

The cover art features three main characters. At the top left is a young girl with vibrant orange hair in a high ponytail, wearing a blue sailor-style uniform with a red bow. She has a worried expression and her hands are clasped together. In the center is a young man with long, flowing white hair and red eyes, wearing a blue jacket with a red cape. He has a determined, slightly aggressive expression. In the bottom left is a close-up of a white, cat-like face with large, dark eyes and a black collar. The background is a dark, night sky with a large, full moon and several black feathers floating around. The title 'Demon King DAIMAŌ ACT9' is prominently displayed at the bottom in a stylized, colorful font.

Shoutarou Mizuki

Demon King
DAIMAŌ
ACT9



Demon King
DAIMAŌ
ACT9



**YES. A
HUGE,
FOOLISH
STORY,
THAT
ERASES
STORIES
THEM-
SELVES.**

**“IS
THAT
THE
STORY
YOU
SPOKE
OF?”**





Character Introduction

JUNKO HATTORI

.....
A pure-hearted class rep who's in love with Akuto. Unable to hide her shock at Akuto's words.

AKUTO SAI

.....
Our "good" protagonist, who was prophesied (again?) to become the Demon King. How will he react to the revival of the first Demon King, Zero?

FUJIKO ETO

.....
A black mage and herbalist who swears loyalty to Akuto. Rides the demon beast Cerberus.

KEENA SOGA

.....
A ditzy airhead girl who's taken a liking to Akuto. Who is she, really?

MIWA HIROSHI

.....
A troublemaker who calls Akuto "Boss." He is also the hero "Brave."

KORONE

.....
A Liradan responsible for guarding and observing Akuto. But she has now been taken over by 2V and Zero.



YOSHIE KITA

Deceived by 2V, she helped bring Zero back to life. Likes Akuto and helps him.



LILY SHIRAISHI

Student Council President at Constant Magical Academy. Quick to fight and gets angry if called small.



2V

A member of Cabinet Magical Intelligence Department, aka CMID-8. Succeeded in bringing back Zero and using his power.



KEISU

A small girl found inside virtual phase space with Zero. Seems to be the key to defeating him?

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Prologue

The red-haired girl didn't know where she was born. But by the age of two or three, she knew exactly who she was.

"I'm me."

In others, she knew that she was none other than herself.

That's why, perhaps, it took a liking to her. The thing came out of nowhere, fusing itself to a human, changing them forever, and taking no responsibility at all. It had no form. It couldn't be observed. Its existence couldn't even be proven. But it had the same mind as a person. No, perhaps you could say a mind was all it had.

Before the girl turned 4, she'd encountered it. As she moved homes from a relative's house, to an orphanage, to another orphanage, she'd started to talk to someone. She'd talk to an empty corner of the room, and then laugh at an answer that nobody could hear.

Everyone around her saw it, but they all told themselves it was just a girl playing with an imaginary friend, which was common at her age. But she was talking to something that she could see quite clearly.

"Who are you?"

"I'm nobody. But I'm about to be you."

"Huh? But I'm me."

"That's also right."

"Hmm... Then nothing changes, I guess? Or does that mean there's more of me?"

"That's right. You'll become part of me."

"I will? Then I won't be lonely anymore, will I?"

"That's not correct. I'm afraid you'll still be alone."

“Why? Aren’t you my friend?”

“I’m going to become you. Not your friend. It’s a very sad thing, but you’re going to be alone for eternity. You’ll go far away, and nobody will ever understand you.”

“I don’t want that. I don’t!”

“The decision has already been made. You’re very special. More special than a four-leaf clover in a clover field, or a boy calico cat.”

“I’m that special?! I never knew why I was alone, or why I always have to go live in different places, or why the grown-ups always bow to me, or sometimes make fun of me, but it’s because I’m special, isn’t it...? But I don’t want to be lonely.”

“You’ll always be lonely, but don’t worry. You’ll at least have one friend. When you’re in trouble, just go ahead and cry. If you do, someone will save you.”

“I just need to cry?”

“That’s right. That’s how the world works.”

That was the first conversation they had. After that, the red-haired girl began to live with it, talk to it, and let it guide her life. She still went from one orphanage to another, but if she did what the voice told her, she never really had many problems.

When she grew up, she eventually forgot it even existed. Maybe that was just a sign that it had completely become one with her. Yet every now and then, without warning, the voice would tell her to do something, and she’d do it.

