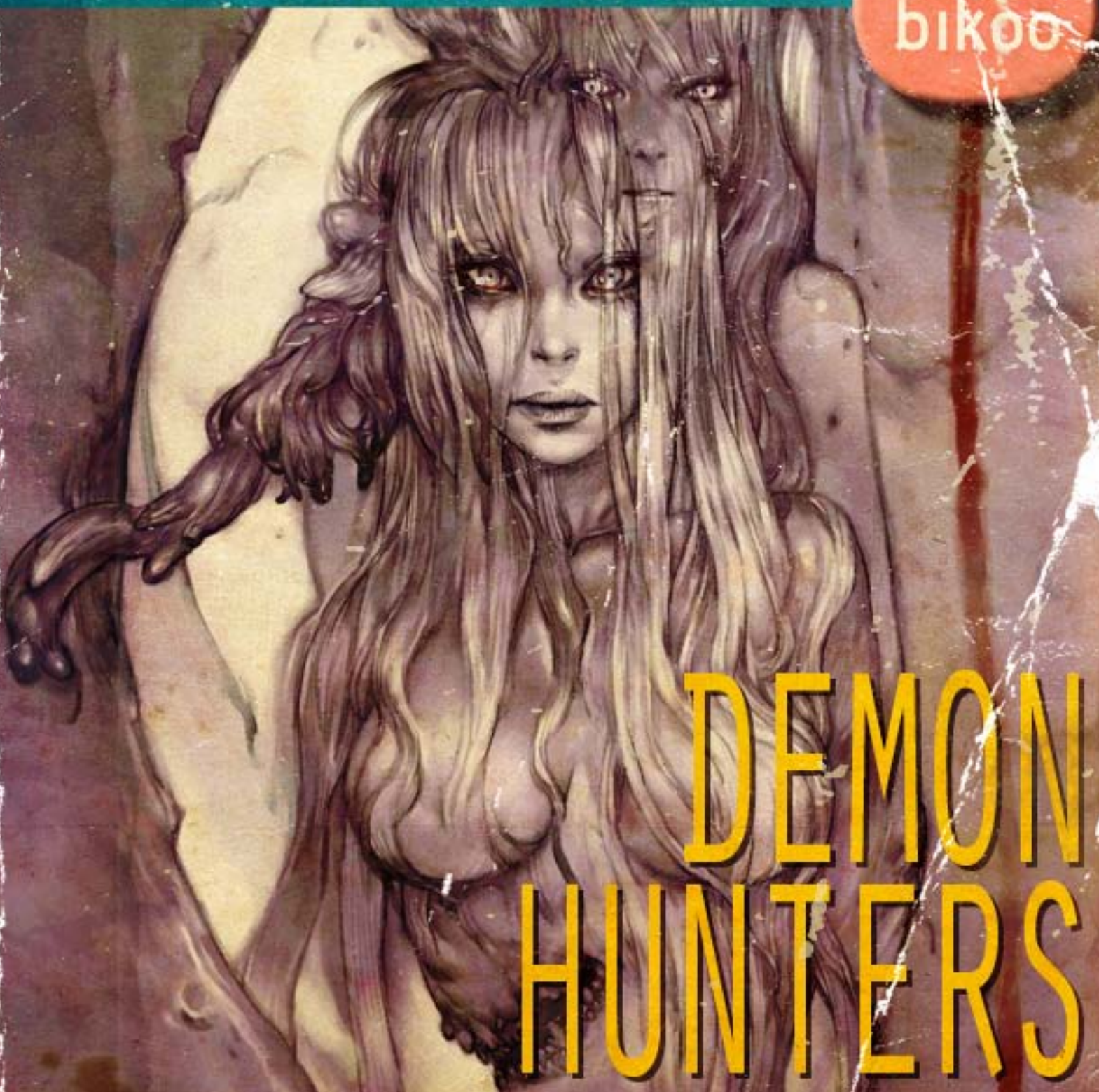


THE PSYCHE DIVER SERIES
VOLUME #1-MAJUGARI

BAKU YUMEMAKURA

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DEMON
HUNTERS

DESIRES OF THE FLESH

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DEMON
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DESIRES OF THE FLESH

BAKU YUMEMAKURA

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Chapter 1

The Dark Ritual of Female Flesh

1

Wind howled through the darkness.

There was something ominous in the way it swept up the valley slope, manifesting from the black void. The undergrowth of the copse rustled in its wake creating a constant whisper.

Fuminari Senkichi scowled at the stench of damp grass. The flora of the valley had absorbed the day's heat, and now it was being released into the night, tinged with the essence of the plants. The stench was raw, not unlike blood. Fuminari knew it well; he felt no particular aversion to it.

Mmm...

In the dark, Fuminari's expression shifted into something of a wry smile. The corners of his mouth traced upward in a subtle curve--extremely rare for him. He had been known to grin subconsciously in the middle of a fight, even when there was no apparent reason. There was just something in him, a brutishness, that thrived on tension.

