
Shoutarou Mizuki
Demon King
DAIMAO
ACT3


Demon King
DAIMAO
ACT3


SUMMER!
THE SEA!
SWIMSUITS!
AND SEA CUCUMBERS!?


WAIT! HOW CAN YOU JUST LEAVE WITH NO EXPLANATION!
GOODBYE.


Character Introduction
AKUTO SAI
Our "good" protagonist, who's told in the future he's going to become the Demon King.
JUNKO HATTORI
The pure-hearted class representative who can't stop thinking about Akuto.
FUJIKO ETO
A black mage who swore loyalty to Akuto.
KEENA SOGA
A ditzy screw-up. Takes a liking to Akuto.
MIWA HIROSHI
A troublemaker who calls Akuto "Boss."
KORONE
An artificial human sent by the government to observe and protect Akuto.

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Prologue

1 - To the School Seaside Retreat

2 - Seaside Album

3 - Surprises in the Dark Woods?

4 - The Legendary Hero Appears!

5 - The Trouble Continues?

Afterword

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

Prologue

The girl was beautiful, like a doll. Her most noticeable traits were her green hair and eyes of the same striking color. Though she had perfectly polished features, there was no trace of an expression on her beautiful face.

She was a Liradan. An artificial human.

Liradans were created as the pinnacle of magical civilization's technology. That was what she was. It wasn't so much that she was *like* a doll — rather, she was a doll herself. And so, the strange name of "Korone" suited her well, as did the strange situation she found herself in now.

She was standing in a field at twilight, encircled by a huge video screen. The screen was a translucent cylinder formed from tiny particles of mana in the air. From a distance, she looked like a doll in a package.

Displayed on the cylindrical screen were ten men in suits, each of their faces blurred out by computer processing. They were all sitting, but their chairs and the scenes behind them were all different, as if they were all in separate places.

"I believe that I am already sending you the data you've requested," Korone said. She had a pleasant voice, but it was monotone, without a tinge of emotion.

One of the men on the screen responded, unsure if he was hearing a question or a complaint. His voice was computer-processed as well, to hide his identity.

"For us humans, it is important to see someone's face and hear their voice."

Then, another of the men interrupted before Korone could answer.

"Of course, it's not that we particularly want to see your face. We are referring to one another. It's best to use you as an intermediary to ensure that we are all on the same page."

"Yet all of you hide both your faces and voices," Korone pointed out. No one could tell if this was intended to be a joke, so she heard both chuckles and

grunts in response.

“Do you have a problem with the system, Liradan? We know who we are, so this doesn’t bother us.”

“Don’t take it personally. Liradans are a part of the system, too. Don’t forget that they’re created to be completely loyal to humans. But a perfectly loyal slave can turn a man into a tyrant. That’s why it’s better for them to have sharp tongues.”

“I’m aware of that, so spare me the lecture. Liradans have emotions as well. And after they are created and some time passes, they begin to form their own identities. Not that I know why.”

“If that was taken as an insult, I apologize. I was simply stating the truth,” Korone said calmly, then continued. “In any case, I can’t imagine that so many members of the cabinet have gathered to discuss the inner workings of a Liradan.”

“That’s right. We’re here to discuss Akuto Sai.”

“It’s a serious problem that he awakened codename ‘Black Dragon.’”

“Some are using this as evidence that he has already become the Demon King.”

“The militants are, anyway.”

“As you are aware, the cabinet oversees every major religious faction. But the gods have become so systemized that control of the individual believer is incomplete.”

“The Diet is filled with fools who seek only to benefit their own gods’ believers, even though those gods are just systems.”

“We’re getting off topic, but we’ll explain because it may be difficult for an artificial human like you to understand. Essentially, the human community is going into a panic, without even trying to find out exactly what this Demon King is.”

“Well then, what is the Demon King?” Korone asked.

“That’s classified. Even you cannot be allowed to know.”

“Even Liradans can’t be told?”

“Correct. However, to be precise, we do not know either. For us, not being able to announce something publicly is the same as not knowing it. But we do know one thing: Akuto Sai is not currently the Demon King.”

“But isn’t that a contradiction? You know he’s not the Demon King, and yet you cannot announce it.”

“That’s a minor matter.”

“It’s not something you should concern yourself with.”

“Our true focus lies elsewhere. From what we’ve learned, the militants have some evidence to back up their claims. Ever since he awakened codename ‘Black Dragon,’ demons everywhere have become more active.”

“Even those of us who aren’t blind fools can see that it may be necessary for Akuto Sai to disappear.”

“Our own opinions are split. Some of us are even considering assassination.”

“But the high priest of the Markt faction, the one you belong to, insists that Akuto Sai is an ordinary civilian. Thus, he is entitled to the full protections of the law.”

“There’s no easy way to settle this argument.”

“And so we wish to find a more fundamental solution.”

“We will take Akuto Sai’s freedom.”

“An arrest without a clear warrant is no different from an assassination, isn’t it?” Korone asked. The members of the cabinet laughed.

“We are men, you see. And we too are sometimes willing to give up our free will.”

“Please explain exactly what you are trying to say.”

“Hahaha. Of course.”

“Akuto Sai has an interest in the fairer sex, doesn’t he?”

“In the conventional sense of the word, yes, most likely,” said Korone,

nodding.

The men on the screen laughed once more.

“Don’t you understand? We’ll use a woman to take away his freedom. We just need to get him involved with one. A woman can ruin a man’s life — it happens all the time. We will use a woman to control him.”

“How vulgar,” Korone said calmly.

The men coughed uncomfortably.

“We are well aware.”

“But we cannot force him into committing a crime.”

“Markt’s records would show that we were the ones behind it. We are not priests, and so we lack the ability to erase those records.”

“But love is a different matter. He will act of his own accord. Even if he finds out we’re behind it, he won’t betray a woman. Especially after becoming intimately involved with her.”

“That’s right. Didn’t you say that’s the kind of person he is?”

“And so, we will ensure that this scenario comes to pass. It will unfold naturally, and it will let us avoid violence.”

“Understood,” Korone said flatly, and nodded.

“This is a matter of personal interest to you, as well. This is covert work. And it’s our order for you, Korone.”

“I belong to the Church of Markt. I cannot obey that order,” Korone said. One of the men on the screen raised a hand. He was holding a piece of paper.

“I have approval here from the Church of Markt. The electronic authorization will be transmitted to your brain.”

“And so I am participating in the cabinet’s plan on behalf of the Church of Markt?”

“Correct.”

“Then I can’t refuse, can I?”

There was a dull glow deep within Korone's eyes.

"I've confirmed the authorization. I see. I've received the detailed mission parameters as well."

The men all looked relieved.

"Then we should be able to put this matter behind us shortly."

"We didn't have this option before the last war, after all."

"Yes, this is our best option."

"He may seem completely straight-laced, but he's still a teenage boy. This will work."

"*If* Korone puts in the effort. And so, Korone, we're all counting on you."

Korone nodded, her expression unchanging.

"I will do my best to seduce Akuto Sai."

"Very well. But if this mission does fail, unfortunately, you'll be asked to take responsibility. Don't forget that."

"Do you mean I'll be relieved from my duties?"

"There's no need for us to answer that question right now."

The screen disappeared before Korone could say a word.

She was left alone in the twilight field.

If someone had seen her, her expression might have seemed sad.

"Humans say that we have feelings, but they don't truly understand what that means. It's a very strange thing," Korone whispered as the wind blew around her.

Someone who knew her well would have been surprised. Her words were flat, but there was strong emotion contained within them. In the same way, Korone began to complain even though there was no one there to listen.

"Seduction is going to be agonizing for me. I doubt it will even work, for one thing..."

She started to walk away, as if in resignation.

“I’m capable of falling in love, too. Not that the person I love would ever understand that.”

1 - To the School Seaside Retreat

Akuto Sai didn't know what to do.

Of course, this was a common state of affairs for him ever since he'd been given the prophecy that he would become the Demon King. His classmates at Constant Magical Academy were always afraid of him, and every day he ran into some new problem. Now he even had a giant dragon for a friend (not exactly a normal friend to have), and he felt like he was gradually getting closer and closer to becoming the Demon King.

Even now he was lying in bed in his dorm room, sighing to himself. His teacher, Mitsuko Torii, had summoned him after school and given him a message.

"Listen, we're all going on a seaside retreat, but you're staying behind. Sorry."

The normally serene Miss Mitsuko seemed truly apologetic this time.

"Was that the decision they made?" Akuto asked.

"Hmm, I don't know. There's a lot of stuff going on. Hey, you know how when the Emperor dies, nobody has a field day for a while? It's kind of like that. No, maybe it's different?"

When he saw how Miss Mitsuko was mumbling, Akuto figured out what was really going on.

"In other words, if I leave the school grounds, it's going to cause some problems for the school. So they've decided to have me stay here."

Miss Mitsuko clapped her hands together.

"Yes, that's right! That's exactly it. Akuto, you're so smart. I'm glad you understand. Yeah."

"Thanks for the compliment, but it doesn't make me feel any better."

"Ahh, don't let it bother you. It's just the first years who are going. The other grades are staying here, so it won't be lonely. You'll be excused from classes for

a while, so you can do whatever you want!”

Miss Mitsuko patted Akuto on the shoulder idly.

“Well, I guess it can’t be helped. Maybe it’s not that big of a deal.”

Akuto’s shoulders slumped.

Miss Mitsuko laughed with relief.

“I’m so glad you understand. I was worried that you’d be mad that you couldn’t see the girls in their swimsuits.”

“Do you really think I’m that kind of person?” asked Akuto, his eyebrows narrowed.

He had a handsome face, but a wicked glare. He looked exactly like a villain in a movie. Miss Mitsuko peered into his eyes.

“...True. You look like a guy who’s got half-naked girls hanging off him all day. You’d probably just be bored, seeing girls in swimsuits. If you’ve got that many girlfriends, I suppose this isn’t a big deal, is it?”

“I’m going just ignore that you said that. But yeah, it’s not a big deal. I understand,” Akuto said, and he left the classroom.

And yet...

—I guess I really don’t get to lead a normal school life, do I?

Akuto was really depressed. He rolled around on the bed and put his right hand over his eyes.

In his heart, he wasn’t at all like his appearance implied. Even so, he tended to show off in front of others. He certainly couldn’t tell her how much he’d been looking forward to the seaside retreat.

—It’s not the swimsuits. I just want a normal life. I could go swimming or something. Wait, what do you even do at a seaside retreat?

“The seaside retreat is your chance to interact very closely with girls,” a voice said, very close to him.

“Uwah!”

Akuto leapt out of bed. He hadn't seen her come in, but Korone was staring down at him.

Even though this was the boy's dorm, and his room was only for one person, she was always in here. Since she was Akuto's observer, she needed to be around him at all times. At night she would sleep in the cabinet above his closet. So it was normal for Korone to be around, but something was different today.

He couldn't put his finger on what it was, but Korone seemed different.

"Wh-What is it?"

"It's an event where you can interact very closely with girls," Korone repeated. And then for some reason she snuggled up next to him.

"Why are you lying next to me?"

"Because I want to. You don't like it?"

Korone wrapped her arm around his chest, and pinned him down on the bed. And then she moved her face close to his.

Seeing a face that was near the human ideal up close was a nerve-wracking experience, even if you were used to it. Akuto felt his heart skip a beat. Liradans breathed too, to help with their pronunciation when they spoke. Her breath was tickling his nose. It had a strange scent, different from a human's.

"L-Listen, are you teasing me again?" Akuto asked, trying his best to pretend that he was still calm.

Korone had teased him like this several times in the past. Akuto had to be careful that she wasn't doing it again.

"No, I'm not teasing you. If you're embarrassed, then I will take your secrets to the grave. No matter what you do here, I will tell no one. I'll even lie in my reports about anything exciting that goes on here."

Korone's voice was like a detective reading a suspect his rights. As she spoke, her hand slid along Akuto's body. From his chest, to his stomach, and then further down...

"W-Wait!" Akuto grabbed her hand and made her stop.

“What’s wrong?”

“Don’t ‘what’s wrong’ me! Seriously, knock it off.”

Akuto squirmed out of her grasp and sat up on the bed. He looked directly at Korone with a serious expression on his face.

Korone sat up as well. But she was holding her arms wrapped around her knees. She was wearing a short skirt, which meant that she was showing Akuto her panties.

“...Is something wrong?” Korone asked after he was silent for a moment.

Akuto shook his head and looked away.

“A-Anyway... This isn’t what you wanted to talk about, right? You were saying something about the seaside retreat.”

“About that. You will now be able to go.”

Korone looked up at him, opening and closing her legs.

“Huh?”

For a moment he didn’t understand what she was saying, and looked back at her. But then he looked away again. Her eyes were boring into him. But then he realized what she’d said and shouted in surprise.

“Huh? I get to go on the seaside retreat?”

“Correct. You will now be able to go.”

“But the Academy said I had to stay here...”

“I will take responsibility.”

“No, I mean you don’t have to do that. There’s a lot of rumors about me on the outside, right? So I don’t want to do anything that’ll cause a problem. I mean, if it’s not a big deal...”

As Akuto mumbled, Korone whispered in a soft voice.

“Is this a burden for you?”

Her voice sounded sad for some reason, and Akuto found himself looking at her face once more.

Her green eyes were strangely filled with emotion, and looking straight at him. They seemed damp, he thought. No, even before he could think that thought, he was starting to panic.

“That’s not it. I’m just confused, because I don’t know why you’d do that for me. That’s right, why would you want...”

Korone lowered her face between her knees and glanced up at him.

“As I said, the seaside retreat is a chance to interact closely with girls. I thought that if you went, it might make you a little less shy...”

Korone pointed downwards. Akuto’s eyes had no choice but to follow. Since she was sitting with her knees pulled tight to her chest, it was obvious what he was going to see.

“S-Seriously, stop teasing me. Anyway, I’m a follower of Ko-Roh. If I do anything like that, it’ll make it much harder for me to become a priest.”

Akuto got off the bed and moved away from Korone.

Korone stretched out her legs and lay down on the bed.

“I’m sleeping here tonight.”

“No way.”

Akuto shook his head. Korone stared at him.

“If you’re not interested in girls, that may be a type of illness.”

“It... it’s not that.”

“Then sleep with me,” she said, still looking at him. But since there was no change in her tone or expression, Akuto wasn’t sure what to make of that. He was really starting to get confused.

—Korone’s not acting like her usual self...

She didn’t seem to be teasing him, and there was no reason for her to seduce him.

“I-I’ll pass.”

“Why?”

“Why? Y-You’re being weird, Korone.”

“By weird, do you mean that you find me unattractive as a woman?”

“No, that’s not quite what I meant...”

“Then what did you mean?”

“No... it... it is what I meant. The way you’re acting isn’t... really turning me on.”

Akuto had no idea how to deal with this conversation, so he just blurted it out. He was worried about how she might respond, but Korone simply gave up.

“I see,” she said, and then stood up and went back to her usual sleeping space in the cabinet.

—She’s not upset or anything, is she? No, she doesn’t seem like the type...

Akuto had no idea what had just happened, but since the bed was empty now he decided to go to sleep.

—Come to think of it, I should have thanked her for letting me go on the seaside retreat. That whole conversation was bizarre, but I need to at least do that.

As he thought about this, his eyelids grew heavy.

But what Akuto didn’t notice was that after Korone was sure he was asleep, she looked down on him and whispered, “If you realized I wasn’t teasing you, would it turn you on? No, for a real approach, this is the wrong way, like you said...”

And so Korone began to search her databanks of past stories to see what it was that men liked.

“It’s morning. Get up. If you don’t get up, I’ll hit you with an elbow drop.”

That morning, Akuto was awakened by a heavy impact.

“Uwah! What the heck?”

He opened his eyes to see Korone straddling him. She was looking down at him with her usual blank expression.

“...Wha... What’s going on?”

“It’s your fault for not getting up sooner, big brother. If I don’t wake you up like this, you’ll never get up. You’re a bad big brother.”

Her voice was completely monotone.

“.....”

Akuto always got up early. He was usually up by 5:00 AM to do some light exercise and take a shower. He looked at the clock on the desk and saw that it was 4:40 AM.

—Why am I being woken up early and complained at? Actually, this “big brother” stuff is the bigger question here.

Akuto thought to himself, his mind still blurry. But that wasn’t the only strange thing going on.

Korone was wearing a dress like a little girl might wear. He’d never seen her dressed like that before. The dress looked nice on her slender body, but the skirt portion was too short, and as she straddled him he could almost totally see her underwear.

“Wait a second... What’s going on there?”

“You’re really not going to get up, big brother? Then I’ll have to use my feet.”

Korone turned her body around, and put her sock-clad foot up against Akuto’s crotch.

“Uwah! Wait! I’m already awake!”

“This is your fault for not getting up... Rub rub.”

“Aah! Ah-ah-ah!”

Akuto struggled desperately until he managed to get out from under her.

“Wh-What are you doing? You’re being weird, Korone.”

Akuto panted as he curled himself up into a ball at the side of the bed.

“I’m not being weird, big brother.”

She let her head droop to one side. He didn’t know how she’d intended to

look, but she seemed like a doll whose head was about to fall off.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying is weird!”

“Would you have preferred a shorter dress?”

“That’s not it!”

“Then perhaps a childhood friend character who lives next door?”

“That’s not any better!”

“Then what kind of girl would you pin to your bed when she came to wake you up?”



“Hell if I know!”

“How selfish. Teenage boys can be so difficult. But it doesn’t seem like you’re lying. I just checked with my feet, and despite it being morning your genitals are still soft.”

“Please don’t say that stuff aloud...”

Akuto was exasperated, but glad that Korone was speaking normally again.

—Good. Apparently she hasn’t broken somehow. But that means that Korone is actually trying to excite me. That’s really strange. What is she up to?

Korone took her bag from the desk and opened it, then removed a white apron from inside.

“Well then, I’ll just have to run through each option until I find the right one. Let’s start with me wearing nothing but an apron.”

“Let’s not! Why are you doing this, any...?”

Korone raised a hand to cut him off.

“Do you dislike this?”

“I certainly don’t like it!” Akuto yelled back.

But Korone didn’t answer immediately, and he started to worry.

—Huh? Did I go too far?

Finally, Korone spoke.

“That is a problem. When the person I like says that to me, I start to think that I might not be attractive,” she said slowly.

Her voice was still as monotone as usual. This only made Akuto feel more uneasy as she was saying such emotional words.

—She said that Liradans do have emotions, right? Does that mean that she’s really worried I might not like her? If that’s the case, then I don’t want to hurt her. But I can’t do anything rash either. I guess I’ll just have to say how I really feel.

Akuto was the type of person who would make what he felt was the socially

correct choice, and then end up trying to act cooler than he really was. He put both hands on Korone's shoulders, and looked straight into her eyes as he spoke.

"I want to be serious in my relationships with women, so I can't do things like that. But that doesn't necessarily mean I'm not interested. Even without you tempting me like this, I've always liked you, and do feel that way about you. So I don't know why you're doing this, but if you're worried that I'm upset with you, please don't be. And I didn't get a chance to say it yesterday, but I'm grateful that you gave me the chance to go to the seaside retreat. Thank you."

Korone froze. It might have been that she was unsure how to respond, or maybe she was just being her usual expressionless self. But even so, after a brief pause, she answered.

"Don't make this more complicated than it needs to be. I'm only interested in a physical relationship."

"Wha..."

Akuto stood frozen in shock.

It was 5:00 AM exactly. The alarm on the desk started to go off.

In that instant, Korone slipped out of Akuto's grasp, and began to put the apron away as if nothing had happened.

"Get moving. If you don't shower and exercise as usual, you won't make it in time for breakfast."

"R-Right..."

Akuto nodded stiffly, turned off the alarm, and quickly left the room. When he was gone, Korone put both of her index fingers up to her cheeks and pushed inwards and upwards. It almost resembled a smile. It didn't reach her eyes, though.

"If a purely physical relationship is too much to hope for, it must be because I'm a Liradan. Maybe if I can learn to smile. No, it's impossible to analyze humans, so I don't know for sure. So maybe if I tried to win his affections in a way that a human can't..."

For once, Korone seemed actually worried.

o

Akuto's worries about Korone's changed attitude only grew. He was keenly aware of how she was following him on the way from the dorm to school. This was because Korone had at some point changed into a maid uniform, and was even wearing cat ears. She was still trying to seduce Akuto, it seemed.

"You're looking cute today, Korone," Hiroshi said as he came up to her.

"So that's what you're into?" asked Akuto.

"Come on, boss, I didn't mean it that way. I just mean she's cute."

Hiroshi flashed a boyish grin and scratched his head in embarrassment.

Hiroshi Miwa. He was Akuto's classmate, and the same age, but looked up to him like an older brother. He was one of the few people who Akuto could call a friend. Everyone else was afraid of him.

"I am cute every day," Korone said.

"Haha, yeah. You are," Hiroshi replied.

"Akuto ignores my charms, however," Korone added.

The mood immediately became awkward. Akuto stole a quick glance at Hiroshi, and confirmed that he was confused by this change in Korone as well.

"Oh, right. So I guess I can go to the seaside retreat, by the way," Akuto said to Hiroshi in a faltering voice.

Of course, he thought that Hiroshi would be happy to hear this, and it could hopefully change the mood. But instead, Hiroshi's expression darkened for a moment. Not only that, he looked like he was forcing himself to smile.

"Uh, that's great, boss!"

"Y-Yeah..."

Akuto's expression stiffened as well. And so no one said anything until they reached the school building. When they got to home room, he figured out why.

"I have a message for everyone about our seaside trip," Miss Mitsuko said.

“Ahem. Akuto Sai will be participating.”

The whole class started to murmur. It was something he should be used to by now, but it still made Akuto uneasy. And then Miss Mitsuko said something that made it even worse.

“The retreat location is a special facility belonging to the Academy, so normally it shouldn’t matter who goes there. But the island where the facility is located is one with a legend about the Demon King. The legend is known to all the people on the island, and goes like this: Before the Demon King revives, a monster will appear from the lake in the center of the island. But then a hero will appear and defeat the monster. After that, the hero will defeat the Demon King.”