That was what happened the day she saw a certain boy. It was a young boy with a strangely grown-up face, and when she saw him, she suddenly decided to cry. She cried and cried, and then he gave her a hairpiece.

That was when the red-haired girl, Keena Soga, figured it all out. Why was her life like this? Why did she have to go from one orphanage to another? Why was she special? Why was she born? All the doubts went away in an instant.

She tried to tell the boy how she felt, but realized that she couldn’t get the

words out right. Before she could figure out what to say, the boy said something that indicated he understood her feelings, and then left. But Keena realized that this meeting was fate.

Of course, once she'd put on the hairpiece, she totally forgot everything that had just happened.

1 - Beginning of the Final Battle

Akuto Sai floated in the sky, looking down on the scenery below.

There was a crowd around the palace, and a big one. Even from where he was up in the sky, he couldn't see where it ended. It was the crowd of people who'd risen up to challenge Zero's Liradans and their rule of the Empire. They'd risen up out of pure rage. But the problem was that when Empress Kazuko had announced her dictatorship, their anger had turned to cheers.

—What choice did I have?

Akuto had just declared himself to be the Demon King. It was the only way to free the people, by defeating Zero and Kazuko. It was 2V who'd awakened Zero, but now Kazuko was controlling him. She'd used Zero to terrify the populace, and then win them over by becoming their savior.

—I'm going to make good use of this power.

Akuto had died, been revived, and then gained the power of the Demon King. It was terrifying, and he didn't really want to believe it, but he had been born as both a human and a weapon. He had a human mind and human feelings, but the power of the gods... the power to use infinite magic.

In other words, he was completely sane. He knew how much power he'd gained, and what he could do with it, down to an extremely minute level, but he was neither scared of his power, nor drunk on it.

—If I was going to be the Demon King, I wish they would've given me the power to do a good evil laugh or something...

Akuto grumbled to himself internally, but on the outside, he still needed to keep up the act.

"Artificial thing that calls yourself the Demon King! I will teach you that there is only one person in this world who is allowed to plunge the people into the depths of terror!" he yelled.

He felt an almost painful wave of emotion coming from below; all the hatred and fear from the huge crowd below was being directed towards him. He was now able to read the logs stored by the gods that digitized human emotions and turned them into language. At this point, his brain was linked directly to the gods themselves, and he could read the pasts of every person in the crowd, right down to what they'd eaten for dinner three years ago.

—This power... It's the power to look into other people's hearts. I can become either a god or a Demon King. Because I'm a normal person, like everyone else, I can choose which one I want to be.

The other Demon Kings throughout history faced this choice too... and made some kind of decision. Just like me, they came up with Demon King-sounding phrases to say, and felt like they could control anybody they wanted to...

"I feel your hatred and fear! Give me more of it! It will become my power!" He was just saying the first things that came to his head, but even if his words were a lie, he could still feel the Demon King inside him, pulling him forward. If he wasn't careful, it would take over. He had to do his best to stay sane.

—I need to stay calm... Analyze the data and decide what to do next... Figure out what it is I should be doing...

Knowing the history of other people's lives gave him more information than he'd imagined. The terrifying fact that he could read their pasts and emotions meant that he knew exactly what they were feeling now, and what they were going to do next.

—So they really believe that only the Empress can save them from Zero? And that I came to take advantage of the chaos and defeat both Zero and the Empress.

It was true that Zero had awakened and tried to control the populace, but it was Kazuko, in fact, who was planning to use that to take control. But the people had put absolute trust in her. They trusted her because she was the empress, and because she had a gentle face and kind manners. Her title and her appearance — that was all they were making their judgements from. In truth, none of them knew the first thing about her.

—My job is to defeat Zero. And of course, the Empress too... And then this

stupid story that everyone believes... I'll destroy both the Empress and the Demon King.

Akuto made a promise to himself. And then he looked down at the one person who was floating above the crowd. It was the “hero” they admired, clad in a special suit.

—If he defeats me in the end, the story the people believe in should come to its end. And what comes after that...

Hiroshi Miwa. Before, he'd been nothing but timid and uncertain, but now Akuto felt a certain resolve from him. Right now he was carrying Junko Hattori someplace safe, but eventually he would come back. Maybe Lily Shiraishi's words had inspired him, or Yuko's actions had given him courage.

