.

“There’s no need to be concerned. For safety reasons, the magic circle does not immediately disappear. It will disappear after a minute or so, but before it does it’s still possible to use it.”

“Then we have to decide if we want to follow her in the next minute?”

“That’s correct. But if you’re inside the circle when it disappears, it won’t hurt you. You’ll simply be left behind.”

—*Fine.*

Akuto made his choice. He looked around and the others, and it seemed they’d made the same decision as well. He mentally assented to the teleportation, and his body suddenly became lighter. A moment later there was a falling sensation. In fact, he really did seem like he was falling. It felt like stepping off a chair onto a stone floor. When he landed, he was in a place he didn’t recognize.

Akuto looked around. It was a wider space than the underground mausoleum. He wasn’t sure that he was underground, but the ceiling above him was very high, so it seemed a safe assumption. It was tall enough to fit a whole building down here, and there was a ton of space around him, too. He thought that you might be able to fit an entire small city in this one room.

The location they’d appeared at was the front of a gate.

—*A palace...?*

Akuto couldn’t believe it. The others had fallen silent in surprise as well. The gate in front of him was studded with elaborate gold decorations. Past the gate was a stone path that continued for a hundred meters or so, and then an altar.

“There’s an altar over there...” Akuto began to say, when suddenly someone appeared in front of the gate.

He couldn’t tell who it was yet, but they were standing with their hands on their hips as if to block him from entering. The person wasn’t that big, but they seemed strangely imposing.

“Hey there, everybody.”

The person lifted up the brim of their hat a little as they spoke.

“The student council president...”

Everyone gasped.

“This is the goal. Fun game, huh?”

The student council president laughed, and the three other members of the council appeared from behind her. A thin girl in black. A tall girl, no longer wearing her three-meter high armor. A muscle-bound girl, still looking sleepy, with her limbs transformed into those of a beast.

—*These three... The thought had crossed my mind, but...*

Akuto looked at each of them. That was definitely them. They had been the three monsters who’d been protecting the treasure all along.

“Did you say this was a game?” Junko said, annoyed.

The student council president laughed.

“That’s right. A little event the student council put on. A treasure-hunting game. Did you enjoy it? The prize is... hmm... I’ll give you a kiss on the cheek,” she said, and laughed again.

But the only ones laughing were her and Keena, who was jumping up and down and shouting “Yay! Yay! Kiss!” The three other student council members were looking at Akuto angrily. The president realized they weren’t laughing and turned around.

“Come on, guys! I’m forcing myself to laugh! You can too! Let’s make this more fun!”

“Ahahahaha!”

“Dondon-pafupafu!”

“So fun-gyah! You’re so smart-gyah! You’ve got the best taste in games-gyah!”

The three forced themselves to laugh as well. But the only one who was truly enjoying herself, of course, was Keena.

“You know that’s impossible. You’re going to tell us what’s going on here, right?” Junko asked.

“Like I said, it’s a game. I made you find that treasure map, set the three of

them around to stop you, and then the first person who gets would get a prize."

The smile was gone from the president's face now, too.

"That's not possible..." Junko refused to give up, but Akuto motioned for her to be quiet.

"Who cares? It was a fun game. Right?" he said.

The false smile returned to the president's face.

"Right? Right? Right? It was so much fun! Ahahaha!"

"Ahahaha," Akuto laughed back just as insincerely.

But even his fake laugh vanished a moment later. Fujiko, who'd been standing silently and holding the keys, started to run.

"You're letting me through!" she yelled as she threw a vial of some drug at the president's feet. Instantly there was a puff of smoke, and everyone was blinded.

"No...!" the president yelled.

Fujiko leapt into the smoke. The three tried to stop her, but she slid through the gate before they could.

The next thing everyone saw was her running down the stone path towards the altar.

"Fujiko!"

Akuto went to follow her, but a sharp yell from the president stopped him.

"Don't! It's dangerous!"

There was something abnormal in her voice that made him stop. He stared at her face.

"This is no game, is it?"

"Everybody knew that. I do appreciate the fact that you played along, though. That's right. This isn't a game."

She shook her head, as if giving up.

"Everything past this point belonged to the last Demon King?"

“That’s right. This is the lowest level of the labyrinth underneath the school. The last battle was held underground. This was the Demon King’s base.”

“Why’s it still here?”

“You’ll know soon. But I will say one thing. Don’t go through this gate.”

She stared at him, her eyes were filled with a strange intensity.

But Akuto refused to give up.

“Why?”

He stared back at her. Hiroshi backed away, of course, and even Junko followed suit.

“Because I tell you to. No matter what happens, don’t move. It won’t do anyone any good.”

Her words were soft, but heavy.

o

Fujiko was the only one to notice that the faint light from the keys pointed towards the altar. And she was sure that this light would illuminate her past. It was what would resolve all the contradictions she felt.

She ran down the stone path. Nobody followed her. When she got close to the altar, she slowed her pace and looked down at the keychain and the tablet.

—I’m supposed to put my hand on the tablet and then replay the recording on the keychain... That means there must be some kind of magical system here, and this is what I need to do to open it.

She searched the altar. It was metallic, and the size of a double bed. It looked like a table you would use to sacrifice someone, and there were words carved on it.