Now sitting motionless, he glanced beyond the canopy of trees toward the pale-white, star-pricked sky like a predator concealed in the undergrowth. The bluish ellipse of a twisted half-moon hung dimly above. He sat on a hill cast in darkness, the thickly forested valley beyond resembling a huge, dark cave.

He was almost naked, only an open shirt covered his bare skin. The woman in his arms, Kumiko Nakano, was in a similar state of undress. She was like a child in Fuminari's embrace, curled up between his crossed legs as they sat in the grass. Of course, far from being a child, she was a fully developed woman, but she appeared tiny next to the extraordinary bulk of the man holding her.

They were in Nishitanzawa. It was a summer night, but the air at a thousand meters was cold, too cold to be cavorting about without any clothes. Despite this, the woman's skin was moistened by a thin layer of sweat. Fuminari took her taut, heavy breasts in his hands and scooped them upward. He massaged her nipples and kissed her. Their tongues met, mixing saliva. Satisfied, Fuminari took her hardened nipples into his mouth, each was the size of an infant's finger; he sucked at them, playing his tongue over them as they became even harder, redder.

"I wonder if they'll show," Kumiko spoke in a voice so light it was almost inaudible. Fuminari pulled his mouth away, continuing to tweak her nipples with his fingers.

"They'll be here," he moved closer and talked into her ear, nibbling her earlobe as he continued to tease his fingertips over her hard, moistened nipples.

"They'll know it's a trap..."

"And they'll know this is gonna be their last chance," as he whispered his response, Fuminari moved his lips down, tracing a line from her ear to the nape of her neck--her fine

hairs stood on end. “You fucked Muto, huh?”

“You knew?”

“I could see it in his eyes.”

“It was before I met you, just once.”

“He’s in love.”

Kumiko was silent.

“He’ll be the first to attack.” Fuminari moved his mouth back to Kumiko’s ear. He spoke softly, “definitely Muto,” at the same time reaching down and sliding his hand up the inside of her thighs. She moaned softly; her voice was sweet, already giving into pleasure. Her body felt hot and flush, ripe; she began to sway. Fuminari’s hands teased, tracing lines around the top of her thighs. He swept them around her back, bringing them down her waist to her buttocks. His fingernails scratched gently along the familiar lines of her body. Thick, rugged fingers danced subtle steps across her skin.

“Stop...stop... You’ll make me horny.” Kumiko tightened her grip around Fuminari’s neck and arched her back, trying to pull away. Fuminari grabbed her firmly, dragging her back toward him. He slid his fingers along the line of her buttocks and pushed one into her. It felt like puncturing a boiled tomato. His finger moved through hot, sticky fluid as it traced out her swollen clitoris. Kumiko swung her hips into him, rubbing herself against Fuminari’s finger.

“Mmmm.” Her breathing had become rough and heavy.

“That’s more like it.” Fuminari lowered her to the grass and crouched, keeping an arm under her, thinking it would be a shame for her light skin to get scratched up. She wrapped her legs around his thighs, locking the two of them together. She reached out and grabbed his erection, guiding it toward the hot, splayed out center of her legs. She brushed the tip over her moist opening, relishing the sensation. He was hot and swollen; his dick felt coiled, ready to break free if she loosened her grip even slightly.

What a great accomplice, Fuminari thought, if the situation were different I’d take my time, build her up...then fuck her until her eyes rolled back.

He turned her over, face up, spread her pale legs wide, then stuck his cock deep inside her. Kumiko’s hips swung upward as she wrapped her legs eagerly around him. As they sank into the undergrowth together, the sound of the river flowing through the base of the dark valley was replaced by the noisy rustling of leaves.

Fuminari began to thrust. He had been taken by a strangely violent mood--he wanted to fuck Kumiko hard, to spoil her pure skin with the green sap of the grass. So he took her without restraint, forcing her legs wide, pivoting and twisting her as though he harbored a resentment of the female body. Still inside her, he brought a finger down to her anus; she almost choked. He stuck the finger in to the first knuckle. Kumiko was fast losing the ability to speak coherently.

Fuminari’s thrusting picked up speed; Kumiko ground her pinned-down hips into him out of sheer delirium, her juices cascading as he penetrated her. She grabbed at her breasts, writhing under him with an intensity like she were trying to break free--her head jerked back and forth, her stunning features distorted. The pinkness of her tongue danced

with a life of its own in her open mouth as though seeking the source of pleasure in the air. She let out a honeyed moan that was like a physical representation of her joy. At that moment, Fuminari leaned forward and whispered into her ear, "They're coming. Up there."

A shadow moved upslope to Fuminari's left, surprisingly close. It roared. A thin iron pipe smashed into the ground next to them. Fuminari leaped into the air, away from Kumiko's side, somersaulting once before rolling into nearby cover. The shadow followed, a series of attacks rained down in succession. Fuminari pitched and rolled, deftly avoiding them. The shadow drew back. It was crouched low and ready, just a few meters away in the darkness--only the sound of heavy breathing permeated the space between them. The attacks had spanned just a few seconds, but the intensity must have drained huge reserves of strength.