Now that Akuto had awakened, he could feel the flow of all the emotions Hiroshi had ever had.

—Once I'm gone, I'll leave everything to Hiroshi!

Akuto looked elsewhere. A single Liradan appeared on the palace terrace. It took the form of a powerful-looking man. This was none other than the body that Zero, the program, was using now. It looked up at Akuto with emotionless eyes, expressing its will.

(You're nothing but a machine for war, too. Why are you so obsessed with defeating me?)

It sounded like a challenge to Akuto. But maybe, to Zero, it was simply a question.

Akuto answered wordlessly. (You're right. I'm an artificial thing too. But there's something fundamentally different inside me: A biological self. A human mind. Your emotions and minds are like dropping one color of water inside another. The two will always intermix. But I am me. In the same way that all humans are unique from one another. I won't let you melt them all together into one being.)

(It is because they are split into individuals that they must be controlled. My master agrees.)

(Master... You mean Kazuko.) Akuto said, but then a clear voice cut him off before he could say more.

(Correct. You may know the power I have already. I stole it from 2V.)

There was something in the voice that made you want to relax and smile. But right now, to Akuto, it sounded like the temptation of a succubus. When he listened to it, it made him want to agree with everything the voice said.

(...If you control Zero, there's no need to defeat it.) Akuto said.

Kazuko was hidden deep within the palace, communicating with Akuto via telepathy.

(Correct. Yes, of course, you are correct.) Kazuko nodded, but she wasn't agreeing with him. (So let me defeat you, instead. That will satisfy the people, right?) she said happily.

Akuto frowned. (And then you'll rule. Is that the plan?)

(Yes. It's very simple, isn't it? The situation's changed. But I'll do what I promised. As long as you obey me, I won't kill you. I'll guarantee you survive,) Kazuko said, as if there was no way he would refuse.

Akuto grunted. (That's pretty selfish.)

But Kazuko didn't seem to care about what he said. She tilted her head slightly as if making a cute request. (Yes. I'm simply being selfish. You'll do what I ask, right? Or were you planning to hurt me after you listened to my request to defeat Zero? You can't do that. It's not fair. People will think you have a bad personality.) Kazuko smiled.

Akuto answered with frustration in his voice. (If they do, that's fine. I know what I am and I've got no intention of hiding it. I'm opposed to what you're doing. The reason you changed sides and started protecting Zero is that it will make it easier for you to rule if you have a god at your side. If Zero's defeated, the gods will lose the core that supports them.)

(Oh my, aren't you the smart one? But if that's the case, then you and I want essentially the same thing. Why can't you realize that? You want everyone to know who you really are. And I'm the same,) Kazuko said, unperturbed.

Akuto knew what she meant when she said she wanted people to understand her. But at their core, Akuto and Kazuko were completely different.

(If you know that the fantasy called the “Empress” isn’t who you really are, then you can just throw it away and live in freedom!)

(Oh my, you don’t understand at all. Who I really am is a very greedy woman. I’ve no desire to be the kind, human empress. But the position of empress is a handy thing; it would be a waste to throw it away. I just need to take advantage of it. You were able to do the same thing with the Demon King, weren’t you?)

(Unfortunately, I’m incapable of thinking about things that way. I want this to be the last time I use my power,) Akuto said. It took a moment before the Empress answered.

(...I expected this, but I guess negotiations have broken down, haven’t they?)

(I never had any intention of working with you.)

(If that’s the case, then in this moment, the whole of humanity is your enemy. Now let’s begin. Let’s make this a real theater. Not just a silly farce.)

Kazuko gave the signal, and instantly Zero jumped off the terrace. Akuto tensed up, but Zero jumped the opposite direction, flying up into the air before ripping off his artificial skin to reveal the internal structure beneath.

Before Akuto could figure out what he was doing, Liradans began to fly up into the air from below. They ripped off their own skin and attached themselves to him. Zero’s body began to grow, like blocks piling on top of one another.

“Well, that’s not good...” Akuto frowned.

By the time Zero was done, Akuto was facing a 15-meter tall giant made of exposed machinery.

“Sheesh... I’ve gotta fight this thing, don’t I?” Akuto sighed.

“There’s a reason he’s combining and growing like that. But if you just glance at it, it seems like a product of the ridiculous belief that a mechanical giant is a symbol of power,” Yoshie said, as if she was trying to impress someone. It was her habit when she got excited. She’d lowered her goggles and was analyzing

Zero, who had now landed in the palace courtyard.