The class went silent. It seemed that they’d all been struck dumb. Everyone was looking towards Akuto’s seat, in the far back row.

He wasn’t sure how to respond, but he thought he’d look stupid if he didn’t say anything, so he spoke up.

“Only a fool would worry about the legends of some ignorant islanders. The Demon King’s war was a century ago, and we had the same government then that we do now. If something like that happened, there would be records of it, not some legend! And nobody can predict the future accurately anyway, so there’s no reason to believe the legend at all. It’s wrong to be scared over something so silly!”

Akuto slammed his fists against the desk.

His voice was a little too forceful and overly dignified, and actually ended up being less persuasive than he’d hoped. But since he made a good point, his classmates all calmed down.

But then he received an entirely different kind of response, one that he wasn’t expecting at all.

“I’m sorry, boss. That island is my home,” Hiroshi said.

—So that’s why he was acting that way on the way to school!

Akuto immediately became flustered.

“No, um, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to insult your family...”

“No, it’s okay. It’s true that my family are a bunch of ignorant islanders,” Hiroshi spat bitterly.

It didn’t seem like he was being sarcastic or humble. He seemed to truly dislike his family.

Akuto was curious about why, but Miss Mitsuko started speaking again before he could ask. When he finally had a chance to talk to Hiroshi at lunch, truly seemed like a complicated situation.

“It really is in the middle of nowhere. Just like you said, you couldn’t have a legend that’s just a century old. There are still people alive from that time, and they’d know what the truth is. And the Demon King was never defeated by a ‘hero’ anyway, so the only reason that legend exists is to give the islanders a reason to feel good about themselves. There’s nothing out there, so at least they want to believe they’ve got a hero who can defeat the Demon King.”

Hiroshi looked resentful. It seemed more like he was dwelling his own past than having a conversation.

Akuto didn’t understand why he would talk that way.

“But you’ve got family there, right? I don’t know if you should be talking about them that way.”

“Maybe not, but that’s my problem, not yours,” said Hiroshi with a frown. Akuto couldn’t help but feel irritated at this response.

“I really don’t like it when people say things like that.”

“Sure, but this isn’t something you’d understand, boss. You’re strong, you know?”

“That’s got nothing to do with it.”

“That’s not what I mean. That’s not what I mean at all!”

Hiroshi closed his mouth like he didn’t want to talk about it anymore. Before Akuto could say another word, he’d gathered up his tray and utensils and stood up.

—What was that about? What does being strong have to do with hating your family?

Akuto wasn't happy with the way they'd left things, but he decided not to worry about it. He would speak to Hiroshi again tomorrow.

o

The first thing Akuto did when he got back to the dorm was open the desk drawer. He climbed up on his chair, and then carefully stuck his foot into the opened drawer. It might've looked like he was trying to flip the desk, or maybe just destroy the drawer, but there was actually a teleportation circle inside. Peterhausen, the black dragon, had put it there for him, saying that it would be too much trouble for him to walk down all the way down to the labyrinth each time. Thanks to that, he could use the desk drawer to go to the Demon King's palace underneath the school.

Peterhausen was a black dragon, the steed of the former Demon King during the last great war. He'd been sealed away after the war ended, and only recently revived. Now he was Akuto's steed, but since Akuto didn't have the slightest intention of riding him, it made things awkward for the both of them.

"Start a war or something already," Peterhausen said tranquilly. His body was curled up in a ball like a cat or dog. "It will be good practice." But despite his peaceful demeanor, his body was 15 meters long, and his whole body was covered in shining black scales. He looked like nothing less than a demon hoping to destroy the world for his own amusement.

Peterhausen's bed was at the center of the underground palace. The palace was huge, with a terrifyingly high ceiling, so there was plenty of space for him to move around. This was, in fact, where Akuto had fought him. But Peterhausen sat on his pile of cushions and didn't move much. He seemed quite content.

Akuto stood in front of Peterhausen and chuckled.

"I'm sorry I have to keep giving you the same answer, but I'm not the Demon King, and I have no intention of becoming one."

"Someday the day will come when you'll realize that it's the best decision," Peterhausen snorted. "Now then, I can't imagine that you'd come to me

without a reason?”

Akuto nodded.

“This is probably a stupid question, but hear me out anyway.”

Akuto asked him about the legend of the island he’d just heard. He thought that Peterhausen would laugh, but instead he was listening intently.

“Yes, that is strange. Perhaps Hiroshi is correct that it’s simply wishful thinking on the part of the islanders, but there are parts of it that are of great interest to me.”

“Great interest?”

“To us, prophecies are nothing but predictions. In other words, the future can only be predicted based off of past data. The fact that you are the Demon King is another prediction based on past data. But there were no heroes in the past.”

“Then maybe you’re mistaken about me, too.”

“That’s a different matter. I can definitively say that I’ve never fought a hero in my life.”

Peterhausen’s eyes were mocking.

“I see. Then maybe it is just a superstition.”

Akuto crossed his arms.

The modern empire had been systematized for 1000 years. Gods were nothing but artificial record storage mechanisms. Perform the good deeds that they were programmed to prefer, and they would offer you social services in return. That system had never fallen apart. But most people weren’t aware of this system, and so gods were literal objects of worship, allowing the system and superstitions to exist side-by-side.

“No, what I found interesting was that despite its simplistic nature, it does seem like a true prophecy. Not a prediction. There would be no reason for the Demon King to go to that place, Miwa Island, was it? The last one didn’t. It’s an isolated island in the southern seas, after all.”

“Don’t say such spooky things,” Akuto said. “Enough about that. Why won’t

you tell me more about the last Demon King?”

Peterhausen opened a single eye, and made an expression that was hard to read. He seemed to be attempting to raise an eyebrow.

“Because you refuse to become the Demon King.”

“I told you, it’s never happening.” Akuto sighed and put his hands on his hips.

“I dislike conflict, so I’m staying here for now. But if there’s any problem, I’m more than willing to go out and start destroying things. And once that happens, there’ll be no going back for you. You will officially become my master.”

Peterhausen laughed. His breath caused little whirlwinds to appear around him. Akuto covered his face with his hand and frowned.

“I wouldn’t like that at all. And anyway, I’m leaving for a while.”

“A seaside retreat, is that what they call it? If you’re concerned about the prophecy, shouldn’t you stay here?”

“I know it’s just superstition, so I’m not worried.”

“Are you sure? If it gets dangerous, summon me and I will come. And then there’ll be a war. I can’t wait,” Peterhausen laughed with a vicious look on his face.

Akuto sighed.

“Let’s keep things peaceful,” he said.

“Deny it all you like. You’re a warrior.”

“Says the dragon with someone napping on its belly.”

Akuto jerked his head in the direction of the small creature sleeping on the dragon’s stomach. He could see tufts of red hair amidst the shining black scales. They were waving at regular intervals. It was the rhythm of someone breathing as they slept.

Keena Soga was taking a nap, and using Peterhausen’s body as a pillow. Her face showed that she was in a state of total relaxation. Just looking at Keena when she was awake was enough to make you sleepy. When she was asleep, it was like she was putting you under hypnosis.

“This girl is the first one to never truly fear me. Even you, Master, seem to keep your distance,” said Peterhausen, sounding impressed.

“She’s got a really special personality,” Akuto said with a shrug.

Looking at Keena’s face always made him feel strange. He couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d met her when he was younger, but Keena herself seemed to have forgotten. Maybe he was just mistaken.

That strange feeling meant that Keena was always on Akuto’s mind. There was something special about her that made her different from his other friends.

—Just who is Keena, anyway?

He’d tried to ask her before, but whenever you talked to Keena, you always found yourself talking about something different than you intended to.

As Akuto stood there in thought, he was suddenly struck from behind.

“Oww!”

“You were looking at her with lust in your eyes. You’re not allowed to look at girls like that, okay?”

The speaker’s words were in a flat monotone. He turned around and saw Korone. For some reason, she was wearing the uniform of another school. She was posing with her hand on her hips, but because she was expressionless, it was hard to tell exactly what she was doing.

“Um... what?”

Korone’s neck dropped to the side once again.

“Can’t you tell? I’m trying to be a classmate who’s jealous of other girls even though she’s not your girlfriend. Doesn’t it turn you on?”

“...No. Not really.”

“Unfortunate. Regardless, stop looking at Keena with lust in your eyes.”

“I am not!” Akuto denied.

“Good. I can’t have the two of you getting two close.”

Korone stood between Akuto and Keena. Peterhausen spoke up, sounding

confused.

“What are you doing? This doesn’t seem like what I’d expect from a conversation between a Liradan observer and the Demon King.”

Korone’s answer was immediate.

“Leave us alone. This is our problem, not yours. It’s a problem between a man and a woman.”

“Would you just stop...?” Akuto said. But Peterhausen only laughed.

“The Demon King is always popular with the ladies. I’m quite jealous.”

“You may have Keena then, Peterhausen.” Korone said. She was serious.

Peterhausen nodded. He was serious too.

“A splendid idea. I’ve taken a liking to her. She’s the one who made this bed for me, after all. Surely that means she intends to make a family for me.”

“What is wrong with you two?! Stop that!” Akuto interjected.

Both Peterhausen and Korone instantly turned towards him. Korone was expressionless, but Peterhausen seemed slightly surprised. Akuto wondered if maybe he’d shouted a little too loud.

“...N-No, I mean you can’t do that without taking Keena’s feelings into account.”

Akuto began to fidget and wave his hands in denial.

“It was a joke, obviously,” Peterhausen said, a little bothered.

Akuto laughed awkwardly.

“Y-Yeah. I’m sure it was. I’m just saying it’s inappropriate. Hahaha...”

“May I interpret your actions to mean you’re in love with Keena?” Korone leaned in towards Akuto questioningly. Akuto flinched.

“Wh-What kind of question is that?”

“Just what I said. Perhaps you wish to begin a sexual relationship followed by marriage, or simply live a life of debauchery with her.”

“L-Listen, don’t be stupid...”

“No, I’m quite serious. I’m not asking whether you actually intend to do it. I’m asking if, in your heart, you would like to.”

Korone’s face got closer.

“Wh-Why do I have to tell you what’s in my heart?”

“I wish to know your sexual proclivities, so that I can provide those services myself.”

“Wha...” Akuto was speechless.

—I need to do something...

He could feel the sweat pouring out from every pore on his body. But then the goddess of salvation appeared.

“What...? It’s kind of noisy...” Keena had woken up. “Oh, Ackie, Korone, you’re here. Stop making so much noise, okay? Petey’s sleeping too.”

Keena smiled and patted Peterhausen on the head. Evidently she was now calling him Petey. It wasn’t the best name for a terrifying dragon, but Peterhausen seemed to like it. Not only was he letting her pat him on the head, his eyes had narrowed like a contented cat’s.

Even if it was possible to speak with him, he was still a 15-meter-long beast. No, in Peterhausen’s case, the fact that you could speak with him only made it worse. He was prideful and violent, so he would probably be less terrifying if you couldn’t understand him. Akuto was forced to realize that whether he liked it or not, Keena seemed to live on a different planet than everyone else.

“Sorry for waking you up,” Akuto said. “Oh, right. I’m going to the seaside retreat with you.”

Keena’s expression brightened.

“Really? Great. If you weren’t going, I wasn’t going to go either. But if you are, I can go with you! I can’t wait!” Keena said, grinning.

“Y-Yeah...”

Akuto nodded. Normally he would’ve been just as happy as she was, but after what Korone had said, it was hard to look directly into Keena’s smile.

“What are you grinning at?”

Korone poked him in the back with her elbow.

“H-Hey, hold on. You’ve been weird ever since yesterday, Korone.”

But Korone just shook her head.

“I am, as always, carrying out my mission. There is no problem at all.”

“.....”

There was nothing he could say to that, but Akuto was starting to get worried that Korone might have really gone off the deep end.

—This is getting a little too weird. I hope it’s not a sign of something bad to come...

Akuto was already getting worried about the school trip, but then Keena pointed out one more headache.

“Hey, but if we go, then Petey’s gonna be all by himself for a while.”

“Ahh, that’s right...”

Akuto hadn’t really thought about it, but the only ones who could spend time with Peterhausen were Akuto and Keena. Given how he’d behaved so far, he was unlikely to go out and do anything that would cause trouble for Akuto. However, if someone were to approach his lair, he would probably kill them and destroy anything else in the vicinity without hesitation.

“We need to make it so nobody else can get in here, at least,” Akuto said.

The palace was deep under the Academy, but it was also connected to the dorms. It would be difficult, but not impossible, for someone to come through the underground labyrinth and make it here.

“Don’t worry! I’ve got a great idea!” Keena said in a voice full of confidence.

“Really?”

“Yup. It’ll be fine! Leave it to me!” She thumped her hands against her chest.

Akuto saw her confidence and decided to leave Peterhausen in her care. If anything, Keena could probably do a better job taking care of him than he

would.

But he found out later that Keena's "idea" was an extremely simple one.

She simply asked Fujiko Eto to watch the place while they were gone. Fujiko was in an upper class, so she wasn't going on the trip. And after what had just happened, she'd fallen in love with Akuto so much that she swore undying loyalty to him and kept going out of her way to find ways to help him.

That wasn't a problem on its own, but in the same incident, she'd also almost been killed by Peterhausen.

"Hyaaaaah!" Fujiko collapsed to the ground in terror in front of Peterhausen. She'd received a letter from Keena saying simply, "Akuto needs your help. Please come see me." When she'd stepped inside the enclosed magical circle, she'd suddenly found herself face to face with the black dragon.

"I heard someone would be sent to attend to my needs. Is that you, girl?"

Peterhausen sounded upset. He liked Keena, and it seemed that a raven-haired beauty like Fujiko wasn't his type.

For her part, Fujiko was too terrified to move. It wasn't often that she encountered a situation where she genuinely would've preferred to be stuck in a cage with a wild animal.

"Kyaaah! Nooo!"

She was flailing around uselessly on the ground like an overturned beetle. But a single sentence from Peterhausen stopped her.

"...Annoying girl. Any more fuss and I'll kill you."

"I... I understand..." Fujiko began to back away, still unable to stand up. "I-I'll be leaving then..."

"Wait. Who told you that you could leave?" Peterhausen said. "You were sent by Akuto and Keena to provide me some minimum of amusement, right?"

A frozen smile formed on Fujiko's face as she began to stammer.

"U-Um... Nobody told me anything about this... What, exactly, would you like me to do?"

“An excellent question. Keena would take naps with me, and tell me stories. You can do that too, right?”

“What?!”

This was a completely unexpected request for Fujiko. Peterhausen continued, oblivious to her stunned expression.

“But I don’t particularly want to take a nap with you. Tell me a funny story.”

“A-Alright...” In other words, he just wanted someone to talk to. But for a proud girl like Fujiko, this was a serious insult.

—*Someday I’ll get you for this...*

Fujiko secretly wrote something in her “Notebook of Malice,” being careful not to let Peterhausen see.

“Hey. Where’s my story?”

“R-Right! Um... The phrase ‘If winter comes, can spring be far behind?’ is a Japanese saying, but actually finds its origin in a phrase from the English poet Shelley...”

“You’re boring me already.”

“R-Right! That was just a digression, the real story is about a hedgehog who went to a psychiatrist to talk about his marital difficulties...”

—*I’ll kill you. Someday I will kill you for this!*

Fujiko hid the bloody tears streaming down her face. With no regard to her plight, Akuto and company left for the seaside retreat the next day.

2 - Seaside Album

The air bus was filled with tension. The bus was smaller than the classroom, only just big enough to hold Miss Mitsuko and Akuto's class. So when a few people started acting nervous, everyone else would immediately pick up on it.

As always, Akuto was the cause of this tension.

"I-I'm telling you to stop being so lewd!"

The one yelling was Junko Hattori, the class representative. She was a beautiful, elegant girl. However, her face was now bright red as she screamed at Korone. It was clear from the way she was trying to hide her blushing that the redness came from embarrassment, not anger.

Korone was sitting on Akuto's lap. Akuto, Hiroshi, Keena, Junko, and Korone were all sitting in a four-person box seat. There was one person too many because Korone was on Akuto's lap, but only she was enjoying it. She was clinging to him like the mistress of a villain in a movie.

Korone was wearing a swimsuit today. And it was a tiny bikini. And the bottom was mostly string above the hips, and below it was little more material than a band-aid. The tail that was unique to Liradans was brushing against Akuto's thighs. As for the top, given Korone's slender frame it just looked like two cloth triangles pasted to her chest.

Korone answered Junko in her usual calm demeanor.

"You're jealous, aren't you? I understand. But don't worry. You can wear the same thing, and Akuto will be yours instantly."

Korone took another swimsuit out from the bag at her side and waved it in front of Junko's face. It was nothing but a single string in a Y shape, and anyone who wore it would be almost literally naked.

Of course, this only made Junko's face flush deeper red. She stood up with crazed eyes and put her hand on her dagger.

“No way in hell am I wearing this! Why would I want to seduce him with a swimsuit anyway? I’d rather just kill him! Yes, that’s exactly what I’ll do! I’ll kill him, and then I’ll die too!”



Junko tried to lunge at Akuto with her dagger. Akuto, meanwhile, was completely perplexed.

“J-Just calm down! Hattori, calm down! And Korone, you’re the one at fault here, so apologize!”

Akuto turned towards Korone as he tried to grab at the hand with the dagger.

Korone bowed expressionlessly.

“I am sorry. But I was only recommending it out of kindness to you. If you wear a swimsuit and sit on his lap, I guarantee you he’ll instantly get hard as a rock.”

Now it was Akuto’s turn to freak out.

“Wh-What are you talking about? It would take a lot more than that...”

And then Junko started to scream more.

“That’s so nasty!”

But Korone was unperturbed.

“I simply meant that you seem to be nervous. Did you misunderstand me?”

“Wh-Wha...!”

Both Akuto and Junko froze for a second.

And then Korone made things worse.

“If simply imagining it was sufficient to cause this panic, then Junko, you must be a very innocent girl. But don’t worry. Akuto and I will instruct you in the ways of sexuality.” The tension in the bus grew even thicker, and their classmates started to murmur.

“He said a girl in a swimsuit sitting on his lap isn’t enough to get him hard...”

“And the two of them are going to instruct the class rep on how to have sex...”

“That’s going too far, even for the Demon King...”

“The seaside retreat will probably turn into an orgy...”

Akuto decided he had to do something. He stood up to speak to his classmates, but he was so flustered he forgot that he had Korone on his lap. She grabbed onto him before she could fall to the ground, and acting on pure reflex, he grabbed her too.

The knot on her swimsuit came undone, and now it only served as a thin barrier between her crotch and Akuto's.

By standing up, he'd ended up making her look more sexual than if she were simply naked. However, he still managed to get some words out.

"Everyone, please settle down. This isn't a big deal. This kind of thing happens all the time. The class rep isn't actually upset, so don't worry."

Akuto sat back down in his chair so that he could fix Korone's swimsuit, but when he heard the whispers around him and saw the look on Junko's face, he realized what he'd implied.

"So that's it... they do this stuff every day, so this isn't a big deal to them."

"The class rep's just jealous, huh? I guess they're getting off on doing it in public..."

Akuto didn't know what he could say to remedy the situation, so he just stayed silent.

—Ah crap. I was looking forward to having fun at the retreat... Man, why do I always do this to myself.

He glanced at Junko, who had turned to look out the window and was sitting still as a statue.

Then he glanced at Hiroshi. He wasn't expecting him to offer any help. Usually Hiroshi was the one who just made things worse. But today he was strangely silent.

Hiroshi seemed lost in thought, and wasn't looking at Akuto.

—He must be thinking about that legend... I wonder what will happen when we get to the island.

The only person who didn't seem down was Keena.

“Ackie, don’t be so mean to girls, okay?” she said as she offered him a snack. He couldn’t tell if she knew what was going on at all.

“These senbei crackers are made from specially selected rice, and each cracker is made individually by hand.”

“That’s cool.”

Akuto didn’t really care about the senbei crackers, but since nobody else was going to talk to him, he decided to take one and eat it.

But before he could put it in his mouth, Korone grabbed it. She stuffed it in her mouth and started to chew.

—Wh-What is she thinking?

Akuto couldn’t help but think that her strange behavior pointed to some deeper mystery.

But eventually the time came for him to escape this painful situation.

“I see the island!” somebody said.

Akuto looked out the window.

He could see a green-ish circle floating in the cobalt-colored sea. It was a coral reef. In the center of it was a tiny island with white beaches around its edge. It was like a picture from an encyclopedia entry on tropical islands.

“It’s pretty, huh?” Junko said. She must have forgotten how mad she was earlier.

“It really is,” Akuto said. He meant it. He’d lived a hard life, and had never had the chance to see a tropical island up close.

But Hiroshi didn’t even bother looking out the window. He just sounded bored.

“The island showed up about a century ago after an earthquake. The coral and the forests are both transplants. The whole stupid thing is artificial.”

This effectively killed the mood.

“You don’t need to put it like that.”

Akuto spoke softly, so he wouldn't come across as mad. Hiroshi shook his head as if startled.

"Sorry, I didn't mean it like that."

Hiroshi apologized, but that only made it harder for Akuto talk to him.

Only the people in Akuto's seat could hear Hiroshi, so the rest of the class was chattering with excitement.

The air bus soon landed on the island's beach. Miss Mitsuko gave out instructions, and Akuto's classmates raced out when the door opened.

Akuto was the last one out. The bright sunlight made for a scene filled with vivid contrasts. Coconut trees cast long shadows on the beach, while the waves quietly rolled up to it. Unlike the view from above, seeing it up close made him realize how different this was from any place he'd ever been.

—This place may be artificial, but it's nice.

He looked towards Hiroshi, who still looked depressed. It wasn't that Akuto was upset with him. He just felt disappointed that they couldn't enjoy the scenery together. Keena was excited, of course, and Junko was smiling. It was sad that Hiroshi couldn't join in the fun.

