

## Family ties

Sat on a chair in his office, John Masefield was completely absorbed in his work. He was a tall, rather handsome man in his forties, with blonde hair and short beard of the same color. He paused for a moment, fidgeting with the blue tie of his expensive suit. He really wanted a break from work! But since he had appointed Chief Executive Office of "Procter Consulting", a world-famous consulting firm, the number of tasks to do had increased significantly.

A light turned on on the intercom he had placed on his modern-looking wooden desk.

"Mr. Masefield, someone wants to see you." a woman's voice said. It was his secretary's.

"I'm really busy." he replied, annoyed. "Tell that person to fix an appointment for next week."

"I would, sir. But he said it's important. He says he needs to discuss a contract... a contract with hidden meanings."

Intuition glinted in Masefield's green eyes. "Oh, I remember now! Let him in."

"I will."

The intercom turned off, and a minute later someone opened the door to the office and walked in. It was a young man, probably in his twenties, dressed in a rather coarse way. He wore rumpled brown trousers and a shirt that may have been elegant a long time before. His brown hair was tied in a long ponytail, and a pair of black sunglasses rested on his nose. He was like a *rara avis* among the businessmen of the building. However, Masefield just smiled and stood up. Dragging his right leg, he limped next to him.

"Jim, Jim Clark!" he exclaimed. "I see that you have responded to my call."

The other man tried to avoid looking directly at Masefield. "You know I'm breaking every rule by being here."

Masefield patted him on the shoulder. "Relax, Jim. Being in charge means that I can bend those rules from time to time."

"How are you doing?" Jim asked, noticing the man's unsteady tread.

"A cut nerve." Masefield replied, emotionless.

"But you know such damage is not permanent anymore. Just find a good doctor and he'll fix that."

"No, Jim." Masefield shook his head. "I was careless with that operation... and this handicap will always remind me to be careful."

"If you say so... anyway, I don't think you've called me just to discuss about your health."

"Indeed I didn't. As you may know, we have got a new front line member recently: Satsuki Ford, the daughter of that semiconductor entrepreneur..."

Jim whistled. "Do you mean *that* Satsuki? Man, she's absolutely *gorgeous!*"

Masefield smiled. "I knew you'd say that. However, she's causing a load of problems to us, and to S.T.E.A.L. as a whole. She's a daredevil, and an *extremely* bad team player. She's so bad everyone refuses to team up with her. And that's not all: when fighting the Darkness she goes berserk, and the damage she causes is so big we have trouble covering it up."

"Why on Earth are we keeping them? We should just kick her out."

"We can't." Masefield's face was grave. "Officially, because her potential is unmatched, but..."

The man opened a drawer and pushed a small button hidden inside. A screen covered the window behind him, and the door locked automatically. A small buzzing sound filled the room.

"Now we are completely shielded, and I can tell you the real reason." he continued. "She's a *Ghu'dharan*."

Jim's heart missed a step and he gaped. "A.. Ghu dh'arn?"

"Ghu'dharan." Masefield corrected him.

"Yes, yes, *that*." Jim dismissed the remark with a wave of his hand. "But don't you realize it's crazy? It's like painting signs on this building saying 'I'm here, shoot me!'. "

"She doesn't know about it yet, luckily. You may remember her sister was brutally killed by the forces of the Darkness."

Jim nodded.

"We decided not to tell her about her true nature, because if she would find that she shares the same blood of the creatures she hates, she might become insane. Unfortunately for us, the Darkness *knows* about her nature. There have been at least seven assassination attempts in the past three months. Luckily, we always thwarted them in time without her noticing."

"I can understand her nature, but getting targeted so frequently... it's not normal."

Masefield sighed. "Indeed it isn't. She does no effort to hide her own abilities, that is why she always gets noticed."

"Terrible. And how I fit into the picture?"

"You'll be her partner from now on. You need to make her learn how to work in a team... or she'll bring us all down."

"Wow, that sounds like a crazy task! I would be better off asking her for a date."

"I wouldn't do so if I were you." Masefield observed. "The last three who tried ended up at the hospital with multiple fractures."

"Hard to catch, eh? Even better!"

"In any case, I count on you. Good luck."

Jim made a salute. "Yes, sir!"

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With a yell, Jim completed his *kata*. He was in one of the training areas of S.T.E.A.L., a large underground room with a lot of exercising equipment scattered around. There were weights, running mats, exercise bicycles more sophisticated machinery, all to make sure that all agents were at the peak of their physical abilities.

Jim wiped off the sweat from his forehead. In what kind of mess had he been dragged into? He was supposed to escort a psychopath who could destroy the world, but she did not know about it (not much of a consolation!). But she looked too good to refuse...

