

*Digital Devil Story Trilogy*

*Book 1*

# *REINCARNATION OF THE GODDESS*

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## PROLOGUE – CHAPTER 1 [PC1]

This story takes place eighteen years ago, when most people did not even know of the existence of the Internet, and personal computers were normally thought of as standalone devices.

In a town called Kuniritsu, a suburb of Tokyo, there was a school known as Jusho High. Everything began in this school one day when a tall student impatiently burst into a room at the end of class. He stormed across the classroom to stop at the seat of a handsome young man who stood out from the rest of his class and ominously slammed the top of the desk.

"You Nakajima?"

"Yes, that's me..."

Ignoring the sudden vibration that the desk sent through his body, Nakajima Akemi resolutely stood up and looked the student in the eye. Kondo Hiroyuki was the captain of the karate club and the unofficial student "boss" of Jusho High. More than one student whom had dared oppose him had been forced to change schools--usually through violent means. Nakajima had never even interacted with Kondo before; he certainly couldn't think of anything that he might have done to make him this angry.

*What gives? I haven't done anything.*

Nakajima gulped and started to open his parched mouth to speak. At that moment, he heard a suppressed giggle from behind him. Nakajima his head and saw her. Bewitching, charming, she almost seemed too sophisticated to be a student. She was staring at him, her catlike gaze alluring yet full of malice. It was one of his classmates, Takamizawa Kyoko. Nakajima suddenly understood everything.

"Hold on a minute!"

The same instant Nakajima spoke, a fist flew into his solar plexus. Without even a chance to cry out, Nakajima fell to the floor. Kondo followed up his punch with a low kick. That was followed by single kicks to the chest and the lower stomach--carefully placed with enough force to hurt badly, but not knock their target out. Afraid of getting involved, Nakajima's classmates started to leave the classroom one by one.

"Hear me out...." Nakajima tried hard to protest, but his voice was silenced when Kondo's foot slammed into his mouth. His tears and saliva spilled out all over the floor.

"I don't wanna hear your excuses. You gotta learn what happens to people who come on to Kyoko."

Kondo kicked Nakajima in the back, flipping him onto his stomach. Kyoko, gleefully watching him get pummeled, knelt down in front of him and flicked his upper lip with her fingers.

"He's got a face like a woman, and he still tried to kiss me!"

"Liar..."

Actually, Kyoko had tried to kiss *him*, and Nakajima had just pushed her away. Her pride hurt, Kyoko had used Kondo and his large crush on her to get her revenge. But Nakajima didn't have a single friend to corroborate his story. Only his classmate Takai Ken'ichi remained in the room, and even he just stood there, worriedly looking at Nakajima through his dark green-rimmed glasses; apparently, he lacked the courage to stop Kondo.

Kondo pulled Nakajima up from the floor with just his left hand before he thrust his right fist into Nakajima's solar plexus again. It felt like his heart was being torn out; Nakajima tried to cry out, but with

the wind knocked out of him, he could neither inhale nor exhale, and all that left his injured lips was a pathetic little moan.

Nakajima had always been something of an independent maverick, not wanting to hurt anyone or get hurt himself, so he had never been beaten like this before. And to think this was over some stupid reason like rejecting a girl! The combined sensations of pain, anger, and humiliation overwhelmed him, and the wound in his psyche started to bleed, a drop at a time. Seeing him like this, Kyoko watched Nakajima with a look of pure ecstasy in her eyes, and laughed out loud. The sound of her high-pitched laugh reverberating throughout the classroom pierced Nakajima's eardrums and echoed in his skull, awakening an emotion he had never experienced before.

*Damn you...I'll get you...you won't get away with this...*

Nakajima's eyes lit up with a fierce, violent look he had never worn before.

"What's with that look?"

Kondo was taken aback for a second by Nakajima's expression. As if mad at himself for faltering, he punched Nakajima hard in the face. At the sound of Nakajima's tooth cracking, Kyoko, as if she had lost interest in the whole thing, asked, "Hey, don't you think that's enough?"

It was the voice of a dirty, cowardly woman, worried only about protecting herself; if Nakajima was beaten any harder, there was a real danger of her being held responsible.

"Hey, lucky you! Looks like you've gotten a reprieve. I've gotta say I'm surprised at what a weak little runt you are. Beating you up was just a waste of energy." His mouth twisted into a smile, Kondo unceremoniously dumped Nakajima's body on the floor like a rag doll.

An hour later, after finally being able to move, Nakajima reached the Chuo-sen Kunitachi train station, supported by Takai.

"Why don't we sit down?"

Still propping Nakajima up, Takai cocked his head in the direction of two open seats nearby.

"Eh? ...oh, sure."

Nakajima collapsed onto the seat and stared forward resolutely, all the while regretting he had ever applied to his school.

Jusho Private High was a famous and prestigious school; every year more than twenty of its students were admitted to Tokyo University. However, anyone familiar with the way the school worked would acknowledge the extreme stratification amongst the students. The school was divided into two groups, the general class, and the "gifted" class. The gifted class received better facilities, better curricula, better teaching materials, and in general were favored much more highly. The gifted class comprised about twenty percent of the student body and was always the target of constant jealousy and disgruntlement from the general class. With such a gulf between the two, the violent incidents born from this jealousy were to an extent unavoidable.

Both Nakajima and Takai were part of the gifted class. With his slender frame and delicate looks, if Nakajima swapped his uniform for a girl's sailor suit, he might very well be able to pass for a beautiful teenage girl. Takai's appearance, on the other hand, was the polar opposite. Judo practice since junior high had given him a rugged body and thick fingers. But his personality was not as tough as his exterior, and when he put on his glasses, he looked almost childlike.

"That Kondo, he seemed even worse than usual today," Takai said, almost as if making excuses; he felt a little guilty for not stepping in to help Nakajima.

Nakajima raised an eyebrow and responded half-heartedly. "His energy doubles whenever he's near a woman."

"What the heck is someone like Kyoko doing in the gifted class anyway? Besides, you'd never come on to her in the first place."

"Actually...it was the other way around."

"So it was Kyoko that got rejected, then."

Takai nodded as everything suddenly made sense. Lots of girls were interested in Nakajima, but none of them so far had been able to strike his fancy. Seeing his indifference, Takai always guessed that Nakajima must have extremely finicky tastes when it came to women.

The two sat next to each other in silence as the train passed through Musashi-Sakai station. Takai took a sidelong glance at Nakajima's profile. Among the students of the gifted class, Nakajima's grades were not particularly high. In contrast to Takai, who got good grades in just about everything, Nakajima was really only good at math and science. In the more liberal arts, the only subject he showed real strength in was world history. He wasn't much of an athlete either.

However, when it came to computers, nobody in school came even close to Nakajima--not even the teachers. Takai thought that you probably wouldn't be able to find someone who was as good as Nakajima in that arena if you searched all of Japan, let alone the school. The games that Nakajima would whip up in a matter of days were fantastic. No matter how popular they were, commercial games just seemed boring after playing one of Nakajima's. Sometimes Nakajima's expression looked positively mad as he hunched over one of the terminals writing programs in the school's CAI (Computer Aided Instruction) room, his fingers flying across the keyboard.

*If I'm a prodigy, then Nakajima must be a bona-fide genius.* Takai nodded to himself as his gaze turned back to the scenery passing by outside the window.

"Demons, eh...?" The words tumbled out of Nakajima's mouth suddenly.

"Eh?"

"No, never mind."

"Did you just..."

Just as Takai pursed his lips as if to say something, the train arrived at Nishi-Ogikubo station.

"See you."

Nakajima started to walk down the station stairs with his shoulders hunched and a brooding expression on his face.

"Geez, what is he thinking?"

Turning away from Nakajima, Takai plopped himself down on the two now-empty seats of the train.

## PROLOGUE – CHAPTER 2 [PC2]

A banner advertizing "Lots for Sale" hung from a newly-built apartment building behind the shopping district. His gaze downward, Nakajima walked while continuously moving his lips. To any passerby, he appeared like an ordinary high school student, deep in concentration trying to memorize something for a test. But those few people that caught a fragment of his words looked at him suspiciously. His voice intoned something like the low and hostile muttering of a dark spell, not at all something they'd expect to hear from a high school student.

A cherry blossom fell from the nearby concrete wall and landed on Nakajima's cheek, but he ignored it and kept walking, his stare still cast towards the ground. When he finally looked up, he was standing in front of a conspicuously tall apartment building. When his electronic key entered the keyhole, the solid plate-glass doors automatically slid open with a heavy sound. The entrance to the building was made from extravagant marble imported from Canada, but still seemed somewhat artificial. As he stepped inside, Nakajima took a deep breath and straightened up.

Nakajima entered the elevator and pressed the button for the thirteenth floor. The change in air pressure induced his body to ache, reminding him of the unpleasant events of the afternoon. A copper plaque with "NAKAJIMA" engraved on it was affixed to the door to apartment 1302. Nakajima pressed the doorbell, but there was no response. Sighing, he unlocked the door.

Opening the door and going inside, Nakajima took off his shoes and negligently tossed them aside before he headed to the bathroom. The injured lip on the face in the mirror had swollen up like a balloon; it was quite unpleasant to look at. His left cheek had a yellowish bruise on it. After looking at himself in the mirror for a bit, Nakajima abruptly turned on the faucet and splashed his face with water. Returning to the living room and collapsing on the sofa, he noticed a memo on the side table.

"I'm going to be late at a meeting. Heat up your dinner in the microwave...."

Nakajima crumpled up the note without reading it to the end. "If you're just going to write the same old excuse, you might as well just photocopy the thing..."

After Nakajima's father was transferred to the branch office in Los Angeles, his mother had become more and more involved in her job as a designer. Sometimes she wouldn't get home until the middle of the night. Picturing his mother's face, Nakajima's smoldering anger suddenly flared up. The telephone rang; it was probably for his mother. Glaring at the ringing phone, Nakajima opened the door to his room.

Lacking even single poster or decoration, Nakajima's room was quite dreary. The walls were filled with large steel bookshelves that stretched to the ceiling, the sole exception the wall with the window. The bookshelves had anime magazines and manga, as expected in a Japanese high school student's room, but one corner seemed starkly out of place. That shelf was filled with books on magic and sorcery with titles like "The Book of the Dead" and "Pnakotic Manuscripts." A fully decked-out computer sat on top of his steel desk, and sitting next to it was a general-purpose book on magic called "The New Golden Dawn Theory." From the look of wear on the leather cover, it was clear the book had seen a lot of use.

Nakajima pulled his chair out from the desk and sat down in front of the display. He flipped the switch on the side of his speakers; the vocals of David Coverdale filled the room. Nakajima's fingers started flying over the keyboard.



## **> LIST**

The command entered, a very long program scrolled down the screen. Following the program list with sharp eyes, Nakajima tapped the keys in a flowing rhythm.

Nakajima first became interested in magic when he had the opportunity to read "The New Golden Dawn Theory." The book was poorly written, the interpretation clumsy and unskillful, but Nakajima read through the whole thing anyway. The world of magic held an appeal that hid a dark and sinister side, yet it also showed a rational and scientific realism as well. While re-reading passages that seemed unusual to him two or three times over, Nakajima had a sudden realization that was almost like an epiphany.

Magical theory and computer theory were surprisingly similar.

At first glance, the two worlds did not seem to have any connection to each other. However, the similarities between them had been noted by both magic and information technology researchers long before Nakajima's revelation. Professor Charles Feed of MIT, a school famous for its study of artificial intelligence, was one of those researchers. Nakajima had immediately become a member of his group, the International Satanist Garden. For the past few months, he had been immersed in writing a program to summon demons, an idea he had thought up himself.

It was almost complete.

Nakajima had already finished the core part of the program. All he had to do now was add a few subroutines and it would be finished. Until today, Nakajima had had reservations about completing his project. If his theory was correct, the program would definitely call a demon into the world. Up until today, Nakajima couldn't think of any particular reason to summon a demon. He hadn't even known what he'd make it do, but the events of the day had given him a clear, simple goal.

"I feel a little sorry for you, but you're going to be the subject of a little experiment."

Nakajima started creating his final subroutines. "Use data addresses 3780-3990 for 'Toad's Legs.' Put this in the buffer, and before displaying the result, chant the spell. Yod, Dur, Dawr, Set. Wonder what this spell means?"

Picking up the modem receiver, Nakajima dialed Arkham in Massachusetts to connect with ISG's host computer. As the connection picked up, his computer's display filled with the image of the demon Lucifer. He called up the ISG AI Craft, and explaining the situation, he asked about the spell. Nakajima's English was not particularly good, so several times the only thing that appeared on-screen was question marks.

**UNDERSTOOD.**

Finally, Craft appeared to have gotten it; Nakajima asked the AI what the spell meant.

**HIGHLY LIKELY TO BE A COUNTER.**

Craft's response indicated that the spell was probably just a time counter.

**> THANK YOU, CRAFT.**

Nakajima cut the connection to ISG and set himself to the task of writing the subroutine once again. Two hours later, there was a knock on his door.

"Come on in." A hint of irritation in his voice, Nakajima responded to the knock without taking his eyes off the program list on-screen.

"Did you eat dinner?"

"...."

Nakajima didn't respond and continued typing on the keyboard.

"Oh, what happened to your lip?" Nakajima's mother bent down from behind him to take a good look at his face.

"I ran into the goalpost playing soccer."

Nakajima stopped typing and looked back at his mother. Nakajima bore a strong resemblance to his mother, a beautiful woman with a slender face. When they were together, they were frequently mistaken for siblings. When it came to her son's education, she was very conservative; she wanted him to get into Keio University's medical school. Of course, there were too many blemishes on his academic record for that to ever happen.

"Shouldn't you put some medicine on it?"

"It's OK, mom. It's not serious."

Irritated at his programming being interrupted, Nakajima absentmindedly tapped keys at random on the keyboard.

*BEEP.*

The computer made a harsh tone, and an error message appeared on-screen. As if realizing that her son wasn't going to pay her any mind, Nakajima's mother left the room.

3AM.

"All right, it's done!"

Nakajima slapped his thighs with his hands and stood up from his chair.

**> RUN**

The disk drive started whining, and bizarre letters blinked on and off the screen. But in less than five minutes, the screen displayed an error message and stopped.

**> OUT OF MEMORY**

If there wasn't enough memory for the program, it was either because the program itself was too long, or because it dealt with more variables than the machine could handle.

"No big deal. One little computer isn't enough to run a program like this anyway. If I use the school's host computer, it should have more than enough memory."

Nakajima's eyes glittered with anticipation.

## PROLOGUE – CHAPTER 3 [PC3]

Iida, on night watch at the school that Saturday, noticed that there was someone in the CAI room and opened the door.

"Who's here at a time like this?"

At the sound of his voice, a student looked up from one of the CAI terminals, his face glowing strangely in the reflected light of the display.

Iida's expression softened. "Oh, it's just you, Nakajima. What are you doing in here with all the lights off?"

Nakajima's academic record was far from perfect, but his genius had endeared him somewhat to the math and science teachers and earned their trust.

"My program's just not working out the way I wanted to. But I'm almost done fixing it." Nakajima's voice seemed slightly metallic, as if in tune with the sound of the disk drive spinning.

"I'm always happy to see your enthusiasm, but you know that you need to ask permission in advance if you want to work in this classroom late at night. You're lucky I found you instead of someone else," Iida scolded as he flicked on the light switch.

"What is this!?" Iida's shocked voice echoed through the illuminated CAI room. A large geometric figure was drawn on the floor in white and red chalk, with Nakajima's seat situated at the center.

"It's a Solomon Hexagram."

"Solomon? That has an occultish sound to it."

Nakajima paid Iida's sarcasm no heed, and his fingers slid over the keys of the terminal. Presently, the host computer behind thick glass walls in the adjacent machine room started to run.

"Great, the bugs are finally gone. It's done!"

After sending a print job to publish the contents of the program list, Nakajima stood and turned toward Iida. His girlish, almond eyes glittered amidst a demonic grin. His still-healing lip split open from his excitement, and a trickle of fresh blood stained his jaw.

Iida's gaze became stern. "All right, Nakajima, do you want to explain just what kind of program you're running on the host computer--and without permission, I might add?"

Nakajima brushed aside some hair from his forehead and responded nonchalantly. "I've written a program that will summon demons. This hexagram is here to protect me from them. In just a moment, a demon will appear. Sensei, you should probably get inside it as well. You might get shredded to pieces otherwise."

For an instant, Iida's mouth gaped open, and he took a long hard look at Nakajima.

"Have you lost it?"

"Is it me who's lost it, or the school? Sensei, take a good look at me. This wound on my lip, the bruise on my face. I got the crap beaten out of me by Kondo from the karate club. Takamizawa Kyoko is just as guilty. The school just lets wild animals like that run free, and doesn't do anything to deal with them. No matter what happens to me in the classroom, the teachers and students just pretend it didn't happen. The violence that happens in this school is as plain as day, and yet nobody gets punished. I suppose the teachers are just waiting for students like that to graduate. As long as they keep their eyes shut, the calamity will just clear itself up on its own. They just have to endure it for two or three years.

But this is the only time I get to be a high school student. I'm not going to let them just do whatever the hell they want any more. I'm going to summon a demon and execute those annoying insects."

Nakajima's speech seemed manic as his shoulders rose and fell in sync with his wild breathing.

Nakajima turned away from the stunned Iida and to the keyboard.

### **> RUN**

The last command displayed on the monitor, the magnetic tape of the host computer started to gradually spin. Iida tried to yell at Nakajima and stop the computer. But the moment he opened his lips, a frigid breeze from nowhere struck him and covered his arms in goose bumps.

"Summoning demons with a computer ...what a concept!" Iida twisted his lips into a smile to hide his fear.