"Hey..."

He started trying to say something to Hiroshi, but stopped when he got the prickly feeling that someone was looking at him. It was a feeling of dread, like that person felt hatred for him.

He turned to look for the source. It had seemed to be coming from the woods behind the beach, but no one was there.

—I guess I imagined it. I mean, surely the people here will welcome us... The seaside retreat happens every year.

Miss Mitsuko called the group together.

"We're moving into the dorms. I've got a list of stuff I have to read off to you, so pay attention!"

Akuto had lost his chance to talk to Hiroshi. The whole group started to follow

Miss Mitsuko.

The narrow path that led away from the beach ended at a small three-story building. It looked like a Japanese inn, but the sign on it read “Constant Magical Academy Dorm.”

Akuto had been scanning the area as he walked, and he’d seen several houses lined with traditional Japanese tiles along the way. That must have been the village.

—I wonder if that’s where Hiroshi was born.

Akuto thought, but he didn’t feel like he could ask him directly. The fact that the houses seemed to be empty just made it harder to ask.

Once they were inside the dorm, Miss Mitsuko motioned for him to come with her. He followed, confused, only to find that he’d been given a personal room.

“Everyone else is sleeping in a big room together, right?” Akuto complained, but Miss Mitsuko just laughed.

“Just be happy you got to come at all, okay? And this lets you have some private time with your girls, too. Good luck.”

“Good luck with what?” Akuto sighed, but then he realized that Miss Mitsuko might know something about Hiroshi.

“So I heard that this is where Hiroshi was born...” he began. Miss Mitsuko frowned.

“That’s right. But he doesn’t seem to like it very much. I wonder if it’s just the usual teenage rebellious phase.”

“I don’t understand why someone would hate the place they were born, though.”

“That’s because you don’t have a home. Just remember that he doesn’t understand how you feel either. So just be kind to him.”

Miss Mitsuko smiled.

“You think so? I guess...” Akuto said, but honestly he didn’t understand what

she meant.

“Since you’re here, though, forget about stuff and have some fun,” Miss Mitsuko said with a wink.

o

There were 30 students to a class, and classes A through F. All in all, about 180 students from first year had come to the retreat. That was a big group, but the beach was plenty large, so each of the students had room to go wherever they liked.

Akuto had set down his towel a distance away from everybody else under the shadow of some rocks, and was sitting down on it. Keena was next to him, lying down under a parasol.

She was wearing a two-piece bikini, and lying face down as her legs bounced up and down happily.

“This is kinda fun, isn’t it?” she said, smiling at him.

Akuto wasn’t sure how to respond. Keena had to take off her clothes when she used her invisibility magic, so if anything, he was more used to seeing her naked. But when she smiled at him in a revealing swimsuit, he wasn’t sure where he was supposed to look. As he sat there with a blank expression on his face, Keena tickled his knee.

“Uwah!”

“Come on, you need to have some fun. Or are you just too enamored by my swimsuit to speak?” Keena giggled.

He was used to jokes like that from Korone, but hearing them from Keena was different. He blushed.

“You’ve got the face and body of a child, though,” he said. Keena puffed out her cheeks.

“It’s okay! My face and body are still growing!”

“I hope your brain does too,” he laughed, and Keena laughed too.

“Are you sure? If I grow up, I’ll have you wrapped around my finger.”

She sounded like she was joking, but a cold shiver ran down Akuto's spine. It didn't matter what the other girls said, but when she said it, it sounded true.

—Keena really does feel different than the other girls...

Suddenly someone jumped on him from behind.

"Wh-What?"

He was shocked to feel bare flesh pressed against his own, and turned around. Korone had jumped on top of him.

"Would you please rub suntan lotion on me?"

"Huh?"

Akuto was completely caught off guard.

Korone had changed her swimsuit. For some reason, she was wearing a school swimsuit like the ones middle school girls wore. It fit her figure perfectly, but it felt out of place here. It even had the name "Korone" written across the chest.

Korone slipped herself between him and Keena and lay down.

"Would you please rub suntan lotion on me?" she repeated, and then she took the lotion out of the bag on her shoulder and handed it to Akuto.

"...Do Liradans get sunburnt?"

"Read the package carefully."

The package read: "Suntan lotion for Liradans! Stops your coating from coming off in bright sunlight, and keeps the salt from getting into your body when you go into the ocean!"

"It sounds like car wax... But even if I wanted to, I don't think I can when you're wearing that swimsuit..." Akuto said.

"It's fine," Korone responded. "You'll need to put the lotion on the part covered by the swimsuit, but that's a simple matter of sticking your hand inside it. See? The swimsuit opens here. You can just stick it in."

She flipped around so that she was facing up, and then grabbed the lower part of her swimsuit and lifted it. The front of it was open, and he could see

beautiful alabaster skin underneath.

“No, wait a second. I-I can’t put my hand in there...”

Naturally, Akuto refused. He glanced at Keena, who seemed actually upset for once.

—Yeah, even she realizes that Korone is acting weird.

Korone suddenly sat up. She grabbed the swimsuit and pulled it to the side, then yanked it down to her waist.

“What are you doing?!”

For an instant, he saw her breasts. He quickly looked away, but Korone made no effort to hide herself.

“It’s cute how you get upset over a naked girl. I took my clothes off to make it easier to put the lotion on. Come on, touch my breasts.”

She grabbed his hands and tried to lead them to her chest.

“W-Wait a second...”

Akuto tried to resist. But since he didn’t want to get rough with her or push her away, all he could do was look away and try to keep his hands from moving.

“W-Wait...”

But before anything else happened, he was strangely rescued by a fierce blow hitting him in the back of the head.

“Wh-What are you doing, you pervert?!”

He turned around and saw Junko, her fists clenched and face red. She was wearing a simple one-piece swimsuit that looked like it might have been intended for a competition.

“Th-Thanks. You actually saved me this time.”

Akuto moved away from Korone.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Junko wasn’t sure why he was thanking her, but she knelt down in front of Korone and pulled her swimsuit back up. Korone calmly let her do it.

“Sheesh... how can you act like this with Keena watching? Anyway. I came to tell you that Miwa’s visiting his family.”

Once she was done dressing Korone, Junko stood up and turned to him to speak.

“I see. So that’s why he’s not here. He was acting kind of weird, I hope everything’s okay.”

“Miss Mitsuko was a little worried, so she asked me to tell you. Now, I’ll be on my way...”

Junko went to leave. Akuto grabbed her by the arm to stop her.

“Wait, want to go swimming together?”

He wanted to get away from Korone, and he figured it would be a good time to apologize for what happened on the bus.

“Huh...?” Junko smiled for a moment, but then she quickly scowled and looked away.

“Do you think you’ve got any right to ask me to go swimming with you? Do you think you can try to seduce every girl you see, and then only ask me to swim when it’s convenient for you?”

“If you’re mad about what’s happened on the bus, then I’m sorry. For the record, Korone has been acting weird. But I think it’s partially my fault too. I’m sorry.”

Akuto lowed his head.

Junko seemed unable to stop herself from smiling.

“F-Fine. If you’re willing to apologize, then I suppose I can go swimming with you for a while. You’re probably lonely, since without Miwa you don’t have any friends.”

“Thanks. I’ve really never had a chance to do anything like this. It would really help me if you’d tell me what I was supposed to do,” Akuto said.

The serious look on his face seemed to be enough to convince Junko that he meant it. She burst out laughing and stared at him.

“What is the deal with you?” she asked. “Just enjoy yourself. Wait, maybe I’m not one to talk. I’m not great at enjoying myself either.”

She grabbed Keena, who’d been watching the two of them with a grin, and made her stand up.

“You come too. You can’t come this far and not get in the water.”

“Okay!” Keena nodded enthusiastically. Before she left, she took a glance back at Korone, but Korone seemed to have decided to let the three of them have fun by themselves. She was sitting on a towel and not moving.

The three of them went up to the water deep enough that the waves lashed against their ankles, but they paused as if waiting to see who was going in first.

“Being the first one to go into the water...”

“...takes some courage, doesn’t it?” Junko and Keena laughed.

“Maybe there’s some psychological resistance to getting wet,” Akuto said as he walked forward. He got waist-deep before turning around to see that Junko and Keena were still where they’d been.

“What’s wrong? You’re not coming with me?”

Keena just laughed in response.

“Ackie! This tickles!”

Keena pointed at her feet.

“The waves wash away the sand beneath your feet and it feels really weird.”

Junko’s legs were fidgeting.

Akuto laughed when he saw it.

“It’s kind of surprising to see you acting that way, Hattori.”

“Y-You dummy! What are you talking about? I’m perfectly calm!”

Junko shook her head, and began to walk into the ocean with big strides.

“Oh, Junko! Wait!” Keena called as she followed after her.

“This is your fault for asking me if I wanted to go swimming with that stern face of yours...”

Junko got close to Akuto, then scooped up the seawater with both hands and splashed it in his face.

“...You’re definitely overly excited!”

“Uwah!”

Akuto’s face was soaked. He shook his head, sending water spraying everywhere.

“I didn’t even splash water at people when I was a... kid!”

Akuto splashed back at her. Junko was soaked from head to toe, and the two of them laughed at each other.

“Oh, that’s not fair! You look like you’re having such fun!”

Keena leapt at both of them, knocking them into the sea.

“Uwah!”

He screamed as he fell, but Akuto felt a sense of fulfillment that he’d never felt before.

—I never thought I’d be able to have a normal school life like this... I’m glad I didn’t die in an unfortunate accident or something...

“What are you grinning at? It’s indecent!” Junko said jokingly as she dragged Akuto down underwater.

Usually when she said something like that, it would be followed by a full-power punch, but today the strength in her hands was gentle. Akuto struggled just a little for show, and when he found an opening he dove deeper into the water and swept Junko off her feet. Junko screamed as she sank too.

They played for a while before he heard Keena say, “Hey! Hey!”

They both stopped and turned to look at her.

“Hey, what’s this? There’s a whole bunch on the bottom of the sea!”

Keena grinned as she showed it to them.

It was brown and cylindrical, and just fit in the palm of her hand. It was slimy and wet, and it had spots like a snake.

“That’s a sea cucumber, right? I’ve seen them in encyclopedias and stuff,” Akuto said.

“Wow, so this is a sea slug, huh? It feels really weird, like it’s all slick!”

Keena laughed innocently and began to rub the cylindrical object up and down in her hands.

“I-I don’t think it’s a good idea to play with that... okay?”

Akuto laughed and looked at Junko, who seemed afraid of the object in Keena’s hand.

“K-Keep that away from me.”

“Hattori, you don’t like them?” Akuto asked. She nodded without looking back at him.

“Th-That’s right. I don’t like things that are all slick and wet, like frogs.”

She was still staring at the sea cucumber in Keena’s hands. She seemed worried that Keena might throw it at her. Akuto realized what she was doing and warned Keena.

“Hey, Hattori doesn’t like it, so don’t point it at her too much.”

Keena nodded.

“Okay, I won’t!”

But in that instant, she must have squeezed hard on it. Something white came spurting out of the tip. It looked sticky.

—That’s right. Sea cucumbers spit out their insides, don’t they? I guess that’s what this looks like...

But when he saw where the insides had gone, he realized that this wasn’t the time to ponder sea cucumber physiology.

The white sticky stuff had landed on Junko’s face.

“Hyaah! Kyaaah!”

Junko screamed and leapt out of the sea and into the sky with the agility of a ninja. In an instant, she was back on the beach.

“See? I told you,” Akuto said.

“Sorry!” said Keena. She didn’t seem to know what to do with the sea cucumber, so she just played with it in her hands.

“I’ll go after her,” Akuto said as he went back onto the beach himself.

He followed after Junko’s footsteps in the sand, and it didn’t take long to catch up on her. Junko was near some rocks, trying desperately to get the white stuff off her face.

“Hattori, are you okay?”

When Akuto approached, she ran up to him.

“G-Get it off me! It’s all sticky!”

She hugged him and held him tight. He looked at her face. It was normally sharp and well-defined, but now it a white, sticky mess.

“F-Fine. Don’t move.”

Akuto carefully ran his fingers down her face. The stuff seemed like long white fibers. He carefully plucked them off her little by little.

“I don’t think it’s poisonous or anything, so you should be fine. Yeah, your face isn’t swelled up or anything,” Akuto said, trying to make her feel better.

“R-Really? Just get them off me.”

Junko seemed to have forgotten herself, and was clinging to him tightly. It made it hard enough to move that it was bothering him, so with his free hand he touched her arm.

“I know you’re scared, okay? But just ease off a little.”

Junko’s face turned bright red as she slowly took her arms off of Akuto.

“D-Don’t get any stupid ideas.”

“I know. You were just scared, right?”

“Th-That’s not it either! You dummy! Even if I was scared, I’d never go to you for help.”

“I know that, too. But you know, I was a little relieved. When we were out in

the water, it felt like the time I first met you. It was bothering me how composed you are at school," Akuto said.

Junko began to fidget a little and looked at him critically.

"H-How could you say that? I'm so humiliated that I ended up in this state. You're the only one I'll let see me like this, okay? And it's only because you're such a weirdo anyway."

"I'm not acting any differently than normal. It's just that everyone around me acts strangely."

"That just means you were weird from the beginning."

"Then there's nothing I can do about it... there. Got it."

Akuto took the last sticky white strand off her face.

For some reason, Junko looked disappointed. A moment ago she'd been trying to move away, but now she froze and looked up at him.

"What's wrong?" Akuto asked. She shook her head as if embarrassed.

"N-No... I just realized I hadn't thanked you."

"There's no need to thank me. It was Keena's fault to begin with."

"What Keena does isn't your responsibility, is it?"

"That's true, but I've just got this feeling that it's my job to keep an eye on her," Akuto laughed. Strangely, Junko looked serious now.



“Y-You call Keena by her first name, don’t you? We’re friends too. So why don’t you call me by my first name?”

She looked down at her feet.

“It’s because you just seem like you’re really prim and proper...”

Akuto felt something warm and strange rising up in his chest, and didn’t know how to react.

—But when I see how differently she acts around me, it definitely makes me feel like I should call her by her first name. I guess it’s the right thing to do...

“Jun... ko...”

He said, feeling a little embarrassed. Junko looked up at him and started to mumble.

“A-Aku...”

And then before she could finish, it happened. It was so sudden that Akuto didn’t have time to react, and it must’ve been even more inexplicable for Junko.

At some point, Korone had snuck up behind Junko. And with her usual lack of expression, she’d put her hand on Junko’s swimsuit, and suddenly yanked it down to her stomach.

“Huh?”

“What?”

Both Akuto and Junko lost the ability to speak. Neither of them moved for a moment. And because of that, Junko’s bare top was exposed to Akuto for a good three seconds.

“Uh...”

“Hya...”

Finally Junko figured out what had happened.

“Hyaaaah!”

She screamed and dropped to her knees.

“Wh-What the hell are you doing, Korone?!” Akuto screamed, but Korone was

unfazed.

“I was attempting to add atmosphere.”

“Don’t lie to me. Why would you do something so mean?”

Korone didn’t seem to understand what he was saying.

“Just because you’re my observer doesn’t mean you can do stuff like this, okay? You shouldn’t be causing problems for the people around me. You’re not her classmate, so it’s not okay for you to mess with her!”

“That’s correct, yes. I am not her classmate, nor yours. I am simply an observer,” Korone said, but her monotone voice seemed a little different than usual.

—Huh?

Akuto suddenly realized what was going on. There was emotion in her voice.

“Perhaps I was wrong to interfere with your life. However, please know that I’m simply not good at this. I didn’t intend to hurt you,” Korone whispered.

“W-Wait...” Akuto began to speak, but Korone continued in her sad, flat tone.

“Please don’t let it bother you. This is my fault. Please don’t forget that I just want to be by your side.”

“Huh? What?”

But Korone turned and walked off before Akuto could react.

Junko seemed confused as well. She just fixed her swimsuit and watched her go.

“Wh-What happened to Korone?”

“I don’t know...”

“But that’s not normal for her. And those last words she said... don’t tell me that Korone...”

Her sentence was drowned out by a loud voice.

“Ackie! Look at this weird sea cucumber!”

Keena came running up from the beach.

Junko froze when she heard the words “sea cucumber.”

“Keena! Don’t bring any of those things over here!” Akuto said, but Keena didn’t answer.

A sea cucumber, differently colored that the one before, came flying at them. Junko started screaming as she tried to knock it out of the air, and Akuto had an awful time calming her down.

In the end, they never got a chance to talk about Korone. Later, when he asked Keena why she did that, she cheerfully replied: “I thought that a sea cucumber with a different color would be okay!”

o

While his classmates were playing at the beach, Hiroshi was visiting home.

He followed the tiny path off the road to the dorm and headed for the village. Several squat huts with distinctive Japanese-style roofs dotted the road. There weren’t many, but the path was well maintained, demonstrating the love the residents had for their homes.

Strangely, there didn’t seem to be a single person around, but Hiroshi thought he knew why, so he went straight towards his house.

—This is why I hate this place. They’re too scared of the Demon King to come out of their own homes...

He tried to open the door to his house, but it was locked, frustrating him further. Normally the doors in this village were never locked.

“Mom, I’m home.”

Only then was the door unlocked.

“Welcome back. You must be tired.”

His mother welcomed him in a cheerful voice, and Hiroshi relaxed a little.

“It’s good to be home, Mom.”

He hated the place, but home was still home. Just going through the front door was enough to make him feel at ease.

His dad and sister emerged from further in the house too. But for some

reason, his parents started to put on their shoes near the front door.

“What’s going on? Are we leaving?”

“You’re coming too. There’s a meeting at the town hall.”

His father seemed annoyed that Hiroshi didn’t know this.

“W-Wait, at least let me settle in a little.”

“I said there’s a meeting. And we can’t leave the door open, so hurry up.”

His father stood up and left.

His mother chuckled.

“He never changes, does he?”

Hiroshi didn’t answer, but he turned around and followed his father. And then his little sister, Yukiko, tugged on his pants. She was a little younger than he was, still 11 years old.

“Welcome back, Brother.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Everybody heard you were coming back, so we’re going to have a party.”

“Yeah? That’s great,” Hiroshi said. But he didn’t really mean it.

There were no young people in the village, so he suspected the “party” was just an excuse for everyone to drink. Sure enough, when he got to the town hall, a sea of elderly red faces turned to look at him.

“Oh, the future hero’s back, huh?”

“If you’re here, the village is safe.”

The elders laughed. There was a banner hanging from the rafters.

“Welcome Back, Future Priest” it said.

Hiroshi tried his best to keep from showing his displeasure. He was given food and drink, but he could barely taste it. He did his best to smile and make small talk for a while, but before long everyone forgot about him and began to chat among themselves.

—They're all just sucking up to me because I might become a priest.

Hiroshi wasn't just being a rebellious teenager. The elders weren't exactly subtle. He'd heard them "joke" about how he needed to help the village ever since he'd been accepted to Constant Magical Academy. Some of them hadn't even bothered with jokes, and had come straight out and said, "Our island is so poor... in the future, you'll help us out, won't you?" Even with Hiroshi's easygoing personality, he didn't like that pressure at all.

The party seemed like it was going to drag on forever, so Hiroshi left early, claiming that he had somewhere to be for school. In the end, he wasn't going to relax at home after all. His parents didn't go with him, as they were probably expected to stay. But his little sister, Yukiko, did.

"Hey, is it true the Demon King is at your school?" she asked as soon as they left the town hall.

"It's not what everybody things," Hiroshi said.

"Everybody's scared. They're all talking about some legend."

"That legend is just a myth."

Hiroshi went around to the back of the town hall, looking for a place to talk with Yukiko. There was a raised brick flower garden bed along the wall. He decided that would do just fine. They sat next to each other.

"But at night, I hear all these weird noises, and see weird people on the street, and I can hear ghosts in the distance sometimes," Yukiko said.

She seemed to believe what she was saying, but Hiroshi figured that she was just being a kid.

"You only hear that stuff because you've gotten yourself all scared."

"Then the Demon King doesn't really exist? I'm too old to be scared of ghosts, but all the grown-ups say he's real..."

"No. There's just a person that they call the Demon King," Hiroshi said. From the way Yukiko was talking, people were really spreading rumors about Akuto, so it would be hard to deny that he existed at all. "But he's not like this Demon King everyone's afraid of."

“What do you mean?”

“He’s not scary. He’s my friend.”

“Really? That’s amazing!” said Yukiko, gazing at him with awe.

“So you see? He’s not scary, right?”

“Yeah!” Yukiko nodded.

And then they heard voices behind where they were sitting. On the other side of the wall, there seemed to be a smoking area, and several villagers had come for a smoke.

“See? I told you Miwa’s son was no good.”

“Oh yeah. From the look of things, I bet his grades at school are nothing special. Magic is all about having a strong spirit, you know.”

Hiroshi could hear them, but they didn’t know he was there. He knew he wasn’t going to like what he’d hear, but if he moved, they’d notice him.

“But we need him to become a priest, or the village’s future is dark.”

“They say even having a single priest gets your village an aid package. Can’t you become a priest as soon as you graduate the Academy? It’s not like being a high priest.”

“But they say the Demon King is at the Academy.”

“Yeah, I heard that’s true. He’s causing all kinds of chaos. I heard he’s already running the place, basically. I don’t believe the legend, but if the Demon King is just somebody with powerful magic who causes a rebellion, then he probably really does exist.”

“That whole Academy’s filled with kids who love to fight, anyway. I heard their student council president wiped out an entire Knight Corps.”

“We’d better hope they don’t come to the village then. We’d need a hero to protect us.”

“The whole thing about demon beasts and heroes is probably all a lie. But Miwa sure believed his son was the hero, hahaha!”

“Hahaha. No way in hell, he’s been a coward his whole life. He was the only

kid in the village who couldn't swim. He was always crying, and if you scared him he'd piss himself."

When he heard their laughter, Hiroshi felt his stomach sink. The mix of anger and sadness almost made him to cry, but he couldn't with his little sister watching.