A sudden sound dragged him away from his thoughts: a punching bag had just fallen on the floor. The culprit was a woman of incredible beauty, with long dark hair and deep brown eyes. She was wearing a pair of tight shorts and a top that did not conceal her finely chiseled form at all. However, her pretty face only showed anger and resentment.

*Here she is.* Jim thought.

Satsuki kicked the punching bag repeatedly in frustration, and almost did not notice that Jim had walked up to her.

"Hey there, Satsuki!" he exclaimed. "You know, glasses would suit you well. That said... Do you want to go out on a date with me?"

He sidestepped just in time to avoid her punch.

"I thought you were friendlier..." Jim commented.

Satsuki stared at him. "What the hell do you want? Speak up!"

"From today on, I'm your mission partner."

She turned her back to the man. "Hell no! Why should I be?"

Jim smiled. "Orders from above."

"I don't care!"

"You *should*." Jim said in a low voice. "Otherwise you will be expelled... and you won't be able to pursue your goal. Besides, we could do a lot of *stuff* together..."

The woman tried to kick him and he jumped backwards, out of her reach.

"Fine." Satsuki replied, faking submission. "But don't get in my way or I'll make you pay!"

She punched the floor with incredible strength, creating a large hole.

"Just calm down." Jim advised. "That stuff is expensive, you know."

"Leave... me ... alone!" she shouted.

Jim shrugged and walked away. Behind him, he could hear equipment being broken into a thousand pieces. He felt bitter: she was hiding something... and it wasn't a pleasant memory. Despite the anger, he had *seen* it... her eyes literally exuded sadness. *Why do I also have to play psychiatrist?* he thought. *Man! I wish women were easier to understand...*

\* \* \*

Jim and Satsuki ran as fast as they could in a deserted street, in a new construction area on the outskirts of New York. Many unfinished buildings were all around, surrounded by cranes and excavators. It was well into the night, and the feeble light that came from small lamps in the construction yards gave a ghastly atmosphere to the place: it looked more like an ancient, frightening shrine than a reassuring urban area.

Despite the scarce lighting, both Jim and Satsuki did not have any problem, as their abilities permitted them to see easily even in pitch-black darkness. Further ahead, an indistinct figure was running away. It was their target, a lesser creature from the Outer Planes, which they had been tracking for days. Once discovered, he had run away, and they had set off in pursuit.

Jim briefly thought about the events that had led him there. He and Satsuki had been doing missions together for over a month, and the situation had slightly improved since their first meeting. The woman was still hot-headed, but at least he had managed to instill some sense in her. However, she refused to communicate at all aside objective-related topics, and of course every attempt at going out on a date had failed. Satsuki had revealed her inner self just once, when she had briefly mentioned having nightmares in which she turned into a monster. *If she knew she is a sort of monster, she'd go insane*, he thought.

Their target took a turn into a yard and he concentrated again on his objective. For a moment he thought he had lost him, but then he heard sounds coming from above: the creature was jumping over an unfinished skyscraper.

"We have cornered him... let's hurry!" he exclaimed.

The two ran inside the construction area and began their ascent. Most of the structure was already finished, so they had no problems climbing up the stairs. Within a few minutes, they ended up in a large room. It was completely empty, and a lot of tools lay on the ground. The large windows on the sides had no glasses yet, and they looked onto the city lights.

Their target was right in front of them. A man on his thirties with a long beard and shredded clothes, he looked wild but certainly not like a demon. He moved jerkily, and his body was frequently shook by violent convulsions. His mouth was moving, but no understandable word was coming out of it, only a clutter of incoherent sounds.

"End of the line for you." Jim said. "If you don't want things to get ugly, just give up that body and return to the Outer Plane."

The other man's response was a high-pitched scream. He brought his thumbs together and part of the floor dissolved into a dark vortex. While Jim was still trying to figure out what was going on, long tentacles shot out of the phenomenon and tied around his arms and legs. Unimpressed, he yelled a single mystic word and the appendices fell to the ground, twitching.

The black pool bubbled and something emerged out of it. Whatever it was, it had no human resemblance: it had a fish-like body covered in scales and three strong legs. Two long tentacles were in place of the arms, and the face resembled the one of an anteater.

Hissing, the creature jumped on Jim. He avoided the attack, but by doing so he had to fall back. With a smile of satisfaction, the other man made a run for a nearby flight of stairs. Upon seeing their target's attempt to escape, Satsuki set off in pursuit.

"No! You must not fight him!" Jim yelled.

"I will kill him! I'm good enough even without you!" the woman shouted back before disappearing from sight.