“Sealed until one who can save all humanity appears. Death to those without that power.”

Next to the words was a keyhole that would probably match the key.

“This is it...”

She put the key inside.

There was a low roar. She knew instantly that the altar itself had activated.

The tablet she was holding began to glow. The toy had the ability to detect mana-based transmissions. She received the transmission and saw that it said, “Confirm handprint.” She put her hand against it, photographed it, and sent it off.

The response was immediate.

《Verbally input encoded password.》

She pressed the button on the keychain. Her brother’s voice played back, and then the audio password.

When she heard the sound of his voice, she started to cry. The tears landed on the altar just as it began to rise up.

“Password confirmed. Restarting system.”

Fujiko stepped away from the altar.

The altar rose up more, then split open like a box made from wooden logs, and a hole opened into the underground. The hole spread until it encompassed the whole dais the altar was on.

Then a silver cylinder rose up from the hole.

It must have been ten meters in diameter. It rose up to five meters above the ground and came to a stop.

Then a crack opened up in the side of the cylinder. It began to open to the left and right.

○

“What’s going to happen now?” Akuto asked. He could see the silver cylinder rising up beyond the student council president.

“That’s right. One could say that you’ve sinned, and need to be punished.”

The president shook her head sadly.

“Sinned?”

“You dug this up, even though we tried to stop you. You know that, right?”

“I’m aware. You were trying to make sure nobody found this place. I can tell that now.”

“What I wanted was to maintain the status quo. No, maybe ‘protect’ would be a better word. If nothing else, the government wanted to pretend this never happened.”

“Because this place belonged to the Demon King?”

“That’s right. Of course, we’re on the government’s side. We’re studying to be important officials one day. And when you’re the student council president, you already work for the government. But the government isn’t a monolith. We, the majority, wanted this place to just remain down here untouched. There was no telling what would happen if it was destroyed, and if somebody found out how to use it, there could be terrible destruction once more. Even the Black Mages don’t want to touch the things the Demon King left behind. In many cases, there’s some kind of requirement for their use. And nobody knows what that is. If you don’t know what you’re doing around them, you’ll die.”

Her words were cold and calm, but Akuto gasped at what she was saying.

“Die...?!”

“That’s right. It might be too late for Fujiko Eto. And your punishment will be that you have to watch and let it happen. I don’t know how close you were to her, but you will remember that it is your fault she died.”

“It was Eiko Teruya who led me to...”

Halfway through his sentence Akuto realized how dumb he sounded, and stopped talking. But the president heard him.

“You’re pathetic. She’s working for one of the government’s extremists. They want to wipe out all the black mages, and they’re willing to start another war to do it. She was either helping to prepare for that war, or maybe she realized that you don’t have whatever it takes to use these things, and brought you here to kill you. There’s no way to know what those people are up to. They’re an eerie bunch all around. They’re always getting ahead of the majority.”

“I see. So you’re telling me to stay here and watch, right?”

“That’s right. Don’t even think about going to save her. The Demon King’s possessions only kill those who don’t have the right to use them, and they never leave their territory,” she explained.

But something didn’t seem right to Akuto.

“How did you learn this?”

“It was a century ago when the Demon King lost the war, and the black mages sealed his possessions all around the land. They were later found, and both the black mages and the government tried to activate them. Several of the more talented ones found ways to do it. And after their deaths, they left us with the knowledge. This place was the last that anyone found.”

“Then Fujiko’s older brother...”

“Supposedly, yes. We don’t know the details, though,” she said. “We just wanted this thing to stay down here, asleep. We found this place right after you received the map. We’d succeeded in the treasure hunt far before you did. But when we asked the government if we should destroy it, they told us to maintain the status quo. Thinking back, there were probably some backroom dealings between the majority and the extremists. But whatever the case is, I’m going to obey my orders.”

The president raised a finger and drew an imaginary line in front of the gate.

“If you cross this line, I’ll show you no mercy.”

o

The silver cylinder began to open in front of Fujiko. White smoke was pouring out from inside. Whatever the contents were, they must have been frozen.

When the cylinder opened all the way, and she could see what was inside, Fujiko gasped.

“That’s...!”

A huge black beast was curled up inside.

—A dragon!

Its body was covered in black iron scales. Its horns were huge steel screws. On its back was a shining silver saddle. It was the legendary dragon that the Demon King had ridden into battle.

It was curled in a ball, with its tail pressed against its head. It began to stir and reawaken. It slid out of the cylinder with a speed that belied its huge size. All in all, it was fifteen meters long. Its folded wings began to open as if it was stretching. It seemed to command far much more of the space than it actually took up.

“So it’s been a century... since I went to sleep?”

The dragon spoke. The voice was a wise one, despite its reptilian face. It looked at Fujiko with opened golden eyes.

“But I do remember. Once, I was almost awakened, but was not. That would have been ten years ago. But if I was activated for no reason, this is not necessarily a cause to rejoice.”

He was speaking to himself, but that was enough to terrify Fujiko.

“Y-You’re the legendary...”

“I’m a legend? Please don’t make me feel old. I was made to serve mankind, and treat all equally, but I was given a personality. And adhering to that personality has precedence over my mission.”