Once the men had finished smoking and left, Hiroshi and Yukiko stood up.

"Big brother..." said Yukiko, sounding worried.

Hiroshi smiled.

"None of them really know the truth. But you do. So make sure to hold onto it."

They went back home silently. Yukiko still seemed worried, but Hiroshi had to go back to the dorm, so he said goodbye to her at the front door.

On his way back, he started to cry a little, so he stopped to wipe the tears away.

When he did, he thought he heard a howl in the distance. He turned around and heard what sounded like a low roar coming from the mountain in the center of the island.

Hiroshi knew the legend well. There was a lake at the base of the mountain that marked the exact center of the island. That was where the beast was supposed to appear from. And the hero's weapon was supposed to be around there, too. But he knew better than anyone that neither the beast nor the weapon were real. And that the "roar" he was hearing was a fake.

—If there is a Beast, I hope it destroys the village. I know there isn't, though.

○

Akuto realized that someone was watching him. From the bushes on his way back from the beach and from the window when he was unpacking at the dorm, he could sense an unknown person staring at him.

It felt like his own senses were getting sharper. Maybe his ability to detect mana was increasing. But if that were the case, then maybe someone really was watching him in secret.

—I guess I should find out who it is before they cause problems for anybody else.

Before dinnertime, he deliberately went out the front of the dorm. Sure enough, he felt somebody watching him immediately. With this in mind, he made a plan. When free time came after dinner, he grabbed his shoes from the front hall so he could leave out the window.

Just as he was getting ready to go, he found himself staring at Korone. She was standing outside his window.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing. There was simply something bothering me,” Korone said.

“Bothering you?”

“Someone is spying on you.”

Korone had been acting strange lately, but when it came to things like this, Akuto knew he could trust her.

“I’ve been wondering about that too. I’m going to follow them.”

“I hope it’s not dangerous. But if you’re going, I will follow,” Korone said.

3 - Surprises in the Dark Woods?

“If you can feel someone watching you, that’s a sign that your mana detection ability has increased,” Korone said.

It was just as Akuto had suspected.

“You mean I can sense the mana in their bodies?”

“Correct. It seems that humans are capable of detecting and remembering the subtle changes in mana patterns that occur within the body. That’s how ‘intuition’ lets you sense the presence of someone concealed.”

“Then that feeling that somebody’s watching me...”

“My sensor has detected it as well. You’re not imagining it.”

Korone showed him the sensor in her hand. It looked like a pocket watch, but instead of a watch face there was a gleaming radar screen.

“This is my mana detection radar. However, a powerful mage can hide their mana signal, and someone without much mana is impossible to detect, so in most cases, it’s useless. In this case, however, it seems to be effective.”

The radar screen showed a map of the area, with a shining dot on top of it. The dot was very close.

“So we just follow this thing?”

Akuto started to walk towards it. He’d have to make his way through some dense foliage to get there, though it wasn’t enough that he couldn’t move. But since it was dark in the woods at night, he borrowed a light from Korone. When he turned it on, the foliage began to stir. Someone was in front of him.

“Over there?”

Akuto started to run, and whoever was in the bushes began to flee. They were surprisingly fast. Akuto had trouble keeping his footing, and he didn’t know the area. He ran as fast as he could, but he still lost sight of them.

“Let me see the radar.”

He reached out a hand towards Korone as he panted for breath. Korone turned the screen towards him and spoke.

“Something’s wrong. I can’t detect them.”

“What?”

He looked at the screen, and could see that it wasn’t working. He couldn’t see the dot of light, and he couldn’t see the map, either.

“Is it broken?” Akuto asked. Korone shook her head.

“There is a mana disturbance in this area. It appears to be affecting any devices which use mana.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’ve switched to a mode where I don’t circulate mana outside my body.”

“Good... But I guess we lost them, then.”

“So it would seem. Our current location is unknown as well.”

“So we’re lost?”

“No. I’ve memorized all the scenery I saw on the way here. As long as you’re with me, you’ll be fine.”

“Then let’s go home.”

Akuto gave up on following the stranger. But then he felt a cold chill run down the back of his neck.

He spun around instantly, but there was nothing there.

Korone seemed to have sensed it too. She put her hand up to her ear as if she were trying to hear something.

“What was that?”

“I heard the sound of someone running. Let’s follow it a while more. I can see in the dark, so I should be able to pursue them visually to a degree.”

Korone suddenly began to run.

“Huh? Wait...”

Akuto hurried after her, but Korone was moving fast.

The woods were dark, and Akuto only had a single light. He fell behind Korone, and soon had no idea where he was. When he realized this, he stopped running.

“Well, this isn’t good... I guess if I wait here, Korone will come back for me soon...”

Akuto found a nearby tree and sat down with his back up against it.

This was the first time that Korone had run off and left him behind. She’d seemed to be behaving normally that night, but evidently not.

—You know, it feels like I’m really helpless without Korone. She’s become someone I can’t live without, huh?

As he sat there in thought, Akuto heard another rustling in the bushes.

○

Just shortly before Akuto had set off to chase his mysterious stalker, Fujiko was in the basement, locked in a deadly duel with Peterhausen... or not.

“That’s right! Akuto will be the ruler, and I’ll be his wife! If anybody tries to rebel, I’ll throw them in a pool filled with poisonous snakes, and then Akuto and I will drink wine made from blood and enjoy dinner while we watch! That’s my dream!”

Fujiko was talking excitedly, and Peterhausen was listening, very satisfied.

“At night, I gather beautiful women from around the country and strip them naked, then make them try and seduce Akuto! But of course, he ignores them! He only shares his bed with me! And I make them watch us while they scream with jealousy! Their jealousy, envy, and sense of defeat only make me more beautiful!”



She began to shake with emotion.

“You have a lot of potential to be an evil queen. Work hard and make that potential reality,” said Peterhausen as he nodded strongly.

“Of course! That’s why I have to serve Akuto, and do everything I can to bring the black mages together!”

Fujiko sipped her tea as she clenched her fist. Several hours with Peterhausen were enough for her to get over her fear. When she was at her best, Fujiko was a master at using words to lie and deceive people. It didn’t take long for her to open up to Peterhausen. Of course, it wasn’t just her conversational skill. Peterhausen seemed to have taken a liking to her rather nasty personality as well.

“I hope you do. My master’s lack of ambition is a serious problem,” Peter sighed, like an old prime minister struggling to raise a young general.

“I think it’s less a lack of ambition, and more that he’s just a good guy,” a different voice answered.

Both Peterhausen and Fujiko turned towards it simultaneously.

A short girl had walked into the underground palace. She was wearing a wide-brimmed hat with a face on it, and she wore a mischievous grin.

It was Lily Shiraishi, the student council president.

“Oh, it’s that brat.” Peterhausen snorted.

Blue veins appeared on Lily’s head, and her expression became stern for a moment, but she seemed to keep herself under control. She made no efforts to hide her displeasure as she walked up to Peterhausen with her arms crossed.

“Don’t call me a brat. I’m a proper maiden, you know. And I’ve got good news for you.”

“Then speak.”

“Man, you really are arrogant. Well, whatever. The Student Council, actually, the whole school, has decided how we’re going to deal with you.”

Peterhausen seemed uninterested, but Fujiko tensed up. She knew that

Peterhausen's presence was, in a sense, a problem for the school.

"Which side did the school pick?"

So far the school had been giving Akuto his freedom, on the theory that he wasn't currently the Demon King. But it would make sense if Peterhausen's presence had caused them to change their mind and side with the extremists.

"Essentially, nothing's changed. Akuto Sai remains a student here, and we'll continue to protect him. Peterhausen's existence doesn't break any laws either. Specifically, there aren't any laws we can apply to him."

Fujiko felt relieved. Lily was, after all, the student council president, so she was already working for the government. So Fujiko was very grateful that there wasn't going to be a fight here.

"Excellent. That is good news, yes."

"That's not all. I don't believe that simply maintaining the status quo is 'good news.' Just know that I've gotten tired of the pacifists... that is, the majority faction that I belong to."

Lily grinned. She had a face like a young boy, but when she smiled it sent shivers down Fujiko's spine.

"Tired of them...?"

"Those old geezers are using a Liradan to try and seduce Akuto Sai."

Fujiko was shocked.

"Um... seduce him?"

"I don't think that's okay. Liradans can't disobey orders. And on top of that, they're telling her that if she fails she'll be removed from the mission. I know that boy's dense, but still, no man's ever been able to refuse a Liradan when she seriously tried to seduce him. A lot of politicians used to be caught up in scandals like that."

"That... that's unforgivable!"

"I agree. Someday, I gotta become an adult who's okay with that stuff. But once I start hating something, I can't stop. And that's the good news. I'm going

to start getting involved in this matter personally.”

“What do you mean...?” Fujiko asked. It certainly didn’t seem like she was planning to help Akuto.

“I’m not going to be working with the pacifists, is what I’m saying. But I’m not going to be ignoring the hardliners like Akuto Sai does, either. I’ve found information on the leaders behind this attempt to start a war. And no matter what Akuto says, I’m going to kill them!”

Lily smacked her fists together in front of her chest.

“The leaders behind the attempt to start a war?”

“CIMO-8.”

“Is that their name?”

“The Cabinet Information Magic Office. They have eight agents. I’ve also got information that they’ve already begun to act. They’re experts in information gathering and anti-magical combat.”

“That... is good news, yes.”

Lily had come to share information with them, and she was also going to crush their current enemy. Maybe for all her talk, she really did care about Akuto, Fujiko thought.

But...

“But that means I’ll be your enemy.” Lily said.

“Huh?”

“If he ends up being a tool of the black mages, or doing anything to destabilize society, no matter what the pacifist faction says, I’ll crush him. You, in particular, should keep this in mind, Fujiko Eto...”

Fujiko tensed up, but she knew that there was no way she could defeat the Student Council President. She started thinking of a way she could get Peterhausen to handle this for her. But Lily quickly broke into a grin.

“You’re not the meal I’m looking for. Pass him a message, okay? Tell him I haven’t shown him everything.”

“...Alright.” Fujiko nodded, and Lily left.

Fujiko slumped backwards, and Peterhausen laughed.

“She’s a good kid, huh?”

“I’d rather fight with my mind,” Fujiko said.

“If you take stubbornness to that degree, it actually turns to your advantage. Anyway, if you’re really so clever, shouldn’t you be passing some information to our master?”

Fujiko gasped, and took out her student handbook. It had a communicator function. She tried to contact Akuto, but for some reason he didn’t pick up.

“Mana interference...?”

Fujiko turned to Peterhausen for an explanation.

“I wonder about this anti-magical expert. Mana jamming is a basic skill someone like that would know.”

“But if the whole class at the retreat is under its effects, the teachers should have noticed. Maybe it’s only Akuto that’s in danger...”

Fujiko decided to send a message to Keena instead. She picked up after a few rings.

《Oh, hey there. How’s it going?》

“Don’t ‘how’s it going’ me! You tricked me and stuck with Peterhausen! Wait... we can talk about that later! Where’s Akuto?”

《Huh? Ackie? I don’t think he’s around, actually.》

“Are you listening? Because this is important...”

○

Akuto heard a noise in the bushes and tensed up as he moved away from the tree. He readied himself for whatever might pop out of the bushes.

But...

“Ackie! I finally found you!”

It was Keena.

“Keena...”

“I got a message from Fujiko, so I followed you so I could tell you.”

Keena sat down right in front of him.

“Sorry. I think somebody was watching me... I followed them with Korone, but she ran off...”

“Oh. When I went to your room I saw you running into the bushes, so I just followed your light,” Keena said, laughing. Akuto felt silly for getting so tense.

“So what did she want?”

Keena tilted her head.

“Huh? Um... there were a lot of things.”

Keena looked like she was trying to remember. Akuto felt a little worried. She wasn’t usually this slow.

“Are you okay?”

He peered into her face. Keena’s face was red, and she was out of breath.

“I’m okay... I just ran and flew for a little, so I’m out of breath. Oh, I remember! One of the things was that a bad guy named Simon-5 is coming after you!”

Keena clapped her hands together.

“That sounds like the name of some kind of five-member folk band...”

“No, I think I might’ve messed the name up. But somebody bad is after you. And they’re good at killing mages. Scary, huh?”

Keena didn’t look scared at all, so Akuto wasn’t sure how to respond. But thinking rationally, this was bad news.

—So that’s what caused the problem with the mana device?

There was no point in telling this to Keena, so he just nodded to himself.

“What else?”

“Um... It was the student council president who told her, she said. What else was there?”

Keena was just too dumb sometimes. That, and her face was really red.

“It’s so hot, isn’t it? But don’t worry. I brought this so we could drink it together.”

Keena took a canteen off of her belt. She took the cap off and poured out a thick white liquid into it.

“What’s that?”

“Heheheh... It’s a new drink I came up with! I got thirsty and had some on the way here, so I can guarantee it’s delicious!”

Keena held the canteen cap up high.

“Okay, so it’s delicious, but... what is it?”

“It’s rice juice!” said Keena as she puffed her chest out proudly. And then she swallowed it down. “It’s so good!”

“...Uh... good? No way...” Akuto said uneasily.

“You can have some too, okay? I always wondered how you could make rice juice, and I finally figured out a way! So I brought it with me on the trip...”

Keena filled up the cap again from the canteen, and offered it to Akuto.

“...You make rice and then you crush it and mix it up with water, and then this is what’s important, you add yeast and yogurt and put it in a bottle! Then you let it sit for two days and the stuff on the top tastes really good! And then I found out something even more amazing! If you skim the stuff off the top and put it in the fridge, it gets carbonated like cider!” Keena happily explained.

—Oh... that’s... Yep. I knew it.

Akuto took the cap and sniffed it. It did smell good, but it didn’t seem like something minors should be drinking.

“Keena, this has alcohol in it...” Akuto said, but she was already too far gone. She was bright red and swaying from side to side.

“Hehehe... I see lots of Ackies!”

—She drank a whole bunch of it after running, so...

“Okay, no more drinking that. Come here and rest.”

Akuto leaned Keena up against the tree he’d been resting against. When he put a hand on her shoulder to keep her from falling over, Keena suddenly yanked him forward.

“Uwah!”

“Hehehe... Ackie, this feels good.”

She rubbed her cheek up against him. He’d been crouching down to keep her from falling over, but since that was uncomfortable, he just sat next to her. Keena kept her arms wrapped around him as she leaned onto him with her whole weight.

“Onyonyonyonyo...”

She started to make weird noises as she nibbled at his ear.

“H-Hey! That tickles!”

“Aww, isn’t it nice? It feels kind of like the old days...”

—The old days? Wait, didn’t I think that I’d met Keena somewhere, a long time ago?

Akuto thought back to his past. Just when he’d been leaving the orphanage, there was a girl who had just arrived. She was crying so much that he’d spent all the money he had to buy her a hairpiece like a grownup would wear. It looked just like the one Keena was wearing now, but Keena didn’t seem to remember this.

“Maybe we really did meet a long time ago.”

“Maybe, huh! Maybe I was destined to meet you. Hehehe...”

Keena laughed for a while. It wasn’t the serious answer that Akuto had hoped for.

—There’s no reason to worry about it though, I guess. But wait... why does this bother me so much?

He remembered what Junko had said to him earlier that day.

“Y-You call Keena by her first name, don’t you? We’re friends too. So why

don’t you call me by my first name?”

He’d thought it was because Junko was always so formal, but thinking back, that didn’t seem to be it. Maybe it was just because he found it easy to relax around Keena?

—If that’s the case... Maybe I fell in love with Keena a long time ago?

Once he started to think about that, he couldn’t stop.

Thanks to her “rice juice,” Keena smelled a little like baked sweets. Her soft, defenseless body was like a fresh rice cake...

—Rice cake? Maybe Keena’s influencing me more than I thought.

Akuto shook his head and tried to calm down. He looked at Keena’s face. She’d gotten so quiet he thought she’d fallen asleep, but she was looking at him with wide-open eyes.

—Uwah...!

He almost gasped. Somehow he managed to avoid looking away. It felt like if he did, it would be rude.

Keena smiled gently, and he felt like he could forget all the things that had happened today. Her eyes seemed to be drawing him in.

“Ackie’s trying to kiss me. Naughty!” Keena said suddenly.

He felt like she’d seen into his heart, and started to panic.

“D-Don’t be stupid.”

“Hmm... Yeah, that’s right. You’re not allowed to be naughty. But you can kiss me on the cheek,” Keena said, and offered him her bright red cheek.

—That’s right. That wouldn’t go against my religion... Wait, yes it would. But...

For Akuto, it was less a feeling of lust and more a feeling of deep contentment in his heart. Something like the family he’d always wanted. It was something he’d sought, but always rejected when it was offered to him. But Keena was the one person he felt he could get it from.

—If it’s just out of friendship, maybe it’s okay...

He brought his face closer to her.

“Yay!” Keena yelled happily, and wrapped her arm around his neck.

His lips moved closer to her cheek...



“Hiya!”

POW!

A violence thwack knocked him away. He fell headfirst into the ground.

“Hey...”

He got up and turned around, and saw Korone standing next to Keena.

“Y-You didn’t need to hit me,” he complained, but Korone responded with her usual expressionless tone.

“I was taking evasive action when you happened to be in my way.”

“I heard you say ‘hiya!’”

Korone ignored him.

“As I said, I was taking evasive action. There’s no time for arguing.”

“What are you talking about...”

He took a step forward, trying to understand what she meant. And suddenly he felt something like a sharp headache.

He staggered for an instant, and then...

BANG!

At the same time, Korone began to slowly collapse.

“Korone!”

He tried to run towards her, but as she fell to her knees she held out a hand to stop him.

“Stay away. I’ll be fine. I was simply shot.”

—Shot? Wait, I know that sound... It’s the sound of an Incantation Gun.

“Is it the guy we were following?” Akuto asked. She nodded. Korone’s body was tough, and her exterior seemed unchanged, but he couldn’t tell how much internal damage she’d taken.

Akuto knelt down, holding his breath as he tried to sense anyone around him. But he couldn’t sense anyone.

“I believe I know who the enemy is,” Korone said.

“Who is it?” Akuto asked, but she shook her head.

“I can’t say.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t say that, either. But there’s something I have to ask you now.”

“What?”

Korone looked at him sternly.

“How do you feel about Keena?”

Through the shock of hearing such a question so suddenly, he noticed that her eyes were different than usual. There was emotion in them.

“Wh-Why are you asking me this now?”

“It’s important. It concerns whether I can fight the enemy for you now.”

“Wh-What are you talking about...?”

“There is no need for further explanation,” Korone said.

—Is this...

Even someone as dim as Akuto was starting to realize what was going on here. Or perhaps his interaction with the drunk Keena had finally made him start thinking about “love.”

—Is Korone in love with me, and trying to disobey the government to help me? Is that why she’s trying to find out what I feel about her? Wait, if that’s right, then what do I do? I need Korone with me, but there’s no way I could be in that kind of relationship with her.

“L-Listen... Are you mad that I was with Keena?” Akuto asked.

“I am not mad. But it causes problems for me,” she responded.

—Come to think of it, Korone has started to use the words “me” and “I” more often lately. I thought Liradans didn’t really talk in those terms... I guess when they get their own identity, they start to do that. Which means that...

“No, I’m sorry. But I don’t think things are going to go in the direction you’re

hoping for... ever," Akuto said. He was hesitant, but he felt that he needed to make this clear. "But that doesn't mean that I don't like you, or that I don't need you. I need you, and that's not going to change. But I don't think I can give you what you're hoping for."

For a moment, Korone didn't answer.

"That is, for me, a very sad thing."

Korone looked down, but he could see the sorrow on her face. Akuto felt something wrenching at his heart. It was something he'd never felt before. Her next words were a whisper that she seemed to be forcing out of her lungs.

"I judge that the mission is a failure. I may no longer be able to stay here."

"W-Wait, what does that mean..."

"I cannot say. But this may be the last time I see your face. If that's correct, I must say goodbye."

"Wait a second!"

With a feeling of dread, Akuto reached out a hand towards Korone.

But she just shook her head.

"I will do my best. But you shouldn't expect much. Thank you for everything. And goodbye..."

Korone took something that looked like a doorknob from her bag and held it over her head. A hole opened in space, like a door appearing out of nowhere. Korone slipped inside it. It must have been some kind of personal teleporter.

"Wait. Why are you leaving without any explanation? I need you..."

Korone was already halfway through the teleporter. She turned back and waved her hand sadly.

"Goodbye."

And then she disappeared.

The teleporter door vanished, and he was once again surrounded by dark woods. The only things left, it seemed, were the tears that Korone had shed.

But there was no time to think about it. He heard the sound of someone moving in the bushes up ahead.

—Is it the guy that shot Korone?

He looked towards the bushes. They were moving as if someone was trying to flee. They must've tried and failed to escape without being noticed.

—Maybe I can at least keep them from getting away...!

Akuto was a consistent failure when it came to magic, but at this point he didn't have a choice. He concentrated on trying to freeze all the bushes. But with the mana jamming, and the headache he'd felt just before Korone was shot, something went wrong. At this point he could've guessed that someone nearby was keeping him from using magic, but right now, he wasn't thinking clearly.

—Damn it!

The power in his hands was already going out of control. But it was too late. An explosion struck the bushes, violently shaking the surrounding area. A blast of light illuminated the darkness. It must've been visible from a long way away.

"Kyaah!"

He heard a scream from the bushes, and was surprised at how young it sounded.

"Huh...?"

He ran towards the scream with his light. Reflected in the light he saw a young girl, who must've been around ten years old.

"A-Are you okay?"

Akuto kneeled by her. Fortunately, she was unhurt, and still breathing. She was just unconscious. The moment he'd realized he'd failed, he'd reduced the power of his magic. Evidently that had paid off. That, and the fact that he hadn't hit her directly. But a loud explosion that close was more than enough to knock a young girl out.

He lifted her up and looked at her face.

—Oh...

Something was familiar about her. She looked just like Hiroshi. Hiroshi looked like a little kid to begin with, so there was no way he could be mistaken.

