

HANTEI WA NO CONTEST

by Rawle Nyanzi

***NOTE:** All Asiatic names are written in Asiatic order, with the family name first (for example, Tanaka Ichiro, not Ichiro Tanaka.)*

Mokuan Daigo stood watch over the sand-filled ring set up in the middle of this tiny town of 2,000 people. Takako, the daughter of the local daimyo, sat in a high chair, overlooking the ring and the spectators around it; she was dressed in a kimono of fine, smooth silk, loose near the waist to allow her legs to move. She had not styled her hair in any elaborate manner, preferring to let it hang loose about her shoulders. A couple of samurai stood guard on either side of the chair.

Daigo couldn't help but be captivated by the girl's loveliness.

"I welcome all of you to the first-ever Hessen Province Tournament of Strength! The winner will join me in facing the demon who eats out the fish in the River Takaramizu, and I shall enhance the winner's might so that he may vanquish the menace," Takako said. Daigo gave a slight chuckle; Hessen Province had only about 8,000 people at most, and its "daimyo" was simply a man who grew wealthy by growing pleasure leaves. He spoiled Takako, and it wasn't long before the girl assumed leadership of the town just by being stubborn with everyone.

Daigo watched the first two contestants enter the ring, but their little wrestling match didn't interest him in the least, only Takako - her clear skin, her long black hair, her amazing legs, her silly personality - occupied his mind.

And he knew how to win her.

As the fight dragged on, Daigo made his way through the crowd to Takako's high chair. The two samurai - really just local tough guys who got their hands on swords - glared at him, their hands on the hilts of their blades. Without hesitation, Daigo lunged in and punched both samurai in the face. The blows sent them stumbling to the ground, and the audience gasped.

"What's going on down there?" Takako asked, but Daigo ignored the question and grabbed the bottom of the high chair. He heaved it backward, and lovely Takako screamed as her lofty seat hurtled to the stones below. One of the samurai on the other side caught the chair before it met the ground, but the sudden stop made Takako tumble out.

Daigo rushed over to the girl and tossed her over his shoulder with ease. The wrestlers, the samurai, and the crowd turned to face him, stunned at his audacity. Daigo ran for the edge of town, headed for the river so he could face the demon. The samurai and the wrestlers gave chase, egged on by Takako's cries for help.

Daigo gripped Takako's legs tightly as she struggled in vain to break free. Though Takako was slim, it took all the energy Daigo had to both carry his captive and outrun the mob of men behind him. As his muscles burned, he kept up the pace, determined to reach the river and face the demon. He staked his honor on this; if he failed but survived, he would end his own life.

But his meeting with destiny arrived sooner than he anticipated.

Amidst the rice paddies, a muscular kappa took up fighting stance, his powerful arms ready to crush anyone who dared to cross him. He wore nothing but a helmet and loincloth, and his beak had a knifelike edge that glinted in the sun. Daigo stopped, as did the men chasing him.

"Kappa, I'm here to-"

The kappa stopped Daigo. "So the young witch will help. A dishonorable way to duel, but I accept your challenge all the same," he said. He bowed, but the helmet prevented the water from falling out of his head, allowing him to maintain his stamina.

"Fine by me," Daigo answered. He put Takako on her feet, then stretched. "Takako, you know what to do," he told her.

Takako made several hand seals, then a wave of inhuman strength came over Daigo; he felt like he could uproot a tree with his bare hands. He turned to the kappa and got into a fighting

stance. Daigo bowed to him, then rushed forward.

Daigo grabbed the amphibian, but his hands slipped off of the oily skin every time. The kappa had no such difficulty; he grabbed Daigo, lifted him high over his head, then slammed him down onto the grass. Were it not for Takako's spell, Daigo's back would have snapped. Daigo got up and tried to strike the kappa this time. Though the demon blocked or evaded the first few blows, his luck didn't last forever; Daigo landed solid strikes to the kappa's chest and face that knocked him backwards but not off his feet. The kappa tried for another grapple, but Daigo ducked and uppercut the monster right in his chin, finally sending him to the ground.

But he was far from being knocked out.

Daigo went to sit on the kappa and remove his helmet, but the slippery creature crawled away, sideswiping Daigo's leg as he passed. Daigo ignored the pain and glanced at where the creature was going.

A sharp pain ran through his spine. He was going for Takako!

Daigo ignored his bleeding leg and dashed toward his opponent. As the kappa crawled toward the girl, she ran for the crowd. But both she and Daigo were too late. The kappa grabbed Takako from behind, then placed one webbed claw under her chin.

"I can fight dishonorably, too. Now leave me be or I will crush this girl's head like an egg," the kappa said, not facing Daigo but definitely addressing him. In the blink of an eye, Daigo closed the distance, grabbed the straps of the kappa's helmet, and snapped them. Before the kappa could react, Daigo forced the kappa's arm down, then lifted off the helmet and knocked the water out of his head.

The kappa let Takako go and fell to his knees. "Well played, young human. I shall leave your river," he said. As the kappa walked away, the men cheered.

"Takako," Daigo called out to the girl.

"Yes?" Takako said.

"I win." Daigo ran up to Takako and kissed her right on the lips. The sudden affection shocked her at first, but she embraced him in return.

Takako broke the kiss. "You're as good a champion as I could ask for," she said. With arms around each other's shoulders, they turned around to face the crowd.

"Everyone, let's get back home. We still need to find out who the strongest guy in town is," Daigo said. Everyone laughed, for the kappa no longer loomed over them.