"Computer theory and magical thought have many overlapping similarities. I bet the first person who thought up the principles of computing was an alchemist or Kabbalist. It's not that well-known, but things like spells, sacrifices, and thaumaturgic circles are very easy to put into binary format. Summoning a demon is just a transfer of the matter comprising the demon in the Atziluth World to the Assiah—real—World. A computer is the perfect device to facilitate it."

As Nakajima explained his theory, cold air wrapped around Iida almost like a living creature, and a bizarre smell entered his nostrils. The lights of the classroom flickered out, and the CAI room plunged into darkness, the only sound the spinning disk drive. Presently, the computer let out a low whine.

"Yod, Heh, Vav, Heh." To Iida's ears, the whine sounded like actual, real words.

"Yod, Heh, Vav, Heh."

Whispering in synch with the computer, Nakajima continued to enter commands on the keyboard with unbelievable speed. Soon the entire room started to shake from an earthquake, and cracks formed in the windows. Nakajima entered his final command.

### **> KILL: KONDO HIROYUKI, TAKAMIZAWA KYOKO**

Iida did not like students like Kondo Hiroyuki and Takamizawa Kyoko. In fact, he hated them, but he felt even more loathing for the manner Nakajima intended to deal with them.

"Stop this foolishness. If you'd like, I can make sure the incident is investigated fully and have Kondo expelled. Just stop doing this."

Stumbling through the shaking room, Iida desperately reached for the computer's power switch. To prevent him from interfering, Nakajima grabbed his arm with a strength one wouldn't even imagine from him. While the two struggled, the rumbling started to subside. The fluorescent lights lit up with a creaking sound and illuminated the room as the freezing air surrounding Iida's body dissipated.

"Where did you go!? Why won't you show yourself? Demon, are you going to abandon me?"

Crying out, Nakajima headed toward the keyboard.

### **> KILL! KILL!**

But the host computer's magnetic tape slowly and mercilessly started spinning to a halt. Anxiously opening the program list, Nakajima scanned the details of the program with bloodshot eyes and stood aimlessly, as if sapped of all his vitality.

"My program was perfect. There wasn't a single bug in it. So why did the demon vanish before showing itself? It should have appeared right over there!"

Leaving the program list open, Nakajima stumbled out of the CAI room as if in a trance. Staring dumbfounded at Nakajima's back as he left, Iida finally came to his senses and turned off the power to the computer.

"I guess it's true how they say that there's a fine line between genius and insanity. That was one hell of an earthquake though," Iida whispered, as if trying to purge his memory of the repulsive experience.



## PROLOGUE – CHAPTER 4 [PC4]

A week later, Iida was teaching Nakajima Akemi and Takamizawa Kyoko's class math in the CAI Room. Perhaps it was because he had witnessed the failure of the demon summoning, but Nakajima was glaring at Iida defiantly. Before, he would never have acted like this. Trying hard to ignore him, Iida continued his lesson.

"Now I'm going to have you take an interactive test using the host computer. However, this test won't affect your grades in any way. Through your interaction with the computer, I'd like you to get a little bit more familiar with any weak points you may have. Begin entering your commands as soon as I give the signal."

The students all affixed their eyes to their screens and silently started answering the questions given them, as the host computer diligently recorded their individual responses.

Iida carefully watched over his class before relaxing a bit.

*Once use of CAI spreads, things will get a lot easier for us teachers. Though if it becomes too widespread, the time may come when we teachers aren't needed any more...*

Suddenly, as if coming from the depths of the earth itself, a low, rumbling voice shook the CAI room.

"Yod, Heh, Vav, Heh."

The host computer's magnetic tape started spinning wildly and the screens of the computers in the room started changing rapidly. Eerie colors and strange images flashed onscreen, and strange letter-like symbols appeared and disappeared. The students said nothing, their eyes transfixed to their screens, as if the class was enthralled.

"Nakajima, this is your doing, isn't it? Come on now, there's nothing wrong with a little mischief once in a while, but there are limits!"

His face twisted into a dark scowl, Iida started to walk over to Nakajima's seat, but the moment he moved a student in the first row stuck his leg out into the aisle, tripping the teacher and causing him to clumsily fall forward. As Iida tried to get up, two more students slammed into his back, pinning him to the ground and twisting his arms behind him.

"Wh-what are you doing!? Stop this at once!"

Taken aback at the sudden hostility of his students, Iida struggled to lift his head up as he cried out. The other students, staring ahead with glazed looks as if in a trance, stood up from their seats. Three male students left the classroom, and the others gradually started to surround Takamizawa Kyoko.

Her face drained of color, Kyoko stared, dumbfounded, as her classmates surrounded her. Her catlike eyes were full of fear; her lips trembled up and down, but held shut as if sewn together. A male student with thick glasses touched her chest. As if freed from a curse, Kyoko leapt up onto the desk.

"Stay away from me, asshole!" Kyoko yelled out desperately, whipping out a razor blade held between her thumb and middle finger.

"Stop, Takamizawa! Run!"

Iida's shaking voice echoed through the classroom. Kyoko took a sidelong glance at her restrained teacher, spat, and swung her razor at the student that had touched her. His glasses flew off as his slashed cheek started oozing fresh blood. The student didn't falter or try to wipe off the blood; obstinately, he grabbed onto Kyoko's right ankle.

"Let go of me, asshole!"

The razor slashed open the student's temple before it sank into his blood-soaked arm, breaking in two. Taking advantage of Kyoko's surprise, another student grabbed her left ankle, and the two students now gripping both her legs raised their arms, hoisting her up in the air and dangling her upside-down. Her skirt fell down around her waist, revealing her white legs. Kano Miyuki, alongside Kyoko one of the most beautiful girls in the school, walked up, put her face in between Kyoko's legs, and bit into her inner thigh. Bending backward in pain, Kyoko attempted to fight back, flailing her arms around like an animal caught in a trap, her drooping hair swishing around wildly, but several students knelt down by her head and started to twist her neck around.

"Stop! Stop this!"

As Iida cried out with tears in his eyes, a cold voice spoke.

"Sensei, it's too late."

Nakajima, who had been at his computer entering commands the whole time, looked at Iida with a sarcastic smile on his face.

"Ooh..."

A meager whimper as Kyoko's legs spasmed a few times. Without even attempting to wipe the blood from her face, Miyuki looked up and the two students holding Kyoko in the air let go of her legs. As Kyoko's twisted, lifeless body dropped to the floor, the circle of students broke up, leaving her behind.

The door opened as the three students that had left earlier returned, Kondo following behind them. After hearing that Kyoko was being ganged up on and verbally harassed by her classmates, Kondo came with a mind to teach the know-it-alls of the gifted class a lesson. However, the classroom was completely silent; not at all what he was expecting. The three students led the perplexed Kondo to the center of the room, then quickly moved away.

"Oh my god..."

Seeing Kyoko's corpse left Kondo thunderstruck; words escaped him for the moment. The students in the classroom surrounded him, as if to cut off his path of retreat. Kondo probably could have gotten away had he set his mind to it, but with his mind clouded with shock and anger, he didn't realize just how dangerous a position he had walked into.

"You bastards, what have you done... who killed Kyoko!?"

His body shaking in rage, Kondo's furious, bloodshot eyes turned to the students. The normally meek students who would usually run away if he merely looked at them showed no signs of fear as they returned his harsh gaze.

There was something seriously strange going on here.

A groan. Looking in the direction of the voice, Kondo saw Nakajima standing over Iida, his foot pinning the teacher's head to the ground.

"Nakajima...?"

Never imagining for a moment that the pretty-boy genius could be capable of something like this, Kondo was completely taken aback.

Iida called out to him from the back of his throat. "Run, Kondo! Everyone's gone mad!"

Called back to his senses by the teacher's voice, Kondo howled like a wild animal and charged Nakajima. Right before he reached Nakajima, a dozen students jumped on him and pulled him to the ground. Struggling with all his might, Kondo knocked off the students clinging to him, punching and kicking any that got close. But even with their foreheads split and their ribs shattered, the students picked themselves off the floor as if they felt no pain at all, and fiercely latched onto Kondo. One of them picked up a computer monitor and hit him hard in the back of the head. Kondo's vision blurred with the shock of the blow. He started to stumble; in that instant, the students pulled him to the floor again and restrained his limbs.

"Shit, let me go! I'll kill you!!"

Watching Kondo vainly struggle against the students, trying to get free, Nakajima's handsome face twisted into a cold smile.

"Actually, you're the only one who's going to be killed here. I was hoping to have Kyoko be your executioner, but as you've seen, she's already died. So I've been nice enough to have Miyuki do the job for her. You should thank me."

Cradling his chin in her hand, as if in thought, Miyuki kneeled down near Kondo and brought her face close to his, her chin still covered in Kyoko's blood. Her warm breath caressed his cheek. Kondo's body stiffened up and he shivered a bit. The knife in Miyuki's hand flashed and was drenched in crimson. A gurgling cry came out of Kondo's severed windpipe; his eyes still open, his head folded backward with a sickening crunch.

"Now then." Nakajima crouched down and looked into Iida's face.

"What do you think, Sensei? You see? My demon summoning experiment wasn't a failure. That day, a demon really *did* appear—inside the CAI host computer. We just didn't realize it. When I was in class here in the CAI room yesterday, the demon sent me a message: "KILL! I UNDERSTAND." He can't escape from the computer, so he used group hypnosis to control the class."

For an instant, Nakajima's eyes glittered with pity. As if to suppress it, he pressed his lips together and stood up. "By the way, Sensei, I promised to give the demon three souls. Kyoko's, Kondo's, and one other..."

"W-wait, please wait..." As Iida desperately wheezed and struggled, ten students dragged their feet along the floor, slowly approaching him.

## NIGHT OF DEMONS –CHAPTER 1 [ND1]

After many days of rain, the sun finally showed its face one June morning. Muddy puddles in the street reflected its rays like little mirrors. Shirasagi Yumiko narrowed her eyes a little bit and gazed at the three-story school building. It shimmered a bit like a mirage, wrapped in the haze created by water vapor evaporating from the ground.

Shirasagi Yumiko.

Her long, slender limbs made her seem appropriate for her name; “Shirasagi” meant “White Heron.” Her inquisitive red-brown eyes reflected her keen intellect. Her well-shaped nose rounded out the qualities of her natural beauty. However, it could be argued that her propensity for mischief kept her from being as mature as the average high school senior.

Yumiko's transfer to Jushe High had been quite sudden. Two months ago, her father, who worked for a major electronics firm, had been transferred from the branch office in Sapporo to the main office in Tokyo. As the daughter of a salaryman, Yumiko had gotten used to frequent moves, but this was a bad time for a major change--next spring she would be taking her college entrance examinations. She had wanted to spend her last year of high school with the friends she had made, and it was hard to give that up. After a lot of indecision and hard thought, the family had decided to move together, mostly on her mother's insistence that “it's too dangerous for either you or your father to live alone.” Two days after having transferred, Yumiko started to regret giving in to her mother.

“I don't like the mood here.”

Yumiko's admission test had demonstrated that her abilities put her in the top tier of the gifted class. Her parents were quite relieved and happy at her scores, but Yumiko felt that this school had an unnatural coldness that she could reach out and touch. Her former school in Sapporo had also been quite a prestigious institution, but there was no sort of artificial separation between “gifted” and “general” classes, and the students there just seemed to enjoy their life as high school students more.

In stark contrast, the students of Jushe High had the air of old hermits who had altogether given up on life. The gifted class simply went through the curriculum like machines being programmed to pass their college entrance exams. Even though the general class had its share of bright and talented students, many of them had lost their motivation because of the way that they were passed over by the administration in favor of the students in the gifted class. Everyone knew their place in the school, and nobody attempted to break that mold.

Come to think of it, excluding her general introduction to the class, she hadn't spoken a word yet. As she had never been the quiet type, that alone was tough for Yumiko to stand. However, she didn't feel any real hostility toward herself from the faculty or students. The entire class was eerily silent, as if they were being awkwardly suppressed by some sort of invisible force. During free periods, not a single one of Yumiko's classmates had said so much as a word to her.

“If you're too popular right from the beginning, people will start to keep an eye on you, and you don't want that!” That was what her mother had laughingly said when Yumiko mentioned the issue to her and, joke or not, the comment had hurt her pride.

Inside the school courtyard, the opening bell rang.

Drawing in a deep breath and summoning her willpower, Yumiko slowly walked toward the school building.

The first hour of the day was Classical Japanese class.

Ohara-sensei-sensei was quite a beauty. She wasn't wearing much in the way of makeup (probably due to work regulations), but her height, style, and face (attractive even to the eyes of other women) were such so that she could easily make it as a model. But the dull, toneless voice she read the text, combined with the monotonous translate-classical-to-colloquial manner in which she conducted the class, could hardly be called attractive, even as insincere flattery. Yumiko had been desperately suppressing yawns all class long.

"In the *Ise Monogatari*, there is a *tanka* poem: 'In the Uzu Mountains of Suruga, I will not meet you in reality or in a dream.' In the past it has come up three times in Keio University's entrance exam, and also in Waseda University's exam, so you should memorize it..." Ignoring all cultural significance of the poem, Ohara-sensei started talking about entrance exams.

*So much for romance and mystique of the Ise Monogatari. Ariwara Narihira must be rolling over in his grave.*

Downright irritated by the class and on the brink of being overcome by drowsiness, Yumiko noticed a rhythmical sound behind her, like a plastic sheet being tapped. Turning her head, she saw a handsome male student diagonally behind her to the right, typing on a handheld computer that sat atop his desk. She recalled his name: Nakajima Akemi. Yumiko had been introduced to him along with all the other students the day before, but their names and faces had all gotten so mixed up she couldn't clearly remember everyone. Nakajima's profile and name were both rather feminine, so his image had stuck in her head, although he had completely ignored her when she had initially bowed her head in greeting.

*Well, he's pretty obviously ignoring class. He's got guts!*

For whatever reason, Yumiko felt some affinity for this particular classmate.

*It doesn't look like he's playing a game. Is he writing a program or something?*

As if taking a break, Nakajima stretched his back and looked up slightly. His almond eyes looked around, and unexpectedly his gaze met Yumiko's.

After his successful test of the demon summoning program, it seemed as if Nakajima's nature had changed at the very roots. Or perhaps his formerly sealed-off demonic nature had been released and had consumed the old Nakajima? Two months ago, his handsome face had only shown weakness, but now it emanated a powerful aura of pure ego. But what surprised Yumiko when their gaze met was not his powerful presence, but rather something else.

Déjà vu.

*I didn't realize it yesterday, but I think I've seen this guy somewhere before--like from a long time ago. Geez, I wonder why that is?* A wave of emotion like awe coursed through Yumiko's body.

Despite Yumiko's stare, Nakajima displayed no interest in her and returned to rhythmically typing on his keyboard. As if staring into a deep ravine, Yumiko was struck with a strange sense of loss.

"Shirasagi-san, what are you looking at?"



Ohara-sensei's somewhat irritated voice pulled Yumiko back to reality. Looking forward, she noticed the *tanka* poem written on the blackboard in white chalk had been annotated with red and yellow markings.

"What does the 'utsutsu' in this *tanka* indicate? Explain."

Yumiko felt the gaze of all the students in the class fall on her, testing her. The dull sound of Nakajima typing monotonously (and flagrantly!) on the keyboard was the only sound in the room.

"Yes, ma'am. It indicates the name of the place, Uzu, and the meaning of the word 'utsutsu' itself, which is 'reality.'" Yumiko's voice sounded slightly nervous, but Ohara-sensei's question was an extremely easy one, especially for someone aiming to become a literary historian.

"I see you've studied well, Shirasagi-san. But sometimes what I'm saying will come in handy too."

Ohara-sensei's expression softened a bit with her sarcastic warning. The momentary tension in the classroom dissipated and, pulled in by Ohara-sensei's smile, the male students all grinned. Yumiko got the sense that the entire class was mocking her.

The class bell rang.

"Excuse me, sensei," Nakajima called out to the teacher, stopping her just as she was about to leave. Ohara-sensei turned around, her eyes clearly full of apprehension.

Yumiko sensed an unusual relationship between the two.

*Sensei is afraid of Nakajima?*

"Sensei, you're coming tonight like we planned, right?" Nakajima stayed seated at his desk, idly playing with the keys on his handheld computer.

Ohara-sensei's face seemed to turn slightly red.

"Hai... I'll see you in the CAI room..." she replied delicately. Nakajima smiled, nodded, and waved to her.

Yumiko gaped at the two in surprise; Nakajima's behavior seemed as if he was saying 'Good girl, now go away.' But this strange relationship between teacher and student didn't seem to bother her classmates in the least as they indifferently prepared for their next class.

Overcome with curiosity, Yumiko waited for Ohara-sensei to leave the classroom before walking over to Nakajima's desk.

"Hey, Nakajima..." Yumiko spoke to him, not really sure of what she was going to say.

Nakajima looked up at her dubiously. Being watched by those eyes full of a strange devilishness, Yumiko was struck once again by a strange sense of *déjà vu*.

*I can't shake the feeling I've met you somewhere before. Why?* While that was what Yumiko really wanted to ask, that kind of question would probably just confuse him. Yumiko struggled to try and figure out what to do with this new, strange sensation.

"You know..." Nakajima opened his mouth and spoke as if teasing a small child. "I think you'd be better off staying away from me."

"No, I..."

With that response, Yumiko was unprepared with what to say next. At a seat further back, a stern, tough-looking male student's expression and hand movements signaled to Yumiko that she should probably leave Nakajima alone.

The classroom bell rang. The physics teacher for the second hour of class had at some point entered the room and was already standing at the head of the class.

Returning to her seat and enduring the thoughts and feelings welling up from the depths of her soul, Yumiko bit down on her lower lip.