The dragon’s voice was low, and it echoed.

“I-I’m sorry. Wh-What do you mean?”

Fujiko’s voice was shaking.

“I mean, I am a selfish creature.”

It stuck out its head at her as if to threaten her. Fujiko screamed and fell backwards. The dragon laughed a little.


Coolant

“It pains me to see your fear, but there’s nothing to be afraid of. If you were the one who activated me, then you lack the right to use me. None who lack the right can ever be my master. And using my power without such a master would cause harm to mankind,” it said.

“Wh-What does that mean?” Fujiko said in a shaking voice.

“When I am activated by those who lack the right to use me, I must instead grant them a swift death,” the dragon said quietly.

And then it opened its mouth wide at her.

o

“Student Council President!” Akuto roared. Everyone there could hear what the dragon had said.

The student council president’s voice was bitter.

“I don’t want to repeat myself.”

The air became heavy, like lead. Nobody spoke, except Keena.

“Ackie! Go save her!”

“I know, but...”

Akuto was infuriated at himself, and the fact that he couldn’t move. He wasn’t frozen out of fear, laziness, or ill will. It was because he knew that politically speaking, letting her die was the right thing to do.

—Nothing good will come of showing the world that the Demon King still lives!

He’d come to the Academy to work with the government in the first place. He knew that the Student Council President’s decision was the right one.

“I have to make the right decision!” Akuto yelled.

But Keena cut him off, screaming even louder.

“Ackie, you dummy! You don’t even know how she feels!”

Akuto’s whole body went numb when he heard her words. He didn’t know what was going on, but when he looked around, he saw that everybody but

Keena was looking confused. They must have felt the same sensation.

—Huh?

Suddenly he felt something flooding into his brain. It was like a waking dream, or perhaps seeing into someone else's memories.

He was running.

Someone was chasing him.

He felt fear, and a terrible sense of urgency.

This was someone's nightmare... No, it was something they'd really experienced.

He'd hide the key at the hot springs shrine. Then he'd write the words on the toy tablet, and photograph the entrance to the cave. He'd promised to take a photo and show it to his little sister. He'd never thought he'd end up using it this way.

He changed the geography of the forest in order to evade his pursuers — it was a higher-class spell given to him by the god Mureet. He'd been given more of Mureet's power than anyone. He wouldn't be able to escape entirely, but he could buy time.

Next he went into the abandoned Knight Equipment Laboratory. He hid the tablet on a shelf in the back. The reason was simple: it was the knights who were chasing him. He hoped this was enough to serve as a condemnation, but he wasn't sure.

He continued to run. He would denounce them. That's right. That's what he had to do. He realized where his last hiding place would be. And he ran.

Somebody had to know... Somebody had to be told about the man who had deceived him.

When the seal on the Demon King's final fortress had been broken, he had been sent along with the research team, despite only being a student. And that's when that man had approached him.

"Can you find a way to break the seal on the dragon? All I need you to do is find the method. I'll ask you to keep this a secret, but the next Demon King has

awakened. The government's decided to reseal this place after the investigation, but I want to destroy it completely."

He hadn't even had a clue that the man was lying to him! Part of the reason he'd said yes was the fact that he knew he was the only one who could crack the difficult passwords on the Demon King's relic. And since he only needed to break the passwords, not the seal itself, there was no risk. He'd even looked into the man's background. He wasn't a black mage. He was a high-ranking member of the public safety committee. There was no reason not to trust him.

But then one day he'd learned that he was now involved in a truly terrifying plan...

Who would've ever imagined that...

He went inside the mausoleum. Once he'd learned about the plot, he'd done another check on the man's background. And he'd learned that what he was being told was impossible. The man was supposed to have died during the great war that took place 90 years ago. Who was this man? He opened the box and looked for bones. Of course, there were none.

Boichiro Yamato.

He hid the toy keychain with the recorded password in the grave.

It made him sad to erase the recording that Fujiko had made. He didn't want to face death without being able to hear her voice...

But the best thing he could do right now was leave behind a way for someone else to break the dragon's seal.

He listened to Fujiko's voice one last time, letting it soak into his brain, before overwriting it with the password and closing the box.

Then he made the map.

《A message to the courageous one who reads this map...》

If possible, he wanted the black mages to find it. They were the only ones he could trust now. It was ironic — until now, he'd hated them, but now it was the government that he couldn't trust.

The most likely place for a black mage at the Academy to be was the Mental

Monastery. He was the only one, besides the black mages themselves, that knew they used it as a dead drop. He'd hated them so much he'd spent his personal time tracking them down.

He put the map up there.

And then he left a hint that this was meant to denounce the government. He hid the map on the spot in the constitution that dealt with the establishment of the public safety committee.

It would take several decades for someone else to appear who was capable of breaking the dragon's seal. The government had no one left who could break the seal on their own. And if things worked out, the black mages would find his message in secret. Even if they didn't, if the map became public knowledge, the civilians and government majority would see it before the extremists did. If that happened, it would be impossible for them to control the dragon on their own.

All his work was done, except for one last thing.

He had to erase his memories of the password, and of the hidden map. He would be caught soon, and once he was, they would kill him and subject him to necromantic magic. He had to delete the memories, or rather records, from Mureet while he was still alive.