Fuminari drew himself to his feet. He was unbelievably huge, almost impossibly so considering the acrobatics of a moment ago, towering at almost two meters. He was rugged like rock, but his frame was superbly balanced. His features were set deep above a thick neck, charming if he smiled, but at the same time, they hinted at something powerful, demonic. For now, he kept his expression neutral. Even just standing there his massive frame exuded an almost physical force into the air.

"Muto, right?" Fuminari called out to the shadow. His breathing was perfectly measured.

"Fell right for it." Kumiko was up; a grin played across her red lips as she spoke. She was holding a collapsible shovel.

"Kawaguchi, get out here," Fuminari shouted into the darkness behind him, his gaze fixed on Muto.

There was a rustling behind them. Kumiko sprang to Fuminari's side with panther-like agility, but nothing attacked. The rustling circled around the darkness to their side and a second shadow appeared next to Muto.

"Traitorous bastard!" the shadow spat the words in anger. The venom was almost palpable as it cut through the night; a weaker opponent might have been forced to look away.

"Kawaguchi, as suspected," Fuminari said in flat monotone. He stood with his legs slightly apart, empty hands hanging casually at his sides. He made no attempt to hide himself--his erection was still firm. At first glance, he appeared to be defenseless, yet he still managed to be intimidating. He was completely naked apart from his hiking boots and open shirt. There was something otherworldly about him; his massive body emanated latent energy like a densely coiled steel spring, ready to jump over his own height regardless of the pose. He took a generous step forward. The shadows stumbled backward, overawed.

"Where's our money?" Muto shouted; his voice was tense.

Fuminari said nothing.

"It's ours!" Kawaguchi groaned.

"Hah!" Fuminari shook his head softly, mockingly, "I'd imagine Towa Bank is saying the same thing, after all, we stole it from them."

"Shut the fuck up!"

"The money's a war chest for the *Kokushigun*!"

"I have no interest in your games of revolution."

“You lied to us.”

“Look, it’s a measly 100 million yen. You’re not going to start a revolution with that, but it’s enough to keep me in the high life for a while,” Fuminari flooded his voice with scorn. He was trying to provoke them.

“Kumiko, did you betray Iwakura too?” Muto yelled. Iwakura was the head of the *Kokushigun*.

“I like strong guys, Muto. Guys like Fuminari,” she answered coolly. She made no effort to conceal herself in the darkness; apart from an open shirt, she was completely naked.

“If he hadn’t been caught, Iwakura would never have let you get away with this.”

“Iwakura, right.” Fuminari’s lips curled into a grin.

“It was you? You sold him to the cops?”

“If I did?”

“Fucker!” Muto yelled, readying a posture for attack.

Fuminari crouched, picking something up from his feet. He hurled it casually into the air. “Here, your money…” A package wrapped in a plastic bag thumped to the ground next to Muto and Kawaguchi distracting them for the briefest of moments--Fuminari launched his massive frame into the air.

“Shit!” Muto swung a steel pipe at Fuminari’s landing place. Fuminari leaned back, easily avoiding the attack. The tip of the pipe whooshed noisily through the air, millimeters away from his nose.

Light flooded over the scene.

Kumiko had switched on the torches they had brought with them. The battery-powered light was weak, but it was all Fuminari needed. He saw Muto in front of him wielding the steel pipe, Kawaguchi a mountain knife. They looked like men still in their 20’s. Muto’s face was wide-eyed, contorted with rage. He let out a shrill, birdlike screech; the veins across his temples were swollen, pulsing subtly. Kawaguchi was half-turned, ready to make an escape, but Kumiko had circled around behind him, lithe as a black cat. Kawaguchi rushed to face her. Fuminari and Muto, Kumiko and Kawaguchi--the two pairs squared off.

Fuminari looked into Muto’s bloodshot eyes and narrowed his own in a smile. “I hear you fucked Kumiko,” he whispered.

Muto’s face went red. He screamed something nonsensical and brought the steel pipe swinging down. Fuminari made his move. He slid in toward Muto’s chest, casually avoiding the blow; when their faces met, they were less than 20 centimeters apart. Fuminari’s mouth curled into a grin. It was the last image Muto would ever see of the world. Fuminari slammed the side of his hand into the base of Muto’s neck; he crumbled wordlessly to the ground. He convulsed on the floor lying face up, eyes open and staring. Fuminari took the steel pipe. Kawaguchi, still engaged with Kumiko, noticed this and made to run. Kumiko gave chase.

“Move!” Fuminari shouted.

Kumiko ducked as Fuminari hurled the pipe. It buzzed through the air, slamming into Kawaguchi’s back with a gruesome crunch. He collapsed forward and stopped moving.

Kumiko checked that he was dead before confiscating the mountain knife. She

walked over to the still-convulsing Muto and crouched over him with the knife in her right hand. She tossed him onto his stomach, straddled his back, then grabbed his hair in her other hand and jerked his head back. She brought the knife around to his throat and slit it open with a single clean motion. Blood fountained out in finger-thick spurts. It flowed out erratically, mirroring the beating of his heart before eventually subsiding to a slow trickle. A tepid circle of blood spread through the grass around the man's neck. The stench was awful.