*You can go ahead and ignore me if you want. I want to know what's up with you, and it's my right to try and find out!*

## NIGHT OF DEMONS –CHAPTER 2 [ND2]

Yumiko stood concealed in the shadows of the schoolyard, watching the CAI room carefully. An uncomfortably warm breeze struck her, carrying with it swarms of irritating insects that refused to leave her alone. The full moon showed itself from a break in the clouds and illuminated the gloomy, flat-roofed separate building that housed the CAI room.

*I feel like an idiot--a high school senior playing detective!*

Yumiko smiled bitterly as she carefully observed the silent, empty CAI room. Yumiko asked herself just why she was out here doing this.

Yumiko was pretty sure that Nakajima had said *tonight*. It just wasn't normal for a student to call a female teacher to the CAI room in the middle of the night. Of course, it was probably none of her business what the two of them would be doing there. However, after seeing Ohara-sensei's nearly drunken gait as she left the classroom, Yumiko had been very upset. Overwhelmed with the urge to find out what the relationship between those two was, she had been hiding here all afternoon long.

*Is this love at first sight?*

No, that was too hasty a conclusion to make.

*Yeah, right...*

Yumiko could not deny that Nakajima held a very unique appeal to him, but she couldn't shake the feeling that she was drawn to him on some sort of deeper connection, on a level beyond an ephemeral love or hate.

The arms of her watch passed 9PM, and just as Yumiko's arms and legs were starting to fall asleep, the silhouette of a person passed through the connecting hallway and entered the CAI room. Yumiko's body stiffened in nervousness. Presently a light went on inside the CAI room; through the glass of the window, the outlines of several people moving about the room were faintly visible. Before Yumiko's heart even had a chance to start racing, the shadow of a very large man approached the window and, in an instant, all the blinds were lowered.

It seemed that Ohara-sensei and Nakajima wouldn't be the only people meeting tonight. The mystery only deepened and overcome with curiosity, Yumiko decided to move from the rear of the schoolyard to the CAI room to get a better look.

As Yumiko left her former watch point, Ohara stealthily approached the CAI room, opened the door slightly, and slipped inside. The room was brilliantly lit as three students arrived to greet her. The three of them were garbed in black robes; one of them reverently carried a silver platter, and the other two carried swords and candlesticks. The desk in the center of the room that usually sported several computers had been replaced with a leather sofa. Nakajima Akemi was sitting on that sofa, deep in meditation. A large circle was drawn on the floor, with the sofa situated in the center. The circle was divided into twelve sections; four points within the circle hosted astrological symbols, representing the Moon, the Sun, Mars, and Pluto, respectively.

"Hello and welcome."

Noticing Ohara's arrival, Nakajima stopped his meditation and slowly stood. As he rose, the belts attached to the sofa's backrest, arms and base, belts expressly designed to bind a person down, became clearly visible. Even after seeing this, Ohara displayed no signs of fear; in fact, her expression even calmed a bit. Smiling, Nakajima ordered the three students to turn out the room lights and light the candles. They obediently followed his orders. As if enthralled by the mysterious aura the now-dark room seemed to hold, Ohara knelt on the ground in front of Nakajima.

Nakajima's pale hand touched Ohara-sensei's flushed cheek.

"Come, relax a bit. In just a few minutes, the demon Loki will arrive. Loki is well known for his beauty and mischievousness. A perfect match for you, sensei," Nakajima said a composed, sweet voice that could melt anyone's heart. As Nakajima's hand slid from Ohara-sensei's cheek to the nape of her neck, her breath became deep and heavy.

"It's time to turn on the host computer. There's no need to worry, sensei. I'm sure that you will satisfy the demon," Nakajima whispering in Ohara-sensei's ear as he stepped away and entered a command into a nearby terminal. Beyond the thick plate glass, the reels of magnetic tape slowly started to spin. Nakajima picked up his handheld computer and entered a quick command. A white haze appeared from the liquid crystal display and began expanding before seeping out the doorway. As soon as it disappeared from view, the low growl of a beast reverberated throughout the outside hallway, sending tremors of fear into the bowels of all within earshot. Its name was Kerberos; a digital beast summoned from the Atziluth world and given form by Nakajima, he was to perform the role of guardian for tonight's ceremony.

Meanwhile, the three students in the room led Ohara to the sofa, and fastened her firmly to the seat using the leather belts.

"Come, steady your breathing. Concentrate your spirit, and call forth the demon from the Atziluth world."

*Click, click.*

As if impatient, the sound of the terminal's disk drive echoed throughout the room.

"The Moon and Mars are opposite each other, and so are the Sun and Pluto, forming the Grand Cross in the heavens. No night could be as perfect as this to summon a demon."

Speaking as if chanting a spell, Nakajima took a helmet-like device from the machine room and placed it on Ohara's head.

It was a Brainwave Modem Helmet. It digitized human brainwaves and acted as an interface to directly communicate with the computer. Two long cables, one red and one black, extended from the back of the helmet near the base of the head. The red cable connected to the host computer, and the black one connected to one of the terminals in the room. Nakajima entered a command on the terminal, and the magnetic tapes started to spin rapidly. Ohara's body began twitching slightly, as if her consciousness was already blending into the host computer. A pungent, musky smell wafted up from somewhere, enveloping her. The faces of the three students watching over the ceremony with glazed, unfocused eyes lit up with an expression like awe.

"Yod, Heh, Vav, Heh."

The instant the low, rumbling voice emitted from the machine room, Ohara let out a cry and started twisting her body. She screamed intermittently as her eyes opened wide with fear, staring emptily into space. The legs of the sofa started to come off the floor as Ohara jerked her limbs as if she were trying to escape from something; the cables connected to her helmet stretched.

Her leather bindings ground against her wrists, breaking the skin and staining the belts black with oozing blood. The expression of panic on Ohara's face soon dissipated, her face became calm, and she closed her eyes. Her mouth turned up into a smile even as her bottom lip still bled from where she had bitten down.

Nakajima looked into the display of the computer connected to the modem helmet. "I see you've succeeded in taking in Ohara, Loki. Now, what are you going to do with her?"

The digital modem helmet had taken Ohara-sensei's thoughts and sensations, digitized them, and sent them into the virtual world that Loki had created within the host computer. Her earlier pain had just been a temporary autonomous rejection reaction when her digitized nervous system initially came into contact with the demon.

Nakajima stared into the display, hoping to get a glimpse of the world that was currently being fed into Ohara's visual cortex. Suddenly, Kerberos' angry roar echoed through the corridor. In reaction to Nakajima's gesture, the two stern students carrying swords started moving toward the door.

Shortly after Ohara-sensei had entered the CAI room, Yumiko moved from the rear of the schoolyard into the hallway that connected the outlying building with the rest of the school. She slowly walked down the corridor, using the moonlight reflected off the linoleum floor as her guide. A slight flickering light, most likely candlelight, was visible through a crack in the blinds.

*Stop this foolishness. Let's just go home, take a shower, and forget all this.*

Yumiko's normal instincts anxiously tried to persuade her, but tonight there was another Yumiko pulling the strings.

*What are you so afraid of? This is our chance to find out what's up with Nakajima!*

Like all teenage girls her age do at least once or twice, Yumiko obeyed the more daring, curious voice. She heard a far-off cry come from the CAI room. Yumiko's heart started racing but before she had the chance to even react, something suddenly crawled out of the darkness in front of her.

The moon broke through the clouds, illuminating the form of a terrible beast. Its body was larger than a lion, and its huge mouth (which looked like it took up half its body) had two rows of long, sharp fangs. Its eyes shone like a flame as it glared at Yumiko; the metallic feelers near its ears moved as if to detect even the slightest change in the area. Its burly shoulders and thick body were striped like a tiger, and its heavy-looking tail was plated with snakelike scales.

The beast roared. A puff of air thick with the stench of bloody meat drifted toward the petrified Yumiko. Yumiko's stomach twisted so powerfully that she almost felt like her intestines were being gouged out; her vision blurred. Unable to withstand the shock, she passed out.

Yumiko was brought to her senses by the sensation of unusual heat and the sound of intermittent panting. The surrounding area was dim and gloomy; she felt one of her cheeks on the cool ground.

*Oh, right! That monster...!*

Yumiko abruptly sat upright. Ohara-sensei, bound to a leather chair, entered her field of vision. She was wearing a strange helmet and breathing heavily. Next to her, Nakajima was staring at a computer display, an eerily cold smile on his handsome face.

"Nakajima..." As Yumiko blurted out her surprise, someone grabbed her right shoulder. Yumiko gulped back her words as she turned around.

Takai Ken'ichi was standing behind her. Normally Takai seemed weak-willed and reasonable, but now he looked at her with the hollow stare of the possessed. Yumiko certainly didn't think he knew where he was or recognized her. Two other students garbed in black robes stood motionlessly in the room looking like sleepwalkers.

At that moment, Ohara's heavy breathing got stronger. Furiously panting and writhing, she was giving off a ghastly aura that seemed like it would pollute the soul of anyone that came close to her.



Yumiko cried out. "What is this? What have you done to Ohara-sensei?"

Takai tried to force Yumiko to the ground, but Nakajima slowly raised his hand to stop him. At his signal, Takai's strong hand stiffly moved away from Yumiko's shoulder.

"You're....Shirasagi Yumiko, was it? Come and have a look at this. It's fascinating."

As Yumiko stood up, she noticed that part of her skirt was torn, as if a dog had bitten it. She immediately realized that the beast she had seen earlier was all too real.

Nakajima pointed to the screen of the terminal connected to Ohara's helmet. A magnificent bronze statue of a youth styled like an ancient Greek sculpture was onscreen. No, it couldn't be a sculpture. As if life had been breathed into it, the divinely beautiful image was moving calmly. The image zoomed in on the youth's head and chest. His expression displayed an intellect beyond anything a human could hope to have; his jet black eyes looked like two black holes that would absorb everything they gazed on.

Nakajima spoke into Yumiko's ear. "That's the demon Loki."

"This is just CG, isn't it?" Yumiko's eyes remained glued to the screen.

"If I could think up a demon this realistic and draw it, I wouldn't have to go to school in the first place. No, this is a real demon. Although I imagine you won't believe that."

Loki flexed his muscular chest onscreen. It was shining black and covered with scales. Yumiko noticed that Ohara-sensei's gasps were in perfect synch with Loki's movements. The next instant, she realized what that meant and gasped.

"That's right. Ohara and Loki are having a little fun together right now. In the virtual world, that is." For some reason, Nakajima spat out the words as if he were slightly upset.

Ohara-sensei was getting closer and closer to orgasm. Her heaving chest, covered in sweat, was visible through her open blouse. Her body had completely accepted the invisible demon in the virtual world. Yumiko noticed a faint blue haze floating about the area of Ohara's chest. The haze was increasing in thickness and an unbearable stench assaulted her nostrils. Looking confused, Nakajima knelt in front of Ohara-sensei with his handheld computer in one hand, typing on the keyboard while waving a rod around the area. As Ohara-sensei cried out and lost consciousness, the blue haze dissipated.

Nakajima let out a deep sigh of relief. Yumiko sensed a faltering in his normally rock-solid confidence.

Nakajima was not a magician. If he had been, he would have known the importance of ironing out a purpose and duration of service when negotiating a contract with a demon.

However, Nakajima had neglected that. When Loki turned Kondo, Takamizawa and Iida into bloody lumps of flesh, he had deluded himself into believing that he had become a great ruler.

Loki's power was tremendous. He had taken the subconscious respect that the students and teachers had for Nakajima and converted it through his power, making the men obey him and the women fawn over him. For a formerly powerless high school student, it was a dream come true.

The demon demanded female sacrifices. Those offered to him would groan, contort, and eventually orgasm. Perhaps deep in his subconscious, Nakajima had taken sadistic glee in violating these women. But he had always thought that what went on was not real, as it only took place in a virtual world.

Loki could not escape from the computer. The immense amount of data necessary to give him form was far too much for any but the world's most powerful computers to process. He could only act within

the confines of the software that Nakajima had written. So what was that blue haze that had shrouded Ohara....?

"Nakajima, you're afraid of something, aren't you?" A woman's voice spoke.

Nakajima remembered that he had been talking to Yumiko about what he was doing.

*What was I thinking? I shouldn't have told her all of all that.*

He affixed his gaze on Yumiko. For an instant, it looked like Yumiko's eyes glowed scarlet, and Nakajima was engulfed in darkness. An unfamiliar, illusory world opened up before him.

Rugged reddish-brown mountains towered toward the heavens; they bore not even a blade of grass. Threaded between the treacherous mountains, a small pathway wriggled forward as far as one could see. A youth desperately ran down the path, clenching his teeth and exhaling breaths that felt like fire. He wore a sleeveless flaxen robe, and as his feet struck the dusty ground, his long, chest-length ponytail flowed behind him as the string of curved jewels around his neck shook. He was dressed as one might have in very ancient times.

However, the youth's face was definitely that of Nakajima Akemi. Beads of sweat ran down his cheek, streaking the dust on his face.

"My husband, why do you abandon me? Izanagi, why...?"

A sad voice full of misery reached the youth's ears. Reflexively, he slowed down. It seemed as if his head was trying to turn around on its own. But the youth bit down strongly on his lips, glared at the path ahead, and ran on. The woman dragged her bloody feet, covered in injuries sustained from the rough stone ground, as she chased him. Her long, graceful white arms extended forward as she futilely tried to reach the youth. Her long, black hair and desperate voice were both blown backward by the wind.

However, the face beneath that hair was rotted and melting, and her eye sockets were completely exposed. Maggots writhed in the space between flesh and bone, and when she gasped for breath, vile fleshy juices fell from her cheeks like tears. Her lips had rotted and fallen off, and as her exposed white teeth clenched together in frustration, she let out a shrill cry.

With the woman's cry, a bolt of purple lightning shot through the gloomy clouds in the sky before coming down to strike nearby. A ghastly creature appeared where the bolt struck. It was a huge woman that looked large enough to reach the clouds, with a slimy green hide and an appearance like a frog. The woman stood in front of the youth's path as it extended both arms out as if to stop him.

"Yomotsu-Shikome, out of my way!" As the youth called out, the woman's squat neck jiggled like a blob of jelly, and she let out a hideous voice.

"STOP."

Seeing the youth continue to press onwards, Yomotsu-Shikome took a step toward him. When her thick, misshapen leg struck the ground, the earth shook with a great sound. Not faltering for a moment, the youth glared at the colossus before him, pulled a red comb from his hair, broke off one of its teeth, and threw it at the woman. The tooth of the comb lodged itself into Yomotsu-Shikome's exposed chest, and the woman's ugly face suddenly twisted into an expression of pain. As if her whole body was being affected by some strong poison, she gripped her chest in pain and vomited syrupy bile all over the ground. Even so, she tried to grab the youth, but her body convulsed furiously and she fell face-forward onto the ground, shaking the very earth itself.

As the youth delicately passed by the side of the huge corpse, the sound of the sad voice echoed in his ears once more.

"Please wait, Izanagi...."

"Nakajima, what's the matter?"

Suddenly brought back to his senses by the sound of someone calling his name, Nakajima saw Yumiko examining his face closely with a perplexed look. Her eyes were full of both fear and pity.

*What the hell just happened? Was that hallucination connected to the Demon Summoning Program in some way? Or else...*

For a moment, Nakajima was lost in Yumiko's eyes. But his stubborn pride would not allow him to show Yumiko any more weakness.

"Forget it, just get out of here." Nakajima's words were curt and cold, as if he was trying to blow off the situation. Yumiko looked like she wanted to say something, but was unwilling to oppose him and obeyed.

"At any rate, I've got to figure out what that haze was." Recovering his composure, Nakajima turned on the modem and called up ISG's host computer.

HELLO NAKAJIMA. WHAT'S UP?

Checking Craft's message, Nakajima changed disk drives and turned on another customized computer, an automatic translator equipped with a database of 50,000 magic and occult-related terms. Of course, Nakajima had created it himself.

**> AN UNKNOWN VAPOR APPEARED ABOVE THE SACRIFICE. I'M SENDING A ROUGH ESTIMATION OF ITS FORM AND COMPOSITION. TRY TO ANALYZE IT FOR ME.**

The data stored in the handheld computer traveled over the phone lines to Massachusetts. Nakajima tapped his fingers impatiently on the desk for a minute...two minutes. Five minutes later, Craft finally sent its analysis.

VOLUME AND MASS SUGGESTS AN ECTOPLASMIC CONTENT FIVE TIMES NORMAL. JUDGING FROM THE SITUATION IN WHICH IT AROSE, THE CHANCE OF THE VAPOR BEING LOKI HIMSELF IS QUITE HIGH.

**> I HAVEN'T PREPARED ANY DATA THAT WOULD ALLOW LOKI TO TAKE A BODY. BESIDES, THE CAI ROOM'S COMPUTER COULDN'T POSSIBLY UNDERTAKE A SIMULATION OF THAT SCALE IN THE FIRST PLACE.**

FROM THE DATA THAT YOU PROVIDED, I CANNOT GIVE YOU AN EXACT ANSWER. THE ONLY THING I CAN SAY IS THAT THE DEMON YOU SUMMONED INTO THE COMPUTER IS LIKE A GENIUS-LEVEL ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE. ONE CANNOT DISCARD THE POSSIBILITY THAT HE HAS FIGURED A WAY TO TAKE FORM HIMSELF.

**> THANK YOU, CRAFT.**

Sending his closing message, Nakajima cut the connection.

*I can't possibly believe that Loki could have figured out a way to take a body on his own. Still, I had better start working on some new technology that I can use to take complete control of him.*

Nakajima walked over to the window and looked up at the black expanse above, thinking.