He used his rank of assistant priest to summon the god. He found the records that matched his search parameters and deleted them. He would have to delete almost everything that had happened during his life at the academy. After his death, his family would probably suffer.

The job was done.

The man was standing in front of him, so beautiful that it made him feel hatred. The man seemed bright, easygoing, and cheerful, but on the inside, he was none of those things... or perhaps he was. Maybe his easygoing, cheerful nature was what let him proceed towards his goal.

"Oh dear. You erased your memories? So now we can't get the dragon?" the man asked. "Splendidly done! This will cause a huge delay in the plan. I suppose I'll just have to come up with a new method."

The man shrugged. It felt good to see his disappointment.

But there was no way he could defeat the man.

He would die soon.

The man's hands stretched out.

Pain.

And then a sudden darkness.

"What the hell was that?!" Akuto yelled.

Everyone else had the same expression on their face as he did.

Korone's calm voice gave him the answer.

"These are memories recorded inside the dragon. While it doesn't seem to be using the official methods, that dragon records all the memories of every imperial citizen."

"So that's the black mages' god?!" Akuto shouted in surprise.

"It seems that even while it slept, its recording function continued to operate. No one was able to use it for a hundred years, though, until now."

Korone's explanation mostly made sense, but there was one thing it didn't clear up.

"Why was it sent into everyone's brain?"

"Someone probably served as a catalyst. Who that was, I couldn't say."

Akuto looked at Keena. She had a look of shock on her face. She didn't seem to know either.

—But it doesn't matter. What matters is that I've seen it. And that changes things, doesn't it?

Akuto smiled at Keena.

Keena saw him and smiled back.

"Yup!"

The student council president must have noticed the change within him.

"Don't blame me if you regret this. I'm not going to hold back."

She waved her hand to shoo Hiroshi and Keena away.

“Korone,” Akuto said.

Korone put on her roller skates (they seemed to be a favorite of hers) and dashed over to Hiroshi and Keena, then carried them off under her arms.

“Hattori,” he called out to Junko as well. She shook her head.

“The followers of Suhara never retreat.”

“Well, do it anyway. There’s no reason for you to take any risks. This is my responsibility.”

“No, I owe Eiko Teruya some payback as well. And I think you’re doing the right thing here, too. And... and...”

Junko fell silent. Then her face turned red as she whispered.

“And if you chose me, I...”

“Huh? Did you say something?”

Akuto couldn’t hear her.

“You idiot! I said...” Junko started to yell.

But once again, Akuto couldn’t hear her. Before she finished her sentence, he was blown back by an incredible force.



—What?

He was smashed into the ground before he even knew what was going on.

The same thing had happened to Junko. She'd seemingly taken more damage than Akuto —she was lying on the ground moaning.

"What the..."

"What did you do?" He tried to ask, before another impact struck.

But this time, as he was knocked backwards, he was able to see what was happening.

The student council president's arms were stretching out. He wasn't sure if she was instantaneously generating more arm tissue, or like Junko's clones, she was dealing damage with only mana, but this much he was sure about: she was standing right where she'd been before, ten meters away from him, and still managing to land punches.

"The fight starts the moment you decide you're gonna fight, you know," she said. And then she continued, sounding unhappy. "I saw the same memories you did. I understand how you feel. But the things I believe in tell me that I can't let you through."

"If that's how you want it then..." Akuto stood up. "...Then could you at least let me enjoy the fight, instead of sucker punching me?"

"You enjoy fighting more than you let on, don't you? Alright, let's have a fun fight then. You know, we've known each other for a while, but I never gave you my name, did I? My name is Lily Shiraishi. Personality-wise, you could say... I'm a little short-tempered."

Lily extended her right fist out again. Akuto twisted his body to dodge it. And then a blow struck him from the opposite side. He took it square on the chin and was knocked back. Her left fist had come up from below.

"You should've seen that feint coming. You like fighting, but you don't do it very often, do you?"

Akuto shook his head to clear out the groggy feeling.

“You’ve got me all wrong. I hate fighting,” he replied.

“You know, they said the same thing. You had all this power, but you were hesitant to use it.”

Lily jerked her head in the direction of the three other members of the student council.

“I see. They were very gentle, too. They were careful not to deal any fatal blows. Except for the last one, I suppose.”

“She goes feral when she transforms. Now, I think that’s enough talking. I have a reputation for kindness myself, too. I’d like to knock you out quickly.”

Lily pointed behind her.

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The dragon fired something from its mouth. In legends, dragons are said to breathe fire. But this dragon breathed iron rods carved in the shape of screws.

The rods flew through the air and pieced the ground. One landed between Fujiko’s legs as she lay on the ground, shattering the stone path and drilling into the earth below.

“I created those within my body, and they are a part of me. Ranged weapons are a cowards tool, and so you must pay a price for using them. That’s what the forerunner thought. Now, girl, rise and fight. Those without the right to command me are at least given the chance to fight me. One must prioritize one’s emotions above the mission. That’s what the forerunner said, and so that is what I will do,” the dragon said.

Fujiko stood up on shaking legs.

But the memories she’d just seen were still inside her mind.

—Brother...