"Why these things *always* happen to me..." Jim muttered under his breath as he prepared to fight.

\* \* \*

Satsuki found her target on the roof. He must have realized he had no means of getting away, because he looked absolutely desperate. *It will be easy*, Sat-

suki thought. She quickly recited an incantation in a forgotten language, and the ground around the man exploded, engulfing him in flames.

The woman looked at that blazing inferno and put her hands on her hips. Had it been *really* that easy? For being a demon from the Outer Planes, that man had surely been weak...

Her confidence shattered when the fire died out. She expected only to see a blackened carcass, but instead a completely different creature stood there. It was unnaturally tall, with a smooth skin that resembled the one of an insect. While humanoid in shape, the arms were long and disproportionate, and ended with three-fingered hands, each with a razor-sharp claw. However his most terrifying feature was the face: vaguely human, it was a random assembly of different features, like the result of a game by some perverse god.

She screamed in terror: her sister Sarah had been mutilated and disfigured by a similar creatures years before. And now, it had come for *her*...

"Stay away, stay away!" she shrieked, almost on the brink of losing her sanity.

Satsuki tried desperately to do something to keep him at bay. She moved her hands in the air and chanted a spell that would have reduced him to ash.

Nothing happened.

While fear grasped her heart, Satsuki tried again, and again, but she was too frightened and her mind did not have enough focus, so all her attempts were in vain.

Noticing the woman's clumsy movements, the monster walked forward. Satsuki fell to her knees.

She held her head with her hands "It has come for me... it has come for me!"

She rose her gaze and saw the creature staring down at her. She screamed at the top of her lungs, then voice died in her throat and she passed out.

\* \* \*

The fish-like creature dissolved in a pool of putrid liquid and Jim wiped off sweat from his forehead. It had been a short but intense battle. Now he had to get back to Satsuki before she would blow the whole building up...

Her scream of terror echoed from upstairs.

*This is getting worse and worse!* Jim thought as he ran to the stairs.

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The monster looked at the unconscious form of Satsuki, puzzled. That woman had shown a great power... but why had she panicked like that? It was true that human minds were unpredictable, but in that case it had been too sudden.

He shrugged. It mattered little, as now her life would end by his hand. He rose his arm, then brought his claws down on the woman's head.

The blades bounced off her skin without causing any damage.

Surprise showed up in his inhuman eyes. *That* was really unexpected. Had she cast some sort of protection or...

Her body twitched, and he instinctively took a step back. Slowly, Satsuki stood up: her face was expressionless, and her eyes were vacuous and empty. Despite her trance-like appearance, the demon felt a very strong power coming from her.

Whatever it was, he would have not let her use it. Moving swiftly as he could, he clawed at her chest.

Satsuki blocked the attack with her bare hand and grabbed her opponent's wrist. Contorting his body desperately, the monster tried to break free, but with no success. A moment later, Satsuki used her other hand as a sword and cut the creature's arm off at the shoulder.

The demon let out a cry of pain and looked at her with fear. The loss of an arm did not worry him much, but he had been shocked by the unexpected turn of events. What had just happened? Where had she got that strength?

A sudden wind blew, and twirled around Satsuki. A large and complicated pattern appeared under her feet, and her appearance changed drastically: her clothes were torn away as she grew in size; scales covered part of her body; two large, bat-like wings emerged from her back; a pair of horns came out on her head and her eyes became two yellow fissures. Finally, a small symbol formed on her neck.

Upon seeing it, the creature understood and feared for his life. She was a Ghu'dharan, and there was no way he could match the power of such a being. However, as she had just Awakened, perhaps there was still a chance...

He opened her mouth and two large fireballs shot out at the woman. Satsuki simply deflected them with her left arm and they exploded in the air. That was the diversion the creature needed. He dashed forward and thrust his claws into the woman's abdomen.

As if he had hit a wall of solid rock, his forearm broke up in millions of pieces. He was still trying to understand what had just happened when Satsuki's hands dug deeply in his chest. With an horrifying sound of lacerated flesh, the woman ripped him in two and threw the halves away.

For a moment that seemed eternal she stood still, stained in blood, beautiful yet terrible. Then consciousness came back to her.

She shook her head, confused. Why was she standing? Where was that monster? Somehow, she felt *different* than before...

Satsuki looked at her own blood-stained hands. *What has just happened?*



In that precise moment, Jim broke in the roof, panting. He opened his mouth to speak, but as soon as he saw Satsuki no words came out.

She turned to him. "Jim?"

He remained silent.

"What's wrong?"

"Satsuki..." he muttered.

Only then she looked at her own body, and a terrible realization came to her mind.

She clenched her teeth. "What... has just happened to me?"