## TRANSFER -CHAPTER 1 [TC1]

It was midnight at Marunouchi, yon-cho-me. Buildings with their darkened windows rose against the skyline. Along the walks under rows of ginkgo trees, not a soul could be seen; the only presence was that of flitting moths attracted to the streetlights, shedding their tiny scales on the sidewalk below. The office district was so quiet that you could almost hear those moths bumping into the iron lampposts.

The dead of night made no difference to the big trading firms that supported the weight of the economy on their shoulders; there was still light coming from the twelfth floor of the Mitsune Productions building. The Third Export Division managed all trade with Europe. There were only two weeks left until August, when the EC Import Regulation Act would take effect. In a last-chance rush to get exports out, all the department's traders were being forced to work at full capacity around the clock.

Inevitably weary at this hour, some were taking catnaps on the sofa, whereas others had gone out for a bite at the ramen shops near Tokyo station. Inoue narrowed his bloodshot eyes and inputted the next day's projected exports into the workstation that connected him to the overseas export online system. His metal-framed glasses covered in fingerprints, he didn't look nearly his normal stylish self.

"How much is left?" Hashiguchi, who had been napping on the sofa, propped himself up on his elbow and called over to Inoue as he clearly stifled a yawn.

"It shouldn't take too long--all that's left are the household electronics slated for shipment to France." Using his vinyl code sheet as a fan, Inoue blew air onto his chest through his V-neck T-shirt.

"So, how much have the exports increased by?" Rubbing his swollen eyelids, Hashiguchi looked over Inoue's shoulder at the screen.

"200% more than last year, most likely. When I think that all this might get stopped at customs, it scares me."

"Some friction has to be expected. After all, in two weeks, we're going to take a 90% hit off of last year's exports."

"The *kacho* and the others are sure taking their time. How long does it take to eat a bowl of ramen? I bet they stopped for drinks afterwards."

Hashiguchi patted Inoue on the shoulder and smiled sympathetically. "Why don't you have a rest? I'll take over with the data entry for a bit."

"OK then, thanks." As Inoue stood up and stretched, the modem rang. The LED that signaled data transfer from the national branch office lit up.

"What do they want at a time like this?" Hashiguchi asked.

"Oh, I'm sure they just want some of our leftover stock. Of course with all our efforts focusing on exports right now, this isn't the time for that." Already getting ready for a rest, Inoue had no other excuse to make.

"No need to get upset at them. The poor guys at the branch office are still working at this godforsaken hour, just like us."

As he soothed his coworker, Hashiguchi switched over to the disk drive and turned the computer over to receive mode. The list of enumerations vanished, and the screen turned completely green. Normally, the ID number of the person sending the transmission would be displayed onscreen at this point. Instead, the display was changing many colors and displaying strange unknown symbols.

"What the heck is this?"

Unusual letters scrolled down the screen, but the two of them had no way of recognizing ancient Hebrew. Presently, the screen displayed an image of statue of a man standing.

"I'd like to tell those guys at the branch office not to play stupid jokes in the middle of the night like this." Looking disinterestedly at the screen with a sidelong glance, Inoue lit a cigarette.

Still, even as a prank, this mysterious statue was pretty well-done CG. A body with the symmetry of an ancient Greek sculpture. Long, black hair. Vivid, rose-colored lips. And his deep black eyes had an unfathomable devilishness about them.

Perhaps it was due to the tobacco smoke, but the two men did not notice the musky smell that started seeping into the office.

"Not that it makes any difference, but this is some pretty high-level CG here," said Hashiguchi.

"Is it CG? It looks almost like a photo." As Inoue looked closely at the display, the unpleasant smell of singed cigarette filter wafted through the air.

"Oh! Sorry 'bout that."

While Inoue turned his attention to putting out his cigarette, the man drawn on the display smiled and pointed at Hashiguchi. His finger was tipped with a claw that looked almost like a bird of prey's talon. The concept of polygons were just starting to become widely-known, so Hashiguchi was enthralled by the graphics—graphics that would normally be impossible to display without the use of a massive supercomputer.

Hashiguchi abruptly noticed that the display looked like it was damp, as if it was covered in a layer of condensation. As he tried to wipe the screen off with his hand, he felt something stick to his fingertips, and jumped back in surprise. Something slimy was stuck to his fingers; as he shook them violently, a heavy, disgusting jelly-like substance fell to the floor with a splat.

"Ugh! What the hell is this!?"

Inoue turned around at Hashiguchi's cry and froze in shock. Beneath the skin of the pink protoplasm, a mesh of green-colored veins spread out as the whole blob pulsated like an organ torn out of its host. The repulsive lump of flesh made a squishing sound as it started to approach the two men. Backing up, Inoue stumbled over a chair and sprayed the contents of his stomach all over the floor.

"Inoue! Get a hold of yourself!" Grabbing his coworker's arm to keep him standing, Hashiguchi started to run toward the door. As he turned, the gelatinous blob lashed out; tentacles covered in a viscous sticky fluid like red jam grabbed onto the legs of both men in an instant.

"Shit!" Hashiguchi cursed as he grabbed files and the phone off his desk—any object within reach—and began throwing them at his attacker. When it showed no fear, he grabbed a chair, lifted it over his head, and brought it crashing down on top of the thing. However, the skin of the gelatinous blob simply pulled the steel chair into its body, where it was quickly dissolved right before Hashiguchi's eyes.

*Thump, thump.*

Hashiguchi could no longer tell whether the sound he heard was his own heart beating or the lump of flesh pulsating. He was brought back to his senses by a strange sensation emanating from his foot; the pink lump of flesh had enveloped his entire right leg. He tried to cry out, but terror had sealed his throat.

Steadily, greedily, the pink blob started to pull Hashiguchi's body into its own. He felt no pain. It was like sinking into warm mud; all he suffered was a boundless feeling of loss and the awareness of his impending death.

*Help me...* No longer able to speak, Hashiguchi clawed at the air, as if trying to find something to grab onto as a last resort. The blob suddenly clamped down on his torso with an incredible force.

The impact sent Hashiguchi's eyeballs flying out of their sockets as his crushed ribs shredded his internal organs. The blood that came pouring out of his body was absorbed by the blob. Only Hashiguchi's head protruded from the mound of flesh; pink tentacles started flowing out of his open mouth and eye sockets.

Now the only person on the deserted floor of the building, Inoue could hardly believe Hashiguchi's gruesome death was real. His capacity for rational thought completely gone, he stabbed madly at the tentacle grabbing his leg with a ballpoint pen, trying to tear it off. He felt someone looking at him and returned to his senses.



At some point, the gelatinous lump had grown an eyeball. Sinister and full of malice, it stared at Inoue. The tentacle slowly crawled up his leg to his chest.

Watching his body being sucked into the grotesque mass of protoplasm, something snapped inside Inoue. Overcome with a rush of madness, he let out a shriek of cackling laughter. The floor's elevator made a sound, opened, and his coworkers returned from their break.

"What's with those guys? What are they laughing at?"

"I bet they're slacking off on the job and watching TV."

The men looked at each other, not having any idea what was going on, unaware of the carnage that they were about to step into.

## TRANSFER -CHAPTER 2 [TC2]

It was past midnight. Nakajima was in the CAI room of Jusho High, facing the Host Computer. The machine was connected via a modem to the outside and he was trying to talk to Loki.

"So what's the story? Did the movement experiment work?"

**"I suppose it would be best to say that it showed some results—at least to an extent."**

The low, rumbling voice that came out of the speakers shook Nakajima's very bowels. Nakajima supposed "results to an extent" meant that Loki could exist inside another computer as an AI construct.

"So I guess you have no choice but to recognize how good my technology is?"

**"If that's what you want to think, go ahead. Let me just say that we're a long way from perfection."**

"Well, that's to be expected. When trying to send that much information in a single burst, there's bound to be some data loss."

Sweat glistened on Nakajima's forehead; his microphone headset gripped his temples. Nakajima continued to talk with a calm, disinterested air, but his entire body, stiff with tension, revealed a hint of uneasiness in a corner of his mind.

*What will happen if Loki gains the ability to take form?* Nakajima asked himself.

*No, that's impossible. Just look, Loki is dutifully obeying me in these demon transfer theory tests.*

Demon Transfer Theory.

Gaining the ability to move freely about the earth had been a dream of demons for aeons. Since ancient times, the areas in which a demon could appear on the earth had been extremely limited. Furthermore, once a demon had actually been summoned, it could only hold form within a radius of a few kilometers from the point it was called. It could easily be said that this was the reason why Earth had gone for so long without seeing a demon invasion.

Nakajima had created a technology that turned what was once common knowledge in the demon world upside-down. This technology digitized a demon and transferred it to other computers over communication lines. Once perfected, it would completely remove the physical restrictions on demon movement on Earth.

Nakajima thought that his experiment had finally succeeded. It was a naive line of thought. He was just an ordinary high school student who had never made contract with a demon before, yet here he was immediately jumping to deal with an incredibly powerful demon lord like Loki, which could very well lead to tragedy. At least he was being prudent and showing forethought by realizing the danger that Loki could pose should he gain the ability to physically manifest.

*I may end up having to summon another powerful demon from the Atziluth World that can counteract Loki.*

Unable to suppress his growing uneasiness, Nakajima started pondering walking down an even more dangerous road when a voice suddenly surged out of the speakers.

**"Give me Shirasagi Yumiko."**

"What!?"

**"Give me Shirasagi Yumiko."**

"No! I can't do that!" The instant he heard Yumiko's name, Nakajima cried out. Even he was surprised by his own reaction.

**"Child, who do you think you are commanding?"**

Loki's voice displayed an anger he had never shown before. The machine let out a strange whine, and sparks flew from where the cables connected to it.

"All right, all right, calm down..."

Nakajima folded to Loki's threat. Angry at himself, Nakajima bit down on his lip almost hard enough to draw blood; an image of Yumiko's face hovered in his mind. Once again, he was pulled into an illusion.

The towering mountains and azure skies were invisible to the youth. His narrow eyes were grimly fixated on the track ahead of him. His parched, earthen-colored lips were encrusted with red-and black dried blood. His feet were swollen and purple; sharp shards of rock were embedded in them. However, the sound of gasps drawing close behind him made his injured feet hasten his pace.

"Izanagi, why won't you wait? Is it because I've become so hideous? You promised me when I entered Yomi that you would bring me back, no matter what happened to me! Was that a lie? I would never run from you, no matter what happened to you!"

"Forgive me..."

As if trying to flee from his fear and guilt, the youth clenched his teeth and took off. But the woman's tenacity was slowly bridging the gap between them. The woman's tears, falling from eyes whose lids had rotted off, dropped to the ground alongside her hair.

"Izanagi..."

As she cried out, the hole in her cheek became larger and larger, until her white molars were fully exposed. Soon the path ended, and the youth could see a wide expanse of shadowy wetlands in front of him.

"I made it back to Toyoashihara..."

His lips trembled with relief. Opening his arms wide, the youth took a deep breath of the humid air, pursed his lips forcefully, turned around, and sat down.

For a while, he stared at the form of the grotesque woman chasing him, then shook his head sadly and closed his eyes.

The youth started to meditate. When the woman had gotten within reach of a stone's throw, his body seemed to float slightly in midair for a moment, and then there was a huge undulation in the atmosphere. As if a huge invisible power had been released, the earth shook. The fissure that appeared directly beneath the youth spread to the surrounding mountains as countless rocks started to fall on the path. As the woman stopped, a giant boulder rolled in front of the path before her eyes, sealing it off.

"Izanagi! I will come to you! Even if it takes hundreds or thousands of years!"

The sound of the woman's bitter cries rose from beyond the towering pile of earth.

"Forgive me, Izanami..."

Covering his ears with his hands, the youth staggered into the wetlands, the tall reeds rising over him.

Nakajima snapped out of his trance and left the CAI room in low spirits. A few minutes later, a dark shadow slipped through the hallway and into the room. Two hands reached out of the inky blackness, searching for the power switch to a terminal. Soon, the light of a display illuminated fingers on the keyboard.

They were smooth, white fingers. They stopped moving at the sound of a coercing low voice.

**"Ohara."**

That was what the voice said.

**"I'm showing you the list for the transport program Nakajima wrote. Can you operate it?"**

"I think I can operate it, but not much more than that."

**"That's fine. There's no more need for any changes to the technology. If I can move and take form on my own, I can conquer the Assiah world singlehandedly."**

The microphone picked up the excited whisper.

"Your will be done."

## POSSESSION –CHAPTER 1 [PC1]

When confronted with the unbelievable, people have a tendency to avoid thinking about it. If they do think about it, they will attempt to rationalize what they saw in an attempt to relieve their anxiety.

Yumiko did the same thing to her experience in the CAI room.

Nakajima had said he summoned a demon using the computer. But when she really thought about it, there was no real hard evidence that what she saw really was a demon. With enough skill manipulating computer graphics, such a scene could be staged easily. As for that demonic beast, Yumiko only saw it for an instant. It would probably be more natural to assume that it just been a large dog that Nakajima had used as a guard, and Yumiko's fear and surprise deluded her into seeing it as some sort of horrific monster. Nakajima might be a genius-level computer nut, but the whole ceremony could have been nothing more than something him and his followers cooked up together. Nakajima had probably just started some sort of occult or magic club.

As the days passed by uneventfully, that was how Yumiko treated the whole experience. Jusho High's gifted class still wasn't a place where she felt entirely comfortable, but she was still able to make a few friends that she could banter with like a normal girl her age.

Still, Nakajima definitely seemed to hold some sort of special authority in the school. Lately, he had been spending all of his time holed up in the CAI room, and rarely (if ever) showed his face in class. The only time he would show up was when other classes were using the CAI room, and even then he would ignore class and program on his handheld computer instead.

No matter how you looked at it, something was not right about the situation. But whenever Yumiko tried talking to her friends about Nakajima, they would just clam up and try to change the subject. It wasn't that they disliked him; their silence radiated a sense of fear and awe, as if they couldn't find the right words to use when talking about such a powerful persona.

*Well, no big deal. Besides, it doesn't really affect me anyway...*

Even though Yumiko could explain the situation away like that, she couldn't keep her heart from racing whenever she pictured his profile in her head.

It was a morning in July, close to the start of summer vacation.

Yumiko walked to school along the highway between Kuniritsu Station and Hitobashi University every morning. The branches of the trees stretched out to their limits so that their leaves would absorb the blinding sunlight, and as Yumiko walked beneath the lines of ginkgo trees and their outstretched pale green leaves, she rubbed her sleepy eyes and thought of the phone call she had received last night.

The call had come while she was cleaning up after dinner. Her mother casually picked up the receiver, then called to her.

"Yumiko, it's from someone called Yamanaka. Have you got a boyfriend already?"

"Yamanaka...?"

Yumiko cocked her head, wondering if she had a classmate with that name before she had a flash of insight.

"I'm sure he's just passing on a message from school," Yumiko lied at once. Thinking of who it might be, she waited a little bit before gently picking up the receiver.

"Hello, this is Yumiko..."

"...."

The sound of faint breathing was all that could be heard from the other side.

"Hello?"

A hushed voice suddenly murmured in Yumiko's ear. For an instant, Yumiko thought the voice sounded like Nakajima's, but she couldn't be sure.

"Stay home from school tomorrow."

"Hello, who is this?"

"He's after you. You should stay away for a while."

The tone of voice became urgent, but that only made it seem more suspicious. As Yumiko tried to decide how to respond, she noticed her mother had stopped cleaning the dishes and was watching her suspiciously.

"We can talk about this at school tomorrow," Yumiko said calmly.

There was the sound of a clicking tongue as the phone hung up on the other end.

"What was that about?" Yumiko's mother asked worriedly.

"It was nothing. Being really popular is really a pain sometimes."

She distracted her mother with an unintelligible response as Yumiko tried to recall what Nakajima's normal speaking voice sounded like.

College students in blue jeans and T-shirts passed by her, discussing their plans for summer vacation. One of them, carrying a guitar case in his left hand, bumped into her.

"Ah, sorry!"

Yumiko looked up suspiciously. The college student shyly smiled at her, but she simply ignored him and looked away.

*That really might have been Nakajima...*

Yumiko wasn't sure at the time, but thinking about it afterwards, she had the sense that her mysterious caller talked a lot like Nakajima.

But if that was the case, what was he trying to tell her? The voice on the phone had been very serious, full of desperation, almost like someone trying to escape from a pursuer.

What could have happened to him?

After the call, Yumiko had tried to prepare for class the next day, but when she tried to focus on her textbooks, she kept picturing Nakajima's eyes when she looked at the page. None of the information stuck. Not only could she not study, but she kept wondering about the phone call. She was dizzy with insomnia; Yumiko had barely slept a wink. The baseball club members had finished their morning practice, and chatted amongst themselves as they walked by.

Yumiko turned left, off of University Avenue, and passed through the gates of her school. A harsh shiver ran up her spine and her arms broke out in goose bumps. Wondering what had happened, she looked around. She noticed that Ohara-sensei was staring at her through the window in the faculty lounge. Her pitch-black eyes wore an almost supernaturally sinister look as they watched Yumiko's every move. Absorbed in the stare, Yumiko started uneasily, and a male student on a bicycle grazed her.

"Hey, careful! Watch where you're going!"

The bicycle sped up and the student pedaled away.

Returning to her senses, Yumiko looked back at the window in the faculty lounge, but Ohara-sensei was no longer there. As waves of students proceeded into the school to avoid being late, they turned around and gave her quizzical looks as she stood as still as a post.

*What are you doing? This isn't like you!*

Admonishing herself, Yumiko ran into the school.

## POSSESSION –CHAPTER 2 [PC2]

Yumiko ran into her classroom and managed to make it to her seat before the opening bell rang. Ohara-sensei entered the classroom Soon afterwards and looked it over with a calm face, as usual. Yumiko had seen her crazy state that night in the CAI room, but even before that, the two had never gotten along. Looking down and not making eye contact with anyone, Ohara-sensei directed the students to go to the CAI room.