“There’s a reason for it?” Junko Hattori asked. Until a moment ago, they’d been inside a flying boat above the crowd, but they’d just landed on one of the outer terraces so that they could climb up the walls and get inside the palace.

“In the end, whether it’s the Demon King or Zero, they’re just fighting over the resource called mana. And that struggle for resources doesn’t take place in the real world. It’s a program. The one with the greater amount of processing power wins,” Yoshie explained as she turned around on the Terrace.

“And it has more processing power when it combines?”

“Yup. It can do parallel processing. Zero is at a disadvantage compared to the Demon King, who can use every resource. But in his present form, in terms of calculating power he probably surpasses the Demon King.”

“Then what is the Demon King... Akuto’s... processing power?”

“His body’s not a machine, so he uses his human brain. But the magical system is built to respond to human imagination and emotions. He may lose the battle for resources, but he won’t lose in a contest of magic. Passion beats everything, you see. Woooah! It’s so exciting!”

Junko ignored Yoshie and leaned over the edge of the terrace so she could see below. “Looks like the crowd ran away...”

When the crowd saw Zero and realized a battle was imminent, they’d begun to move away from the palace. Now the only ones near the palace’s outskirts were Junko, Yoshie, and Keisu.

“Oh? You don’t think it’s exciting? Well, I guess I can understand that. We made it, but things have changed, and unless Keisu can remember something, there’s nothing we can do...” Yoshie shrugged and looked at Keisu.

Keisu — a young girl with a ponytail, dressed like a samurai — was a Liradan, but the only Liradan who wasn’t under Zero’s control. She supposedly had some kind of secret that would help seal Zero, but right now she was just tagging along.

“I bring great shame upon myself in saying so, but I remember nothing...”

Keisu said apologetically.

“Nah, it’s fine, I guess. Just as long as you remember it when we need you to.”
Yoshie patted Keisu on the head.

Keisu looked up at her and giggled like she felt ticklish. “You’re very kind, Master.”

“Master?”

“I’ve decided to call you that, for I have entrusted you with my life.”

Yoshie grinned. “Sure, I guess. If that helps you somehow.”

“...Wait, I think if anybody needs someone to protect them, it’s not you, it’s Keisu,” Junko said, slightly nervous.

Yoshie looked around the palace for a moment, before tensing up at what she saw. Kazuko had appeared from one of the corridors leading into the palace.

“Is that Keisu, then?” she said gently, and walked towards them with elegant steps. But Kazuko’s hands were covered in blood.

“Your Highness... is that... human blood?”

Junko had been to war once, and she knew that demon beast blood and human blood had different smells.

But Kazuko was unfazed by her words. She simply chuckled. “I had some rather complicated family matters to deal with. But it’s very embarrassing to me that you’ve seen proof I was in a fight.”

“.....!” Junko let out a wordless breath. She felt an instinctive terror at Kazuko.

“Oh my. Don’t look at me like I’m insane. If nothing else, I’m more confident of my sanity than anyone else in the world,” Kazuko said. There was an abnormal aura rising up from her; a lump of murderous emotion, different from a mana flash. It froze both Junko and Yoshie where they stood.

“Th-This...”

“This is bad...!”

The two of them began to sweat. They’d both lost the ability to move.

Then suddenly, a voice snapped them out of their fear. “Get Keisu out of here!” It came from behind Kazuko, and it was one that Junko recognized.

“Keena?” Junko whispered. She could move now.

Junko moved quick while she still had the chance, drawing her sword and jumping in front of Keisu. She arrived just as the mana ball did, blocking it with her blade. The ball spun in the air as it traveled, but when the blade struck, it sliced through it like jelly. When the ball was completely separated into two halves, it fell to the ground.



“What...?”

The mana ball had a strange feeling to it. It was different than the ones she was used to. Kazuko had been the one who fired it. She could tell from the path it had followed that it had been fired at Keisu.

Kazuko’s eyes opened a little, as if she found this surprisingly entertaining. “You can slice through a Yasakani-no-Magatama...? That blade was a gift from a god, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, but... But if that’s true then what...?” Junko didn’t know what to think. Some sort of spell she didn’t understand was at work here.

Kazuko smiled at her. “If it wasn’t, you could not defeat my magic. That’s all.” She raised her hand to summon another mana ball.