She’d learned the truth. The feelings she’d carried with her for a decade were all built on a lie. And now, everything seemed meaningless.

“So you’ve risen to your feet, then. But you can’t hope to fight me on those shaking legs.”

The dragon's words were cold.

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"You heard the dragon," Lily said with a shrug. "So it's better that you're out cold. You don't want to see a girl's body ripped apart by drills, do you? Once Eto's dead, the dragon will go back to sleep. And when that happens, I'll destroy the keychain with the password recording. That will end everything for good. By the time you wake up, it'll all be done."

"I don't want that to happen. That's why I'm standing here."

Akuto looked straight into Lily's eyes.

"So what will you do? Get past me and fight the dragon?" Lily said mockingly. "That would mean you want to be the Demon King, wouldn't it?"

Akuto started to say something, but then realized she was right.

"I... I'll work something out. So I don't become the Demon King."

Lily burst out laughing.

"Hahaha! I love it! If you're not ready for what lies past those gates, then I really can't let you through."

She launched another punch, and Akuto was knocked back again.

—*Maybe she's right. Maybe I'm not ready...*

Akuto realized that his feelings were wavering. He had a bad habit of trying to act cooler than he really was. It was possible that his words just now that been nothing but bravado.

But— "I have the resolve you need! I have it, Akuto Sai!"

He heard a voice. Junko had risen to her feet. Akuto looked up at her as she yelled at Lily and Akuto both.

"Even if you don't have that resolve, I do! If you become the Demon King, I'll kill you!"

Her words brought clarity to his mind. Akuto stood up.

"Sheesh... I guess I'll have to fight then."

Akuto looked at Junko.

“I know that I’m not the best person.”

Junko’s face turned scarlet as he stared at her.

“W-What are you talking about?” she asked.

“The past, the future — I just want everything to work out. I’m indecisive and unprepared for all these things that are happening, but if you’re willing to kill me... then I’ll just have to get prepared, won’t I?”

Akuto smiled. Junko looked away.

“Y-You loser.”

“So that’s how it is, President.”

Akuto turned back towards Lily. She seemed impressed.

“You’re quite the lady-killer, aren’t you? You’ve got the makings of a leader.”

“Huh? I never thought of it that way...”

“I see. So it’s unconscious, huh?”

Lily stretched out her arms again. But this time it was at Junko, not Akuto.

“Tch!”

Junko managed to block the first round of punches with her katana, but they just kept coming and coming. Eventually her defenses were overwhelmed, and she was knocked away.

“Hattori!” Akuto yelled.

Junko was back on the ground.

“Ugh... Forget about me. You just...”

“I know.”

He could feel Junko’s resolve so well it almost hurt. Akuto turned towards Lily, preparing to fight.

“Here I come.”

Akuto remembered the whirlwind amplifier he’d used in the underground

cemetery. If he could only remember that spell, he should be able to recreate the same effect even without a bullet. He tried to recall the magical pulses the spell had created. He moved his fingertips to generate the same signals in his brain, and then used words to give them more power.

"Let the trembling of my heart become wind!"

Akuto amplified the whirlwind that was growing in his hands, turning it into a tornado that bore down on Lily. It was now several dozen meters high, but Lily looked at it without fear.

"In the end, it's just wind made from mana. And you can stop mana with mana. You should remember that."

Lily created a ball of wind in her hands. It grew into a tornado as well, and when it collided with Akuto's, they both disappeared.

"Long-range attacks can be easily canceled out by manipulating the mana. What you did before, using mana pressure to snap a person's limbs, is normally only possible when you are much stronger than your opponent. Once there's distance between you, it gets much weaker," Lily explained.

"That's good to know. Then I guess the best thing to do is start attacking physically, huh? That way, it's only important how much mana we each have in our bodies. A tiny person like you should be at a disadvantage," Akuto said.

He hadn't really meant anything by it, but for some reason, the rest of the student council stiffened at his words.

—Huh?

Lily was acting strange. She was looking down and shaking, her hand slowly running across the brim of her hat.

The trio started to panic.

"Oh no-gyah!"

"When she touches her hat, it means big trouble!"

"Ugah!"

Lily's body shook as she spoke.

“Tiny...?”

She looked up, her face filled with anger. And then she grabbed the brim of her hat between her fingers and flipped it backwards.

“Oh no! She’s turned her hat around!”

“Once she does that, there’s no stopping her-gyah!”

The trio held each other tightly, trembling.

“DIE!” Lily roared. Both arms disappeared from her sides.

—*Whoa!*

Akuto was shocked. No, he didn’t even have time to be shocked. Punches were coming at him from all directions.

“Awah!”

Even as his body was struck over and over, Akuto could see that the whole space around him, stretching out for dozens of meters, was filled with fists. They knocked him up into the air, refusing to let him down. It was like a huge sphere of fists floating in the air, with Akuto at the center.

Once she saw that Akuto had fallen still, Lily finally stopped. The light of sanity had returned to her eyes.

“So you finally passed out, huh?”

As Akuto fell to the ground, Lily turned her hat back.

Fujiko was just barely managing to dodge the dragon’s attacks, but she was an herbalist, not a fighter — close-range combat was beyond her abilities. She was slowly being pushed up against the wall.