*The CAI room for a classical Japanese lesson? What does she intend to do there?*

In Yumiko's experience, Jusho High's CAI room was only used for science, math, and English. Why would they need computers to teach classical Japanese?

Paying no attention to the doubtful Yumiko, her classmates closed their books and stood up, leaving their pens at their desks. Yumiko instinctively looked around to see if Nakajima was in class, but his desk was clean; it looked like he hadn't arrived at school yet.

*"He's after you. You should stay away for a while."*

All of a sudden, Yumiko remembered the words from the mysterious telephone conversation the night before. A bead of cold sweat ran down from her temple to her chest.

"Hey, are you OK?"

Yumiko's friend Kano Miyuki entered her spaced-out line of sight. Miyuki's big black eyes were sparkling mischievously.

"Hey now, Yumiko, no cutting class."

"No, I really don't feel well...."

"Come on, let's go." Miyuki was oddly enthusiastic as she grabbed Yumiko's arm and pulled her up out of her seat. Right then, Ohara-sensei came close to them.

"Shirasagi-san, you look a little pale. Do you need to take a rest in the infirmary?" She spoke in a voice that sounded a little bit *too* kind.

"It's OK, sensei. I'll be with her to make sure she's all right." With a grand gesture, Miyuki patted Yumiko on the shoulder. The other students ignored the exchange as they left the room, but Yumiko sensed that there was something unnatural about the way they moved.

*They're not acting normal!*

A shiver ran down Yumiko's spine; Miyuki gripped her hand more tightly.

"I'm OK, Miyuki. I can walk on my own." Despite her confident words, Yumiko's voice was shaking. She was determined to throw off Miyuki's grip and make a break for it when she left the classroom, but the minute she stepped out of the door, a swarm of male students surrounded her.

"Come on, let's go."

As he urged Yumiko along, Takai's eyes wandered aimlessly through the air. Before she knew it, Yumiko was in the dead center of a throng of her classmates. Miyuki continued to hold her arm tightly. Her delicate frame belied the incredible strength in her grip.

"Please, let go of me."

As Yumiko opened her mouth to cry out, a handkerchief was thrust into her mouth to gag her. The students walked along the corridor, surrounding Yumiko as she tried to escape.

As soon as the class was inside the CAI room, Ohara quickly shut the door.

*Click.*

As if signaled by the sound of the lock, the students stopped moving. Finally released from Miyuki's grasp, Yumiko looked around the classroom and let out a shrill cry.

*It's just like it was that night!*

There were no chairs or tables in the classroom. Nakajima sat on the leather sofa in the middle of the room. There was a twinge of pity and regret in his face as he stared at Yumiko.

*Nakajima, why...* Yumiko's lips moved, pleading for an explanation.

Looking straight at Yumiko, Nakajima slowly stood up and pointed at the sofa that he had been sitting in.

"Today, this is your seat." His low murmur pierced Yumiko's soul. The events of that night garishly resurfaced in her mind.

"No, I won't!" Unable to stand, Yumiko slumped to the floor. The many scratches on the linoleum tiles only too vividly reminded her of that night. Nakajima had said that he offered Ohara-sensei to a demon. Was that for real? And now she was going to be the next offering? Unable to run or get help, Yumiko started sobbing, and her tears trailed off her cheeks to the floor.

Black vinyl high heels stepped on Yumiko's tears as they pooled on the ground. Nervously looking up, Yumiko saw Ohara-sensei looking down on her with an eerie smile on her face.

"There's nothing to be afraid of. Come on, stand up." Holding out her hand, Ohara spoke in a soft, coaxing voice.

"No! No!" Yumiko furiously shook her head, and looked to Nakajima, seeking rescue.

"It's too late now. There's no other way." Nakajima spoke as if trying to convince himself, and Yumiko listened in despair. Nakajima's narrowed eyes turned to the host computer beyond the plate glass as its magnetic tapes began to spin. In time with the tape, the display in front of him flashed in brilliant colors.

"Prepare the sacrifice." There was no hesitation in Nakajima's voice as he gave the order. Yumiko saw several students approach to bring her to the chair. However, a sudden earthquake stopped them.

**"STOP!"**

A gut-wrenching, solemn voice commanded.

"Why did you stop them, Loki!?" Losing his calm at the unexpected turn of events, Nakajima gripped the microphone, his hands covered with cold sweat.

**"I don't need your help anymore,"** Loki said.

"What!?"

**"Don't you understand, Nakajima? I already have the ability to materialize in the Assiah world on my own."**

Nakajima's eyes were filled with shock as, right before his eyes, the monitor displaying Loki started to ooze a blue haze. A dimensional tear between the demon and human worlds was starting to form right then and there. Vibrantly-colored light shone like an aura, the atmosphere twisted and writhed unusually, and a pungent cold air burst forth.

Yumiko just watched the haze billow forth, her mouth agape. She was paralyzed with fear at the unbelievable events unfolding in front of her. The haze gradually thickened, and started to shape itself

into a vaguely-defined shape much like a hologram. Slowly, the form solidified. The light dancing within the frigid gust changed into flowing black hair, and the outline of a handsome face gained bronze skin as its deep black eyes gazing at the students in the room.

**"Yod, Seh, Vav, Seh."**

In an ancient language, Loki declared his own divinity. Ohara, who had at some point fallen on her knees in front of him, put her hands together, looked up at him in awe, and spoke the same words as if worshipping an all-powerful god.

*To think that Loki would have affected Ohara this much...*

Powerless, Nakajima stared at Loki and Ohara.

*I should have considered the possibility that this could happen. I'd better find a weakness, and soon!*

Nakajima frantically pointed the sensor connected to his computer at the nearly-materialized Loki. Calling up the ISG host computer, he sent the data the sensor had gathered about the demon to Craft. Meanwhile, Loki extended his hand toward Yumiko, rigid with terror. His bronze, naked body was beautifully symmetrical, almost like the Greek Apollo, and his muscular chest was covered in black scales. His black eyes, from which no one could possibly fathom any emotion, paralyzed her.

"Come over here." Pointing his talon at Yumiko, Loki commanded her in a low, cold voice. Yumiko looked to Nakajima for help, but he merely glanced at her and continued talking with the AI.

Nakajima knew he wouldn't have a chance if he tried to fight Loki directly, but Loki probably couldn't risk doing anything to him so long as Nakajima had control of the computer environment. Nakajima knew that he had to find some sort of weakness to Loki while he still had the chance. He had a hunch that Loki would not be able to leave the magnetic field being generated by the computer.

However, just as Yumiko tried to stagger away and flee, a strange sound came from Loki's arms. For a moment they looked like they were beginning to melt, and then they changed into giant, jiggling, pink-colored blobs of protoplasm. From their tips, multiple tentacles lashed out and wrapped around Yumiko's limbs.

"No, stop!" The tentacles gripping the crying Yumiko's limbs pulled her up into the air, toward the body of the blob. A new pink tentacle sprouted and wrapped around Yumiko's body, and the liquid leaking from its membrane melted her clothes, latched onto her now-exposed skin and started writhing along her slender body.

**>CRAFT, HURRY!**

Covering his ears so he wouldn't have to hear Yumiko's screams, Nakajima frantically kept hitting the keys. Finally the data transfer LED lit up, and Craft sent a response.

ACCORDING TO THE DATA YOU SENT, THE JELLY SUBSTANCE IS 58% WATER AND 17% ECTOPLASM. THE REMAINING MATTER IS NOT NATIVE TO THE PLANET AND CANNOT BE ANALYZED.

**>HAS THERE EVER BEEN A CASE OF SIMILAR MATTER BEING DISCOVERED BEFORE?**

YES. THIS CENTURY, SIMILAR MATTER WAS DISCOVERED IN A MAYAN TEMPLE AND IN NEW HAMPSHIRE.

**> WHAT IS ITS WEAK POINT?**



I CANNOT MAKE A HYPOTHESIS DUE TO INSUFFICIENT DATA. HOWEVER, THE MATTER DISCOVERED UNDER A RELIEF IN THE MAYAN TEMPLE WAS REPORTED TO HAVE EVAPORATED WHEN IT CAME IN CONTACT WITH MERCURIC SULFIDE-BASED PAINT.

**> MERCURIC SULFIDE? YOU MEAN A MIXTURE OF MERCURY AND SULFUR. BUT I DON'T HAVE THE TIME TO FIND SOMETHING LIKE THAT. TELL ME HOW TO DEAL WITH HIM NOW!**

UNFORTUNATELY I DO NOT HAVE SUFFICIENT DATA TO PROVIDE AN ANSWER.

Angry at Craft's ignorance, Nakajima punched the keyboard.

A strange gasping voice broke Nakajima's train of thought. He turned around and noticed Ohara writhing at Loki's feet, her chest fully exposed as she hugged her breasts. Nakajima did not miss the glowing fist-sized patch of skin below her breasts. He immediately reported the situation to Craft and asked what happened.

THE MOST LIKELY CONCLUSION IS THAT SHE IS PREGNANT WITH THE DEMON'S CHILD. SIMILAR SYMPTOMS HAVE BEEN REPORTED BEFORE IN EUROPE.

"That's impossible! Ohara only had sex with Loki in a virtual world. Could it be..."

Thinking of the terrible possibilities, Nakajima shuddered in fear. Could it be that Loki had already materialized several times before, only he had never realized it? Meanwhile, as if in tune with Ohara's gasps, Loki's entire body started to change into something bizarre. Except for his face, his skin turned pink, as if his cellular structure had changed entirely, and started to secrete a viscous substance.

"Aah..."

Letting out a cry of joy, Ohara tore off her clothes and grabbed onto Loki's legs. Loki's body jiggled like jelly and started to envelop her. Be it the gods on Mount Olympus or the monsters of Hades, many beings from other worlds had their hearts stolen by the beauty and sexual allure of human females. Most likely, even a demon as powerful as Loki could not resist arousal at the prospect of having his way with two beautiful women.

Leaving his handsome face intact, Loki started to change into a cylindrical lump of flesh that sprouted countless small tentacles. The pink protoplasm started to glow and the movement of the tentacle fondling Yumiko's body became faster and rougher.

Yumiko lost all will to resist, and her head fell to the side limply as she passed out. Loki started to pull her doll-like body into his own; he failed to notice that Ohara was glaring furiously at Yumiko even as she was enveloped within the protoplasm.

Many women could not resist the allure of demons. Even if they despised them normally, they'd fall madly in love with them if they had sex with them even once. For Ohara, who had devoted herself body and soul to Loki, watching him have sex with one of her students in front of her eyes was an unbearable humiliation. Once Yumiko's slender white legs had sunk into the protoplasm and she was inside Loki up to her chest, Ohara went mad with jealousy, grabbed Yumiko's head, and started to twist it.

"Agh!" Yumiko's face twisted in pain, and her body spasmed in agony.

"Stop! Stop it!" Crying out in anguish, Nakajima ran to her, only to be struck hard in the face by a thick tentacle. Knocked back against the wall, his vision blacked out for an instant. When he finally managed to pull himself off the floor, Yumiko's body showed no signs of life; her head was unnaturally twisted to the side and her eyes were open and glazed over.

Sitting atop the pillar of flesh, Loki's face wore a surprised expression before he glared with displeasure at Ohara, inside his body. But Loki was closer and more accustomed to Ohara; she was more important than Yumiko. Loki lifted his tentacle and dumped Yumiko's body on the floor.

Nakajima went mad with regret.

*Why didn't I warn her more seriously last night? If I hadn't made such a half-assed phone call and instead told her everything, this never would have happened. I killed Shirasagi Yumiko!*

Not only had he never thought that Loki would have attained the knowhow to materialize himself, but he had never even considered that Ohara might kill Yumiko. But Loki's sinister body was here in the Assiah world and the innocent Yumiko had been murdered.

And he just looked on, powerless.

Biting down in his lip, Nakajima noticed a faint scarlet light in his peripheral vision and jerked up his head. Loki's body had spread throughout the entire CAI room, and the classroom looked like a jungle of protoplasm. Pink tentacles pulsed and twisted as they grabbed hypnotized students and pulled them inside Loki's body, where they were consumed one by one. However, the red light that had caught Nakajima's attention lay beyond the carnage. By the room's entrance, the atmosphere was permeated with red and shook like an aurora.

*There's a dimensional warp! It can't be--a demon other than Loki....!?* As Nakajima's attention was drawn away, several tentacles wrapped around his legs.

"Loki, what are you doing to me!?" Nakajima, shocked to his very core, could not believe that Loki would attack him.

***"I bet you thought you were safe so long as you were in charge of the computer. But this woman can serve as your replacement easily enough. Now that I can appear in the Assiah world, not only are your abilities no longer useful—they're a liability."***

As if to back up Loki's statement, Ohara laughed within his body.

Nakajima immediately grabbed his handheld computer and entered the command to summon Kerberos. From the liquid crystal display, a white mist wafted into the room.

"Come forth, Kerberos!"

In response to Nakajima's cry, the mist rapidly solidified, impatient to fully take form, and assaulted Loki.

***"You are a beast of the demon world and yet you side with the human!?"***

Flame-like breath burst forth from the fang-lined maw, and Loki let out a cry that shook the very earth. Deftly dodging an attacking tentacle, the demon beast Kerberos bit down at the tentacle's base and tore it off of Loki's body. Loki's purple blood gushed out and melted the linoleum tiling on the floor. The two demons let out roars like thunder; cracks shot up the plate glass window, and the ceiling and walls started to crumble. Despite the fierce fight, Loki refused to drop Nakajima.

"Kerberos, over here!"

As Kerberos leapt through the air in response to Nakajima's cry, he was finally caught as a tentacle wrapped around his body. His tail split in half and became two serpents; they raised their heads and

tore off the tentacle holding him. Freed from Loki's grasp, Kerberos leapt at the tentacles restraining Nakajima in an attempt to save him.

As if to thwart the beast's effort, Loki bent his tentacle and smashed Nakajima's head against the floor. The impact was almost enough to crack his skull. Nakajima's consciousness wavered as fresh blood poured from the split in his forehead. His sight was drenched in red. With his vision distorting, the ferociously fighting Kerberos seemed like a far-away illusion.

*So this is the pathetic fate of the magician...*

As his consciousness faded and he prepared to die, memories of those strange illusions from before spontaneously appeared in a corner of Nakajima's mind.

What were those? The woman from them called that man that looked just like him "Izanagi." Did it have any connection to the story of Izanami and Izanagi from Japanese mythology?

*Even if I knew, what difference does it make now...?*

Muttering to himself, Nakajima closed his eyes in acceptance of his fate.

The heart of the seemingly dead Yumiko started to beat faintly.

*Yumiko, Yumiko!*

A kind voice was calling her name.

*Who are you? Is that you, Mom?* Yumiko asked instinctively in her mind.

As if recognizing that she had awakened, the voice cut off briefly, then resumed speaking in a kind voice.

*Stand up, Yumiko.*

Yumiko did not hear the roars of the demon beast nor the sounds of the classroom being destroyed. In fact, she had no sense of her terrible experience at all. All she could hear was the voice of the woman. Timidly opening her eyes, Yumiko realized that the voice was coming from the red aurora in the warped area in the air.

Through the aurora, the mirage of a peaceful countryside was visible. Blue rice paddies with not-yet-ripened seeds. Rolling hills covered in summer grass. Groups of giant boulders, simple yet mysterious.

Yumiko had seen that scenery somewhere before.

*Isn't that the Asuka Ishibutai tomb...?* As the thought popped into her mind, the woman's voice spoke again.

*When you were Izanami in a former life, that's what you called it.*

*My former life? Izanami...you mean the goddess from Japanese mythology?*

Yumiko was confused by the suddenness of the words, but what the voice said had the sense of an undeniable truth.

*Stand, Yumiko. This space in the air is connected to Asuka, where I rest. Take Nakajima--no, your dearest Izanagi--and come to me.*

The instant she obeyed the voice and stood, the angry cries of Loki and the roars of Kerberos filled Yumiko's ears as she returned to reality. Overwhelmed with a sudden dizziness, she immediately sat down again. But as blood rushed to her head and she saw the crumpled Nakajima on the floor, she was struck with an overwhelming sense of duty.

*I've got to save him!*

It was a feeling greater than love or friendship, closer to instinct. It was a powerful emotion; the boy named Nakajima Akemi was literally a part of her, and if he was lost there would be no meaning to her continued existence. Without any idea how to save him, she stood up and clenched her teeth, and the voice sounded again.

*For the moment, I am going to enter your body so you can use my power--the power to burn anything you stare at with conviction. I pray that your body can take the strain of it.*

From the dimensional rift, a blinding flash pulsed, and a pure power Yumiko had never felt before rushed through her body.

**"GYAAS!"**

A bizarre cry snapped Nakajima Akemi back to consciousness.

Opening his eyes, he saw Loki's smoking tentacle spasming over his head as it gave off the stench of cooked meat. Enduring the head-splitting pain, Nakajima sat up. Pillars of flame burst from various spots on Loki's body, and his charred tentacles flailed through the air like waves, giving off dark fumes thick with that charred meat smell.

Yumiko, who he had thought dead, was facing off against Loki; gouts of flame shot out everywhere she stared. In medieval Europe, when magic use had been at its height, the ability was known as spontaneous combustion.

*What the heck is going on...?*

Nakajima stared, dumbfounded, as Yumiko wielded a power he could never have imagined her controlling. Nakajima soon noticed that her face was unusually pale, and that her entire body was shaking. Just with the force of her will, Yumiko was channeling the immense power of Izanami, and her body was getting close to the limit of what it could stand.

Meanwhile, under intense attack from the flame, Loki ejected Ohara from inside his body and started to chant a spell in an eerie rhythm. The pink protoplasm started to condense, changing back into the form of the bronze-skinned youth.