—But there's no way a little kid like her would shoot an Incantation Gun...

Akuto tensed up, but there was no one else around. The headache was gone too.

"Keena, are you okay?"

Akuto turned around.

"Yeah. But Ackie..."

Keena sounded a little worried as she stood up.

"Korone's gone, isn't she?"

"You were listening?"

"I fell asleep, so I just heard the end. Oh, and I'm sorry. I remembered the other thing Fujiko told me," Keena said, finally snapping out of her stupor.

"What did you remember?"

"Korone... she was ordered to seduce you. And if she failed, they were going to fire her from her observer position..."

—What!?

Akuto couldn't speak.

He was disgusted by the idea that someone might try to control him by seduction, and angry at her superiors for making her do something like that, and regretful that if he'd known, he might've been able to do something. But all those emotions quickly disappeared, and all that was left was guilt. Could he have done something more for her?

But he didn't have time to find a way to lighten his heavy heart. Someone had heard the explosion and was coming closer.

"Is anyone there?"

"Yukiko! Yukiko!"

The girl in his arms woke up when she heard the voices. He waited for her to wake up and set her down.

“Are you okay? Sorry for scaring you. It looks like somebody’s here to get you.”

Yukiko looked up at him in surprise.

“Are you the Demon King?”

He was annoyed, but he couldn’t be a jerk to a little kid.

“No... I’m not. Just... some people call me that.”

Yukiko looked up at him with surprise. And then the voices of the approaching villagers turned fearful.

“Yukiko! Watch out!”

“Get away from him!”

But they didn’t approach. The villagers kept their distance, their faces tight with fear.

That wouldn’t have been a problem on its own, but before Yukiko could move away, they began to pick up rocks and throw them at him.

“Uwah...”

Akuto started to dodge, but when he saw that the stones would hit Yukiko, he knocked them out of the air with his hand instead. He swatted away rocks the size of a fist. He’d used mana to enhance his body, so it was simple for him, but that simplicity meant that he forgot how it would look to someone who didn’t know magic.

“H-He’s a monster!”

“Run, Yukiko!”

—Ah crap...

The stones began to come faster. He had to cover Yukiko with his body to keep them from hitting her, but that only made things worse.

“H-He’s going to kidnap her!”

—That's not what's happening at all...

Akuto said to himself, but there was no way the villagers would understand. He decided to persuade Yukiko instead.

"If you don't go back, those men will keep throwing rocks," Akuto said, but Yukiko looked like she still wanted to say something. "...What's wrong?"

"Are you my brother's friend?"

Since he knew she was Hiroshi's little sister, he was able to answer her question.

"You're Hiroshi Miwa's sister? Then yes, I am."

"Then..." she said, gripping his hand tightly. "Tell me the truth! Is my brother the hero?"

Akuto didn't understand the question, or what was causing the desperation in her voice.

"No. I don't think someone like him would want to be anyway."

Yukiko suddenly kicked him in the shin.

"Huh...?"

There was no pain, but he gasped in surprise. When he did, Yukiko slipped out of his grasp and ran. She was crying.

"Yukiko got away!"

"This way! Hurry! We're getting out of here!"

He could hear the voices in the distance.

"Oh jeez..."

At this point, he'd just have to leave. He took Keena, who was hiding behind a tree, and quickly ran.

"Ackie, are you okay?"

"I'm okay, but... There's a lot about this that's bothering me. That thing with Korone, too... I don't know what to do..."

4 - The Legendary Hero Appears!

Between Korone, the attacker, and Hiroshi, Akuto was barely able to sleep. He tended to worry too much, so he was lying alone in his bed, half lost in thought. If Korone was there, she would have made fun of him no matter what was going on. Only now did he realize how much that had helped him, and how serious her disappearance was.

Eventually he got tired and passed out, only to be woken up early the next morning by Junko.

“You idiot! What did you do? Look in front of the dorm! The villagers are demanding to see you!”

Akuto leapt up from the bed.

Junko must have just woken up too, because she was dead pale and wearing a T-shirt and sweatpants. Something must have been causing a stir.

After a moment, Akuto remembered what had happened yesterday. The villagers were probably angry about Yukiko.

“Well, this isn’t good... But yeah, I think I am to blame.”

“Idiot! What did you do?!”

“It’s not my fault... but I think they misunderstood me.”

He looked at the clock. It was 5:00 AM. When he went out into the hallway, Miss Mitsuko and Hiroshi were there.

“Looks like they’re having some kind of riot! Big trouble on this little island, huh? Lots of fun! Or maybe not.”

Miss Mitsuko must have just gotten up too, because she was very excited. Hiroshi, however, was frowning and trying his best not to look at Akuto.

—*Oh jeez...*

Akuto was feeling depressed, but he also had a strong sense of responsibility

and justice. He decided that he was at fault after all, and that he had to apologize.

“I’ll explain things to the villagers. I’m sure they’ll understand. We don’t want there to be any kind of fuss.”

“There’s already a big fuss,” Miss Mitsuko laughed.

Hiroshi looked even gloomier, but he spoke up when Akuto walked by.

“I’m sorry, boss. The people from my home are...”

“Don’t worry about it. I did something that caused a misunderstanding. I’m sure if we can talk things out, they’ll understand.”

Akuto started to walk towards the front door. But when he got to the point where he could see out the window, he realized that something strange was going on.

A few dozen men standing outside, surrounding the front door. The youngest was middle-aged, and many of them were elderly. They were all carrying shotguns, machetes, and other weapons. He could see from their bloodshot eyes that something was very wrong, but their expressions spoke of terror, not anger.

—They’re afraid of me, huh? But that’s why I need to calm them down.

Akuto gulped.

He had to be ready for this. There was no telling what these people might do when they were afraid. On his own, he might be fine, but he didn’t want to cause any problems for the people around him. And ironically, while physical damage didn’t mean much to him, mental damage hurt him really hard.

He took a deep breath and opened the door. The villagers all murmured as they looked towards him.

All of them took a step back.

“I’m Akuto Sai, a freshman at Constant Magical Academy. You’re here about what happened last night, yes?” Akuto said.

A middle-aged man who seemed to be their leader took a step forward. He

had a shotgun slung from his shoulder. He was heavily-built and tough, but Akuto could see that his legs were shaking.

“Were you the one who attacked one of the village children?”

“If you’re talking about the girl named Yukiko, then yes. But I didn’t mean to. I mistook her for someone else, and scared her a little.”

“You mistook her for someone else? Ridiculous. She was crying, and she said you were the Demon King.”

“She’s just a child. You shouldn’t listen to her,” Akuto said. The villagers started to glance at one another and whisper, and Akuto quickly realized that he’d said the wrong thing.

“No, I just mean that the Demon King doesn’t exist. It’s just a childish fantasy.”

Akuto raised his voice. It was just the first excuse that came to his mind, but his clear voice and show-off personality made him sound bolder than he really was.

But the heavyset man didn’t falter.

“W-Wait... That doesn’t make sense. The prophecy said you were going to be the Demon King, right? And it’s never been wrong... That’s no fantasy, is it?”

“The prophecy is a fantasy. You’re all just being deceived. I’ve heard about the prophecy of this island. That’s what scares you all, right? But as you can see, I’m just a student. I don’t have that kind of power.”

The men all fell silent. Akuto sounded so confident that none of them dared to contradict him. And it was true, from the outside he just looked like a normal, if somewhat bold, young man. Akuto felt relieved.

“Of course, I apologize. It’s true that I made Yukiko cry. I’m sorry,” Akuto said, and bowed deeply.

The villagers seemed to calm down. The heavyset man must have realized that Akuto was someone he could reason with, because his expression softened as he asked his next question.

“No, I hate to say it, but we’ve had all kinds of problems with the students at

the seaside school. So we were just a little tense, is all. Especially since people were saying that you were the Demon King. But you seem to be a normal, reasonable boy, so you can't be the Demon King. Everyone is on edge, though. The demon beast in the prophecy is starting to feel real, and everyone is getting nervous."

"If you have some evidence to think that, I can see why you'd get worried. What happened?" Akuto asked.

"Yesterday someone heard a roar from the lake where the demon beast is supposed to live, and the ground there shook like an earthquake. There's also stories of a suspicious man who's been sighted around here. But I guess it wasn't you. Supposedly when you get near this person, you hear strange sounds and get a headache."

Akuto thought he might know what the man was talking about. If he was honest with him, he decided, it might make it easier to fix this misunderstanding.

"I'm sure if you think about this rationally, you'll find lots of potential causes of the strange events. And I think I may have seen this suspicious man, as well. There was someone who was following me last night. I was trying to find him when I ran into Yukiko."

"So that's what happened..." the man said.

"I'm curious about him too. I'll help you," said Akuto, and he smiled at the heavyset man, who smiled back.

"You students are supposed to be great with magic. I'm sure you'll be big help. Thank you very mu..."

Just as the man reached out his hand, a high-pitched voice rang out from behind the crowd.

"He's lying! That's a lie! If the Demon King doesn't exist, then what happens to the hero?!"

It was Yukiko. She ran in front of the crowd and glared at Akuto.

"Huh?"

Akuto wasn’t sure what to do, but the villagers laughed.

“Hahaha! Oh, that’s right. If there’s a Demon King, that means there has to be a hero! So if there’s no Demon King, that means no hero.”

The heavyset man laughed and patted Yukiko on the head. She looked angry, like she might burst into tears at any moment.

The villagers explained what was going on to the confused Akuto.

“Her family thinks that her older brother is the hero.”

“But we never believed that. I hate to say it, but he doesn’t look the type.”

“He’s a bit too much of a wimp.”

“He certainly doesn’t feel like a hero. He’s always been a big scaredy-cat since he was little.”

“He wasn’t that smart, either.”

The villagers laughed, and Yukiko started to cry.

“You’re all so mean! My brother made it into the Academy, that’s how amazing he is! And you all want him to help you when he grows up and becomes really important...”

Her voice was so soft that the villagers didn’t seem to hear her. But Akuto did. Maybe his ears were getting sharper.

Akuto understood what was going on now.

“You shouldn’t laugh at her,” he said. He thought his voice was soft, but all the villagers turned towards him.

“Huh? Uh... did that upset you?”

“Yes, I suppose it did. You’re laughing at one of your own people, who went out into the world and is working very hard,” Akuto said, his voice loud and deep now.

The villagers started to step back. It wasn’t that they were afraid — they were feeling an almost physical pressure emanating from him. Shining mana exploded at his feet, spreading out quickly in a circle around him. He’d gotten so upset that he’d lost control, and his power was starting to leak out.

“W-We were just kidding. Everybody talks behind people’s backs, right? We’re all actually fond of him...”

The villagers were starting to stammer and shake.

“That’s not what’s upset me. You’re calling him weak, but you’re weaker than anyone. You believe in the legend. But you don’t believe in the hero who’s supposed to come from your village, just the Demon King that you fear. If that’s not weakness, then what is?! You want the government to pay for everything you need. You only do things in groups. You hurt people who are weaker than you, and suck up to people who are more powerful. If you want to know what’s upsetting me, it’s your hypocrisy!”

Akuto found himself yelling. When he got like this, there was no stopping him.

“Your village is doomed, even if nobody does a damn thing! Look at you people, bringing guns to confront a single student! Don’t you realize how ridiculous you are?”

Akuto grabbed the barrel of the nearest shotgun and tried to knock it away. But the frightened villager pulled the trigger out of sheer reflex.

There was a loud bang. The gun was pointed right at Akuto’s chest. At that range, it would be enough to blow a huge hole in a human body. But Akuto wasn’t a normal human. His body was shaking, but he was fine. Beneath his tattered shirt, the tiny pieces of lead clattered to the ground.

“H-He’s a monster!”

The villagers started to scream. And then, at the worst possible time, he heard the roar of a beast in the distance. It sounded like the demon beast the villagers had been talking about. Akuto didn’t know if that’s what it was, but he heard it along with everyone else.

—Damn it. Talk about bad timing... Now they really are going to think I’m the Demon King!

Only then did Akuto’s rage subside. The villagers were still surrounding him, but every one of them was frozen. They were all too afraid now to fight him, but the machetes and shotguns were still pointed at him. That was a bad sign. If they all jumped on him at once, he was sure he could neutralize them, but if

they all ran there was no way he'd be able to clean up this mess.

—Why does this always happen to me? What am I doing wrong? If only Korone was here, she might be able to do something...

And then help came from a surprising place.

"H-Hey, everyone... Please don't try to fight him."

The voice came from behind him. It was Hiroshi.

—I'm saved. If Hiroshi comes off as strong, and I back down, this will all work out.

Akuto felt relieved.

Yukiko ran up to Hiroshi.

"Brother! Brother, help me! You're strong, right? You're not actually his friend, right? You were just pretending to be friends with the Demon King so you could defeat him, right?" Yukiko sobbed as she yelled.

The villagers murmured "No way..." "No, could it be true...?" as they stared at him.

Hiroshi clearly didn't know what to do. He had so little self-confidence that the hope in the villagers' eyes was probably scaring him. Because of that, he couldn't say yes or no to Yukiko's question. All he had to do to make her feel better was answer one way or the other, but he couldn't.

—That's the problem with you...!

Akuto should've known better, but he was upset by Hiroshi's attitude. His power began to leak out again, forming a violent spiral around his body. Akuto was someone who could fight a 15-meter long dragon with his fists. Only someone with a heart made of steel could get close to him when he was angry.

Of course, Hiroshi was scared too. And that only made Akuto angrier.

Akuto took a step forward. He was going to tell Hiroshi exactly what was on his mind. But from the outside, that didn't look like what he was planning. He seemed to be intending to burn Hiroshi and Yukiko to ash.

"U-Uwaah!"

Hiroshi panicked and grabbed Yukiko with his left hand as he pushed forward with his right. His right hand collided with Akuto's chest.

Thud.

There was a small, unimpressive noise. The sound brought Akuto back to his senses.

—Oh, um... I did it again... What do I do now...? Oh, I know! I can just make it look like he beat me!

This seemed to Akuto like a great idea.

"H-He beat me!"

Akuto staggered back and collapsed. He closed his eyes and lay on the ground.

—It worked...

But Akuto was the only person there who took the sudden silence as a sign of success. But at least it had accomplished something, as it had calmed things down.

"Wh-What...?"

"What a freak..."

The villagers started to back away from him.

"I know! Miwa's kid must've paid him off to make it look like he lost."

"Then his little sister never got attacked, either?"

"I bet the whole thing's a hoax..."

—Huh? Wait... No, this isn't good. Did I just do something really mean to Hiroshi?

Akuto opened his eyes.

Yukiko was sobbing as she ran away, and Hiroshi was looking down at him. Akuto saw straight into his tear-filled eyes. His expression was indescribable — it was like nothing Akuto had ever seen before. He wanted to forget about it as soon as he could, but he knew he wouldn't be able to. Every time he thought

about it, he'd be filled with regret.

But Akuto's gaze locked with Hiroshi's for only a second before Hiroshi ran off crying after Yukiko, ignoring the people around him.

—*Ah crap...*

Akuto regretted a lot of things that he'd done since coming to this island, but this was the one that he regretted the most.

○

"You idiot! Do you have any idea what you just did?"

Junko slapped him across the face. He'd been kicked and punched, but never slapped like this before.

"I... regret it."

Akuto bowed his head. Junko was standing in front of him with one hand on her hip, glowering at him.

"If you regret it now, then why did you lose control back there? They may have misunderstood, but the villagers didn't do anything wrong. They were right to come complain after one of their children was hurt. The problem here is that you were so focused on acting righteous that you couldn't forgive them for being weak!"

"I know... No, actually I just realized that. I didn't know before. I can't really explain it, but..."

Akuto looked down at his feet as he spoke.

The villagers had all left. They'd decided that this was too stupid to waste their time with. Keena had run after Hiroshi. She'd probably be able to bring him back just fine. And now Akuto was in one of the dorm rooms being lectured by Junko.

"You mean you don't understand how it feels to be weak, right? I'm sure you don't!"

"No... I understand... or at least, I thought I did. I was a poor orphan, and I've been through a lot."

Akuto looked so depressed that Junko found it hard to pressure him any further. She put a hand to her head and looked away as she started to speak.

“My father once told me that when people are training themselves to be more powerful, they become unable to forgive the weak. You don’t have a very forgiving personality to begin with, anyway.”

“I don’t?” Akuto said. He seemed genuinely surprised.

Junko chuckled.

“How can you be forgiving when you’re always obsessed with doing the right thing?”

“I see... You’re right.”

Akuto put a hand on his chin as if he was just realizing this for the first time. Junko started to laugh.

“Come on, why are you taking this so seriously? This isn’t like you.”

“Don’t laugh. You and I both have this in common.”

Junko’s face turned red as she froze. She mumbled to herself quietly.

“Stop it. This is why I can’t just leave you alone.”

But Akuto heard her, and nodded.

“I always appreciate it.”

Junko stopped moving and stared at him.

“I-I’m scolding you, you know.”

“I know. I’m listening, and I’m grateful.”

“You don’t sound like somebody who’s being scolded. You should be crying or something.”

Junko’s voice started to rise in pitch.

“I’m listening to you. I think that’s what I’m supposed to be doing.”

“No, I’m starting to think that’s wrong. You should be resisting so that I can punch you.”

“It doesn’t count as resisting if you tell me to do it.”

“That’s right... I guess we’re done then. You should be more forgiving. And you need to go apologize to Hiroshi.” Junko coughed and changed the subject. “By the way, where was Korone? If she was there, things would’ve gone better.”

Akuto’s expression turned serious, and he explained what had happened to Junko.

“Seduction? Fired? I see... I did think she was acting strange.” Junko remembered her last interactions with Korone, and blushed. “A-Anyway, I can’t believe they’d do something so cowardly. You should file a complaint and get her back.”

Akuto nodded. However...

“But the seduction aspect aside, if the government decided to fire her, we have to obey that. What’s the right thing to do?” he said.

Junko sighed.

“You’re the one who said you’d make sure everything worked out, right?”

“Yeah, you’re right. That was what I decided. But it feels like they want me to rebel against the government... Is there any way out of that?”

“Strength comes with responsibility,” Junko said cheerfully. “If you don’t want to be the Demon King, then study hard and get an important position in the government. Now, you’re going to apologize to Hiroshi, right?”

With that, Junko shooed him out of the room.

o

Meanwhile, Keena had caught up with Hiroshi. He didn’t want to go to the village or back to the dorm, so he was just wandering aimlessly through the forest. It was inevitable that she’d find him quickly.

“Listen, Ackie didn’t mean anything bad by it.”

Keena was walking a few paces behind him.

“I know that. That’s what makes it hard.” Hiroshi sat down, too tired to walk

anymore. “I know it’s my fault for being weak. So what he’s saying is right. And I can understand why everybody’s laughing.”

“But you’re better at magic than I am, and you have more friends, right?” Keena crouched down in front of him.

“That’s not what I mean. Maybe I just don’t like it when everybody has these expectations of me. I’m not as strong as they expect me to be.”

“They expect you to be?”

“Part of it is the fact that they expect so much from me, but part of it is... This is a weird thing to say, but I hate the idea of ‘justice.’”

Hiroshi raised his head as he spoke.

“Justice?” Keena repeated, confused.

“I guess I mean, I hate people who force their idea of justice on you. Most of the village is like that... It’s a tiny village, so we have all these weird rules to protect it. And that’s what everyone calls ‘justice.’ But even in our small community, that can cause conflict...”

“Oh, I kind of know what you mean.”

“So once I get strong, I realized, I’ll probably end up on the side of the people who make the rules. No, I guess I’m never going to be strong, so there’s no sense in thinking about that.”

Hiroshi laughed weakly.

“Nah. You really are strong, Hiroshi. But you’re kind, so you don’t want to get strong and hurt somebody, right?”

Keena smiled, and Hiroshi blushed and turned away.

“S-Stop it. That’s not true.”

“But you’re strong and kind, and that’s why you fought to help Ackie, right? You even got hurt once.”



“I got hurt because I’m weak.”

“That’s not true. You were trying not to hurt the person you were fighting, right?”

“You’re giving me too much credit...”

“Huh? But you’re the hero, right?”

“You know I’m not the hero. I hated that so much, that’s why I...”

Hiroshi stood up, as if he’d just realized something.

“Alright, I’ll prove that the legend is just a bunch of crap. Come with me. I’ll take you to where it’s supposed to be.”

Hiroshi started walking.

○

Meanwhile, at the Academy...

Fujiko was woken up by a message from Junko. It was still 7:00 AM.

《There’s something I want you to check for me...》

Junko had asked her to look into Korone’s removal. Not only was she in a bad mood after being woken up, but Fujiko had had very little contact with Korone. There was no reason for her to accept.

“Out of the question. Why would I do anything for that meddling Liradan...”

Suddenly the person on the other end of the line changed. Junko knew that this would convince her.

《It would mean a lot to me if you’d help...》

“Akuto!” Fujiko gasped, and her attitude immediately changed.

“Yes, of course! I’ll find out all the answers you need!”

And then Fujiko headed for the underground labyrinth.

“...And so that’s how it is.”

Fujiko told Peterhausen what Akuto had told her. Even with her network, she couldn’t peer into the inner workings of the government. It would be faster to

ask Peterhausen, who had the same capabilities as a god. Peterhausen knew a lot about this world, but the level of information was so great that he would only reveal what you asked him about directly. Fujiko didn't know if that was just how his powers worked, or just who he was, but at least she had figured this out.

"I can't access the core government logs."

"Logs" in this case referred to the records of human actions that were recorded by mana in the brain and transmitted to the gods. This was what the gods used to judge humanity. And Peterhausen was the god of the black mages, who were opposed to this. He was supposed to have the capacity to record the logs of every human being.

"Don't you have everyone's logs?"

"If that were possible right now, the government would have been overthrown a long time ago. You need to register with a god, in a process called baptism. There's no need for baptism to offer your logs to me, but you need to be aware of me and want me to have them."

"I should've guessed..."