“Oh no...!” Junko shot a quick glance at Yoshie. But Yoshie was already moving before the warning came.

“We’re getting out of here Keisu!” Yoshie turned on the chainsaw she was holding and climbed up onto the terrace railing.

“But I dislike fleeing in the face of the enemy...” Keisu seemed reluctant until Yoshie cut her off.

“I’m jumping off the ledge. Protect me.” Yoshie leaned forward off the railing and then disappeared.

“Master!” Keisu leaned off the edge as well. She could see Yoshie falling. “I’m coming for you!” She jumped after her to follow.

Once she saw that they were gone, Junko readied her sword and waited for an attack from Kazuko. But it never came.

“You still want to try this?”

Kazuko wasn’t moving, but was looking down. Someone had grabbed her leg. And it wasn’t just the hand that was wrapped around her leg; the forearm it was connected to was wrapped all the way around it like rubber.

“If you don’t consider it a defeat, you’re not defeated even if you’re dead.” It was Lily Shiraishi. She was lying on the ground a few meters behind Kazuko.

Her clothes were a mess. It looked like she'd been struck many times. Her boyish face was swelled up and bruised from violent punches. But despite this, Lily Shiraishi still had her arm reached out towards Kazuko.

"Yashakuni-no-Magatama." Without even looking behind her, Kazuko attacked Lily with several mana balls.

"Tch!" Lily retracted her arm and staggered to her feet. But there was no way she could move faster than the mana balls.

"Watch out...!" Junko raced past Kazuko and stood in front of Lily. With a single slash of her blade, she struck the mana balls down.

"President?! What's going on here?" She asked Lily. Until now she'd acted out of instinct, but she still didn't know what was going on.

Lily answered with a sarcastic smile. "Eh, as long as you know that the Empress was behind this whole thing, you won't be too far off. She killed 2V and now she's trying to keep us from telling the world," she said.

Of course, Junko believed she was telling the truth. Her face took on a tense expression as she looked at the Empress.

Kazuko just laughed. "That's not a very nice thing to say," she chuckled. "But I suppose I'm not being very nice right now."

Junko furrowed her brow. "...I'm disappointed in you, Empress."

Kazuko laughed her off. "Sometimes you need to win the throne even if it means disappointing others. Otherwise, peace will always remain impossible."

"Do you think the people want you to sit on that throne?" Junko asked.

Kazuko nodded. "Did you not hear them just now?"

"Tch..." Junko didn't know what to say.

"Give it up. She won't listen to reason. Anyway, more than one person made it outside. What will you do if they tell the truth?" Lily interjected as she staggered to her feet.

Besides her, both Fujiko Eto and Keena Soga knew that Kazuko had murdered 2V. And they weren't here now.

“Wait, where are Fujiko and Keena?” Junko asked.

Lily grinned. “Keena took her clothes off, you see. And Fujiko split the first chance she got while I was fighting.”

“I see. So that’s what happened.”

Keena could turn invisible. Even with mana-detection magic, there was no way to find her. But she couldn’t make the things she was wearing disappear, so she had to take off her clothes. That was probably the voice she’d heard before.

Kazuko was listening to their conversation, and her eyes narrowed a little when they discussed Keena. But then she just shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. I can find the ones who escaped and shut them up.”

Kazuko raised a hand. A sword of light appeared in a blast of mana.

“Ame-no-murakumo-no-tsurugi.”

That was what Kazuko called the two-meter-long sword that appeared out of thin air. The sword of light was shining like a piece of the sun had fallen to Earth. Junko was standing a good bit away, and she could still feel its heat.

“Be careful. That thing’s incredibly powerful,” said Lily, who had seen the sword run 2V’s body through.

“Alright. I’ll focus on having a perfect defense...” Junko tilted her blade just a little to the left as she assumed her fighting stance. It was a defensive stance that could block an attack from any direction.

“That’s not what I meant! Its power is...” Lily screamed.

Kazuko’s eyes narrowed. “It’s too late. I’ll run you both through...” She waved her hand, and the sword of light flew towards Junko.

“Aah!”

The roar as it sliced through the air, and the rumbling of the mana around it, told her exactly how powerful it was. Anything created with mana had a certain maximum limit to its strength. But the waves of power and heat coming from the sword were fiercer than any she’d ever experienced.