"Impressive girl," Fuminari commented. Just a few moments earlier she had been underneath him moaning with pleasure, then she held her own in a fight with a man before personally slitting the throat of an ex-lover.

"You're upset that I wasn't killed, huh?"

"Oh yeah," Kumiko walked across to the smiling Fuminari and wrapped her arms around him. Something prodded her in the stomach.

"Mmm..." Kumiko smiled a lecherous smile, taking hold of his cock. It was still fully erect, burning hot. "It appears that a certain something needs taking care of before we clean this up." She laid down across from Muto's lifeless body.

As Fuminari thrust into her, his senses were assaulted by the heady stink of grass and blood. As he pumped away, it struck him just how similar the two were.

2

They buried the two bodies in holes dug with the collapsible shovel; by the time they set off it was the middle of the night.

They planned on hiking to Yamanakako, avoiding any marked trails. There were always a few eccentrics out in the mountains at night come August, and heading to Nakagawa Springs meant the risk of running across more of the *Kokushigun*. They had reached the slopes west of Azegamaru, leaving Nishitanzawa behind them. The direct route to Yamanakako was just over 15 kilometers. They would walk for 20 at most.

Two hours into the hike, Kumiko's breathing became labored. She followed without complaint, but she was clearly fatigued--it was only natural hiking through the night at this pace, and they were avoiding even half-decent paths. Not many women would be able to match Fuminari's unchecked pace for so long, he was impressed.

"Wait," she finally said.

"Tired?" Fuminari turned.

"No. Just there, I saw a light."

"What?" Fuminari killed the light of his headlamp. Kumiko followed suit.

"Over there, look."

Fuminari moved closer, trampling through the darkness. He brought his head level with hers, tracing her line of sight. Something flickered below to the left. A light flitted through the leaves, between the dark trunks of the beech trees. It seemed to be firelight. It would have been easy enough to miss, obscured by the shadows of the trees it had only been visible from Kumiko's height.

It was closer than he had expected. They would have passed right by it if they had

kept heading down. The terrain was far from suitable for someone to have set up camp. A light breeze rustled through the undergrowth carrying a faint scent up the side of the valley. Fuminari felt a chill crawl up his back.

“Can you smell that?”

“Yeah, like some kind of incense.” Kumiko’s voice had become a whisper.

There was something ominous in the way the yellowish light filtered through the gaps of the darkened grove. And the scent...it seemed to coil around the flesh, kindling sexual desire. Fuminari imagined trying to sleep while inhaling it; he would spend the night feverish with lust, awaking dry and spent like a ragged cloth. If they had not just fucked, he was certain it would be driving them wild by now.

“Listen, I can hear something.”

Human voices, more than one--a group of people intoning some kind of chant. The voices drifted in and out of earshot, sounding intermittently on the breeze, the wind carried the voices over a surprising distance. Fuminari and Kumiko realized that they had probably been in range of both the scent and the chanting for a while now. The chants were a blend of western melody with readings from Buddhist sutra, but they had a deviant quality. They sounded *similar* to prayer, but they were clearly something darker, more like a hex. If it was prayer, it sounded pretty damn unholy. Fuminari felt a curious sense of foreboding. His hair was standing on end.

Am I getting scared!?

No, he decided, that was not it. He felt repulsion, but at the same time some dark part of him was responding to the voices. He felt an inexplicable excitement, as though a part of him that had been slumbering, a part both primitive and brutal, was being called to wake. He felt his blood seething. The chanting stopped. The torchlight wavered invitingly. Fuminari tapped Kumiko’s shoulder, “Keep the lights off and follow me.”

3

The view was surreal.

An area of grass had been leveled into a clearing. The space was easily the size of three tennis courts. A few rocks had been lined in a circle to one side enclosing a large fire.

Fuminari and Kumiko observed the scene from the cover of the trees on the other side of the fire. Kumiko reached to her side, subconsciously gripping Fuminari by the arm. Her hands were trembling. Usually tough and controlled, Kumiko had become completely enthralled by the spectacle before them.

The firelight danced over a mass of naked men and women, all intertwined in an orgy. Over 20 couples swelled together, moaning lustily. Some of the men took women from behind, others had women on top while groping at their breasts as they thrust feverishly upward. One had a woman’s legs hooked over his shoulders, head buried between them. The woman pulled him toward her, ravaging her hands through his hair--convulsing like she had been possessed.

It was all clear in the firelight: sweat-drenched bodies; a seething mass of exposed

breasts, hips, backs and bellies like a shapeless creature writhing on its back. The scent...that incense-like smell was potent. It was impossible to make out the faces of the people in the firelight, but it was clear that they had abandoned themselves to the pleasures of the flesh. The sexual moans welled as a single chorus of pleasure. They could have been a swarm of toads, awake after a long hibernation, furiously mating in a puddle of water.

“Look--” Fuminari gestured to the side with his chin, drawing Kumiko’s attention. A cross had been planted in the ground, slightly apart from the flames. Kumiko’s reply stuck in her throat. A woman hung naked from it, crucified.

