

MEET THE DEVILS

Volume One

Demonic Rebellion Arc

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AWAKENING

1.1



Buzz!

The alarm sounded from its place on the bedside table. Takumi jumped out of bed without bothering to look at the blaring nuisance as he hit the snooze button.

“Takumi, are you up yet?” his mother called from the other side of the door.

“Yeah, I’ll be down in a minute!”

“Takumi?” his mother called again, and he made his way to open the door.

She flashed him an innocent smile and ruffled his dark brown hair. Despite her otherwise cheerful expression, the woman’s eyes held a hint of worry. “Are you alright, dear? Did you sleep well?”

“Can I sleep a little bit longer?” Takumi replied with a lazy smile.

His mother crossed her arms over her chest. “Get ready for school or you’ll be late.” She reached over and pressed the back of her hand to his forehead. Her body stiffened for a moment, a look of surprising joining the concern behind her eyes as she pulled her hand back. “Takumi, you’re burning up!”

Takumi touched his brow. Although a throbbing ache filled his head, he hadn’t noticed his high temperature. “That’s odd. I feel just fine.”

“If you have a fever, you should stay home and rest for the day. Who knows what might happen at—”

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“No, there’s no need. I’ll be fine. It’s probably just one of those things that happens to a child going through puberty. It’s nothing to worry about.”

His mother shot him a dubious look that showed her discomfort with the idea, but she seemed to let it go. “If something comes up at school, call me, alright?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Takumi! I’m serious, here! If anything, I mean *anything* happens at school, call me immediately!” She gripped his shoulder. Her eyes told him she wasn’t joking.

“Fine, I will. I promise.”

She dropped her hand away from his arm. “You know I love you, right?”

Why is she acting strange all of a sudden?

“Um.... Yeah, I love you too.... But you’re acting really weird this morning. Is everything okay?”

His mother nodded and offered him a forced smile. “I’m fine, just worried a bit. That’s all. After school, come straight home, okay?” The strange expression left her face, and she returned to her usual self as she turned to make her way back downstairs.

Takumi watched her as she walked away.

Takumi, you know I love you, right?

The words didn’t sit well with him, and he didn’t know why. He felt as if her words held a deeper meaning—a deeper meaning that he couldn’t understand.

Pushing it from his mind, he returned to his bedroom to get ready for school.

Takumi skipped downstairs, already dressed in his uniform.

His father sat with the daily newspaper glued to his face, and his mother poured tea into her husband’s cup.

“Good morning.” Takumi rushed past them and reached for the door-knob.

“Oi, kid, off to school already?” His father glanced at his watch.

“Yeah, I’m already late. The bus will be here soon.”

“But it’s not even—”

“Bye! See ya!”

“Wait! Takumi, you forgot your lunch!” his mother called after him as

she held up his lunch box.

“I’ll get something to eat at school.”

“O-okay. Remember what I said: be back home early today!”

“Kay, bye!” Takumi flashed her a smile before racing out the door.

His mother watched him until he left her line of vision, then she turned around with a grim expression. Her husband looked up at her as she lowered herself into the chair opposite his. “You felt it, didn’t you?”

Her husband returned his focus to his newspaper. “Of course, I did. It’s awake.”

“What do we do now? They’ll come after him soon.” She lifted the tea mug from the table in front of her and took a sip from it.

“We won’t allow that. We would be breaking our promise to *him* if we let them get their hands on Takumi.”

“I take it you already have a plan in mind?” Her voice held a more serious tone now, and her irises turned the color of blood as she blinked.

“Of course, I do.” The man folded his newspaper before rising from his seat. His eyes changed their pigmentation to match hers. “I’ll make the necessary preparations. They won’t lay a finger on my boy.”

Takumi adjusted his tie as he sprinted toward the bus stop. “Dammit! I don’t think I’ll make it.”

“Takumi!” A tall boy with white hair and glasses waved at him from the bus stop.

Panting and sweating, Takumi came to an abrupt stop and landed on the bench behind him.

“I see you’re doing some early morning exercises,” his friend said. “Nice, but should you really do it in your uniform?”

“Hey, Akihiko. You’re late too. That’s a relief.” Takumi used the back of his hand to wipe the sweat from his brow.

“Late? We’re ten minutes early.” The other boy raised an eyebrow.

“What are you sa—” Takumi dropped his head in disappointment as he checked the time on his phone screen and compared it to his wristwatch. The time on his watch was ten minutes ahead of his phone, and he went limp on the bench as he realized what that meant. “I didn’t even eat breakfast!”

“You’re hopeless. Here.” Akihiko pulled a sandwich from his lunch bag and tossed it to Takumi.