Jim looked away from her.

"You knew about this, didn't you?" she burst out. "Answer me! What *am I*?"

"I can explain everything, Satsuki but you should not..."

Tears flowed down Satsuki's cheeks. "I know what you're thinking... I'm a monster, am I not?"

"No, that's not it..."

"I knew it... I knew it! Since that night... I have always known that *I* was the one meant to be killed! Sarah died because of *me*..."

Jim took a step forward. "Satsuki, please calm down..."

She gave him a glance full of anger. "Don't come near me! Now that I know my nature... I will just put an end to it!"

Without any warning, the woman jumped off the roof.

"Partner, psychiatrist, now even hero!" Jim yelled as he ran towards the ledge and threw himself off.

He grabbed Satsuki in mid air then quickly pulled out a gun from a holster on his belt. As they fell down, he pointed it at the building and fired: a grappling hook attached to a rope shot out and tied around a beam, stopping their descent.

"Why won't you let me die?" Satsuki asked in a feeble voice.

"Because it's stupid!" Jim scolded her, surprised of his own angry tone.

"I am a monster... I should not live."

"*You* say you're a monster, but I think not! Who cares about your looks? It's your soul that matters, and you *are* definitely human! You joined S.T.E.A.L. to prevent what happened to your sister from repeating, right?"

Satsuki nodded reluctantly.

"Do you think one from the Darkness would do that? No, Satsuki. It's true that you did not choose to be like this. I can understand that. But what you can do... is to use it to help others from the Darkness. But if you just end your life, you will have accomplished nothing."

"Jim..."

With a loud sound, the rope snapped. As he fell down, Jim closed his eyes and braced for the impact, but that moment never came. As he opened his eyes he realized he was flying in Satsuki's arms.

The woman landed in a back alley and placed Jim on the ground. A moment later, her shape blurred and she was back to her normal self. Before Jim could say something, she flung herself to his neck and started crying.

"I'm so sorry!" she exclaimed with a sob. "I made you go through all of this because of me!"

"Hey, it's ok..." Jim stuttered, embarrassed.

She dug her head in his chest and kept on crying until no tears came out anymore. When she looked back at him, her eyes had a new light in them.

"You know..." she started. "You were right, really. I was so stupid... I did not want to avenge Sarah's death, I just wanted to throw my life away to atone for it. I thought someone like me was tainted... utterly evil. But I admit... the way you treated me and all, even if I was so bad with you... well... just... Thank you, Jim."

"Actually I am the one who should thank you. I would have been one with the sidewalk right now had it not been for you."

Satsuki smiled. "I did not want you to die, because..."

She stopped when she saw that Jim's cheeks had turned red. "What is it?"

"Uh..." he muttered. "Satsuki, you're still..."

Satsuki looked at herself. She was *naked*! She screamed and stepped back, covering herself as best as she could. A moment later Jim took off his shirt and threw it at her.

"Use it." he said. "I don't want you to attract too many stares."

She put it on and found it was big enough to cover most of her. "What will we do now?" she asked

Jim grinned. "I know what ..."

"Do you mean..." she replied worriedly.

"What the hell are you thinking? We have made a mess up there, we have to call for reinforcements and clean things up!"

Satsuki slapped him. "You're such a jerk, Jim Clark!"

They both burst into laughter.

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A few days later, in an apparently normal office of an information technology firm, Jim was busy typing his report about that night. He groaned: it was only

thanks to Masefield's influence that he had managed to avoid serious trouble with his direct superiors.

"Hey Jim" a man, a bright and cheerful person named Johnson, said. "What about that Satsuki? Did you even manage to go out with her?"

Jim puffed and waved his hand in dismissal. "Let's not talk about it, ok? All that trouble for..."

He was interrupted by whistling sounds. All the men in the room were staring at a woman who had just walked in. It was Satsuki. She strode up to Jim's desk and gave him a conniving glance.

"Uh, Satsuki..." Jim stuttered. "It is a nice... day, isn't it?"

"Tomorrow night, 8 p.m., in front of my house." she replied.

Jim gaped, speechless.

"Don't be late, ok?" Satsuki winked and walked away.

As he tried to find the words, Jim found himself literally assaulted by a lot of his colleagues asking all kinds of questions about her.

"What did you do to her?" one asked.

"I..." Jim started.

"Don't play dumb with us," another echoed. "Spill it! How long have you been going out with her?"

"Leave me alone!" Jim shouted.

Just outside the office, Satsuki chuckled. He had not expected that. But after all, the way he acted was one of the reasons she liked him. She was really looking forward to that night...

Whistling happily, she put on a pair of small glasses.