Yumiko desperately channeled her will and attempted to incinerate Loki with the power of Izanami, but the flames harmlessly dissolved against his bronze skin. Loki did not budge and simply stood still, as if waiting for her to expend all her energy. A wave of intense exhaustion swept over Yumiko's body, and her vision started to waver. Right as she felt like she was going to drop to her knees, no longer able to withstand the effort, the voice spoke once more.

*Hurry, get Nakajima and escape!*

Her courage restored by the voice, Yumiko ran over to Nakajima, but slipped and stumbled. However, determined not to show any weakness, she immediately looked up and glared at Loki. Witnessing her determined expression, something awoke in Nakajima's despair-filled soul. Ever since he had been beaten up over a foolish misunderstanding and had made the decision to summon a demon, he had sealed off his emotions; in that instant they came back, and he felt a kind of love that he had never experienced before.

*For her sake, I can't die!*

Nakajima's dizziness dissipated. He quickly looked around the room. At some point, the still-naked Ohara had gone over to a terminal. She was studying the screen as she typed in commands. She was nowhere near as skilled as Nakajima, but she was clearly used to operating a computer. Nakajima

realized that Ohara was saving the changes in the data that had occurred when Loki materialized; he immediately understood the demon's unusual actions.

The reason that Loki was staying close to the terminal was because the demon was not completely confident in his own materialization. There was a very good chance that his protoplasmic blob-form was a result of a coincidental bug in the data transfer. Loki must have been practicing transforming into that form. He probably didn't know what would happen if he tried to leave the computer-generated magnetic field in his true form. He may have gained his freedom and escaped the limitations of existing digitally, but there was still a danger of annihilating himself entirely. Just in case, Ohara was saving all the data.

The instant Nakajima realized this, he deduced that he'd be able to escape if he tried *now*. He quickly used his handheld computer to recall Kerberos, defeated in the battle and now lying on his side as if he was dead. Loki noticed Nakajima's movement.

No matter what happened, Loki could not let Nakajima escape; he knew everything about the demon. Even knowing the danger it would put him in, Loki stepped away from the computer and toward Nakajima.

"Nakajima, look out!" Yumiko desperately stood up. Everything went red. Yumiko's lips moved in words that she was not trying to say.

"Back, demon!"

For a moment, Izanami took over Yumiko's body entirely and released all her energy. A gout of flame erupted on the approaching Loki's forehead, at the one spot where his body was still in gelatinous form. Loki let out a cry like an enraged beast, and the Izanami-possessed Yumiko grabbed Nakajima's body and headed for the aurora.

Overcome with shock and rage, Loki let out a roar and went after them. For an instant, Loki's body wavered like heat haze and his bronze skin became almost translucent. Numbers flowed like mad over the terminal's display as Ohara powerlessly glared at the screen.

A few moments later, the host computer stopped going haywire and Loki recovered his form. Right before the folds of the aurora enveloped Nakajima and Yumiko's bodies, Loki flew toward them like the wind and clawed at the two.

His long talons gouged Yumiko deeply from the nape of her neck to the middle of her back, and fresh blood poured out of the wounds. But as soon as the aurora enveloped the two, it immediately started fading. The only thing left behind where the aurora had been were streaks of Yumiko's blood, and the room shook with the anguished cry of the now completely summoned Loki .

## DOWN THE ROAD –CHAPTER 1 [DR1]

It had been drizzling in the Asuka area since the previous evening. Ancient thickets of cedars blocked the sunlight, making it dark on Ayakashi Mountain even during daytime. A statue deep in the mountains that somewhat resembled a monkey, placed there ages before even the Tenbyo era in the eighth century, looked up at the sky with its huge eyes that almost took up half its face.

The rain falling in front of the statue became tinged with crimson. Despite the winds being calm, the raindrops started to waver. Something like an aurora appeared between two moss-covered old tree trunks. This phenomenon, called "Ayakashi" by the people of Yamato, was the origin of the mountain's name. The aurora increased in density, shining a brilliant festival of lights on the normally dark mountainside. A sudden gust of wind blew the light rain aside, and as it seemed to shake the aurora itself, the shapes of two people appeared in midair.

The two shapes solidified and dropped to the grass below. Just as it had appeared, the aurora gradually lost its light and vanished. As if it had never been there, the drizzle fell through the area where it had hovered a moment before.

According to the traditions of the local people, the gods of Yamato used the Ayakashi to travel to China and India. Those unfortunate humans who entered it unknowingly would vanish and never be seen again, so people were forbidden to approach it. Izanami had used that power to save Nakajima and Yumiko.

The calm wind on his skin and the cold rain on his cheek, Nakajima opened his eyes. Next to him, covered in fern leaves, lay the half-naked Yumiko.

*Where are we?*

Not letting go of Yumiko's hand, Nakajima warily scanned his surroundings. The world he had seen beyond the aurora had been one of fields and rolling hills, yet they were now in a dim forest.

Either way, they were safe. That, of course, was due to Yumiko's courage and extraordinary power. Wondering how that sweet expression could possibly hold the power to stop a demon in its tracks, Nakajima put his hand on her cheek.

Yumiko's cheek was hard and cold, almost as if she was a doll of ice. Telling himself it was because of the rain, Nakajima took off his shirt and sat Yumiko up so he could to put it around her. However, when he put his hand behind her delicate shoulder, it came back covered in thick black clots of blood. Nakajima timidly looked at her back, suppressed the urge to cry out, and shuddered.

From her right shoulder to her waist, Yumiko's back had been brutally torn open; even her bones were visible. In trying to grab her, Loki's claws had dealt her a terrible wound. As if awakening from a deep sleep, Yumiko opened her eyes. Her calm, pure expression betrayed no hint of pain from the wound as she gazed at Nakajima and whispered "I'm sorry."

"...."

Nakajima didn't know how to respond and simply hugged Yumiko tight. He should have been the one apologizing. Having Yumiko apologize to him hurt far worse than her condemnation would.

But Yumiko's words had a meaning to them. She murmured into Nakajima's ear.

"Sorry...I don't think I'm going to survive this. But will you wish to bring me back?"

"What are you saying? You won't die just from this wound! Hang on!"

"No, that's not it. Izanami told me earlier. It's not just because of this wound on my back. I borrowed Izanami's power to fight Loki. But her power was far too strong for me to handle..."

"Izanami?"

Nakajima was shocked by the words coming from Yumiko's mouth. With his background in magic and mythology, he was able to grasp the meaning of what she said, even if only vaguely. At the same time, he realized the meaning of the strange visions that he had seen several times before.

They had been an exact replay of Japanese mythology. In order to bring back his dead wife Izanami, Izanagi, the father of the gods, went to the land of Yomi. While there, Izanagi looked upon his wife, who had become hideous, and broke a great taboo in doing so. He was forced to abandon her and flee back to the surface.

"She told me that I am a reincarnation of Izanami. And that if you desire for me to return to life, you should bring my body deep into her grave, right to the room where she is entombed. If you do so then I will return to life, and this time we can be together." Yumiko started coughing fiercely.

As her throat shuddered, Nakajima wiped aside the fresh blood she coughed up.

"Yumiko, don't talk like that. You're not going to die. We're going to live happily ever after." Nakajima opening up to her, when he had never been open with anyone, brought a smile to Yumiko's pale face.

"Thanks. Don't abandon me mid-way like Izanagi did in the myth..." Yumiko closed her eyes like she was going to sleep, and drew her last breath.

Embracing her body and stroking her wet hair, a fire of emotion blazed forth inside Nakajima. Putting aside those visions, he had never had any contact with Izanami. But he believed Yumiko. Or perhaps it would be better to say that he had decided to believe her. After all, he *had* summoned Loki, the god from the legends of northern Europe. Nakajima had no idea how the mechanism for reincarnation worked, but if Izanami from Japanese myth really existed, then he would seek her out.

"Hold on. I promise I'll bring you back." Carefully laying down Yumiko's body, Nakajima picked up the handheld computer that had dropped to his side and turned on the switch. Fortunately, it still appeared to be working.

*If I can summon Kerberos...*

As the white mist appeared from the small liquid crystal display, Nakajima breathed a sign of relief. The fully materialized electronic beast roared once and looked at his master with fire in his eyes. But the wounds he had sustained fighting Loki had robbed Kerberos of his usual vigor; it even looked as if his entire body had gotten a little smaller. It would probably take at least a few months for wounds that serious to heal. It might be possible to heal him by fixing errors in the computer data that comprised him but Nakajima had never tried to do anything like that before. Even if he tried, it wasn't something that could be completed in a day or two, and Nakajima didn't have that kind of time. Patting Kerberos' muzzle to encourage him, Nakajima pulled Yumiko's body up onto his back and set out.

After ten minutes walking along animal tracks, they emerged from the trees. Far beyond a steep slope covered in *kumazasa* growth, the humidity in the air shrouded a small mountain hamlet in mist. On the right was a great stone tumulus, and behind it, mountains emitted a greenish aura.

*That's an Ishibutai grave and Tono Peak. So this must be Asuka!*

The scenery perfectly matched the photos in a much-reread book on ancient history he had eagerly studied long ago. Maybe it was true that an ancient Japanese goddess had called them to the mountains of Asuka, which were intimately entwined with Japanese myth. But how was he supposed to find Izanami's tomb without any guidance?

The demonic beast beside Nakajima let out a low growl, as if to encourage the motionless youth as he stared ahead blankly.

"Yeah, you're right, Kerberos. That has to be it..."

Drawing a deep breath, Nakajima balled his right hand into a fist and touched the tip of the beast's sharp fang with his wrist. In an instant, sharp pain ran through his arm as fresh blood flowed out of the wound. Nakajima tried to use his own blood to create and power a thaumaturgic circle In order to find

the location of Izanami's tomb. Even as his blood fell to the muddy ground, the rain simply washed it away, distorting the shape of the circle. Dizzy from blood loss, Nakajima tried to redraw it.

Though he was well-versed in magical theory, Nakajima had always relied on computers up until now. Although this was his first time casting a spell by himself, there was no hesitation in his expression. There couldn't be any ambiguity when casting spells using a computer. Having mastered the theory to that extent, he was sure he could do this. Nakajima calculated his direction from the Ishibutai and Tono Peak, used his computer's astrology software to find the position of the stars and phase of the moon, and drew his circle. Circle completed, Nakajima sat down and murmured, "Izanami, please tell me where you are."

He made a sign with his hands and began to meditate.

Nakajima lacked any sort of psychic powers, but his feelings toward Yumiko and the unique magnetic field at Mount Ayakashi easily pulled him into a trance. He concentrated on the silver thread of fate that connected Yumiko and himself. The thread he pictured started to glow. In that state of deep meditation, Nakajima tried to superimpose the thread that he was picturing onto the scenery of the real world. His brow wrinkled deeply as he focused his spirit to the utmost. An eternity later, he could clearly see the silver thread in his mental image being pulled into two small knolls that had been plowed into grape fields.

*That must be where Izanami's grave is.*

Awakened from his meditation, Nakajima knelt down and looked for something in the scenery around him that matched what he had seen in his trance.

"That's it! That's Izanami's grave!" Nakajima cried aloud.

The two knolls formed a perfect triangle between the Ishibutai and Tono Peak. Drawn by the smell of blood, several flies crowded around Yumiko and landed on her wound. Irritably brushing them aside, Nakajima picked her up and put her up onto Kerberos' back.



## **DOWN THE ROAD –CHAPTER 2** [DR2]

Ohara faced the host computer, talking with Loki in the now-decimated CAI room. Even though he could now take full form, Loki seemed to prefer staying inside the computer in a digital form; it was most likely less of a physical burden.

**"Damned Nakajima. He fled all the way to Asuka."**

"What should I do? Should I send my students after them, or do you have another idea?"

**"No. I'll go myself."**

Loki's voice was full of resolve. He fully realized that the revolutionary technology of summoning demons with computers was on par with nuclear weapon technology. If he could master the demon transfer technology Nakajima had developed, conquering the human world would be more than just a far-fetched dream.

But the same thing could apply to other demons. In order to prevent the technology from getting into the hands of other demons and thus ensuring his absolute superiority in the Assiah world, Loki could not let Nakajima live.

Loki had servants to spy for him—flies. Flies were one of the few creatures that could freely travel between the Assiah and Aztiluth worlds; Loki had the ability to not only talk with all flies, but to sense everything they experienced as if he was there himself.

From them, Loki had learned that Nakajima had appeared in Asuka.

"Well then..." Ohara entered a command into the computer.

Displayed onscreen was a part of Nakajima's database: the numbers for City Banks in the Kinki region. Ohara scrolled the screen and pulled up a map of Japan, referencing it with the phone numbers.

"I think that Fourth Kangyo Bank in Inai would be best."

**"Then send me there."**

As the magnetic tape started spinning furiously, the screen became awash in brilliant colors. Setting the modem, Ohara pressed each button of Fourth Kangyo Bank's phone number carefully to avoid making any mistakes.

## DOWN THE ROAD –CHAPTER 3 [DR3]

Sinking their sneakers into the gravel of the path, the hikers in Asuka hurried along the trail. The faces of all the nearby tourists displayed irritation at the unwelcome arrival of rain. Kerberos shot through the hills at high speed, Nakajima on his back tightly gripping the corpse of Yumiko. But the extremely abnormal sight didn't seem to faze the hikers.

"What was that just now?"

"They must be shooting a movie here, I guess."

The relaxed voices grew faint behind Nakajima. Presently, Nakajima arrived at the hills he had seen in his vision. Nakajima did not know that this 200-meter tall hill was a Kofun tomb known as the Shirasagi Mound. The Shirasagi Mound was huge for a Kofun tomb, and deeply shrouded in mystery. It was unknown whether or not it was a *zenpoko-en-fun* keyhole-style tomb or just one that took advantage of a natural hill, let alone who was buried there or when it was built. However, it had been passed down in oral tradition that a woman had been buried here, and some of those who had studied the treatise Gishi-Wajin-den argued that it was the grave of Himiko, the ancient queen of Yamato. In modern times, fully half of Shirasagi Mound had been cultivated into fields; of the original burial mound, only a single stone chamber remained, along with a few *kumazasa* shrubs and pine woods.

As Kerberos climbed the hill, his movement became visibly slower, and the spasms of his rough breathing could be felt on his back. As soon as what appeared to be the entrance to the burial chamber appeared, Kerberos came to a stop. Nakajima dropped to the ground, leaving Yumiko on the back of the demon beast. As if his strained nerves had finally reached their breaking point, Kerberos' front legs bent, and he collapsed to the ground. Perhaps his wounds from the battle with Loki had worsened, or perhaps Shirasagi Mound itself caused pain to the animal, but either way, he could no longer take another step. Kerberos stuck his tongue out and started panting, letting out a low whine as he did. The flicker of fire in his eyes was gone.

"You did good, Kerberos. You can go on back."

Nakajima had no choice but to return the digital beast to his handheld computer.

## DOWN THE ROAD –CHAPTER 4 [DR4]

Four female employees in the operations room of the branch office of Fourth Kangyo Bank in Inai, entering data in the host computer so it could write a patch to send the day's transfers to other bank branches. None of the four were looking down at their keyboards; their glances only turned back and forth from their displays to the numbers on the display vouchers they had been working with.

"Why is my terminal always the one to break!?" One of the workers irritably got up from her seat.

Her name was Mida Yoshie and she had been working at the bank for two years. She was brilliant but somewhat short-tempered lady, with a bob-cut appearance that complimented her energetic personality. Yoshie looked closely at the other workers' terminals, but it appeared that she was the only one experiencing the problem. Her screen was completely dark and not responding to any keyboard input at all.

"Isn't that what normally happens when you send data to the host computer?" Shimamura Yuko, Yoshie's polar opposite in appearance and personality, looked over at her as she continued to enter data into her own terminal.

Yuko had been at the company a year longer than Yoshie and was thus slightly higher on the chain of command.

"Is it just mine, then? Oh well, I might as well go make some tea."

As Yoshie discontentedly left the room, a blue haze started to seep from the display behind her. A pungent musky smell started to waft throughout the room; engrossed in their work, nobody seemed to notice. The blue haze started to coagulate and take form behind the chair that Yoshie had been sitting in.

Tired from all the data entry, Yuko thrust her arms toward the ceiling and stretched. A strange jelly-like substance grabbed onto her white throat.

"Yoshie, cut it out."

Yawning as she turned around, Yuko found herself staring into the bronze face of Loki, his head atop that bizarre pillar of gelatinous flesh. She tried to scream, but her vocal chords froze; she could not make a sound. The demon's tentacle constricted, crushing Yuko's skull with a loud crunch. Yuko's head was nothing more than a grotesque lump of disfigured flesh; her hands continued to tap on the terminal keys out of sheer inertia. The other two women sat paralyzed with fear; fresh tentacles grabbed them and pulled them inside the demon's body.

From behind Loki came the sound of porcelain shattering. Yoshie had returned with tea and dropped her tray at the unbelievable bloodbath she had walked into. Loki's tentacle stretched out. Heat shot through Yoshie's chest, along with a sticky sensation. In the next instant, blinding pain shot through her as fresh blood spurted out of her rent skin.

"What's going on?"

A male employee carrying a load of bills to the safe had heard the strange sound within the room and opened the door. Loki mercilessly threw Yoshie's now-decapitated head at his chest with incredible force.

"Agh!"

Knocked hard against the wall, the man blearily searched for the emergency alarm and barely managed to press it with his remaining strength before passing out.

The shrill sound of the alarm echoed throughout the building. In the midst of the clamor, Loki calmly completed his transformation into his bronze humanoid form and turned his pitch-black eyes toward Asuka.