"But rumors are starting to spread, and I'm starting to receive logs. But still, I have no information from anyone related to Korone. Though even if I did know it, I couldn't say."

"Why is that?"

Peterhausen grinned.

"I have the same duties as a god. I'm forbidden to share the logs to protect the rights of those who give them to me."

"That's surprising."

"Black mages are all about equality. They don't peek at the logs or take advantage of them, like the government does. You're a black mage, aren't you?"

"I like to take advantage of things like loopholes and extenuating circumstances."

“You’re a very naughty girl... By the way, was that your only question?”

“That’s right. If you can’t help me with Korone, I’ll investigate on my own. As for me personally, I’m a little curious about Akuto. I think by now he should be ruling that whole village.”

“That matter is a bit problematic for me.”

“Huh?” Fujiko said, confused. “Does someone like you even have problems?”

Peterhausen nodded.

“The reason I decide on a master is to give him the ability to control me. I don’t normally act on my own at all. But my master lacks the will to completely control me, and so I am incomplete.”

—*That means...*

That explained a lot to Fujiko.

“When Akuto becomes the Demon King... Or rather, when he decides of his own will to become the Demon King...”

Peterhausen nodded.

“That will be when he decides to destroy the present order, and create a new one. That is the moment I desire.”

—*That will be the moment the Demon King is born...!*

Fujiko shivered with excitement. Akuto wasn’t the Demon King yet, but the key was in his hands.

“That explains why they’d resort to seduction.” Fujiko licked her lips. “I still want a revolution. This just means I’ll have to work even harder at seducing him myself...”

“I’m glad to hear that. It’s something I want to see too. But right now, there’s a problem...”

“A problem?”

“You see...”

○

“So this is the lake?”

Keena let out a cry of joy as she looked at the beautiful lake. It was pure blue, and surrounded by white sand. It was small enough that if you stood in front of it and turned your head to the left or right, you could see the whole thing. It was a beautiful ring of blue and white surrounded by the green of the mountains.

“That’s right. This is the lake in the legend.”

“It’s so pretty. I can see why there’d be a strange legend about it!” Keena said excitedly.

But Hiroshi shook his head.

“No. Don’t you think it’s weird that there’s white sand and water that’s this blue, even though we’re in the middle of the island?”

“Really? I don’t know.”

“I’ll tell you why then. This is actually part of the ocean. There’s an underground cavern that connects this to the sea.”

“I see!”

Just as Keena spoke, they both heard the loud “ROAR!” from the mountains near the lake again.

“Kyah!”

Keena put her hands over her ears and dropped to her knees. But Hiroshi calmly explained.

“There’s a part of the cavern that’s above the water, and it’s connected to the mountain. The hole is filled with air, and once a year, the tides make a loud noise that echoes through it. This year, it’s especially loud. That’s why everyone believes in the Demon Beast, you see.”

“Huh? Is that why?” Keena looked up at him in surprise.

“Yeah. I’m not good at swimming... I guess you knew that. So I came to this lake, which everyone avoids because of the legend, and practiced here. When I did, I ended up almost drowning... and then I found the part of the cavern with

air in it, which was the only reason I survived. That's when I discovered the secret of where the sound was coming from. When I was in there, it was really loud." Hiroshi laughed. "And like I said before, this island's only been around about a century. He's dead now, but my grandpa was one of the first inhabitants. So only I know about this secret."

"Secret?" Keena repeated, and Hiroshi pointed to the narrow road that ran around the lake.

"That road leads to the cave I was talking about. And there's a shrine in the cave that has the Sign of the Hero."

"Huh? Sign of the Hero?"

"Stupid, isn't it? My grandpa made the shrine. His name's on it. And the Sign of the Hero is this tiny sword stuck in a stone. Supposedly only the hero can take it out. I tried to take it out as a joke, and I couldn't. When I told my dad about that, he got mad at me in a weird way. He was like, 'You need to study more.' That's why I ended up going to the Academy. But now I think you understand that it's all a big joke. I mean, my family basically invented the legend, right? It's all so stupid..."

Hiroshi was laughing, but the tears were gradually building up in his eyes.

"So I... It hurts when they tell me I'm the hero. It's just something my family made up. And when I did my own occupation exam on the first day of school, I arrived after everybody else, and got mine done late. Do you know what it said?"

"Was it something bad, Hiroshi? No, I don't know."

"It said I was going to be a hero. But the teachers kept it a secret. That's because... unlike the Demon King, I don't think they believed it. Funny, huh?"

Hiroshi's voice fell.

But Keena looked straight at him.

"No, I don't think it's funny."

"Huh...?"

"You believed that Ackie was the Demon King, right? That's because you want

to believe you're the hero, right?"

Hiroshi wasn't sure how to answer.

"N-No, because then..."

Hiroshi tried to deny it, but he couldn't come up with a reason. He'd always admired strength. He didn't care if it was good or evil, he just wanted to be strong. That's why he'd admired Akuto's bold attitude. He'd felt like if he was with Akuto, he could become strong. But whenever he was confronted with his own weakness, he'd always run away.

When he realized this, Hiroshi couldn't speak. But Keena just smiled at him.

"Hey, let's go see this shrine."

"Huh? But it's..."

"Don't worry about it. Come on, okay?"

He hesitated, but Keena grabbed him by the hand. She ran down the road that Hiroshi had pointed out.

After following the empty road for a while, they came to an open space, where there was an entrance to a cave.

But Hiroshi and Keena saw someone standing there, and stopped.

"Huh?"

Both of them were confused. But the man looked so suspicious that they dropped their voices low.

The man was staring at the lake. His back was turned, but even from behind they could see how unusual he was. He was wearing a long white coat, even though it was summer. And they could see how muscled he was even through the coat.

"Wh-Who is that?!"

"I don't know, but he looks pretty weird," Keena said.

"There's nobody like that in the village."

"I bet not..."

Keena and Hiroshi hid themselves in the bushes by the side of the road.

Suddenly the man opened his coat.

“Hey, is that...”

“He looks like a flasher...”

And then the man began to scream.

“Lake! Answer my cry!” he yelled.

He wasn’t just shouting — it was a scream, a meaningless, primal scream. He took deep, belly-filling breaths. It was very loud, and very annoying.

“NISHUGYUUUOOUUUWAAHHAGYOOIIIMOOODOIIMAOOUKOKOROBOOOJIBOTSUGAMOMORUEOTOTSURIROOFUEEMADOIIMODOOOMEDOO!”

Since he was far away from the village, there was no need to worry about bothering the villagers. Maybe that’s why he was so loud.

When he finally finished, Hiroshi and Keena looked at one another.

“Wh-What the heck was that?”

“H-He’s really craz...”

And then the man spoke.

“My voice is in great shape today. I guess that’s enough warming up, though.” He started to shake his open coat.

And then the coat began to make noise. It must’ve had speakers embedded inside, and very powerful ones at that.

Hiroshi and Keena put their hands over their ears. The noise was louder and more unpleasant than the man’s voice.

It was a loud mix of clanging metal, explosions, electronic beeps, radio static, and more.

And on top of it, the man started to scream again.

“Muhaoouuwakoootoooojyoboosareetafooonnaawoooo!”

And as he screamed, he fell to the ground and began to writhe. He seemed to be undergoing an electric shock. That, or he was dying.

Both Hiroshi and Keena were silent with shock.

But then something even stranger happened.

The man stopped screaming, then stood up, panting as if he'd exhausted all his energy.

"Now it's time to get serious."

That was enough to make both of them shiver, but his next words astonished them even more.

"I have the Demon King's noise pattern. Now heed my cry, pitiful demon beast!"

○

"The problem is that he's using me while he's still unawakened," Peterhausen said.

"What do you mean?" Fujiko asked.

"I was created to give magic to all people. But this affects not only humanity, but other life forms as well. This gives them what you could call a serious bug."

Fujiko began to realize what he was trying to say.

"You don't mean..." She gulped. Peterhausen nodded.

"The mana inside them goes out of control, and changes them. That's what creates a demon beast. An awakened Demon King could control me, but an unawakened one will cause demon beasts to appear everywhere. Or perhaps those demon beasts which were sealed in the past will revive," Peterhausen continued. "The demon beasts grow active in response to the aura generated by the mana inside the Demon King's body. That's what gives him the ability to control them. I'm sure that's the same for my present master, as well."

"That's right. I remember hearing Akuto say that he removed the mana from a demon beast. That's supposed to be impossible."

"He can command them during combat, but as long as he's unawakened, he'll only create more of the poor creatures."

○

“Hooowwl!” The roar echoed across the lake. It was clearly the roar of a living thing.

“This... isn’t how it usually sounds.” Hiroshi began to panic.

“It’s not?” Keena said. Hiroshi was pale.

“This isn’t the sound I know. This might be a real—”

BOOM!

There was an explosion at the center of the lake, and a pillar of water shot up over a dozen meters in the air. The roar was coming from the center of the pillar, causing the water to splash everywhere.

A spray of water droplets fell on Keena and Hiroshi like a downpour of rain.

“Hyahahaha! It’s revived!” the strange man screamed. He was getting soaked too, but he just stretched out his arms and laughed.

The man was staring at the center of the lake, where the demon beast had revealed itself.

It looked like a huge cylindrical tower. It was so thick that three men couldn’t wrap their arms around it, and as tall as a five-story building. There was an opening at the top, from which beard-like tentacles were stretching out. The whole body was dark brown, with leopard-like spots.

“A sea cucumber...” Keena whispered.

“One of the sea cucumbers turned into a demon beast...? W-We have to get out of here and tell Akuto...” Hiroshi said to Keena, and turned to run.

“Kyaaah!”

Suddenly he heard a loud scream. It was a voice he instantly recognized.

“Yukiko...”

Hiroshi turned around and saw Yukiko screaming in shock as she stared at the monster. He wanted to take her with him and run, but her scream had attracted the man’s attention.

The strange man turned around, and Hiroshi saw that he had tanned skin and close-cut hair, and he was wearing sunglasses. That wasn’t too unusual on its

own, but what was unusual was his expression. Even with his sunglasses on, his smile made him look possessed.

“You saw me, didn’t you?”

The strange man began to slowly stride towards Yukiko.

“N-No...”

Yukiko was frozen and unable to move. The man kept coming towards her, his arm stretched out.

“W-Wait!” Hiroshi yelled.

The man spun his head around, craning his neck in a bizarre angle. He looked at Hiroshi and then back at Yukiko, and then back at Hiroshi again.

“I see two people with the same face,” he said, “a big one and a little one! The big one isn’t that big, though.”

Then he rushed at Yukiko with surprising speed.

“Stop it!” Hiroshi yelled.

“Brother!” Yukiko’s scream echoed across the lake.

The strange man grabbed her and lifted her off the ground.

“I’m taking the little one as a hostage. Big one, don’t you run away... But this makes me seem like such a cliché villain... How boring. I guess it can’t be helped. I need a totally original plan, or it’s not art. Don’t you agree?” the strange man said to Hiroshi in a friendly tone.

—Damn it. Who is this guy?

Hiroshi was shaking with anger and fear. But he had to protect Yukiko, no matter what.

“Let my sister go.”

“Sorry, no. This isn’t art, and so it’s boring. But now that she’s seen me I need to get rid of her. Of course, that goes for you too.”

The strange man said. A bolt of fear ran through Hiroshi’s body.

—Where’s Keena...?

He turned around and saw Keena's clothes lying on the ground. She must be using her invisibility magic. Maybe she'd be able to save Yukiko.

—*If that weirdo isn't that good at magic, then maybe I can...*

Hiroshi held out his arms in a fighting stance and started to advance. The strange man laughed.

"You're a student of the Academy, huh? So you're a magic-user then."

"What's so funny?"

"Because what you're doing is reckless and stupid. But still, I need you to try your hardest. Art lies in being reckless and throwing caution to the wind. So I'll let you have a chance at doing something brave," the strange man spoke of his strange theory.

"Shut... up!"

Hiroshi put his hands behind his back and tried to form a mana ball. He hoped that if he could get his attack ready when the man couldn't see it, he could catch him by surprise.

But...

—*What...?*

Hiroshi didn't understand what was going on. He couldn't create the mana ball.

"This is impossible..."

It wasn't that he was too nervous to perform magic. The mana was just refusing to gather.

"Hahahaha!" The strange man suddenly began to laugh.

He pointed past Hiroshi, towards the lake.

The demon beast was still in the center, looking like a giant tower in the middle of the water. Its body was squirming in the air, as if it was drawing something into its mouth.

"...Oh!"

Hiroshi realized what was going on. There was a light gathering at the center of its mouth.

“Is it... absorbing the mana?”

“That’s right! It’s a mana-absorbing demon beast! In this world, you need mana to do almost everything. And so when he appears...” The strange man laughed happily.

“What are you going to do with it?” Hiroshi asked, but the man just laughed louder.

“There’s no need for me to tell you that. But personally, I think as long as there’s destruction and disorder, that’s good enough for me. That is anarchy! That is art!”

“You’re crazy...” Hiroshi whispered, and the man began to scream uncontrollably.

“Crazy! That’s the problem with you plebeians! You don’t understand what noise really is! Destruction doesn’t just mean smashing things! If a boring man tries to destroy something, he can only do it in a boring way! Disorder is what makes people show who they really are!”

And then suddenly his expression became peaceful, as if the last few minutes had never happened.

“Well, you can’t expect the ordinary man to understand art. You need to experience it first-hand before you can truly understand. Anyway, that’s enough talking.”

The strange man started to stride towards Hiroshi now. Hiroshi’s blood ran cold as he realized what this meant.

—He’s really going to kill everyone who saw him...

Yukiko was still in the man’s arms. Without magic, there was no way he could save her. But Hiroshi wasn’t such a coward that he could run away.

—Even without magic, I can at least give Yukiko time to escape...

Hiroshi steeled himself. But before he could act, things got worse. Hiroshi saw something the color of skin pass through the corner of his vision.

!!!

Keena, now stark naked, was trying to sneak up on the man from behind. She probably hadn't heard their conversation, and still thought she was invisible. When she got close, she reached out her hand to grab Yukiko.

If she had been invisible, she would've been able to grab Yukiko and get away. But now, with her mana gone, she was completely exposed.

—*Oh no...*

Keena saw the worry on his face. She stuck her thumb up as if to say "It's okay." Then she slowly moved around from the man's back to his front, to make it easier to grab Yukiko.

"Hey," the man said. Only then did she realize she was visible.

"Huh? How?!"

The man used his other hand to quickly grab Keena by the neck.

"I don't know how you got here, but why are you naked?"

"Nooo!"

Keena tried to resist, but the man was too strong. He excitedly began to explain another pet theory.

"Attacking someone from behind while stark naked! I like it! That's art! I'll add you to the long list of naked artists! They've brought peace and tranquility, but more than anything confusion, to the cities over the years!"

He laughed as he swung Yukiko and Keena around in both hands.

"Kyaah!"

"Nooo!"

Yukiko and Keena sobbed.

"Yukiko!" Hiroshi screamed.

"Brother! Help me!"

"Hahaha! That would be reckless! But that's why he should do it!" The strange man turned towards Hiroshi.

Hiroshi knew he couldn't win. He didn't have his magic, and his opponent was far bigger than he was. And the man knew he couldn't use magic, too. He was probably ready to fight Hiroshi without it.

—Damn it...

Hiroshi was overcome with despair. More than anything, he was in despair at his own weakness. It wasn't that he didn't have the courage to face him. Even if his opponent was clearly insane, he had the courage to fight. But until now, he'd always avoided being in any situation where his own strength would prove the deciding factor. And because of that, he'd missed all his chances to become strong.

"My brother's the hero! He'll beat you up!" Yukiko was screaming.

—That's not true.

Hiroshi thought to himself. He wasn't strong. He preferred it when somebody strong made a decision, and he obeyed it. In a situation like that he'd happily give up his own life. But he'd rather die than end up with someone else's life in his hands.

—I'm not a hero.

Hiroshi stood there, motionless. The strange man got closer and closer. Both of his hands were full. But Hiroshi couldn't move.

The strange man's leg swung out in a long arc. His kick struck Hiroshi in the head.

Hiroshi's world turned upside-down. Everything shook for a moment with the impact, and then he found himself looking at the sloping ground.

"Brother!" He heard Yukiko's voice.

"So he's the hero, huh?" the strange man said.

"I'm here to stop the hero from being born. I'm supposed to mess up the plan for his birth. That's part of my job."

—What? What is he talking about? The plan? Wait, he seemed to know about the demon beast...

Hiroshi's mind was oddly calm. Maybe he just didn't care anymore. He stood up without even realizing that he'd done so.

"You stood up! I like that! That's the recklessness I want to see!"

The strange man kicked him again.

"But the situation hasn't changed! Because you're weak! Because you're tied down by what the rest of the world thinks! Because you don't understand art!"

The man kept screaming, but what really hurt Hiroshi was his next kick, and his next words.

The man stood on one leg like a ballerina, and kicked the other out at Hiroshi. It landed directly on Hiroshi's solar plexus. His whole body buckled forward.

And then the man raised his leg up high, taking Hiroshi upwards with it.

The man's balance and strength were exquisite. He was carrying a girl in each hand, and lifting a boy up with one leg.

"And you're not revealing who you really are. You're willing to throw away your life instead. And I'm afraid that someone like that can't complain, no matter what they have to suffer. You don't even have the right to hate me."

And then the man swept his leg up higher.

Hiroshi flew through the sky and landed in the lake.

"Brother!"

"Hiroshi!"

He heard what sounded like a scream from Yukiko and Keena. His body sank into the water. And even when the ripples disappeared, he didn't come up.

The strange man nodded, satisfied.

"Now, I suppose it's your turn."

Neither Keena nor Yukiko had the strength left to scream. He grinned and looked at each of them in turn.

"Who should go first?" he said happily, but then he looked off into the distance as if he sensed something.

“Tch... The Demon King’s on the move faster than I expected. I guess he was following them... If I’m going to kill them anyway, it would be much more artistic to do it in front of him.”

He took the limply struggling Keena, and the now unmoving Yukiko, and started to walk.

o

The demon beast left the lake and started moving towards the village. It seemed to be seeking out sources of mana. It was so tall that it could be seen even from far away.

Akuto and Junko, who’d gone to look for Hiroshi, were struck dumb for a moment when they saw it.

Akuto felt something stirring in his chest when he looked at it.

—That monster... It’s like it’s calling to me.

“Wh-What is that? Do you know it?” Junko asked.

“No, I don’t,” Akuto said as he looked at Junko. She seemed very scared. After all, it was a huge sea cucumber. The incident earlier today had evidently traumatized her.

“If you’re scared, you can go home. I’m going to check that thing out,” Akuto said.

Junko’s expression stiffened but she immediately shook her head.

“I’m going too. I won’t slow you down, but... if I can...”

She started off strong, but her words gradually became weaker. Akuto couldn’t help but laugh.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to force yourself.”

“Th-That’s not what’s going on here!” Junko said loudly, but then she started to whisper again. “If you... If you’re with me, I think it will be okay.”

Akuto smiled.

“Then let’s go. I’m getting a weird feeling from that monster,” he said, and then he started to walk.

By the time they found the demon beast, they were already a long way away from the dorm. It felt to him like it was faster to go straight towards it than head back and find out what was going on.

But before long, Akuto had to stop. There was a tall man standing on the path through the forest. His skin was tanned and he wore sunglasses and a long white coat.

“Who are you?” Akuto asked cautiously. The man was very clearly suspicious.

“I shall give you the name I gave myself! I am Mister X!” the man said.

Akuto wasn’t sure how to react to the man’s strange attitude. And he certainly wasn’t sure how to react to the man’s stupid name.

“...That’s the name you gave yourself?” Junko asked.

“Be careful. He’s probably a pervert.”

“Shut up! None of you people understand art!” Mister X screamed.

“Art?”

“That’s right. I thought that the Demon King, of all people, would understand art,” Mister X said, and then took a step to the side, exposing the two hostages behind him.

“Ackie!” Keena, who was naked, screamed. Yukiko was next to her. They were wearing collars around their necks, and Mister X was holding the chains attached to them.

“I guess there was no need to ask who you were.”

Akuto’s voice was low. His gaze was piercing straight through Mister X. There was enough heat in his gaze to burn anyone, mage or not. But Mister X just grinned.

“You’re mad, huh? I like it when people expose their emotions.”

“You bastard! What did you do to Keena?” Junko screamed.

“Nothing. Yet, that is. But I’m about to murder her, and I wanted you, the Demon King, to see me. The kid I got rid of just before I came here was no fun at all.”

Junko’s face went pale. Keena had been following Hiroshi, and more than anything, if his little sister Yukiko was here, that meant...

“No...”

But the rage was completely gone from Akuto’s face now. His voice was calm and quiet as he spoke.

“Did you kill that kid?”



“That’s right. I kicked him again and again, and then flung him into the lake. If he could swim he might survive, but I think I kicked him hard enough that he didn’t have the strength left to do it.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do.”

“Huh?”

“You’re about to have the same thing happen to you. But since there’s no water around here for you to drown in, we’ll have to use stomach acid instead.”

“What are you—”

Mister X couldn’t finish his sentence. His body was doubled over, and Akuto’s foot was embedded in his solar plexus.

“Gruggh... Gwahh...” Akuto removed his leg, and Mister X began to vomit up the contents of his stomach.

“Now shove your face in it!”

Akuto raised his leg to kick Mister X in the back of the head.

But even as he vomited, Mister X leapt backwards.

—!

Akuto was surprised at how fast he was. And it seemed that Mister X was surprised as well. Once he finished throwing up, he started to laugh with glee.

“Hahahahaha! This is great! You’re so much faster than the data said, and so much more short-tempered! That’s what I wanted to see! It’s not art otherwise! I take back what I said before. You *do* understand art!”

Mister X pulled on the chains that were holding Keena and Yukiko.

“But I’m starting to realize that I can’t get rid of them until I do something about you. I don’t really like taking hostages, but you two are going to have to —”

Yet again, Mister X didn’t get a chance to finish his sentence. Akuto moved even faster than before, punching him hard and sending him flying several meters.