“It’s a pity, but this is the end for you,” Lily whispered so that Fujiko couldn’t hear.

But—

“It’s not over yet.”

Akuto’s voice echoed throughout the room.

Lily turned around in shock.

Akuto was covered in bruises, but he was still standing. He was limping towards her unsteadily.

“You haven’t had enough pain?!”

Lily’s arms launched more punches. She wasn’t out of her mind with fury this time, but her punches still had the same force as before. And now they were aiming right for Akuto’s vital spots.

But Akuto didn’t stop going forward.

“Haha... You’re so nice, President. You’re teaching me how to fight, aren’t you? I understand. If you know you’re going to get hit, then it doesn’t hurt! That’s the trick. Interesting,” Akuto mumbled.

“Ahaha... Figured that out, have you?” Lily laughed, half in terror.

Naturally, the student council president was the most powerful person in the school. She’d once used her fists to destroy an entire knight corps after they’d called her tiny. And Akuto was walking right through her attacks.

“You three!” Lily yelled.

“Right!”

The trio stood up straight and instantly readied themselves for combat. Clothes turned into hardened silver, armor appeared, and fur grew from hands and legs.

“Don’t hold back! Get him!”

The trio’s formation worked in perfect harmony as they struck at Akuto from three directions. The silver blade came from above his head, the bestial fangs from his right, and the giant axe, as tall as he was, from the left. Each of these attacks had proven difficult for him before, and there was no way he could dodge them.

But—

Akuto kept moving forward.

He grabbed the silver blade in his teeth. He clutched the beast’s claws with his right hand. And with his left hand he held the blade, ignoring the fact that it was

digging into his fingers. He dragged the trio with him as he advanced.

Lily kept attacking. But Akuto didn't stop.

When he was right in front of her, he shook them off his body. His strength was incredible — the trio flew ten meters, at least.

"Uwah!"

"Gnyah!"

"Aah!"

They screamed as they landed hard on the floor, making a loud clattering noise.

Lily stopped her attacks. There was sweat dripping from her brow.

"You're kidding me. Why the hell do you have to do all this?" she snapped as she looked up at Akuto towering over her.

"No real reason. I just figured that if there's a possibility where I can make everything work out, then maybe I should try it. I didn't really think about the details, so there's no real reason."

Akuto looked down at her with a face covered in wounds.

Lily slumped her shoulders with exasperation.

"Are you stupid? If that's seriously why you're doing all this, then I just don't care anymore. I was about to hit you with one last special move, but I'm not even going to bother. I don't know if it'll be the dragon or Hattori that kills you, but either way, I hope you just die."

Akuto gasped when he realized the meaning of what she was saying.

"Then..."

"Shut up. I didn't lose. I just don't care anymore."

Lily pointed behind her.

"Thank you."

Akuto bowed.

"Thank Hattori. I'm doing this because I believe in her. I still think what you're

doing is wrong.”

Lily jerked her head in Junko’s direction. Akuto turned back towards her too. Junko was just getting back on her feet. She was holding her bruised cheek in shame, and motioning for Akuto to keep going forward.

“I’ll make sure it all works out. Is that wrong?” Akuto asked Lily.

Lily smiled.

“You’re wrong. That’s why we call you the Demon King.”

As Akuto walked past her, she suddenly called out to him as if she’d remembered something.

“Hold it.”

“Huh?”

Akuto stopped.

“Crouch down,” Lily said.

Akuto obeyed, confused. She stood up on her tiptoes.

“I forgot the reward I promised you.”

Lily kissed his cheek.

o

The metal spike that had embedded itself into the wall next to her head terrified Fujiko.

There was nothing else she could do to fight back. She was out of drugs. Of course, she didn’t know if any of the ones she’d used had even had an effect on the dragon.

Even as her back was literally against the wall, Fujiko remembered her older brother.

She had been resenting him for so long. And now she’d found out that he was actually loyal and strong. Her image of him from when she was young had been right.

But it was too late for regrets. Despite her repentance, there was nothing she

could do to change the twisted life she had led. She just wanted to be a little girl, spoiled by her brother. But she'd pushed that feeling deep inside herself. She regretted that too. All the time she'd spent trying to craft the perfect public persona was a waste, and all the cowardly things she'd done in secret were just vain attempts to live up to her brother's potential.

—But once I'm dead, I'll be free from all that, won't I? According to the religion of the common people, I'll go see my brother if I die. I wonder if that's true.

It seemed so funny when she thought about it that she actually broke into a smile.

The dragon's jaws opened right next to her face. She could smell the sharp stench of metal deep within its throat. Fujiko felt herself wanting to throw up.

And then—

"It's okay now. I'll find a way to handle this."

It was Akuto's voice. Fujiko turned towards the sound.

Akuto was already far past the gate. He was right behind the dragon. It was plain that it was all he could do to stay standing, but his head was still held high.

The dragon turned its head towards him.

"Most humans who talk tough turn out to be weaklings. It angers me when those who lack the right pretend that they have it."

The dragon opened its mouth at Akuto, firing a metal spiral spike at incredible speed.

The spike roared as it spun towards him. It was easily a meter long.

But Akuto didn't dodge.

"Oorryaaah!"

He yelled with the last of his strength, and punched the front of the spinning spike with his fist.