## DOWN THE ROAD –CHAPTER 5 [DR5]

After returning Kerberos to the demon world, Nakajima hoisted Yumiko onto his back and approached the stone burial chamber of Shirasagi Mound. However, after peering into the small room through the *kumazasa* overgrowth, he could not hold back disappointment. The burial chamber was dug vertically into the ground with an opening about 90 centimeters wide and tall, but the walls of the chamber itself were only a few meters long at most. It was just tall enough for Nakajima to stand in if he hunched over. It seemed awfully small for the entryway to such a huge Kofun tomb. Was Izanami really here?

*Don't panic, this sort of burial chambers must have some sort of trick or secret passage, or something!* Trying to reassure himself, Nakajima lowered himself into the chamber.

The room's cold air was stagnant even as its basalt walls, damp with humidity, glistened. Nakajima gently lowered Yumiko onto the ground. A frog that had been watching this strange intruder from one of the corners of the chamber croaked and jumped forward in surprise. Sitting down on the stone floor, Nakajima entered a trance and tried to make a connection with Izanami, but he had very little experience doing this sort of thing. Perhaps because of his anxiety, but the picture in his mind's eye did not change; the only thing that happened as he sat on the ground was the passage of time. Nakajima furrowed his brow in frustration.

"I can't feel anything, even though I must be much closer to Izanami than I was before. Izanami, answer me--how can I find you?"

As if in response to his whispered question, the entire burial chamber started shuddering. The stones in the walls started to groan, and a bit of dirt fell from the ceiling. Coughing, Nakajima unconsciously pulled Yumiko's corpse closer to him.

"Izanami, answer me, so I can revive Yumiko!" As if he were chanting a spell, Nakajima murmured the same words over and over.

The earthquake soon subsided. As if it were trying to ask something, the frog's croaking became louder. Nakajima turned and looked in its direction; what he saw made his eyes glimmer with excitement. The earthquake had created a gap between the stones in the wall that rendered the crimson paint on their edges clearly visible. Approaching the divide between the flagstones, Nakajima could feel cold air flowing through the reddish crack. Twisting his fingers into the gap, Nakajima dislodged the stones one by one, revealing a crawlspace large enough for a person to enter. The crawlspace sloped slightly downward, deep into the earth.

The pit was shrouded in darkness, but Nakajima did not hesitate. He tore his shirt and used the strips to tie Yumiko and his handheld computer to his body. Nakajima got down on his stomach and put his feet into the hole. Under his palms, a cold, smooth feeling like marble gave lie to the fact that the structure was man-made. Hunkered down on all fours so that he would not slip, Nakajima started climbing down the shaft carefully, into the inky blackness below.

## **DOWN THE ROAD –CHAPTER 6** [DR6]

Loki had left the Fourth Kangyo Bank and was standing at the summit of Tonomine, where he could look out over the whole of Asuka. Below him lay the groups of Asuka megaliths. The drizzle fell on his face; Loki opened his mouth. His throat expanded bizarrely, his tongue started vibrating. The extremely high-frequency pitch of his voice was inaudible to human ears but, drawn in by the sound, countless black dots the size of rice grains cut through the rain on a beeline toward him. It was a swarm of flies under Loki's command. Brushing his face with their hairy legs, they flew into his ear canals and each whispered something to him.

After hearing all the information he needed, Lokie ordered the flies to return to their posts. Rubbing the wound on his forehead, Loki stared at Shirasagi Mound.

***Nakajima...what do you intend to do, going in there....?***

He knew that Nakajima had not escaped to Asuka by his own power. Nor had Yumiko's power brought them here. A human woman would never have the power to wound a demon. Most likely a Japanese god or demon had possessed her, and summoned them here to Asuka. And it would be safe to assume that it was quite a powerful one at that.

***"I don't care who you are, but I won't let you get away with this. I'll crush you to a pulp!"***

Loki murmured, charging down the slope toward Shirasagi Mound.

## **SWORD OF FLAME –CHAPTER 1** [SF1]

The cave sloped down gently, seemingly continuing on forever. his limbs stiff, Nakajima kept his balance as he slowly descended. As the sounds of his labored breathing echoed off the smooth walls of the shaft, the entrance far above him started to vanish in the distance. The reverberations almost made it sound as if Yumiko, strapped to Nakajima's back, was breathing, and several times Nakajima stopped and strained his ears.

But the shoulders of the corpse were as slumped over. At each stop, Nakajima only detected the stench of death.

His sense of time was long gone. The tunnel was so long that he was almost convinced that it continued all the way to the center of the earth. Nakajima's arms and legs felt strained from the effort of supporting the weight of two bodies. He felt that if he let his concentration slip for even a moment he would lose his grip and slide all the way down. Twisting his body, Nakajima pulled off his shoes and socks and continued downwards bare-footed. He could be more certain of his footholds this way. Had he been here by himself, he might have been able to slide all the way down the shaft, but if Yumiko's body was damaged, all his effort would have been for nothing.

All of a sudden, Nakajima's feet found thin air.

"Agh!"

Nakajima desperately extended his arms forward and clawed at the air as loss, terror, and despair shot through his body. An instant later, he was painfully slammed against a hard stone surface. He had fallen straight down at least two or three meters. He had unconsciously moved to protect Yumiko's body; his shoulders and back took more of the shock than they should have, and unable to stand, he lost consciousness.

A faint light and a calm breeze. His cheek caressed by the cold, Nakajima opened his heavy eyelids. A little ways away, Yumiko's body lay silently. He felt light, and it didn't seem like he had any broken bones. He was in pain, but it wasn't enough to worry about. Gathering his energy, he stood and took a deep breath. As his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, his surroundings became clearer.

And what mysterious surroundings they were! Nakajima found himself standing in a plaza carved in a niche between towering cliffs. The walls around him were deep crimson. About three meters up one wall was a dark opening; most likely, it was the shaft that Nakajima had just crawled down. There should have been a visible ceiling to this subterranean chamber, but the walls simply climbed up until the red stones were shrouded in the darkness above. At the end of the plaza, a narrow path stretched out into the bottomless darkness.

Was this the pathway to Izanami's burial chamber? Unlike the earlier shaft, this appeared to be a natural underground ravine. The phosphorescent light illuminating the path and the underground chamber appeared to be produced by mossy plants growing on the rock face. Nakajima recalled the scene from the visions he had of being chased by the rotting woman.

A viscous drop of water fell onto Nakajima's cheek. Listening closely, he could hear the steady sound of water coming from high above. Over the aeons, the lime deposits in this trickle had accumulated here and there along the path to form giant stalagmites. Nakajima touched the rising cliff to feel it. The surface of the cold stone was wet with condensation. When he scratched it, the rock crumbled away easily, revealing a new layer of red stone below. Idly recalling that the ancient red paint used in ancient Japanese tombs was mercuric-sulfide based, Nakajima suddenly remembered Craft's words.

When explorers had discovered material that was apparently part of a demon's body in a Mayan temple, it evaporated when it came into contact with their mercuric-sulfide based paint. In other words,

this tomb was designed specifically to keep demons out. His courage buoyed by this realization, Nakajima picked up Yumiko's body and walked toward the depths of the red valley. However, he'd never had that much in the way of stamina in the first place. In less than ten minutes, his legs were exhausted. He would have liked Kerberos' help, but he didn't want to put any more stress on the already terribly-injured demon. Besides, this path with walls literally painted with demon repellent would hardly be the most appropriate place for Kerberos.

Breathing heavily, the exhausted Nakajima proceeded along the path to the burial chamber, its stone walls towering up into the air above him. The sweat dripping off his forehead into his eyes blurred his vision, and each step required every ounce of effort he had. Nakajima shook his head back and forth to get rid of the built-up perspiration; when his vision cleared, he noticed a white silhouette in his peripheral vision.

"Who's there!?"

Looking closer, he saw that there was more than just one silhouette. There were quite a few of them, but none of them displayed any indication of movement, and simply stood or squatted there. Nakajima gingerly approached one; it was a bleached mummy, its head tilted to the side and its black eye sockets staring up into space. Whether it was the power of the mercuric sulfide or the cold of the underground chamber, the corpse had been preserved from natural decay. Its chest area had what looked like a large hole deliberately drilled in. Looking around, it seemed that the dozen or so mummies here were scattered about without any order to them. Judging by their clothing, they appeared to be the bones of people from many different time periods. One wore primitive robes, another appeared to be wearing the *eboshi* hat of a Kamakura-era samurai, and yet another looked like an Edo-period peasant. Many of them bore signs their bones had been crushed by large jaws while others had had their throats torn out. Few people would come into a place like this by accident; these were most likely grave robbers here to plunder the Kofun tomb. But who had done this to them?

A bizarre cry suddenly assaulted Nakajima's ears.

"YAAH! GLULULU!"

It seemed like the voice was coming from far away, but the unusual reverberations produced by the burial pathway walls made it difficult to judge the distance of sounds. Nakajima cast a sidelong glance at the butchered corpses of the mummies. If the grave guardian that mercilessly slaughtered these would-be grave robbers was still patrolling the path to the burial chamber now...

As Nakajima shuddered, that self-same guardian leapt from the shadow of a great rock into his line of sight.

"Yomotsu-Shikome!" Nakajima cried.

The fierce image of the monster woman from his vision was burned into Nakajima's memory, but the Yomotsu-Shikome standing before him was far more grotesque in real life than he had imagined. She was almost exactly twice his height. Her squat, purple-flecked legs glistened with white slime as her bloated lower stomach stuck out like that of a pregnant woman. The robe she wore seemed almost comically small; it did not even extend down far enough to cover her breasts, which drooped all the way down to her navel. Her webbed hands shuddered, thick with blubber. Her face was almost exactly that of a green frog. When she exhaled, two gill-like slits on the side of her throat expanded, exposing the pink fleshy walls within. Her long, shimmering black hair only made her look all the more disgusting.

Yomotsu-Shikome took a step forward. As Nakajima met her gaze, he carefully laid Yumiko down, wiped the cold sweat on his hands onto his slacks, and picked up his handheld computer.

"Kerberos, please come here."

Before the white haze that emerged from the liquid crystal display could even take on a rough outline of its shape, it vanished with a weak bark. Apparently, the pathway's crimson paint really did seal off the power of the demon beast.

Yomotsu-Shikome thrust her webbed hands at the petrified Nakajima's shoulders. Leaping to the side at the last minute, Nakajima slipped and fell on the ground. He desperately tried to get up, but the large hands had already grabbed him. Yomotsu-Shikome's long tongue licked the area around her huge mouth, and her rancid breath assaulted Nakajima's senses.

"Izanami, are you going to abandon me after I've come all this way?" Nakajima instinctively cried out.

For some reason, the instant that the monster woman heard Nakajima's cry, she began acting strangely. Her mouth agape, she looked at Nakajima with a blank expression, all hostility gone completely. Her eyes looked around the area, then fixated on the body of Yumiko, laying on the side of the path. An expression of awe came over her face.

"Izanami..."

Her throat jiggled as Yomotsu-Shikome spoke the name reverently. Putting Nakajima back on the ground, the monster woman clumsily waddled over to Yumiko, and picked her up as carefully as if she were handling a fragile broken object.

"Hey, wait! What are you going to do with Yumiko?"

Yomotsu-Shikome shot Nakajima a disapproving glance before she cocked her head, as if to signal he follow her. She proceeded down the burial pathway holding Yumiko.



## **SWORD OF FLAME –CHAPTER 2** [SF2]

Loki swiftly entered Shirasagi Mound and stood before the passageway that Nakajima had passed through earlier.

**"Be patient, Nakajima. Soon, I will defile your precious woman before your very eyes before devouring you whole."** A twisted smile on his face, Loki transformed himself into an amorphous blob and oozed into the tunnel.

Loki descended the passageway that took Nakajima hours to traverse in mere minutes. Soon the blob of flesh made a squishing sound as it dropped to the stone floor of the burial chamber plaza. The moment he touched the floor, his outer membrane hissed smoke as it started to melt.

**"Damn you!"**

Loki quickly transformed back into his bronze body. Kneeling, he let loose a terrible howl. He could not stand the chemical reaction that took place when his protoplasmic body came into contact with the mercuric sulfide. Between his eyes, the one gelatinous place on his body throbbed and pulsed.

Gritting his teeth as he stood, Loki glared at the crimson burial road.

## **SWORD OF FLAME –CHAPTER 3** [SF3]

Led by Yomotsu-Shikome, Nakajima had reached the end of the burial pathway. Before him, a burial chamber stood; it had to be the spot where Izanami lay.

*I've finally made it here...*

The chamber itself had no door, but a silvery, fluorescent relief in the entryway's floor emitted an aura, as if it were guarding the chamber within. It strongly resembled a Solomon Hexagram.

Yomotsu-Shikome gestured with her chin as if to urge him inside. As Nakajima started to enter, she gently placed Yumiko on his back so that he could carry her.

"Aren't you coming in?"

At his question, the monster woman looked struck by fear and awe and shook her head. All of a sudden, Yomotsu-Shikome thrust her long arm down her throat, all the way down to her elbow. Her green neck expanded, and she vomited fiercely. An awful stench wafted up from the bile; Nakajima reflexively turned away. Yomotsu-Shikome, on the other hand, retrieved two glowing blue spheres from amongst the vomit and presented them to Nakajima. While he didn't particularly want to take them, he didn't want to ignore the beast woman's kindness, and grimaced as he accepted the gift.

The phlegm-covered spheres felt very light and fit perfectly into his hands.

"What are these?"

In response to Nakajima's question, the giant woman made a motion of striking her slimy hands together.

"Am I supposed to knock these together?"

Yomotsu-Shikome nodded over and over again, narrowed her eyes, and opened her mouth halfway.

*Was that just a smile?* Nakajima started to feel fondness for the monster.

The sound of someone's cry from the far end of the burial pathway echoed throughout the area. Yomotsu-Shikome shuddered with surprise. She started back along the path, regretfully looking behind several times. Stooping over so that Yumiko would not slide off his back, Nakajima wiped off the spheres the monster woman had given him on his slacks and knocked them together forcefully. Bright orange fireworks flew in all directions, but aside from that, nothing seemed to happen.

*Are these supposed to be used in some sort of ceremony or something?*

Unable to find an answer, Nakajima dropped the two spheres into his pocket and, Yumiko's weight on his back, waddled over to the relief.

The burial chamber itself smelled slightly of flowers. It was about four meters long in every direction. Dozens of pots as high as Nakajima's waist were stacked up all around the room. He looked inside them and saw oil gathered at their bottoms. They appeared to be what was giving off the smell of flowers. It was most likely a pomade offered to Izanami. In front of him, a white granite dais stood. On top of it lay ashes in the form of a cross.

No, it was the form of a person lying on their back.

## **SWORD OF FLAME –CHAPTER 4** [SF4]

After leading Nakajima to the burial chamber, Yomotsu-Shikome had sensed a new presence and hurried to confront it. As she rarely displayed any sort of emotion outwardly, it was unclear whether or not she was pondering the large number of intruders today; in the thousands of years she had protected the sanctity of the Kofun tomb, there had never been a time when it had seen two visitors on the same day. Presently, she came upon Loki running down the burial corridor. She stretched her slimy arms out as far as they could go to block his passage.

"RAUIERE!"

Yomotsu-Shikome tried to tell him something in her foreign tongue. She could sense that this intruder possessed a power much different and far greater than any foolish human tomb robber that had previously wandered in. If possible, she wanted to expel him without a fight.

Caught off guard, Loki stood still and narrowed his jet-black eyes as he sized up the power of this new arrival. He then started to calmly walk forward, an arrogant smirk on his face.

Traveling faster than the eye could see, Loki's fist slammed into Yomotsu-Shikome's still-extended shoulder. Without even a chance to cry out, the monster woman was slammed against the rock wall, her flailing purple-flecked legs kicking at the cold stone floor.

**"Did you really think you would be able to stop me?"** Loki mocked Yomotsu-Shikome as she finally managed to stand back up.

Having fully regained her senses, Yomotsu-Shikome charged at Loki, bellowing threats at him. But Loki did not even attempt to dodge. He merely grabbed the fearsome monster woman's arm as she charged and twisted it hard. Yomotsu-Shikome's arm was torn off below the elbow; fresh blood gushed out of the wound. Realizing that she didn't stand a chance of defeating Loki by sheer strength, the monster woman made a suicidal charge at the demon, attempting to pin him with her overwhelming weight. Surprised, Loki fell over as she crashed into him. Though her attack succeeded, Yomotsu-Shikome's fangs could not penetrate his bronze skin. Even as she attempted to tear out his throat, she only succeeded in making harmless scraping sounds against his neck.

Loki plunged his sharp talons into Yomotsu-Shikome's chest and tore out her heart. He nonchalantly threw the monster woman aside as she let out a horrible death cry, before proceeding down the path as if nothing had happened.

"Izanami, Izanami...."

Yomotsu-Shikome's sorrowful cries soon became quieter than the gentle breeze flowing through the corridor.

## **SWORD OF FLAME –CHAPTER 5** [SF5]

Though he had made it all the way to Izanami's burial chamber, Nakajima had no idea how to make contact with her. He was at a loss for what to do. A cold chill ran down his spine; he looked around and found himself staring at Loki. The demon was looking in through the entrance to the chamber. Unable to make a sound, Nakajima froze, rooted in place.

**"It's nice to see you are doing well."** Loki calmly folded his arms as he spoke, intimidating.

Shielding Yumiko's body, Nakajima carefully watched Loki to see what the demon would do. If he had half a mind to, Loki could easily demolish him in his current defenseless state. So why wasn't he trying to come inside the burial chamber?

Before long, Nakajima's eyes were drawn to the silver relief carved into the floor of the chamber's entrance. The Hexagram was preventing Loki from entering. That was the only possible explanation. As if maybe he had realized what Nakajima had been thinking, Loki started talking to him in a coaxing tone.