“Gwahah!” Mister X slammed into the ground.

“I’d rather not get into the habit of fighting all the time, but if you’re telling me you killed one of my friends, then I can’t just shrug that off,” Akuto said, and then he snapped the chains he’d grabbed from Mister X.

“Ackie!” Keena cried as she grabbed on to him. He lightly patted her on the head as he shattered her collar and Yukiko’s with his fingers.

“Hang on. He and I are going to have a talk,” Akuto said. But Keena looked at him worriedly.

“Ackie?”

“Hmm? Don’t worry. There’s no way I’ll lose to...”

“That’s not it.”

“Hmm?”

“You can’t kill him.”

Her words brought him back to his senses.

—Oh jeez. I didn’t realize until she told me. I guess I was thinking it’s natural for me to kill him.

“Alright.”

He smiled and nodded at Keena. And then he took off his shirt and handed it to her, and motioned to Junko, who nodded and took Keena and Yukiko a distance away.

Then Akuto looked back at Mister X.

“What do you want? What the hell are you trying to do here?”

Mister X had only just managed to stand up. He was still laughing. He seemed to be truly enjoying himself.

“You’re amazing! I’ll never be able to defeat you the normal way!”

“What’s so funny?”

“When I experience art, I always go crazy! Don’t you want to laugh at those times, too?”

“I don’t care. I’m asking what you’re trying to do.”

“Haha! You’re pretty dense, huh? But that’s art, too! Well, I guess answering your question is easy enough.”

Mister X pointed behind him. Akuto could see the demon beast advancing as it howled.

“You’re going to just stay here and watch as that thing levels the village. All I have to do is keep you here.”

“What? What’s the point of doing that?”

“The point? Even if there was a point, I wouldn’t be allowed to tell you,” Mister X said as he laughed. “What I’m trying to say is that I can’t let you through.”

“You’ve got a big mouth for somebody who just got his ass kicked. I won’t kill you, but you’re never going to laugh again.”

Akuto took a step forward. If he didn’t stop it, the demon beast was going to attack the village. He needed to get past this guy before that happened.

And then...

Junko heard a noise from above and looked up, then shouted.

“Oh! Look...!”

Akuto looked up too. He could see his classmates flying through the blue sky. There were five of them in formation, some of the best in the class, all of whom had mastered flight magic. They’d probably seen the demon beast from the dorm and had permission from the teacher to attack it.

“You’re going to have that monster destroy the village, you said? If that was your goal then you’re wasting your time. It looks like the rest of the class are going to take care of it for me.”

But when he looked back at Mr. X, he saw that he seemed completely unconcerned. Akuto didn’t understand why he wasn’t more worried.

“Do you have someone else working with you?” he asked.

“Nope. I just know exactly how this is going to go.”

Mister X pointed his thumb at the demon beast without turning around.

“Oh!” Junko gasped.

The students in the air seemed to gradually lose power, and one by one they fell to the ground.

“Did they get shot down...? No, their mana...” Akuto immediately realized that the demon beast was absorbing mana. “That demon beast absorbs the mana around it?”

“That’s right. No mage can beat it. When the sea cucumbers on this island become demon beasts, they gain that ability. Wonderful, isn’t it? It’s a natural danger! Art!”

“You really want to destroy the village that badly? No...”

Akuto thought for a moment.

—What’s the point of destroying the village? He doesn’t just want to level the place. There’s nothing of value on this island. Or is his goal to use the demon beast? But if it absorbs mana, then he can’t control it either. But he doesn’t want me getting close to it, that means...

Akuto suddenly realized what was going on.

“So I have the power to stand up to that thing, don’t I?”

It was only when he said that that he realized the meaning of the strange sensation he’d been feeling.

—I feel some kind of sympathy towards that monster. I don’t want to think about why, but it’s got something to do with me...!

“There’s some kind of relationship between it and me. In other words, you want to make it seem like I’m the one who destroyed the village!” Akuto yelled.

“That’s right.”

Mister X clapped his hands together.

“But if you know that much, then just stand there and watch. Things will go the way you want them to, basically. You really are the Demon King. You have to accept that,” Mister X said, grinning.

“Shut up! I’m not the Demon King!” Akuto yelled, but Mister X wasn’t listening.

“You haven’t been hiding who you really are, you just refuse to accept it. At the bottom of your heart lies the truth. And I’m just helping to bring it out. You need to be honest with yourself.”

“Don’t act like you know how I feel,” Akuto spat, but the words gave him an awful sensation. It was like he’d realized something that he’d been trying to ignore.

—The person behind all this wants to make me become the Demon King. And it would have been impossible to execute this plan unless they knew what was going to happen. Can they see the future, or something?

“Who’s the one behind all this? Who told Korone she’d be fired? Who did all this? It has to be the Imperial Government. And the system that said I was the Demon King... All of this fits together, right?”

“You know I’m not going to answer that. You’re sharp, though. You’ll be a good Demon King.”

“Shut up! I’ll just beat the answer out of you. And then I’ll stop that monster, too. Kicking your ass will be easy.”

With that, Akuto charged forward.

“Nope!”

Mister X flung open the front of his white coat.

“What?”

“I-Is he a pervert?”

Akuto was surprised, and Junko blushed, at the sudden sight.

But the real shock came a moment later. He was wearing normal clothing beneath his white coat, but the inside of the coat was lined with speakers, all of which were howling with noise.

Clanging metal, electric beeps, badly sampled moans, all of it overlaid together to make a cacophony that filled the air around them.

“Noise...?”

“Hahaha! That’s right! This is noise music! The ultimate art!” Mister X said, filled with confidence and shaking his body like he was spasming.

“It’s obnoxious, you pervert!”

Akuto jumped towards Mister X, the man dodged him easily.

“What?!”

Akuto almost lost his balance.

“Hahaha! Do you think I’d fight the Demon King without a plan?”

“What do you mean...”

Akuto tried to turn around, but Mister X was faster. His kick landed in Akuto’s stomach.

“Gwah...!”

Akuto’s body was wracked with pain. He couldn’t breathe, but he could feel his muscles twitch.

—No way... I can’t focus my mana...

Akuto’s body was always enhanced with mana. So normally, no matter how hard he was hit, it wouldn’t affect him.

“This is the power of noise. I’m an anti-mage combat expert, you see.”

“Noise...?” Akuto looked up.

“That’s right. Unpredictable sounds disturb the heart. In other words, as long as you’re hearing my noise, you can’t use your magic! You won’t be able to concentrate enough to use even the simplest spell!”

Mister X pressed the attack with another kick. Akuto crossed his arms to keep the kick from hitting him in the stomach again, but it quickly turned into a blow to the head. Akuto was knocked away and landed on his back.

“And I love my noise! It’s the ultimate music! In other words, I can use magic to enhance my body!”

Akuto was just barely able to stand up in time to be hit with a roundhouse

kick. He jumped back to dodge it, but Mister X just spun and kicked again from the opposite direction. This one landed hard on Akuto's stomach.

"And lastly, I've trained my body to be able to fight without magic! When I fight with my art, even the Demon King falls before me!"

Mister X struck Akuto with one final kick, and Akuto landed headfirst onto the ground.

"Ackie!"

"Akuto!"

Keena and Junko screamed.

Mister X laughed.

"Don't worry! He's the one man I won't kill! I need to wipe out the village and blame it on him! But I do need to kill the witnesses!"

Mister X turned his gaze towards the girls. Junko tensed.

"Junko..." Keena sounded worried.

"I normally rely on magic, but I know more marital arts than most people. I can do this," Junko said, but she couldn't hide her shaking legs.

Mister X started to move forward.

"I hate to say it, but it's clear you can't beat me just by looking at you. Now, there's nothing artistic about a brutal murder, but I guess that's what I'll have to do."

o

When Hiroshi sank into the lake, he was still conscious.

—It sucks to admit it, but it's true that I wanted to hide my weakness...

Despite what was happening, he only felt frustrated with himself.

He hadn't been able to become strong. No, he didn't want the responsibility that came with that power. In the end, he'd used everything he could think of to run away from that.

—Yukiko...

His little sister's face and words flashed through his mind "You're the hero, right Brother?"

He'd said no because he didn't want to look like an idiot in front of everyone. He didn't want to bear the burden of that responsibility, or of their hopes. But that had disappointed his sister. Whether he believed in the legend or not, he'd still let Yukiko down.

—Boss...

He imagined Akuto's face.

All the hopes he'd had for Akuto were for his own benefit. If he was with Akuto, he wouldn't need to get strong. Whether he believed in the legend or not, he'd still forced Akuto to bear the burden of those hopes.

He'd thought that by pretending to be even weaker than he really was, it would be okay if he was weak. That was how he'd spent his whole life.

And this was the result.

He opened his eyes. The blue lake came into his sight. The inside of the lake was quiet.

—Are you sure you want to drown here? If you swim you can still survive!

Hiroshi struggled.

—I need to swim! I was an idiot to think I didn't have to learn!

He struggled and flailed for a moment before realizing he was near a place he knew. It was the cave that led to the shrine. There was a hole in the water that led there.

—I should have faced my fears and learned to swim, instead of avoiding it my whole life. But if I try now, I can still do it! If I try now, I can still change!

With new resolve, Hiroshi paddled through the water as hard as he could. He'd almost passed out, but the water currents helped him. They carried him into the hole without any work on his part.

He came to a spot in the cave with oxygen and took a deep breath.

He was still alive.

The cave was dark and just wide enough for a single person to pass through. Here he steeled his resolve.

—I'll be reborn. I'll be strong.

Hiroshi started to walk. He felt like he had just remembered something from a long time ago. As he went further, he saw light. It was proof that the caves connected to the outside.

And there was a shrine in the middle of the path. In the center was the stone with the hero's sword.

He stood in front of the shrine. It was shorter than he was. The hero's "sword" was too small to really be a sword, and the stone was too small to really be a proper stone. It was a knife in a rock, that was all.

Hiroshi put his hand up to it. He pulled. It didn't come out. It looked like a small rock, but it was embedded deep in the ground.

—What if I can't be the hero after all?

He pulled as hard as he could, but it didn't matter.

—Is my resolve to become strong just not enough?

Just as he was about to give up, though, a new thought came to him, almost naturally.

—No, that's not right. I'm already the hero. That's how I need to think.

He pulled hard at the sword once more.

—I am the hero. Pulling this out doesn't make me the hero.

He felt the sword begin to slide.

—I'm already the hero. But I just don't have the hero's power yet.

"And I'm about to get it," he whispered.

And then he heard a voice answer.

"Authorization complete. Welcome, Hero."

—Wha...?

The voice was clearly coming from the sword, which was so small that it was

more like a knife.

“What... the...?”

Hiroshi didn’t know what was going on, but the knife changed shape inside his hand. The blade split open like a beetle spreading its wings, and a mechanical device appeared inside. The device wrapped itself around his wrist as he stood there in shock.

“Wah!”

The device transformed quickly, becoming a bracelet that wrapped around his arm.

“I am anti-magical combat unit D-13. Please give me a startup command. The default is ‘hero.’ If you wish to leave this unchanged, please say ‘hero.’”

“Hero?”

“Command recognized. Please perform the startup test. The command is once again ‘hero.’”

Hiroshi was shocked to find the voice coming from within his own head. But it was slightly different than the usual telepathic calls. There was no mana in this space to begin with, or at least, there wasn’t supposed to be. He couldn’t feel the mana within himself.

—Is this the power of the hero? An anti-magical combat unit?

Hiroshi said the word again: “Hero.”

“Unit engaged. Generating dimensional fault. Removing all objects within five centimeters of the user.”

There was a loud bang, and Hiroshi’s body was wrapped in light.

“Uwah!”

“Transferring unit. Transfer will require one second. Transfer complete.”

Hiroshi didn’t know what had happened. But when the light faded away, he realized that his field of vision was covered by something translucent.

—I’m wearing a visor or something. It looks like it put some kind of helmet on me.

Particles of light began to gather on the visor, forming words. A translucent display was floating in front of him.

“Electronics functioning normally. Life-support systems green. Please select internal or external air circulation. Use thought input to activate nuclear fusion engine.”

The words in his head were the same as the words on the screen.

—So basically, it’s put some kind of suit on me?

He walked outside and looked at himself in the surface of the lake.

He was wearing a helmet that came down to his nose. From a distance away, you wouldn’t know it was him. He was wearing a tight-fitting suit, but he couldn’t be sure what it was made out of. There was some kind of device on his wrist with several holes in it.

—Is this a weapon?

He raised it up to his face. It looked dangerous, like there were weapons inside. He craned his head around and saw that there was something on his back that looked like a weapon too.

—What is this?

And then he heard the voice again.

“Displaying manual. For help, perform thought input to select the dolphin in the lower right corner.”

The letters appeared before him. There was even a cute dolphin character in the bottom right. Hiroshi felt annoyed at the sight, and with that thought, the dolphin disappeared.

“Weapon usage requires the startup of the nuclear fusion engine. Perform thought input to activate the engine.”

—I see... So thought input means I think and it does what I want. And a nuclear fusion engine... That means...

“This unit can function in areas without mana. It can also absorb and destroy mana. It is guaranteed to be effective in battles against mages.”

—An independent combat unit that doesn't rely on mana!

Hiroshi was elated.

—I can fight that pervert guy, and the demon beast too!

o

"...Now, there's nothing artistic about a brutal murder, but I guess that's what I'll have to do," Mr. X said as he advanced on the girls. He opened the front of his coat.

Junko tensed up, her cheeks flush with sweat.

"Junko..." Keena sounded worried. It was obvious that she couldn't win. But Junko didn't let it show.

"Shut up! I don't care where I die, unless it's in front of him! That goes for you and me both!"

Keena knew that she was talking about Akuto. She nodded strongly. Akuto must have heard her, because he stood up behind Mr. X.

"...You don't get to touch them while I'm still alive," Akuto said. Mister X turned to him happily.

"Oh, now this is unexpected! And anything unexpected is great art!"

"If you love the unexpected, then don't set up everything so it goes the way you planned. I don't know what it is you're trying to set up with this prophecy thing, but tell your boss I said that," Akuto said, and he readied himself to fight.

"I don't like the prophecy either. But I have to do it anyway. But unexpected things can happen, and they bring with them chaos. And I love that more than anything!" Mister X was grinning.

"Now, you've managed to stand up, but how will you fight back? You need to entertain me. I'm not allowed to kill you, after all."

Akuto put his hands over both ears.

"Haha! That's a good idea! If you can't hear the noise, you can win, huh?"

Mister X charged and kicked. Akuto couldn't defend himself. He went flying.

“Gwah!”

“It’s not enough not to hear it! My noise is also a vibration that you can feel with your whole body! That’s what makes it true noise! I can make noise without sound! You felt it, didn’t you? When I took the resonant frequency of the mana in your body that night?”

Mister X shook his legs and began to dance in a weird, spasm-like way. He twisted his body and began to scream and spin.

—I see. So that headache I felt on that night was...

Akuto remembered the night when he’d first met Yukiko. That was Mister X’s doing. But knowing that now didn’t help him at all.

—Damn it... Is there nothing I can do?

Akuto looked up at the sky as he lay on the ground. He could see the demon beast rampaging in the distance, and hear screams mixed in with the sound of the noise. The monster was probably crushing the village. He could see flames rising up near its lower half. Some of the villagers were strong, perhaps, but without magic they were helpless. His classmates had probably fled too, since they were helpless as well. The demon beast was destroying everything around it, like a scene out of hell. And it was partially his fault.

—No, I need to do something while I can still move...

He was able to move his fingers when he tried, so he thought he might be able to stand up, but he didn’t seem to have the strength left.

—But even if I could stand up, there’s nothing I can do...

He tried to think of what he should do next, but he couldn’t concentrate because of the noise. His irritation just kept growing stronger and stronger. The destruction around him, and the frustration at being helpless against it, made him want to scream.

Mister X seemed to have turned his attention back to Keena and Junko. He could see him slowly pacing towards them.

—No matter what happens to anyone else, I have to protect them. Keena treats me normally even though everyone says I’m the Demon King, and Junko

understands me like no one else. I can't afford to lose them.

Even though they were about to be killed, both of them were looking at Akuto, worried about him.

When he saw them, he suddenly got an idea.

—I know!

"Wait."

Akuto stood up, and Mister X turned around in surprise.

"You're still standing up? But now it's starting to annoy me. The same repeating refrain isn't noise! And thus, it isn't art!"

"Fwahaha... fwahahaha... fwahahahaha... fwahahaha!" Akuto began to shake with laughter.

"Huh?" Mister X seemed confused.

But Akuto only laughed harder.

"Wahahahahaha!"

"Wh-What's so funny?!" Worry started to appear on Mister X's face.

When he was done laughing, Akuto smiled an invincible smile.

"I finally understand what this noise you're talking about is. It's your music. It's the cry of your soul."

"Th-That's right. But what does knowing that help you?"

"It means that if my soul screams louder, you can't hurt me at all."

But then the fear disappeared from Mister X's face. He smiled in relief.

"If it was that easy to get rid of the noise, everybody would do it! Many have said that, and fallen before me! The noise cannot be predicted!"

"If it's unpredictable, then I can just stop caring! No matter what, my voice will drown it out! I don't know if I'm the Demon King, but I'm definitely me. And that's one thing that will never change. If I don't like somebody, I kick their ass. And of course, I don't like you."

Akuto began to move forward.

“It’s useless! Sink into a sea of noise!”

Mister X kicked Akuto once again. His kick landed. No, Akuto didn’t even bother dodging.

“I’m going to destroy you and bury your body in the ground! Whether you cry or beg, that won’t change! That’s my decision!” Akuto screamed.

Mister X turned pale. The sensation under his foot was clearly different than before. Akuto’s body felt like steel.

“You’re controlling your mana?”

“That’s right! I need to thank you. You taught me about what a scream from the heart really is. That doesn’t mean I won’t kick your ass, though.” Akuto’s voice vibrated his whole body, canceling out the noise.

“Chiiih!” Mister X amped up the volume. But Akuto’s scream only got louder.

“You’re going down! For every kick you gave me, you get a punch!”

Akuto’s fist exploded on Mister X’s face. Mister X spun backwards through the air, and he landed face-up on the ground.

“Gwaah!”

Mister X took a moment before he could breathe again, but when he could he looked up at the stars and started to laugh.

“Hahahaha! I’m happy you understand my art. But no matter what you say, I’m working towards a greater goal. The greatest art. You’ll love it, too! I know you will! War, and war, and war! The last expression of art. All truly moving art was created during war. And whether you’re the Demon King or not, that’s the type of person you are. You can try to run from the fate that someone else laid out for you, but you can’t change the way you live. Most of the old dictators were geniuses, incredibly attractive, and all of them understood art. And you’ll rank up there with any of them! You’ll sacrifice those around you, without ever knowing that you’re doing it! Like right now, those two girls are going to die because of you! Hahaha!”

Mister X probably only meant this as one final line before his defeat. But it stunned Akuto.

“Shut up!” he screamed, but the edge was gone from his voice. Mister X was still lying on the ground, but he could feel the change in Akuto.

“I see. So that’s your weak spot, huh? I’m not just better at making noise, I’m better at using my brain, too.” Mister X raised his head.

His words reminded Akuto of Korone.

—*Someone who’s sacrificed because of me...*

Akuto stopped moving as the noise began to affect him once more. Akuto’s last hit had hurt Mister X hard, so he wasn’t as powerful as before. But still, his attacks were too much for Akuto to keep standing.

“Stop this! I will fight you!” Junko shouted, but her legs were shaking.

Mister X shrugged, as if he couldn’t be bothered to deal with her.

“I’m getting really sick of this, so I’m just going to end this now. Even if it’s not art.”

Mister X pulled an Incantation Gun out of the pocket of his white coat. Without her magic, a shot from it could kill Junko.

Junko stood between him and Keena, and Keena wrapped herself around Yukiko.

Akuto looked up, saw what they were doing, and screamed.

“Stop it!”

“Noise doesn’t stop when you tell it to. That’s what makes it great.”

Mister X pulled the trigger.

There was a loud bang as the bullet shot towards Junko. The shell, embedded with explosion magic, burst open right in front of her, covering all of them with fire.

Akuto screamed a wordless scream.

But...

“Pathetic. Can you really do nothing without me?”

He heard a calm voice from somewhere.

“Wha... Who’s there?” Mister X said.

Of course, Akuto recognized the voice.

“K-Korone... You came back?”

“Yes, I came back.”

Korone appeared from within the flames. She waved the cap-like piece of cloth in her hand and the flames and smoke started to disappear. Behind her, the other girls were safe.

“A fire blanket is always good to have.” She raised it high.

“Korone!”

“Korone...”

Junko and Keena yelled. Korone wordlessly gave them a victory sign with her hand.

“The details are rather complex, but I’ve made a plea bargain which allowed me to return.” And then she pointed to Mister X.

“CIM8, Code Name Mister X. Your present actions have been deemed outside the scope of your duties as an intelligence officer. Thus, as Akuto Sai’s observer, I will neutralize you in order to protect him.”

“A bullet from that gun should be enough to fry a Liradan’s brain! How did you survive it?” Mister X yelled in surprise.


In Case of Fire
Safety First

“I am special,” she said as she began to walk towards Mister X. He opened his coat and showered her with noise.

“You’re wasting your time. It won’t affect me.” Korone was right on top of Mr. X.

“Tch!” Mister X tried to hit Korone with one of his kicks.

“Your attempts are futile.” She grabbed his foot with one hand.

“I’m willing to deal with this myself, but I’ll leave it to Akuto instead.”

Korone took a new tool out of her bag. It was shaped like a long rod, and she held it high.

“This is the magical bat! It may look like just a normal metal bat, and actually, it is just a normal metal bat!”

“What...?” Akuto sighed, but his face had begun to relax.

“I don’t need a weapon. I’ve got a hold of myself now that you’re back.”

“We can talk more later. For now, just know one thing. I’ve never felt that I’ve suffered for you, and I doubt I ever will.”