“I can’t... block it!” Junko couldn’t move her sword. If she tried to block, it

would snap the blade in two. And then it would run through her, and Lily behind her as well.

But instead, the Ame-no-murakumo-no-tsurugi flew past them with a loud roar. It embedded itself into the palace wall behind them, melting the area around the hole it made with its heat. Terrifyingly, when it crashed into the wall it had made almost no noise. In other words, it had melted it away with barely any resistance.

“We’re saved...” Junko sighed in relief. Of course, she knew better than anybody else that she hadn’t been able to dodge. She’d survived because the blade was never aimed at her to begin with.

The sword had gone off course because Kazuko had been knocked off balance. Just before she’d fired it off, Kazuko had suffered some kind of impact that knocked her to her knees. Behind her, Junko could see a small shining hairpiece floating in the sky.

“Thank you...” Junko whispered softly.

The hairpiece was Keena. Just before Kazuko had attacked, she must have slammed into her.

Lily let out a sigh of relief too. But then she shook her head as if to say that they couldn’t let their guard down. “We’re saved... But we won’t be so lucky next time. The Empress loves to hurt people. That’s why she used her mana balls. But since they don’t work on you, she brought out her sword...”

Kazuko was standing up again and shaking her head. She seemed to have noticed Keena’s power. “So you have someone with you who can turn invisible, I see. But since it appears they can’t actually hurt me, they don’t pose a serious threat. Next time, I won’t miss.”

Kazuko waved a hand through the air around her. She was checking that Keena wasn’t anywhere nearby.

“That sword... those balls... what are they?” Junko turned around and asked Lily.

“Magic that only the Imperial Family can use. There’s three of those spells in all. Those two and the one Lily used to control the Liradans.”

“Only the Imperial family...?”

“Being able to use those spells is proof that you’re of royal blood. It’s a symbol of authority.”

“And they’re that powerful...?” Junko was satisfied with Lily’s explanation, but she knew that one more hit and she’d be finished.

“You need to run. I’ll hold her off for a little more,” Lily said. There was no sense of tragic resolve in her expression. It seemed like to her, it was the natural thing to do.

Junko shook her head. “...I can’t run after you’ve said that. And I’ve made a decision of my own. I left him once because of my feelings. But this time, as long as he’s here fighting, I will be here with him. I don’t want to have any more regrets.”

Junko’s expression was unwavering. Now that she knew what was going on here, she knew exactly what Akuto was trying to do. Akuto was betting his entire being on defeating Kazuko and Zero.

From the look on her face, Lily knew exactly who Junko meant by “him.” She grinned and pulled down the torn brim of her hat as she looked away. “That’s so old-fashioned... But if that’s your situation, then I won’t tell you what to do. You have to win, though, if you want it to matter. You have to kill the Empress,” she said. Junko nodded firmly.

Kazuko laughed as if she’d been listening. “Kill the Empress? That’s an excellent joke, but I’m honestly not sure how to respond to it.” She smiled and raised a hand. Mana gathered there and another sword of light appeared.

Junko could barely bring herself to move in the face of its power, but now that she’d decided to fight, she’d already come up with a way to do it. “I’ll move fast and distract her...!” She raced forward and then jumped, her sword at the ready.

Kazuko turned her head. The girl in front of her had seemed to disappear. And when she finally found Junko again, she’d already jumped to the opposite side. No, if she’d jumped, how could she be over there too?

There were now two Junkos. It was her clone technique; her favorite spell.

Another physical Junko, created out of pure mana.

“Iga Ninja Technique: Raging Moonshadow!” Junko created five more clones, all of which began to race quickly around Kazuko.

Kazuko couldn’t focus on any one point. Just when she became sufficiently distracted, the five Junko’s struck at her at once.

“HYAAAAAH!”

The clones were all real objects, made out of mana. They weren’t illusions; each of them had real power. And each of them attacked at a slightly different time. It was an undodgeable attack that was sure to kill its target.

But...

“You made clones with mana, didn’t you? But that won’t work against somebody who can control mana on a detailed level,” Kazuko said calmly, and then waved her hand.

“What?!”

Everyone was astonished. First, the Junko in front of Kazuko disappeared. As she moved around her hand around the room, each of the clones disappeared.

“...Tch!” But Junko didn’t halt her attack. The four clone Junkos had disappeared, but she still slashed her katana at Kazuko’s side. “Raaaaah!” she yelled.