The cross had been inverted with the horizontal bar near its base instead of the top. The woman had been pinned upside down with her legs suspended vertically, arms stretched along the horizontal bar. Her long hair dangled below. She was perfectly still. It was impossible to tell if she was alive or dead. Even if she was alive, she would not last long in that position.

“They’ve drawn something in the ground.” This time, the voice was Kumiko’s. Fuminari had noticed it too. The overall shape was obscured beneath the shadows of the crowd, but he could make out a number of straight lines dividing the ground into a series of squares. The squares were cross-sectioned pieces of one larger square, the size of half the clearing. The area was marked like a chessboard. Each square was occupied by a single couple. This was something fundamentally beyond a mere orgy. The place, the atmosphere...everything suggested something that was alien to sex for its own sake. This was degenerate--its roots delved deeper into the realm of thick, stagnant, nightmarish emotion. These people were slaves to a mysterious hysteria. Together, they formed a living mandala of copulating men and women.

Fuminari was sweating. It was as though the hysteria had mixed with the incense and transformed the darkness into a secretion that clung to his skin. He suddenly realized that for these people to be doing this, there would have to be someone on watch nearby. Fuminari cursed himself. It was not the time to get sidetracked into making a mistake because of whatever was before them. They would not be able to play dumb with these people--not if they were caught hoarding 100 million yen.

“Hey!” Fuminari pressed Kumiko’s head down. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He withdrew his attention from the sounds of the orgy and brought himself into phase with the sound of the wind. Like a fever, the feelings of lust washed away as he felt his mind become clear again. He opened his eyes, slowly, focusing on the darkness around them. He could not sense anyone nearby. They would have posted watch at any paths leading directly to the clearing, so it was safe to assume there would be lookouts at any of the paths nearby. That much was certain. *We were lucky*, Fuminari reflected. Things could have easily gone bad if they had taken a regular trail and stumbled across one of the lookouts; they would have been embroiled in this mess.

“Look!” Kumiko pulled at Fuminari’s arm.

Fuminari glanced back toward the clearing. Two men stood at either side of the woman on the cross. They wore black, ankle-length robes. Each held a flaming torch in their right hand. The dark wad of pubic hair between the legs of the upturned woman was laid

bare in the torchlight.

A woman appeared from the darkness, also in a black robe, holding something like a ceramic bowl in her hands. She walked to the cross and came to a stop, placing the bowl on the ground under the head of the crucified woman. Another woman came into view. She was carrying a bowl, slightly smaller than that of the first woman. The first woman cast her hands upward before the cross, revealing arms that shone white in the darkness. Voices swelled over the night, the same sutra-like chanting as before, as though the gesture had been a signal. It sounded like the hushed groan of the dying, but there was a clear, tune-like sense to it; the prayer-like, curse-like chanting resembled a strange kind of song.

Fuminari focused on the scene unfolding before them, he saw a line of figures in shadow, positioned behind the open fire, ten or so to a side. They all wore the same black robes. The figures had been obscured from view on the other side of the fire. They were the source of the chanting. Again, Fuminari found himself struck with a curious sense of something, as though the chanting was insinuating itself inside him, stoking a bestial darkness. He was unsure if he felt disturbed by the sensation, or if, in fact, it caused the opposite effect.

The second woman dipped her hands into the bowl and began rubbing something across the body of the woman on the cross. It was thick and viscous, dark-crimson, like blood that had begun to congeal.

A terrified scream tore across the clearing. It was the upside-down woman; she was still alive. She had been unconscious, woken now as the woman massaged the reddish black liquid over her. The scream was hoarse and sickening, her voice had broken, but not simply because she had been strung upside down--she had screamed like this many times already. The scream was almost unbearably desperate; the kind you would only hear once in a lifetime, if at all.

The second woman withdrew, bowl in hand. The first woman reached inside her robe with her right hand. When she pulled her hand out the screams became more shrill. The woman on the cross had watched her pull out a dagger; it glinted with a sharp, metallic light.

The intoning reached a crescendo.

The woman swept the dagger down.

The screaming stopped.

The woman raised her bloodied hands in the air, softly reciting something. The dagger's handle jutted out at an awkward angle hanging from the left breast of the woman on the cross. A horrific amount of blood poured from the wound. It ran down the woman's chest, over her throat and cheeks and through her dangling hair, soaking the ends and dripping into the bowl below.

The woman brought her hands down and took hold of the dagger's handle. Her body was in the way, Fuminari was unable to make out what was happening. She thrust her left hand high into the air. In it she held a bloodied heart. The attendant next to her held up a wooden tray on which she placed the heart. The wind picked up and the trees rustled loudly through the night's darkness. The chanting grew louder, finding a sort of resonance with the wind. The moon above the clearing cast a wan, bluish shadow over the group of entangled

men and women.

Kumiko had struggled not to scream as she watched them decapitate the upturned woman. Only a short while ago, she had ended a man's life, but she took no joy in cutting human flesh. She knew she would not hesitate to kill when necessary, but what she had just witnessed in front of her was something more than just killing. It was overwhelming, foreign to her.