His fist and the metal rod collided.

There was an ear-piercing whine, the sound of two pieces of metal wearing

away at one another.

“What?!”

The dragon’s voice was shocked.

Akuto’s punch had stopped its momentum in mid air. It hadn’t stopped spinning, but the tip didn’t pierce Akuto’s fist. Sparks flew from the point where they touched, until eventually the rod’s rotation stopped. It fell to the ground with a clunk.

“I’m not good a brawling, so this is the only way I know how to do this.”

Akuto shook his hand as if it were in pain.

The dragon laughed happily.

“I don’t know if you have the right or not, but it’s been a century since I’ve seen a man like you!”

“That’s ‘cause you were asleep for a hundred years. I’m not that special.”



Before Akuto could finish closing his mouth, this time the dragon flailed its tail around at him. It was the size of a tree trunk. But Akuto stopped it with a punch once more.

Sparks flew between his fist and the scales. The dragon pushed harder, hoping to slam him into the dirt.

But he stayed standing and knocked the tail away. Panting and covered in sweat, he motioned for the dragon to try again.

“What are you doing?” the dragon asked, confused.

“I tried to come up with some way where you don’t have to kill Fujiko, and I don’t have to kill you. How about we knock each other around for a while? There’s a bit of a size difference, though.”

Akuto seemed to be serious. The dragon laughed aloud.

“Hahaha! No one’s ever said that to me before! Very well! Try and knock me around!”

Akuto and the dragon faced off, fist against spike and fist against tail. Both of them counted twenty blows, but after that they were too exhausted to continue.

And then—

The dragon brought its head to bear down on Akuto for one final strike. It roared as its face drew closer to him.

Akuto punched it. There was the sound of metal colliding and shattering.

When the sound faded, the man and the dragon both slowly fell to the ground.

Fujiko watched, and couldn’t understand what she’d just seen. But she knew what she had to do.

Fujiko ran to Akuto.

o

“What’s your name?” the dragon asked as it lay sprawled on the ground next to him.

At this point, Akuto didn't have the energy left to care about anything, but he still felt obligated to answer.

"Akuto Sai."

"That's an awful name."

"It's the name of an orphan. Leave me alone. What about you?"

"Peterhausen."

"That's an awful name."

"It's a name given to me by my master before he passed. He had terrible taste in names. But I like it."

"I guess you had a good relationship with your master, huh?"

"He was a good man. And I hope that my good relationship with him will continue."

"Isn't he dead?"

"With my new master."

"Glad to hear you've got a new one. Congratulations."

"Are there no brains inside your skull, Akuto Sai? I mean you."

—*Huh?*

Akuto sat up in shock.

"What do you mean?"

"Once I've awakened, I need a master. Otherwise, I wouldn't have to kill someone every time I awoke."

"But I need some kind of right, don't I?"

"And defeating me shows that you have it."

"No, hold it! Wait, I'll pass! No thanks!"

"I'm afraid you can't refuse. If you do, I'll just have to go back to killing."

"Wait, wait a minute. If I do become your master, does that mean I have to do anything special?"

“Nothing. But my master is usually known as the Demon King.”

—Crap... I didn’t think this through again...

Akuto cradled his head in his hands.

Then suddenly Fujiko ran up and hugged him.

“Uwah! What the heck is going on here?!” Fujiko was looking at him with dewy eyes.

—This is bad news... Did the shock of what she’s seen change her personality?

“Just calm down...”

“You are my master now, Demon King! As a black mage, I will serve you forever!”

Fujiko knocked him to the ground.

“Wait... hold it!”

—This is just making things worse, isn’t it... My dream was to become a first-rate... what was it again?

5 - The Cheerful Conspirator

“I really don’t know about this...” Akuto mumbled to himself.

Peterhausen had insisted that his master should live down here, and so he’d been given a room in this underground palace. It looked like a king’s throne room from a picture book, with red carpets and a tall chair. Akuto was sitting down in the chair, but it made his butt itch.

“And you know, if someone saw this...”

“If someone saw this, what?” Peterhausen asked.

“I definitely look like a villain, don’t I?” Akuto replied.

The tall throne was decorated with skull emblems. Akuto was sitting in it with his legs crossed. Fujiko was sitting on one of the armrests, draping herself off of Akuto’s shoulder. She had now awoken to her true destiny as a black mage, and sworn eternal loyalty to him. Keena was sitting on his lap, too, though more because it was funny than any deeper reason of loyalty. To top it off, Junko was standing beside them looking surly, with her hand on her sword.

Finishing off the scene was Peterhausen, the fifteen meter-long dragon, curled up behind the throne. Korone and Hiroshi were standing at the bottom of the steps.

“It totally looks like he’s trying to take over the world. Maybe I should take a photo for the school paper,” Lily said, only half joking as she watched from a distance. The trio nodded.

“Please don’t! I’m going back to the dorm, okay? I’m leading a normal life!” Akuto sobbed.

“You don’t know when to give up, do you? But...” Lily shrugged.

o

Somewhere in the Imperial Capital.

He was sitting in the director’s office in a certain building. The man was

astonishingly beautiful, but strangely, he inspired no resentment. He had a gentle aura that made you feel he could talk to just about anyone.