“If I can hear you say that, the rest will work itself out.” Akuto motioned for Korone to step back and stood in front of Mister X.

“Let’s keep going. I can’t let a girl handle this for me.” Akuto grinned.

Mister X must have decided it was time to end things, because he let loose another strange howl into the heavens and turned his noise to maximum.

Akuto and Mister X struck and kicked each other violently.

But now that Akuto had begun to concentrate enough to ignore the noise, Mister X was no match for him.

Eventually, his noise was overwhelmed.

Akuto’s next strike hit him in the stomach. His screaming stopped, and the noise from the speakers came to an end.

“I’ve lost... That was splendid art. But my plan is as good as successful. The villagers will spread fear of the Demon King, and eventually you’ll be driven

from the school. When that happens, you'll either have to die or rebel against the empire," Mister X said in a raspy voice.

"It'll be fine. It looks like I'm not alone after all," Akuto said as he looked towards Korone and the other girls.

"Tch... You manslut..." These were Mister X's last words before he fell to the ground.

"It's over, isn't it?" Korone came over and looked up at him.

When he looked into her eyes, he finally relaxed. And then suddenly he felt very embarrassed.

"I'm glad you're back."

"You are." She nodded. There was something like joy on her expression.

"U-Umm..." Akuto wasn't sure what to say, but Korone nodded as if she understood.

"But before our happy reunion, you need to finish things." She pointed towards the direction of the demon beast.

—That's right. That thing is still there.

Akuto saw the demon beast destroying the village. Its long cylindrical body was spitting up something long and white. It was probably its organs. Even at this size, it was a still a sea cucumber. But unlike a normal sea cucumber's insides, any buildings they touched would start to melt. And its organs were regenerating at incredible speed. No sooner did one set land than another was spat out.

"Th-That's..." Junko's voice was shaking with fear.

Yukiko was sobbing, and Keena was trying to make her feel better.

"Let's go." Korone said.

Akuto nodded, but then there was a flash of light in the sky in the direction of the demon beast, even though it was the middle of the day.

—What is that?

It was coming from the sky and heading straight towards the demon beast.

○

“Please check the output gauge in the upper left. When energy transfer is insufficient, a reboot will be required. The main battery contains enough energy to power five minutes of flight.”

As he listened to the system, Hiroshi realized that what he was wearing was not a product of magical civilization. Unlike mana, there was no sensation of power welling up in his body. And unlike the sensation of riding on the wind you felt when controlling the mana in the atmosphere to fly, there was a feeling of floating, like being released from gravity. From the style, and the fact that it was made for humans to use, it was clearly not a product of a different civilization. It felt like something that was made before civilization began to rely on the use of mana.

—How much power does it have?

Hiroshi wondered. Since he couldn’t sense the power in himself, he couldn’t see how strong he was. But he could see the demon beast below him, and how it was destroying the village, and he knew that he had to do something.

—Can I do it? I guess I have to.

He thought he had to chase the strange man, too, but right now his house was about to be crushed by a demon beast. He couldn’t ignore that. His parents were standing a short distance from their home, firing hunting rifles at the demon beast. Of course, it didn’t seem to be doing a thing.

Hiroshi accelerated towards them. The suit did exactly what he told it to. It headed straight towards the Demon Beast, as if gravity didn’t exist.

—It’s so fast!

But his body felt almost no load at all. He could do this, he thought to himself.

“Do I have any weapons?” Hiroshi asked.

“There is a high frequency blade for your right hand. By controlling the vibrations, you can use it as a blunt weapon against other humans. This is recommended when you wish to capture or disable someone without endangering their life. The left hand contains an atomic cutter. It can be used to

cut through non-living things. It will kill any living creature it's used on, so caution is required. In addition, this weapon requires transfer from the trans-dimensional main unit.

"There are six laser cannons on your back. Each can be fired individually. Energy transfer is required after six shots. One minute will be required for reloading. These are the primary weapons. Please check the links for details on more options."

"I've got the basic idea."

Hiroshi flew through the air in front of the demon beast's eyes. He needed to draw its attention. Of course, he didn't know where its eyes were, so he just headed in front of the direction it was traveling.

The demon beast seemed to notice him. It tilted its head towards Hiroshi.

—Okay, this way!

He was satisfied that he'd been able to lead it away. He took a glance down at his parents. His mother looked surprised, but his father didn't. He seemed calm somehow as he looked at Hiroshi.

—Does he know something about this, then?

Hiroshi thought, but there wasn't time to ponder it. The demon beast had spat up its long white organs at him.

Hiroshi dodged them. He was amazed how easy it was. All he had to do was think about the movement, and it would respond.

—I'm getting used to this!

The long thin threads each moved on their own like living creatures, chasing him in ways that were almost impossible to predict. But the image on his visor showed him what was going on behind him. When he realized that he was looking into a rear-view mirror, suddenly he was able to visualize the entire world 360 degrees around him. He was able to see how the organs were moving and dodge them.

And there seemed to be a function that would automatically let him dodge anything that approached at his speed. Sometimes an organ would approach

and he wouldn't notice, and he'd dodge it without even realizing. From below, he must've looked like a ray of light weaving through the tentacle-like organs.

—Laser.

Hiroshi thought, and a shining laser fired from his back, rising up and backwards like a snake ready to strike before it headed straight for the demon beast.

The demon beast howled. Burn marks appeared on its spotted body, and steam from the dissolved liquid began to rise up. The laser swept across it, slicing it open. Any of its organs that were caught in the blast were sliced open and fell to the ground.

—Wow!

Hiroshi was excited. But he forced himself to calm down a moment later.

—No, I can't get cocky. If I mess this up, it'll put the others in danger.

The demon beast was writhing in pain. Hiroshi's home ended up being caught in its spasms, and the organs that fell out began to melt the surrounding buildings.

—I need to put a stop to this now...

"Do I have any weapons for destroying large objects?"

"You have two options for anti-material weaponry. One is a nuclear fusion bomb. It can be transferred and equipped. It will turn a three-kilometer area into ash. Please get at least three kilometers away after dropping it within five seconds. It is recommended that you fire it from three kilometers in the air. Any living beings within a five-kilometer radius without radiation shielding will be in mortal danger."

"...And the other?"

"A high-temperature plasma ball. A magnetically compressed plasma ball is created within the suit, and when the target is touched, the magnetic field is released, destroying the target. This cannot be used with the suit's battery. Reloading will require five minutes."

"I'll go for that one."

“Deploying heat-resistant cloak.”

A moment later, what looked like a fabric cape appeared around his suit.

“Transferring plasma.”

A ball of light appeared within the cape. It looked like he just had to touch the demon beast with this.

—So I’m supposed to just charge at it, huh?

Hiroshi looked at the demon beast that was writhing below him. If he could somehow pass through its body, he would be able to destroy it with the heat, perhaps.



—I guess I'll try it.

Hiroshi flew higher for a moment, and then turned and accelerated towards the demon beast.

The cape spread out and the plasma ball began to spin. Soon Hiroshi was a ball of violently spinning energy.

"Plasma stabilization field functioning normally. Setting time between contact and release to one nanosecond. Adjusting visor spectrum translucency from 23% to below 1%. Deploying dimensional fault field. Contact with target in five seconds."

He was rapidly approaching the demon beast, but strangely he felt no fear.

—So this is what it means to have power?

Hiroshi thought.

Now a ball of energy, he flew into the thing's mouth, and just a few seconds later was back up in the sky. He looked down to see that the demon beast had exploded from within, and turned into a steaming brown mass before it could even scream.

—With this, it would be easy to kill anyone!

Hiroshi suddenly felt afraid. This was too much for him.

But...

—It would be easy to protect someone, too!

He looked down to see that the villagers were exhausted, but looking at him with a mix of relief and shock. From the looks on their faces, none of them realized that it was Hiroshi who was the mysterious flying hero.

Everyone was grateful to be saved, but he could see that they were uncertain who this hero was, and a little concerned. He felt like he had to say something.

"Voice output can be changed to protect the wearer of the suit."

He heard the voice of the support system. It must have read his thoughts.

Hiroshi thought for a moment, and then waved his hand.

“My name is Brave, the legendary hero.”

○

Though he was still a good distance away, Akuto saw what was going on. Someone who was able to fly, even without mana, had defeated the demon beast.

“What is that?” Akuto said to no one in particular, and of course, no one answered.

Both Junko and Keena, and even Korone were looking on in shock.

“Is that the legendary hero...?” Junko whispered.

Akuto couldn’t tell her she was wrong.

“But how could the prophecy be true...?”

But then something even more shocking happened in the next instant. The hero flew through the sky towards him.

He flew as if gravity didn’t exist, and landed in front of them.

It was a man in a full body suit and helmet. He was short, but Akuto had just seen his power for himself. His body stiffened with tension.

“Who are you...?” Akuto said, but the hero didn’t answer.

The hero glanced at the fallen Mister X for a moment, and then disappeared.

“Huh?”

Akuto looked around, but by the time he found the hero it was too late. The hero had kicked Mister X’s body high into the sky. Mister X was breathing, but still helpless. He flew high up into the air.

—Oh no!

Akuto tried to stop him, but it all happened too fast. In the next instant the hero had disappeared again. He reappeared in the sky next to Mister X, and then he kicked him to the side. Mister X ‘s body flew far into the distance.

He heard the sound of water splashing far away. Mister X had fallen into the sea.

—Did he kill him?

Akuto thought that he must have.

“What are you doing?!”

Anger started to well up inside of Akuto. He didn’t like killing, no matter what the reason was.

The hero came back down to Earth, and walked towards Akuto with broad strides.

The two glared at each other.

Junko watched them, but the air between the two was like nothing she’d ever felt before. So far all the fights she’d seen Akuto in had been brawls, where the air was heated as the combatants hit each other with everything they had. But now the tension between these two felt like if they started fighting, something terrible would happen.

“Why did you attack him?” Akuto asked.

“I earned this power because I wanted to protect everyone. If I don’t get rid of him, I can’t protect this island,” the hero said. Akuto didn’t like those words.

“That’s wrong. There are better ways to do it.”

The two of them faced each other wordlessly.

“Oh!”

And then suddenly Yukiko, who’d been silent and dazed, spoke up. From the way he acted and what he’d done, she’d realized who the hero was. But her interjection caused the tension between them to burst.

Akuto’s right fist crossed with the hero’s.

Clang!

There was a metallic sound.

Akuto held the hero’s left fist in his hand.

The hero held Akuto’s right fist in his hand.

The two of them stepped away from each other.

The hero floated wordlessly into the sky. And as Akuto watched, he flew above the clouds and vanished.

—*Is it... over?* Akuto looked around at everyone else. Junko and Keena both looked relieved. And Korone was beside him too. All that was missing now was Hiroshi.

—*I can't believe he'd die in a place like this...*

But just as he thought this, he heard a voice he'd never expected to hear from beyond the path.

"Boss! Yukiko!"

Akuto gasped and turned around.

Hiroshi waved his hand and ran towards them.

"Brother!" Yukiko was grinning. She ran towards Hiroshi.

"You're alive... I'm so glad..."

Akuto saw them embrace each other and collapsed in relief.

And then Korone stood in front of Akuto. She lifted him to his feet, and then wrapped her arm around his waist and held him tight.

"It was pretty hard until I got back, you know?" Korone said looking up at him. There was a note of mockery in her tone, but it seemed to Akuto that she was blushing.

"I know what you're doing. You're fishing for compliments, right?" Akuto put his hand on Korone's head.

5 - The Trouble Continues?

“Wow, who was that, you think?” Keena asked Yukiko excitedly.

Yukiko gave her a scathing look that clearly said, “You really couldn’t tell?” It seemed that Keena really didn’t understand.

Hiroshi returned to the village with Keena and Yukiko. He’d brought Keena because he’d assumed she’d learned his secret, but it seemed he was wrong. He’d be able to keep the suit a secret from the rest of the school.

Then, in front of his destroyed home, Hiroshi reunited with his parents.

“Dad...”

When Hiroshi approached, his father left Yukiko and Keena to his mother, and led Hiroshi behind the ruined house. When he was sure no one was around, he took Hiroshi’s hand.

“That was you, wasn’t it?”

When Hiroshi nodded silently, his father began to share his secrets.

“That was left behind by your grandfather. So was the legend. But I don’t know the details. According to your grandfather, a man appeared out of nowhere on the island, left the suit and the legend, and left. He said that someday, one of my bloodline would use the suit. I’d seen the suit myself when I was little, so I had no choice but to believe.”

“But then that means there was a real person who could see the future...” Hiroshi said, confused.

“That, I don’t know. It’s said that telling the future is impossible. I don’t know if he just chose us at random, or if the bloodline of the hero really exists. But given the dangers of that suit, I had no choice but to protect the legend. I know it caused problems for you, but only you can use it. So you need to figure out how.”

And then he said goodbye.

After that, even when the villagers asked him, he would no longer say that his son was the hero. Eventually the villagers stopped asking, but they stopped making fun of him in the shadows, too.

On the way back to school, Yukiko had seemed to want to say something as she saw them off, but Hiroshi just patted her on the head and said, “It’s a secret.” That seemed to help her understand everything.

But Hiroshi didn’t feel better. He was still a bit upset about how he’d fought with Akuto over Mister X. For one thing, this power was too much for him. And then there was that prophecy, too. It said that in the end, the hero would defeat the Demon King.

—That’s impossible, right? To avoid it, I’ll just have to not fight the boss.

Hiroshi tried to shake off this dark feeling that was upon him.

But he couldn’t stop thinking about the man who’d brought the suit to the island.

The man’s name, he’d been told, was Boichiro Yamato.

○

“...And so I’m back.”

Korone finished her explanation once they arrived at the dorm. Hiroshi was taking Keena for a visit home. Akuto was alone in his room with Korone and Junko.

This is what had happened. Korone knew the rumors about the Cabinet Information Magic Office, and realized who it was who had attacked Akuto in the woods. She’d taken it to the Cabinet and used the information to threaten their boss. Their boss hadn’t known how far the office had gone out of control, and as he apologized, he had no choice but to turn over the authority to observe Akuto to Korone and the rest of the Church of Markt.

“The Cabinet Information Magic Office had been controlled by someone from the shadows, is what I’m told. Unfortunately, it resulted in political deals like these.”

Akuto didn’t understand half of what was said, but it seemed that there was

an argument over whether fixing the messes Akuto had caused was a political matter or a peacekeeping matter.

But that didn't explain how Korone had acted at the forest.

"Then what was this about being fired?"

Korone nodded.

"Things have mostly resolved, but that problem remains, actually."

"Huh?"

"I asked at the Cabinet, and they said that they were disappointed that you learned about the order. The Academy filed a complaint. I supposed Eto might be responsible for this."

"Then that thing about seducing me is over...?"

"The order itself hasn't been rescinded. It remains in effect, and it seems they have no intention of rescinding their plan."

"Hmm?" Akuto was surprised.

"But once I've learned what's going on, it's not going to work anymore, is it?"

"Aren't you misunderstanding the situation?"

"Misunderstanding?"

"Yes. The plan was to control your relationships with women. Even if it's exposed, I just have to tempt you anyway," Korone said, completely serious.

"Listen, you can't seduce me once I know what's going on."

But Korone's response was immediate.

"That's the misunderstanding. Since you know so little about women, I was simply attempting to provide you with sexual education. The plan isn't to have you do anything with me."

"Huh?" Akuto was shocked to hear this.

Korone continued.

"The plan was to marry you with a woman of good breeding. Now that it's been found out, I'll ask you directly. Akuto, please marry Junko. I can have the

wedding arranged for next month.”

“Wha...?”

“Huh...?”

Both Akuto and Junko froze. Korone continued, seemingly oblivious.

“I thought in the woods that Akuto was in love with Keena, and thus the mission had failed,” she said. “Keena does not belong to a proper household, and so any relationship with her would not improve Akuto’s situation. But it seems that after that, nothing happened. Which means that instead, he should marry Junko and join her household. That will solve all the problems. If he really can’t forget Keena, he can keep her as a mistress. He’ll certainly have the money.”

Akuto was still confused, but at least he understood the meaning of Korone’s strange actions now.

—But still...

He glanced over at Junko. She’d sat down on her knees like a proper Japanese lady, her lips pressed tight together. When she saw Akuto was looking at her, she began to stammer.

“Y-You know, this is crazy...” Akuto began, but Junko started to mumble things that didn’t make any sense.

“Hyah... Hyo... Nyo... M-Marriage?”

And then she suddenly turned to face Akuto with an indescribable expression on her face before screaming and running out of the room.

“U-Uwaaah!”

“W-Wait...” Akuto said, but he couldn’t stop her.

o

Junko found herself alone, sitting in front of the vending machines in one of the school’s break rooms, and muttering to herself.

—Marriage? M-M-M-Marriage?

She’d never thought about it. Many of the Hattori spent their lives in service

to the country's most important individuals. Most of them never had a happy family. The eldest was expected to form a political alliance via marriage, and the others were expected to dedicate their lives to those they served. In a case where their master was of the opposite sex, this service would often manifest itself in the form of a hidden love, and this was also part of the Hattori family training.

Of course, Junko would sometimes think about Akuto before she fell asleep... but when she did, her usual fantasy was of sneaking under Akuto's bed and feeling his warmth while she watched over him. So it was kind of weird.

—If we get married, I won't be sleeping below him, I'll be sleeping next to him, won't I? N-Next to him...

Junko felt like she would explode from embarrassment. She bought herself some soda to calm herself down, panting as she gulped it down from a paper cup.

—No, being married to someone doesn't just mean sleeping next to them... It means doing what comes next...

Junko started to choke on her drink, and it was five minutes before she stopped.

Those students who watched her from a distance assumed that she was upset because Akuto had done something else to damage the school's reputation.

○

"Wh...What are you trying to do here?" Akuto asked Korone after Junko left.

But Korone was unperturbed.

"That will solve everything. Is there a problem?"

"Well... what about how we feel?" Akuto asked the natural question, and Korone gave the natural response.

—Huh...?

And it caught Akuto off-guard completely.

"I have feelings as well, you know. And I'm holding them back," Korone said.

Her face was alive with emotion.

Korone put her hand to her mouth as Akuto stood there in shock. And then she blushed, and fidgeted like she was embarrassed.

“This order was painful for me as well. Because really, I...”

Korone’s expression was that of a girl in love. Akuto froze as she put her face up towards his. She stuck out her lips a little and moved in for a kiss.

And just before their lips touched...

“So this was your preference for being approached by a woman,” Korone said coldly, returning to her emotionless expression.

“Hey... Y-You tricked me, didn’t you.” Akuto’s face turned red.

Korone laughed.

“Hehehe... Just a little joke.” Her smile was so natural.

Akuto didn’t know what to do, so he just forgave her.



Afterword

Hello again, and thank you. I'm Shoutarou Mizuki. It's the height of summer as I write these words to you, and I'm having cold sweet sake to beat the heat. This is rice juice too.

This has been the third volume of the series. The book's been popular everywhere, perhaps thanks to Itou's illustrations, and I was able to advance the story in many ways. I don't wish to disappoint anyone who grabbed the wrong thing, but the manga will begin in the September 2008 edition of Champion Red. It will be drawn by Souichi himself. Speaking as the original author, I can't wait to have my illustrator drawing the comic, and I spend my days pacing back and forth in my room waiting or the time to pass. No, if time passes quickly that's going to make it hard for Itou, so I guess I'll have to pace slower.

And there are other things going on that I can't announce right now. Some of them may be announced by the time you read this, so look forward to them.

So, time to talk about something useless.

I wrote this whole thing listening to noise music. This stuff is... incredible. There's all kinds of screams and electronic beeps that you can't really describe in words. Of course, it was loud and annoying, but if you put up with it for a while, weirdly enough it makes you sleepy. Come to think of it, most music makes a rhythm inside your head, but noise can't do that, so basically with any sound the brain can't process, no matter how noisy it is, the brain has to give up and go to sleep. This is a new discovery I made.

And so I got curious and watched a live performance, and I found out that between the violent movements and the screams, the singers (?) wear themselves out, so the concerts only last five minutes. It was really incredible, the way they twitched and moved. I hurt my neck imitating it. "The noise musicians must be training themselves to avoid injury!" I said, but when I looked up the artist info, he'd hurt himself too. Noise music is dangerous!

Anyway, noise music is so interesting that at some point I'd like to write a noise light novel. One that is five pages long at most. Actually, I can't think about what that would be at all. And I'm not sure when "someday" will be.

Anyway, back to the story.

I don't think I need to explain anything. I do, however, need to give a warning for once: Do not copy the behavior of the characters in the story. Particularly the methods used to make rice juice and the perversion. Both of them will get you arrested.

You won't do the perverted stuff? Well, I'm sure. But well, some types of perverted stuff you want to do outside, I suppose. I saw a little kid wading through a stream yelling indecent words a while ago. He might end up like Mutsugoro someday.

Let's end with acknowledgments.

Souichi Itou, the illustrator. I'm sure you're incredibly busy, but let's fight together. The expression on Korone was amazing this time. I know I came up with this character, but I still said to myself "She's saying naughty words with that expression?!" Well, there are little kids who wade through streams screaming indecent words, so maybe it's not so impossible after all?

Ohashi, my editor. Thanks again for your help. Next time I want to finish this in a time period where it's a little easier for you. If you ask me if I'm going to say that every volume, I'm going to say no, but it's strange how much time it takes to create something. I keep hoping someday I'll get faster. Some of you may have noticed this is how I closed out volume 2. I may be an author who never learns, but please don't give up on me.

Also, I'm grateful to everyone else involved with the project. Thank you for everything.

I think we've got a lot more fun to come!

Shoutarou Mizuki / Souichi Itou



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 4 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

Demon King Daimaou: Volume 3

by Shoutarou Mizuki

Translated by Adam Lensenmayer Edited by Aimee Zink

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2008 Shoutarou Mizuki Illustrations Copyright © 2008 Souichi Itou Cover illustration by Souichi Itou

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2008 by Hobby Japan This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo English translation © 2017 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: November 2017