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“What would I do without you?” Takumi took the sandwich and devoured it.

“Slow down, or you’ll choke. You really need to get yourself in order, you know. I won’t always come to your rescue. We’re already in the third term of our second year of high school. Soon enough, we’ll be third years, then before you know it, we’ll be studying for college entrance exams and—”

“Yeah, yeah, I get the gist already. You want me to be more composed, isn’t that it?” Takumi thrust his left pinky into his ear and twisted it a bit in response to Akihiko’s concern.

“I don’t like your attitude.” Akihiko crossed his arms over his chest and pouted as he turned his face away from Takumi.

“Geez, Aki, you’re such a lady.”

“W-what’s that supposed to mean?” Akihiko’s cheeks burned bright red as he looked back at his friend.

“Hey, do you have some crush on me, or something?” Takumi teased. “Is that why you’re so worried?” He poked his friend’s bicep, a mocking smirk across his face.

Akihiko’s face turned even redder, and he swatted Takumi’s finger away from his arm. “Y-you wish. Who’d ever like someone like you? A crush?” He scoffed. “Like anyone would ever crush on you. You’re revolting.”

“Whoa, that’s harsh. Honestly, I’m hurt.”

“I’m not one to sugarcoat my words.... But seriously, you need to get yourself in order. You rely on me too much, and I’m worried you won’t be able to do anything without me.” Akihiko cast Takumi a sidelong glance.

Takumi didn’t respond right away, instead placing his forefinger on his cheek as if deep in thought. “Hmm.... I guess you’re right,” he finally said as he turned to Akihiko. “I do rely on you a lot.”

Akihiko glared at him for his shameless admission.

“Say, Aki, I have an idea. I’ll study hard so I can get into the same college as you. That way, you can keep taking care of me. In fact...” Takumi trailed off as he grabbed Akihiko’s hand, making his friend jolt in shock. He knelt on one knee, a playful sparkle in his azure blue eyes as he stared up at Akihiko. “Will you marry me, Akihiko?”

Caught off guard by the question, Akihiko slapped Takumi’s hand away and averted his gaze again. “Not happening.”

Awakening

Takumi got up and brushed the dirt from his knees. “Well, it was worth a try.” He dropped back down in the space beside his friend.

...You belong to me...

A girl’s voice flashed through Takumi’s mind, followed by a vision of a luminescent sword piercing his heart.

...What’s this feeling? His body throbbed, and a burning swelled in his chest as his eyes grew wider. His hands trembled, a sudden surge of fear twisting his insides into a knot. The whole world faded to black around him. He clutched his chest in pain as the sound of his own pounding heart filled his ears.

“Dude, are you okay?” Akihiko’s voiced echoed from beside him.

Takumi snapped back to reality and tried to catch his breath. Sweat coated his palms, and a bead of sweat rolled off his nose and landed on the back of his hand resting on his lap.

What just happened?

“Takumi?” Akihiko gripped him by the shoulders and shook him vigorously. “Earth to Takumi. Helllo!”

Takumi only looked up at him.

“You’re acting really strange, and it’s scaring me,” Akihiko went on.

“Sorry about that. It’s just heartburn. I guess I could’ve eaten that sandwich slower.” Takumi gave a soft, strained laugh and rubbed the back of his head.

“Are you serious right now? That doesn’t look like normal heartburn. You looked like you were in a lot of pain. A second ago, you were shaking like crazy. Dammit, you’re even sweating. Those aren’t symptoms of heartburn.” Akihiko placed a hand against Takumi’s forehead. “You’re burning up!”

“Aki, it’s nothing. Really, I’m fine.”

“‘Fine’ isn’t how I’d describe this. I could fry an egg on your face!”

“Don’t worry.” Takumi jumped up from the bench and flexed his muscles to show he was healthy and quell his friend’s worries.

“Well, you do look pretty healthy. But what’s up with the fever?”

“Puberty?”

They each pressed their forefinger to their chin in thought, then nodded.

Akihiko crossed his arms. “But aren’t you a little too old for this to be something like puberty?”

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“How am I supposed to know that?” Takumi chuckled and rubbed the back of his head again.

“Dummy. But still, are you one-hundred percent sure you’re okay?”

“Yup. I’m as fine as can be. Plus, if I do fall sick in school, I have my wife here to take care of me.” Takumi winked.

Akihiko punched his arm, then laughed and shook his head. “You’re such an idiot.”

“And that’s why we’re best friends.” Takumi pulled Akihiko into a headlock and ruffled his hair.