The robed woman held the blood-filled bowl high and stepped into the mass of fornicating couples, pouring the liquid on them as they writhed together in a diverse mix of sexual positions. They undulated in synchronized movements spreading the blood over each other's bodies. Some accepted it with open mouths. The orgy grew in intensity, its constituents became increasingly consumed by the hysteria. The gasping and moaning rose to a cacophonous animal roar.

The woman offered the final drops of blood to a man and woman at the center of the throng and then signaled to the other robed woman now holding the tray bearing the heart and severed head. The woman carried the tray to the center and offered it to the couple; the man glanced up from his position on top of his partner. He was old. His hairline had completely receded, only a few wisps of grey hair grew to the sides of his forehead. He grabbed the heart from the tray and, still inside his partner, brought it to his mouth. He greedily sunk his teeth into it. His mouth stained red.

"This is unbearable," Fuminari groaned, but he had no idea *what* was unbearable, or *how* it was unbearable. His hairs stood on end. His skin prickled. He felt sick. But, between his legs, he was hard and swollen, fully erect. Some bestial darkness had awoken within, kindled by these dark emotions.

Rustling grass, close by.

Fuminari spun around and in a single, clean motion pulled the hiking knife from his pocket, hurling it toward the shadow that had appeared in his peripheral vision. The shadow crumpled to the ground without making a sound. Fuminari focused his attention on the surroundings, checked that no-one else was nearby, and then looked back toward the clearing. Nothing suggested that the others had been alerted.

"Don't make a sound," he told Kumiko. He moved to examine the fallen body. The knife had pierced the man's throat. Fuminari's skill was impressive.

"He's still young," Kumiko whispered, looking at the man's face. He was around the same age as Muto and his gang, probably in his mid-20's; Kumiko had used the same knife to kill one of them only a few hours ago.

It was unclear whether he had approached because they had been noticed, or whether he had simply chanced upon them during a regular patrol. Whatever the case, they could not afford to idle around.

"We're leaving. Now," Fuminari said. If they could make it back to the darkness of the mountains, no-one would be able to find them...he hoped. They would need a methodical trawl of the hills and tracker dogs to have any hope of catching them.

Fuminari's mind felt clear again.

There was something out there.

An energy slightly out of phase with the mountain. One moment it was there, the next it was gone. The sensation was weak enough to be dismissible as a trick of the mind, but Fuminari was certain it was there, that it was no figment of his imagination. They were being tailed by something; it was unfaltering, persistent. Fuminari was certain, it felt as though something had spread a thin membrane from his neck down to the base of his spine. The membrane extruded a strand of web outward, guiding their hunter through the darkness. No matter what Fuminari tried, there was no way to cut the strand.

He was no coward, *But this feeling--just call it fear*, he thought. Fuminari thought of himself as an animal, he respected fear. When pursued, animals naturally become acutely aware of their hunter. If an animal were to doubt its instincts, that would be its end, no different than suicide. Wild animals do not commit suicide.

Who was tracking them? Perhaps someone had found the body, but even if that were the case how could they be able to track them? It was the middle of the night. Tracking footprints would be too slow, even with flashlights they would continue to fall further behind. But whatever was following them now, he was sure, was maintaining the same distance. If anything, it was slowly lessening the gap. *Dogs?* Fuminari had taken the knife from the man's throat and brought it with him. The dogs would have no scent to track, that was unlikely.

What was tracking them? If human, it could only be one, maybe two people, not a large group. A group of people, unless fully-trained professionals, would make enough noise for the sound to reach him. There was no sound. He could only discern the *presence* of something giving chase across the darkness. Someone, or some *thing*, had discovered the body. It had made a rapid assessment of the situation and decided to give chase. It was clearly not an opponent to take lightly. Two things were clear from the fact that it had started after them: it understood there was no time to tell its people and, moreover, it judged itself capable of handling the situation alone. If so, its talents would be formidable. Then there was the fact it had managed to track them this far.

Fuminari charged up over the hillside. Heading down would not only limit their escape routes but also expose them to other dangers. The rule was always the same when you got lost in the mountains: head upward.

They reached the ridgeline. The land below was covered by a dense forest of beech trees. The undergrowth had transitioned from bushes and weeds to long bamboo grass. His awareness of something was still there.

"Can you sense it?" Fuminari asked Kumiko, pushing the grass aside.

Kumiko halted, looking puzzled.

"Okay. It's probably better that way," Fuminari muttered, speeding up. They had hardly spoken since the clearing. Kumiko seemed to have left the situation in Fuminari's hands.

What the hell was all that anyway? Fuminari remembered what they had seen earlier.

It had been horrific. The sutra-like chanting, the woman's screams--the sound still rang in his ears. And the smell, the crowds of men and women writhing in the torchlight, the woman's raw, severed head, the old man's face as he feasted on her heart. For some reason, Fuminari felt he had seen that face before. The man's features were grotesque. Could a human face become so distorted? Was he a monster? More like a demon, he had been at the very least partially human. Fuminari had also not forgotten the surge of nausea and the extraordinary thrill that had taken hold of him. If he had watched long enough, he would not have been surprised to have actually ejaculated. Fuminari reminded himself of the powerful urge he felt to run over and join them. Perhaps whatever followed them now was that shadow of himself--of the darkness that had awoken deep in his own consciousness and possessed him.