But her yell suddenly stopped. The katana froze in mid-air. Kazuko was turned towards Junko, her blade of light pointing at her face. “This is how you fight with magic.”

“Wha... Impossible...”

“No, this is the inevitable result. If nothing else, you may find happiness in the fact that you were killed by a being greater than a god.” Kazuko smiled.

And then Keena, still invisible, slammed into Kazuko, and her whole body shook. But that was all. Kazuko knew she was there, and knew that she had almost no power of her own.

The Empress lazily waved a hand through empty air. There was a scream and

the sound of something being knocked away. The whole time, her blade of light remained pointed at Junko's throat.

"I won't be interrupted again. Now..."

"Eek..." Junko's eyes opened wide in fear.

Kazuko moved to drive the blade home. And then...

Suddenly, all the lights went out in the palace.

Kazuko froze, but she wasn't the sort of person to lose her senses just because it went dark. Especially since it was the middle of the day, and enough light was coming from outside to see.

"A-Are we saved...?" Junko whispered, and then she jumped back. Kazuko's sword was losing its form.

"The mana in the air is vanishing..." Kazuko turned her palm upwards, tried using her magic, and confirmed that there was only a small reaction.

"The atmospheric mana itself is disappearing?" Junko wiped away the sweat on her brow and tried to sense the feeling of the mana.

"The energy it's supplying is also fading..." Lily said.

Junko was beginning to recover her senses. She realized that this was her chance to actually cause some damage. "I won't hit as hard, but if we both can't use magic, then maybe I can win!" she shouted as she jumped at Kazuko again.

The Empress dodged with a backstep. "It was Zero who absorbed the mana and energy, I assume. No, the Demon King is probably capable of the same thing."

Kazuko glanced out the window.

○

"Master, don't scare me like that. I didn't know you were perfectly capable of getting down on your own."

"Of course I am. I don't do stupid things."

Yoshie had stabbed the chainsaw into the wall and used it to slow her descent, and then dropped to the ground on her own. Keisu had jumped down

after her, slammed into the ground, and had to have Yoshie dig her out.

Now the two of them were watching the battle between Akuto and Zero, as they kept an eye out for pursuers from the palace. Zero was now a giant humanoid machine, covering half the sky. Akuto was in front of him, and seemed to be the size of a toy doll in comparison. But it seemed to Yoshie that the two of them were putting out an equal amount of power.

“It’s strange. They’re so different in size, but the aura they give off is so similar,” Yoshie said.

“But the flow of mana is different. Look...” Keisu pointed at Zero.

In that moment, Zero suddenly spread his arms wide. The sound of them slicing through the air echoed as the compressed air exploded, but that wasn’t all.

“Mana....? Oh! This is...” Yoshie lowered her goggles and looked around. She was able to use them to visualize the flow of mana.

The colored mana spread throughout the atmosphere like a cloud. Though if it were a real cloud, it would be more like a typhoon had descended into the lower atmosphere. The mana was swirling around Zero in a spiral.

“Wooah! This is one heck of a cyclone,” Yoshie whispered. The flow creating the spiraling mana disturbed the atmosphere as well, causing the wind to shake the girls’ hair. Now it was a physical storm, stealing the mana around it.

The cyclone started near the palace, and spread out in a circle, turning off the lights of any building it passed through. On the ground, every mana-powered vehicle stopped, and magic itself ceased to be possible.

“It’s like the end of the world. The last battle between an all-devouring black giant and a fallen angel. A modern armageddon is unfolding before our eyes. We have to watch this. It might be the beginning of a living hell,” she said, grinning within the storm.

○

—So he combined in order to suck away mana?

Akuto understood what Zero was trying to do. He’d dismantled and

reassembled all those Liradans so that he could have the processing power to absorb and control huge amounts of mana. But he couldn't use complicated spells like a human, which meant he'd be forced to rely on brute force.

Akuto's guess was right. The monster raised its fist and brought it down on him. The fist was covered in a mana storm.

—I wouldn't survive a hit from that, I guess.

Akuto controlled the flow of mana around him. He couldn't overpower Zero in a physical struggle for mana, or in a battle over energy to supply to the mana. Which meant that he'd have to finesse things, controlling the mana just enough to divert his foe's power. It was the same technique that the headmaster of Constant Magical Academy had used before, just applied on a larger scale.