The man — Boichiro Yamato — was staring at a Japanese garden outside the window. He looked like he was thinking about something, but he also looked like he had a deep enough understanding of the garden that he could stare at it for hours.

And then, someone rudely stepped into the garden. Boichiro's expression clouded. But the girl in the garden didn't seem to notice the change, and when she opened the window and came in, she told him exactly how she was feeling.

"Hey! I want you to make Akuto Sai and Junko Hattori suffer! Please?" Eiko yelled as she leaned herself against the chair where Boichiro was sitting.

"Make them suffer? Now that's not very nice."

"They're crazy, though! They should just die!"

"That's right. But in the end, Akuto Sai didn't die," Boichiro said, as if he only just now remembered.

"That's right! And that's weird! Why?"

"Hm. Well, predictions about the future are just predictions. When the situation is complex, they can be wrong. But this time, something was definitely strange. Akuto Sai was supposed to open the seal, and he was supposed to die. That was a certainty."

Boichiro put his hand on his jaw in thought. Eiko furiously agreed.

"That's right! That's what you said!"

"But it wasn't him who opened the seal, it was another, and Akuto Sai saved her. Perhaps the secret to why the plan failed is hidden there."

"What do you mean?"

Eiko moved up to his lap, and wrapped her arm around his neck. Boichiro patted her on the head as he answered.

"He grew up in a very short period of time. And mana control is highly dependent on mental state, too. Something happened that caused him to

become serious.”

“Wow! You really do know everything!”

Eiko was excited like a little child.

Boichiro laughed bashfully.

“I’ve been alive a long time, you know. Now, don’t you need to go give your family your work report?”

Boichiro gave her a tiny slap on her behind. Eiko squirmed gleefully and ran out of the room.

Once she was gone, Boichiro let out a long sigh. He took out the pendant on his chest and began to play with it. The pendant was a locket, and when he opened it, a 3D holographic photo appeared. It was an image of a beautiful blonde woman.

He brushed off his knees, as if wiping away some stain that Eiko had made, and then sat back in his chair as he stared at the picture.

“Time lasts so very, very long, doesn’t it? And I’m getting very tired. I think it’s about time I really, truly settle things with that Demon King,” he said to no one in particular.

Afterword

I’m Shotaro Mizuki, I guess. How are you guys doing? I’m doing... well, okay.

So this is volume two! Also my second afterword! I thought I should talk about the same stuff I did in volume one, but of course, I didn’t get mountains of information about nasty food from all over Japan (obviously). Instead I was impressed by the quality and sensibility of the Japanese taste bud, and so, I won’t be able to talk about that topic again. That’s right. Usually places with bad food just go out of business, don’t they?

But that being said, my rather twisted personality is unlikely to fix itself anytime soon, so I’ll be talking about something similar: “good deeds,” something I’ve been thinking about a lot lately. Lately I’ve noticed that lots of people brag about bad deeds they do, but nobody ever brags about good things they do. If, for example, local punks started bragging to each other about how they did good things instead of bad things, how would Japan change? Let’s imagine it.

“You know man, in the past I used to be one hell of a good guy.”

“Seriously, boss? You don’t look it.”

“Right? But I used to be a famous volunteer around town.”

“Really? That’s badass.”

“When I was little, I was satisfied with just collecting donations, but when I heard that barely any of that money went to the people in need, I got pissed off.”

“That’s right. There’s some of those charities that just spend the money on themselves. Screw those assholes.”

“Does that mean you used to be into that stuff too?”

“No, not like you. I never got into it like you did. You know how you can, like, kinda ‘adopt’ kids from foreign countries and send money to them? You’d

probably know all about it. I do that. I only give a few hundred thousand yen a month, but...”

“Wow, you don’t look the type.”

“Nah, I’m not as amazing as you are.”

I can tell you right now, this is never going to happen. Nobody ever brags about the good deeds they’ve done. It’s not that they’re hard. It’s that they’re boring. There’s nothing harder to brag about than a good deed. You can send reports of good deeds you’ve done to our editing department, but I’m not going to publish them, so keep that in mind.

Anyway, on to the book itself.

I wrote this book so that it wouldn’t need any complicated exposition. You should be able to breeze right through it. But I do get excited when I write this stuff, so I hope you get excited when you read it too. Like, maybe go yell in a place where nobody’s watching. Anyway, fortunately I’m gonna be able to keep writing, so I hope you’ll keep reading. I’ve got a lot left in me to write about.

And now, the thank yous.

To Souichi Itou, the illustrator, I think he’s aiming to go worldwide. I was amazed the first time I saw his rough sketches for this volume. Personally I like the student council president the best. I’ve never seen a character who I wouldn’t want to have as a friend, a lover, or even an acquaintance, but I still love her! Even as the person who came up with her personality I still couldn’t predict this.

To my editor, Ohashi,

Thanks again for this volume. Next time I want to get it done at a slightly easier time. Maybe I’m just going to keep saying that, but it’s strange how long it takes to do this work. I pray each day that I’ll get a little faster.

And thanks to everyone else who helped as well.

Now come on, there’s lots more fun to be had!

Shoutarou Mizuki / Souichi Itou



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by Shoutarou Mizuki

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