Kumiko was already out of breath. She was exhausted, gasping for air, pace slowing. *Should I leave her?* Alone, Fuminari felt confident of his chances of escaping, but leaving her would mean having to silence her. He had to make his decision. *Either deal with her now or lay in wait and take this thing on.* The sound of a river drafted up from below. The water was fast and loud. It sounded as though there might be a verge nearby.

"Hey," Fuminari called out. He had already started to head down from the ridge. "We're being followed."

Kumiko looked up.

"It knows what it's doing."

Kumiko held her breath for a moment. "I thought so."

"So you knew?"

"You gave it away."

"Okay. We're gonna ambush the fucker."

After a short while they came upon an area where the hillside began to level out. There was an open clearing roughly the size of a house--traces of moonlight spilled downward casting a teal haze over the bamboo grass. There was a large beech tree at the other end of the clearing. Fuminari walked over to it and stopped.

"This is the place." He put his rucksack down and told Kumiko to find cover. "Give me the shovel." Fuminari took it from her.

"What should I do?"

"Wait here. I'll take care of this." Fights were easier without the good intentions of others, especially against an opponent like the one chasing them through the dark.

Fuminari took a wad of cash from the rucksack and stuffed it into his pocket. If the fight went bad there was a chance they might have to run. If that happened the hefty wad of notes would be a liability. He hid the rucksack with the rest of the cash in the bushes nearby. He extended the folding shovel and stuck it into the ground at his feet.

"Any minute now. Don't make a sound, got it?"

There would be one or two of them, Fuminari thought, three at the most. A single flash of his knife would be enough if it was a single opponent. If there were three of them... well, he would find a way. Whatever happened, he would take one of them down. He would make the first move while he still had reserves of strength, better than taking them on after a chase. Fuminari was not ready to die, no matter how tough his hunters turned out to be,

not with the 100 million yen he had risked his life for in hand. *Maybe I'm getting weak*, he thought. The logical move would have been to dispose of Kumiko and get the hell away, but he had decided to step onto a rickety bridge with full knowledge of the danger before him. *I've fallen for her*. A thin smile spread across his features as he came to the realization.

There was one other thing that Fuminari was aware of: an increasing fascination with their hunter, the source of that abnormally strong aura. He had wanted to steer clear of any foolish, avoidable conflicts, but things were what they were, and he was enjoying the anticipation born of the situation. *Ah well, that's just me*. The sides of Fuminari's mouth curled up. It looked like a smile. He heard rustling.

This is it!

Fuminari readied the knife. The presence halted just before the clearing. It had sensed Fuminari and purposefully held back from exposing itself to the moonlight. A black aura seemed to billow from the shadows. *It knows I'm here*. A powerful, murderous intent radiated from the depths of the blackness. The sensation was so intense it seemed to manifest as a bluish-white aura.

Fuminari roared, mustering all his strength, concentrating his energy until every cell in his body burned, unleashing in the direction of the shadow. The knife sliced through the air.

There was no response.

It had vanished; it was as though the knife, hurled with such murderous aggression, had simply been absorbed into the darkness. If he had missed, the knife would have impaled a tree or fallen into the grass, either way there would have been a sound. But there was only silence. The only remaining possibility was that whatever was hiding in the shadows had caught the lethal blade in mid-flight.

In daylight, Fuminari could have done the same. Even in the dark, he probably could have used something to deflect the attack. But this thing had just plucked it out of the air. It was then that Fuminari realized he was facing a beast, an opponent of a completely different class than any he had faced before.

Fuminari felt a sudden surge of aggression from the darkness. Something soared across the clearing, flashing sharply in the moonlight. Fuminari ducked, instinct taking over. The piercing light sliced the air above his head. The knife he had just thrown moments ago impaled the trunk of a tree behind him, only the hilt was visible. The shadow rushed in leaving no time for Fuminari to retrieve the blade. Fuminari grabbed the shovel and launched his own attack. The two terrible forces collided in mid-air. There was a crack as the handle of the shovel snapped cleanly across the middle.

The thing appeared human, but its form was massively distorted. Its back was hunched at an odd angle; its arms and legs were bent out of shape. Fuminari could not make out any more detail in the dim moonlight. It stood poised on two legs ready to fight. The pose was unconventional, not from any particular school of martial arts. It had naturally taken the stance after springing back from the airborne clash. Fuminari stood facing the creature at the center of the clearing. It was immense. Even though its back was half bent, it was almost the same height as Fuminari.

Fuminari felt himself trembling. He had brought the shovel down hard, aiming for the thing's head, but had no idea where he had hit it. And not just that, the creature had accepted the blow and, at the same time, launched two powerful kicks. Fuminari had only barely managed to avoid them. He felt lucky. He had the advantage with the reach of the shovel, yet the beast's legs had skimmed across his flank like a black hurricane covered with an ice-cold sweat. Fuminari was not afraid; he felt only a burning sense of joy. He had found an opponent that he would have to fight with all his might, all his energy. *I will kill it*, he thought. *Whatever happens, I am going to kill this abomination. I have to kill it.*

He had an erection.