The bus pulled up in front of the stop, and its door slid open with a *hiss*. They both looked up at the fat man driving the bus.

“Get in, ya rats!” the driver yelled, and the boys ran to board the vehicle.

Takumi glanced out the window as he dropped down onto one of the seats. A wave of surprise rattled him when his eyes landed on the form of a stunning girl standing under a tree, just behind the bench where he and Akihiko had sat only moments before. She reminded him of a model he once saw in a copy of his mom’s *Beauty Today* magazines: tall and busty with slight curves that shaped her perfectly. The wind carried her long black hair, and her blue eyes sparkled in the morning sunlight.

Has she been there this whole time? Takumi knew he might have imagined it, but for a quick second, he swore she winked at him.

“Hey, Aki.” Takumi lightly tapped his friend who already had his nose buried in a book. “Check her out.”

Akihiko looked up, his eyes following Takumi’s gesture toward the window. “Check who out?” He sounded confused.

Takumi looked again to point her out, but she was gone, vanished from the spot where he knew she had just stood. He blinked twice as if it would bring her back. Her presence had felt too real to have just been a figment of his imagination.

“Dude.” Akihiko returned his attention to his book. “You really need to get checked out. Your strange behavior is starting to bother me.”

The hell

There was a girl there a minute ago

1.2

A large house stood in the middle of a forest clearing, its elegance matching that of a palace. The design of a four-angled star adorned the main gate as its centerpiece. Several ravens circled overhead while others rested in their treetop nests. The iron gates swung inward with a hollow *creak* as a girl made her way onto the compound.

Her dark hair reached down to her waist, and she wore a short dress that hugged her body tightly, showcasing the skin of her chest and legs. The ravens scrutinized her with their beady black eyes as she approached the house and rang the doorbell. She waited as the doors crept open in response, then she stepped through, disappearing from the piercing gazes of the feathered onlookers. The birds scattered, abandoning their perches as the doors swung shut behind her with a resounding *bang!*

The girl walked down an elegantly decorated hallway until she reached a large door at the end. An engraving of that same four-pointed star marked the door's surface.

"I've returned," she said.

"Please come in," a soft, feminine voice replied from within, and the girl accepted the invitation, letting herself through the heavy door.

A king-size bed stood at the room's center, and the chandelier's light reflected off the gold-plated walls, making them glimmer and sparkle. The scent of rose petals and strawberries filled the air, accompanied by the

distant sound of running water.

"In here, Ino," the feminine voice called from the attached bathroom as the sound of the water came to a stop.

The girl followed the voice into the bathroom, the floral fragrance growing stronger here. She looked down into the bathtub at the scarlet-haired girl who rested in the water with her face half-submerged under a layer of lather and rose petals.

"Is now really the time for a bath, Mira?" Ino lowered herself onto a stool beside the large, pristine bathtub.

"You know I can't help it when I'm stressed out." The other girl emerged from the water, lather clinging to her hair. "How's everything with the boy?"

"As we feared, it's finally happened. It's awake."

"I see.... So an extraction wouldn't be possible?"

"There's a twenty percent possibility of extracting it without damaging it or its host."

"And the other eighty percent?"

"Is the probability that the extraction will fail, and we'll end up destroying it and killing the host."

"Those odds aren't good. What do we do now?"

"Well...there is a way around it." Ino turned her gaze toward the ceiling.

"I know what you're going to say, and if that's the only way, then I guess we have no choice but to go with your plan."

"I never thought you'd agree to that!" Ino leaped from her seat, unable to hide the excitement in her tone.

"Like I said, we have no choice. We've watched him for too long to let him slip through our fingers. Getting our hands on a Heavenly Arms is top priority. If the price for that is to let a man into our house, I'm more than willing to pay it." Mira furrowed her brow in irritation.

"This is really unlike you, but if you've made your decision, who am I to object?"

"Like you ever would. I know you've always wanted a man in the house, and I know it's because of your weird tendency to play with them."

"You know me too well. It's scary." Ino chuckled, then stopped. "There's something else." She suddenly sounded much more serious.

"Judging by your tone, I'm guessing it isn't good?"

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“It’s very bad, indeed.” Ino cleared her throat before continuing. “A great cloud of death looms over his head. I noticed it a few days ago when I was watching him. At first, it seemed like nothing serious, but it’s escalated since then. He’s going to die soon.”

“That can’t be good. For him, that is.”

“Wait.... Are you saying?”

“Yes, we’ll take advantage of his death and bring him to our side.” Mira climbed out of the bathtub. “Tell the girls to get ready. We’ll be heading out soon.”

Ino nodded and left without another word