**"Nakajima, there is no reason to fear me. If you join forces with me again, you can rule the human world!"**

"Hah! You think *that* will work after you tried to kill me? To start with, I didn't run away from you in the first place. I've got to bring Yumiko back to life, whatever it takes. Now go away and don't bother me."

**"You want to revive the woman? Then why don't you ask me to? It would be only too simple for me to teach you the art of Soul-Returning."**

The art of Soul-Returning was a spell to revive the dead. However, even if the spell could completely restore a person's body, it could not restore their soul as well.

"The art of Soul-Returning? Are you seriously asking me to replace Yumiko's pure soul with that of a demon?"

**"Pure, you say?"** Snickering, Loki opened his jet-black eyes wide. **"That seems like an unlikely choice of words for a human who willfully joined forces with demons. Look at my eyes!"**

Loki's voice was full of power difficult to defy. Nakajima reflexively looked into the demon's eyes and gulped at the horrific vision he saw deep within.

Countless people with heads wrenched off or severed by demon tentacles. Eyes rotting and oozing out of their sockets. Flowing rivers of fresh blood. Kondo Hiroyuki, Takamizawa Kyoko, and a host of women he had never seen before glared at Nakajima, hatred and curses in their eyes. He could almost hear their anguished cries.

**"Take a good look, Nakajima. This is all what you wanted. It was none other than you that called me here to the Assiah World."**

Loki's hearty laughter ripped deep into Nakajima's soul. But the faint smell of flowers kept Nakajima from breaking down completely.

"The very least I can do now is bring Yumiko back to life."

**"Without using the art of Soul-Returning, what can a mere human do to revive the dead?"**

"You're right that I can't do anything myself. But the spirit of Izanami, resting in this burial chamber, will grant my wish."

"**Such foolishness!**" Loki grinned and laughed, but his lips were twisted somewhat unnaturally. Even with the protection of his thick bronze skin, the crimson paint was starting to consume the demon's body little by little.

"**Very well, then. If that corpse is so important to you, then proceed.**" Loki's laugh turned into a roar of anger. His pitch-black eyes, full of hatred, turned to Yumiko's corpse. White vapor suddenly began to rise out of her body; a horrible rotting smell assaulted Nakajima's nostrils.

"Stop it!"

Trying to shield her from Loki's gaze, Nakajima ran over to Yumiko. He put his hand to the nape of her neck, but it came back covered in rotten flesh and wet with meaty juices. Unable to control himself, Nakajima vomited into the blackened hand covered in fleshy liquids. Yumiko's neck seemed to droop into an unnatural position; her eyeballs rolled out of her head and onto the floor, trailing blood behind them. Where her nose had been, nothing but a hole with a few scraps of flesh remained. Her hair separated from her rotting scalp and fell to the floor. Yumiko's white teeth became visible where her lips rotted away and dropped off. Nakajima stared, dumbfounded, becoming more terrified by the moment. Yumiko's hand slowly began to move on its own. His whole body drenched in cold sweat, Nakajima stepped away from her.

"Why are you doing this to me? Please let me die!" Yumiko finally stood up on her own.

"Please, kill me..." Speaking indistinctly, Yumiko approached Nakajima. Each step she took, a pot shattered, and the pomade inside flowed out onto the floor. Her fingers, merely bone now that their flesh had rotted off, grasped at the air, trying to grab onto Nakajima's hand.

Having completely lost all capacity for reason, Nakajima shook his hand wildly, as if to keep Yumiko away, and retreated further into the burial chamber. Slowly and steadily, as if being pulled in on an invisible line, she came closer and closer to him. No matter how hideous she became, Nakajima could never harm Yumiko. As he was pressed further and further back into the burial chamber, he placed his hand down onto the granite dais, picked up a handful of ash, and threw it at Yumiko.

Ancient magicians had used ash as a ward against evil spirits, and perhaps memories of this had lodged somewhere deep in Nakajima's subconscious. As the ash landed on the pomade spilling from the broken pots, it flew back up into the air despite there being no hint of a breeze; it began to assemble into an image highlighted like a hologram. The instant Yumiko's extended hand was about to grab onto Nakajima's throat, her body was enveloped in a flash of crimson.

The spell controlling her cadaver like a puppet was broken. The power flooded out of Yumiko's corpse, and it crumpled to the ground.

"I'm glad you made it, Akemi."

Nakajima returned to his senses as a gentle voice called to him. A woman that looked exactly like Yumiko was gazing at him with eyes full of kindness. No, only her silhouette matched Yumiko's. Her milky-white skin, concealing the divinity within, shone with a slight phosphorescent glow, and her chocolate-brown eyes glimmered with a light that suggested a wisdom clearly different than that of a human.

"Izanami..." Nakajima found himself kneeling all of a sudden. The goddess nodded before she turned toward Loki.

"Demon, return to your world!" Her voice was cold and harsh.

Loki smiled sarcastically, but his expression could not hide his uneasiness.

"You appear to be one of the *Kunitsukami* of Yamato--why do you go to such lengths to support these humans?"

"Because this girl is my reincarnation."

**"Your reincarnation?"** Loki spread his arms in an exaggerated motion. **"Very well. You can have the girl. In exchange, I will take the boy. It surely will benefit him to join forces with me. I still wish to avoid any unnecessary confrontation."**

Holding his breath, Nakajima watched the two talk. A shiver ran down his spine.

"You're simply afraid that some other demon will get a hold of Akemi and his knowledge." Izanami strained her eyes and glared at Loki's chest. Red light exploded on his breast, and Loki stumbled back from the blow. The spontaneous combustion power she used was many times more powerful than when she had possessed Yumiko.

**"So that's your answer, eh?"** Angry, Loki's hair stood on end, and he glared at Izanami from the entrance of the burial chamber. No matter what he did, he could not cross that silver relief. On the other hand, Izanami's power had not dealt him any serious damage either. As the two glared at each other, the goddess' expression clouded. Right at that moment, Nakajima noticed the form of a white silhouette in Loki's dark eyes.

*I've seen that before...!*

Loki's eyes reflected not the Izanami standing before him, but her form as a hideous cadaver, chasing after the man she loved.

**"Take a good look, Izanami."** Loki's low voice shook the goddess' resolve.

**"Like a mirror, my eyes reflect whatever your deepest fears are. The more you look into them, the more your own fears will make you tremble. I must say that you're quite hideous—I have trouble believing this is your true form."** As if to add fuel to the fire Loki was kindling, the image of a single person appeared, that of the young Izanagi, running in terror from the hideous Izanami chasing him.

**"Your mate abandoned you because of your ugliness? How pathetic. Heh, heh, heh."**

"You dirty..." Forgetting herself in her humiliation, Izanami started walking towards Loki, pulled in.

"No, Izanami! If you leave the burial chamber, you'll be at Loki's mercy!"

At Nakajima's words, Izanami painfully stopped in her tracks. Someone's dark shadow darted behind her.

Loki's left hand was moving in a rhythmical motion. By the time Izanami realized it was a spell to control the dead, it was already too late. Yumiko's corpse had stood up and shoved Izanami from behind. Surprised, the goddess stumbled outside of the burial chamber.

Making sure to stay out of her deadly line of sight, Loki kicked out Izanami's legs out from under her, and twisted her arm behind her back, pinning her to the ground.

"That was all too easy! It was foolish for a mere woman like you to try to resist me." The parts of Loki's body making contact with Izanami started to change from bronze skin into pink protoplasm.

*"Kunitsukami of Yamato, I will impregnate you with the child of a demon."*

With a stench seemingly capable of polluting the purest of substances, the repulsive blob started to spread over Izanami's body. Izanami looked at Nakajima, asking for help. But what could the unarmed Nakajima do against a demon that was capable of effortlessly restraining even a goddess? In a last-ditch effort, Nakajima entered a command into his handheld computer. Though trying to summon the electronic beast failed in the crimson burial pathway, the powerful aura in the burial chamber might act as a catalyst to bring its power back. In answer to Nakajima's prayers, Kerberos appeared in the chamber and let out a roar that shook its very walls, then stood ready for any orders.

*"Kerberos, rescue Izanami!"*

The outcome of the battle was clear from the outset. Even if Kerberos was at peak health, Loki was on an entirely different level of power. Nakajima already knew what the result of such a match would be. Add to that the fact that the demon beast was already hurt and tired, and it became all the more obvious. Even so, Kerberos resolutely leapt at Loki. His beast's instinct had most likely already told it that this terrible enemy's one weak point was the protoplasmic area on his forehead. Dodging Loki's swipes, Kerberos clawed at Loki's forehead with his burly front paws, leapt away, and lunged at him again, repeating the attack pattern without let. Trying to fend off these attacks while using another hand to keep Izanami down, Loki was having more trouble fighting Kerberos than might have been expected.

Loki was not paying any attention to Nakajima at all.

If he was able to seize this chance and hit him in the wound in his forehead, he might be able to rescue Izanami. If only he had some sort of weapon...Nakajima desperately looked around the chamber, praying to find something he could use.

Izanami cried out. Turning around in surprise, Nakajima saw her writhing in agony, still under Loki's restraint. But her eyes were not displaying any pain. It almost seemed as if she was secretly trying to communicate something to him.

*What is it you want to say?*

Instinctively Nakajima started to step outside of the chamber. As if to warn him, the goddess glared at him, and cried out, "Hurry! The fire!"

For an instant, Loki was distracted by Izanami's words and looked in Nakajima's direction; Kerberos seized the opportunity and slashed Loki's forehead, once again drawing the demon's attention.

*Fire? What do you mean by fire?*

In a moment of epiphany, Nakajima remembered the two spheres that Yomotsu-Shikome had given him. Praying that they would do something, he knocked them together. Twice, three times, pale fireworks shot out, but other than that, nothing happened.

"Is this really what Izanami wants...?" Nakajima's palms started sweating with worry.

His last-ditch attempt at doing anything by knocking the spheres together produced fireworks that lit the pomade in the room. With a large roar, the flames leapt up and formed a circle in the air. In the center of the pale orange flames, the shape of a human's face formed, and flickered with purpose.

*Hi-no-Kagutsuchi...*

It was the god of fire, Hi-no-Kagutsuchi, whom Izanami gave birth to right before she first died. Even though he had not been taught that name by anyone, Nakajima somehow knew it. Instinctively,

Nakajima extended his right hand into the flames hovering into the air. Air swirling like a whirlwind, Hi-no-Kagutsuchi's flames painted a spiral shape in the air as they coiled around Nakajima's outstretched hand.

Nakajima bit down on his lip and tried to withstand the heat. His skin did not feel like it was being scorched by flames. Instead, it felt as if the flesh and bone making contact with the flame was somehow boiling, giving off heat from within. His flame-enveloped arm gave off a great flash of light so blinding that even the battling Loki and Kerberos stopped for a moment.

Rubbing his dazzled eyes, Nakajima realized that his hand, stretched upward toward the ceiling, gripped a sword that emitted a phosphorescent, crimson glow. An overwhelming power the likes of which he had never experienced flowed throughout his body.

Without hesitation, Nakajima leapt out of the burial chamber. As his sword emanated its unimaginable aura, Loki's movements faltered for a moment. Not missing a beat, Kerberos bared his fangs and attacked; the instant Loki tried to brush him aside with his hand, he left his face wide open.

Nakajima thrust the blade forward with all his might. Reflexively, Loki let go of Izanami and tried to cover his forehead with his right hand, but Nakajima's sword clove it in two. With a feeling of heavy resistance, Nakajima's sword sank deep into Loki's forehead.

**"GYAAAAA!"**

Loki's cry shook the very walls of the burial pathway. Clutching his wound with his left hand, Loki staggered to his feet, the sword still embedded in his forehead. Starting from the protoplasmic mass of his lower body, the demon's bronze torso underwent a rapid transformation. With an unpleasant slimy sound, his bronze skin crumbled away. The impaled sword clattered to the ground. Loki's entire body transformed into an undefined, undulating lump.

Astonished at his own unexpected power, Nakajima watched as one section of the unstable mass of flesh before him started throbbing. Suddenly, as if it was a separate life of its own, a green heart broke through the protoplasmic mass and tumbled onto the floor. It started to draw a strange figure on the floor with the stream of green blood flowing behind it. As it did so, the air seemed to slightly twist in on itself, centered on the figure the heart was drawing.

**"That is Loki! Nakajima, do not let the demon escape!"**

Pulled back to his senses by Izanami's voice, Nakajima swiftly picked the Hi-no-Kagutsuchi sword off the floor and thrust it into the heart of Loki as it tried to escape into the warped space.

After an instant of silence, the heart burst like a popped balloon. The undefined mass of flesh stopped writhing.

Within a heartbeat, the silence was broken as Nakajima was assaulted by a rumbling roar from deep under the floor of the underground valley. Crimson stones started falling from the high, darkness-blanketed ceiling.

Still holding the sword, Nakajima tumbled into the burial chamber. He crawled through the rumbling underground space. The pots shattered one after another, spilling their pomade on the floor. Out of place amongst the chaos, the gentle smell of flowers wafted throughout the room.

"Yumiko..." As Nakajima tried to make out the glowing white form by the entrance of the burial chamber, his consciousness drifted far away.



## EPILOGUE [EPL]

*Thump, Thump.*

Something was throbbing. It was a slight rhythm, but was definitely there.

Nakajima had awoken earlier. He had felt warmth, and felt as if he wanted to remain immersed in sleep for just a little longer. Struck by a wave of sentimentality, Nakajima slowly opened his eyelids. He found that his arms were wrapped around Yumiko. A bittersweet fragrance drifted from her body.

Hesitantly, Nakajima spoke. "Yumiko..."

She showed no response to his breath, but she had definitely returned to life. Her formerly torn mouth had returned to its lovely original shape, and her slightly opened lips shivered slightly as she breathed. Her eye sockets were now covered with well-formed eyelids, and her cheeks had a slight pink hue to them.

Nakajima's impatience was enveloped by an untainted presence.

"Don't worry. She will awaken soon enough."

Turning around, Nakajima saw Izanami standing above him. Though her hair was matted with green blood, her shining, beautiful expression, full of kindness, calmed his soul.

The goddess opened her lips. "I will take care of her for a while."

Nakajima was perplexed by her statement.

"It will not be long; only until I strengthen her enough so that she can fight demons."

"Fight demons? But Loki's dead!"

The goddess approached, took Nakajima's hands and looked into his eyes. White light shone throughout the space in front of his eyes, and all color vanished from his field of vision.

"Look at this scene, Akemi." Her voice full of worry, Izanami's voice hinted at the gravity of the situation.

As Izanami's fingers grabbed Nakajima's hands, an image clearly formed amongst the white space.

In the Jusho High CAI room that Nakajima was so familiar with, Ohara was sitting at a terminal, talking desperately.

"Loki, why won't you answer?"

Gripping the microphone as she faced the silent computer, the image of Ohara trembled. Turning the power on and off again and again, she tried to run the demon summoning program. But the host computer's magnetic tapes remained motionless. Only the fans of the air conditioner disturbed the silence of the CAI room.

"Ooh..." Ohara stooped over and grabbed her lower belly. All the blood drained from her face. As if a sign that she was carrying the child of a demon within her, scales had started growing on the white nape of her neck.

"Don't kick!" Ohara whispered, scolding the new life growing within her.

As Ohara continued typing on the keyboard with a hopeful look on her face, the magnetic tapes started spinning as if mocking her on a whim.

"Loki, is that you!?" Ohara's eyes glimmered with joy. She tightly gripped the microphone.

"I've been worried about you, Loki!"

At Ohara's words, the magnetic tape slowed its spinning, almost as if it were hesitating. As Ohara cocked her head in suspicion, a low, hoarse voice sounded from the speakers.

**"I am Set. Are you the one that calls me?"**

"Set? I'm looking for Loki. Loki, please respond. Where are you?" Ohara's hysterical voice echoed throughout the CAI room.

**"My name is Set. You are insolent to call the name of another..."**

As Izanami let go of Nakajima's hands, the image dispersed, and in its place a gloomy space spread out before his eyes. Sweat from his temples trickled down his neck.

"Set!? That's the most powerful evil god from Egyptian legend!" Nakajima's voice was shaking.

"It's not just Set. Many demons have sensed the pathway you opened to their world, kindling their ambition to conquer the human world. More than just a handful of demons are looking to make an alliance with you...."

Izanami's voice was solemn and full of gravity.

Trying to push indecision out of his mind, Nakajima closed his eyes and spoke.

"This is all my doing and I have to reap the seeds that I have sown. My mission now is to find a way to close the passageway to the demon world and do so."

"Well spoken." Izanami's expression softened slightly. "It will be difficult, but I am confident your efforts will eventually pay off. I cannot descend to the material world myself so I cannot fight alongside you. However, I will give you Hi-no-Kagutsuchi instead. He is a god that will lend you great power as a sword of flame when you are in danger. Hi-no-Kagutsuchi's power is a force to be reckoned with even amongst the gods of Yamato, and will surely help you."

As he listened to Izanami, Nakajima could not help but feel anxious about the still-sleeping Yumiko. Perhaps she knew what he was feeling since the goddess gently put her hand on his shoulder.

"I will give this girl my power. And when she has gotten strong enough to defend herself on her own, I will return her to you. You'll wait that long, won't you?" Not waiting for an answer to her question, Izanami turned away from Nakajima.

"Soon a messenger from Yomi will come to pick up your friend. Until then, enjoy your brief reunion." With a smile, Izanami quietly lay on top of the dais. She vanished as if dissolving into the very air; ashes in the form of a human figure remained behind on the stone slab.

"Izanami..." Nakajima reflexively started toward the disappearing vision of the goddess; a familiar voice called him to a stop.

"Nakajima-kun, you kept your promise to me!"

Turning around, he saw Yumiko looking back at him, her chocolate eyes filled with kindness. Delicate and pure, she leapt into Nakajima's waiting arms.