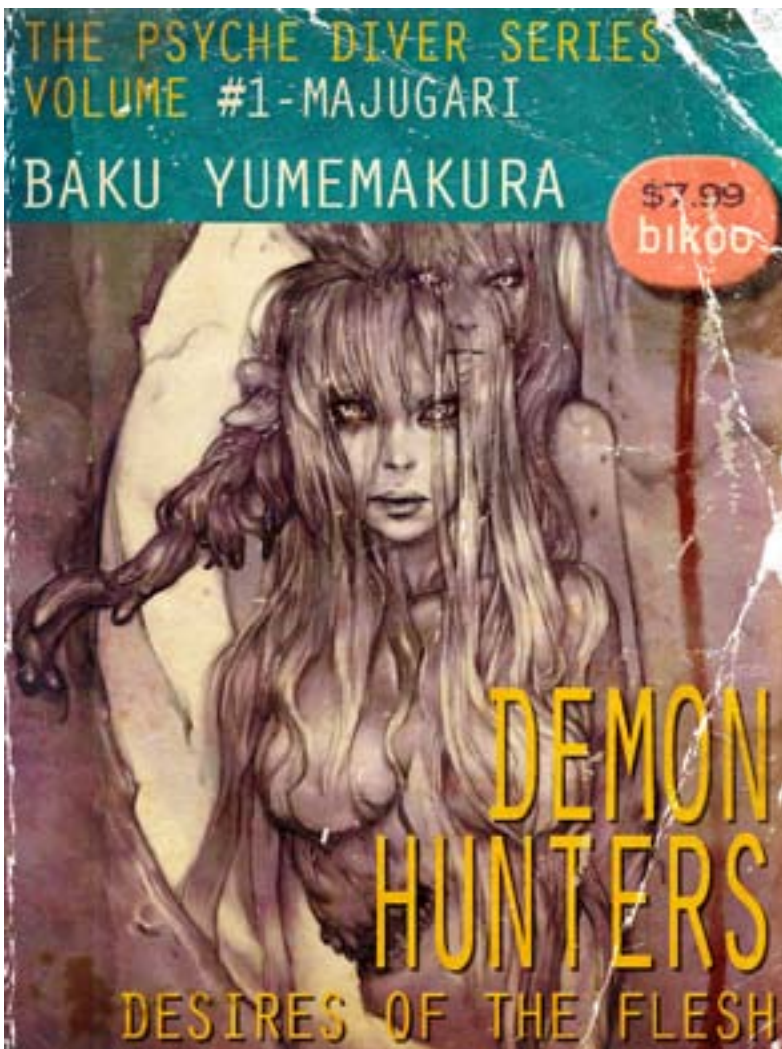
He hurled the shovel's handle at the creature. It dodged, leaving a slight opening for Fuminari to unleash a powerful roundhouse kick that connected hard. The power behind the kick would have been enough to instantly kill an untrained opponent, but the creature deflected it with unbelievable force, in the same moment sending a black mass hurtling toward Fuminari's head: the thing's fist. Fuminari raised both arms to block. To his terror, the blow knocked his upper body backward. The creature flowed gracefully into the air, the black outline of its body seemed to swell double its original size. Fuminari let himself fall back into the grass and flipped straight back to his feet. He had taken a shallow blow to the shoulder, but it had been enough to make it numb. The creature's strength was unreal. It would be easier to go hand-to-hand with a bear. The creature let out an animal howl. It was no human sound. It was the sound of the gatekeeper hounds of Hades tearing free from their chains.

The nightmarish battle commenced. During its course Fuminari became convinced his opponent was the devil itself. The creature did not slow, even when he landed a heavy blow to the body, its thickly knotted muscles casually absorbed the force of the attack. The creature did not use its fists as weapons, it used its nails. They lacerated Fuminari's back and tore into his chest. If the creature gained decent purchase, its nails would easily claw out huge chunks of flesh. It had bottomless reserves of energy.

There's no fucking way I'm gonna let this thing kill me. Fuminari felt himself weakening; he bit down on his lips, marshaling his strength. He was covered in blood. His shirt was soaked red and torn to shreds.

He went for its eyes. He was willing to sacrifice a leg in exchange for the eyes. He desperately searched for an opening. This was no hooligan's squabble, a normal man would have lost his sanity by now. This was a fight to death against an outlandish monster, a relentless onslaught of intolerable physical and mental tension. It was enough that he was still conscious. The only thing that spurred him on now, barely, was the burning obsession he had developed with this monster.

There would only be one chance and Fuminari was going to have to force it. He raised a bloodcurdling scream and launched himself into the air. His left leg burned in agony as his attack connected. Fuminari ignored it. As soon as he landed he fired his left hand upward, putting his full weight behind it, slamming it into the monster's face. He felt hot chunks of flesh being torn apart. Fuminari landed and vaulted backward. His hand burned, it felt like he had plunged it into a pool of molten lava.



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