Akuto moved just enough to dodge his enemy's attack, which was heading towards him at the speed of a small plane. By controlling the mana torrents, he was able to use a minimum amount of power to control a much greater force.

(You won't be able to withstand me forever. I can absorb the mana around me, but your capacity is limited. There's no point in forcing yourself.) Zero said, surprisingly kindly.

(Why are you telling me this?)

(My goal is to control humanity. Not to destroy you.)

(So the Empress isn't in full control of you?) Akuto asked. He knew for certain that the Empress was trying to kill him. But Zero said otherwise.

(My highest priority task lies elsewhere. It is the preservation of humanity.)

(So you'll obey any of her orders that don't interfere with that task?) Akuto said, understanding now.

(That is correct. I want to make this as efficient as possible. I don't want to waste energy, and I want to decrease the human population, but not to the point where they go extinct.)

It was a strange conversation for two people in the middle of a battle. But the way they were each confirming what they were after while they fought was something that made this battle unique. Akuto was satisfied.

(...If that's what's going on, then we are fated to fight.)

(It is a waste of energy. It is impossible for me to disappear.)

Zero seemed satisfied too, in his own way. After he said that, he waved another giant fist.

(...I don't know about that.)

Akuto followed the fist after it passed him, placed his hand on top of a massive finger, and concentrated the mana there.

“Haahh!” Akuto shouted. The part of the finger that he touched — the second joint of the pinky — exploded, and the end of it began to tear apart and fall to the ground.



Zero drew back his fist and moved away from Akuto. (You used my own mana against me?) Zero said as he looked at the exposed mechanical mechanisms of his finger. Akuto had changed the mana built up in Zero's body into explosive power.

(This technique doesn't take much mana at all, and I can use it to overcome our difference in sizes.) Akuto said.

But it also took a huge amount of concentration, too. The mana was Zero's to begin with; in order to steal away control and make it his own, he needed to be aware of every single particle. Even with his Demon King powers, it was hard to maintain concentration.

Of course, Zero knew exactly what Akuto was doing. (Your body is not a machine. There's a limit to what you can do.) Zero began to slam his huge fist down on Akuto.

—*Tch!*

Akuto deflected it as he jumped out of the way. He waited for an opening at a distance. Zero's fists were punching far faster than his huge body would seem to be capable of.

A human could only use mana by passing it through his body, which meant that the most effective way to use mana was to have a form with both arms and legs like a human. Zero's fighting style, even as a machine, was still similar to martial arts. He had made his attacks with both arms extremely efficient.

The ends of his massive limbs were moving faster than the speed of sound. His fists compressed the air, forming cone-shaped clouds of compressed steam that further amplified his attacks. But the timing and openings of his attacks were essentially the same as martial arts.

—*Then I guess I need to play along with his way of doing things...!*

"Uwoooaah!" Akuto howled. He gripped his hand into a fist and charged. His opponent was about ten times his size; it was worse than a child fighting a parent. But still, it was possible for them to fight.

Both of them came to a stop in mid-air as they began to violently flail their

limbs. Zero tried to hit the center of Akuto's body with a killing strike, and Akuto tried to wear down Zero with smaller, but still damaging, blows.

The two colliding fists were of vastly different sizes, and their styles were completely different, but still, they were able to punch at one another.

Zero predicted Akuto's movements, and tried to direct his punches to where Akuto was going to be. Akuto knocked each gigantic fist away, deflecting the attacks as he smashed his own fists into the side of Zero's hands. It was like passing a thread through the eye of a needle moving at high speed.

Zero's processing abilities and Akuto's mental stamina; it was a contest to see which would give first. Very few of Zero's blows landed, but those that did hit Akuto head on and forced him to use all his mana for defense. At this rate, Akuto's concentration would be worn down.

But Akuto's blows were gradually destroying Zero's fists, too. There was no telling whether Akuto's concentration would fail him first, or if Zero's body would simply be worn away.

The metal, plastic, and mana light that made up Zero's body began to rain down on the ground below. It was physical evidence of the intensity of the battle.

o

Hiroshi had climbed back up to the sky above the palace. He felt something cold run down his back as he watched Zero and Akuto fight.

—Is he planning on dying here?

The battle was a terrifying thing to behold.

—I know Boss saw me. But...

A feeling like fear froze Hiroshi's body.

—He's really planning to die and leave me to handle everything!

Hiroshi knew what was going on. Akuto had once tried to destroy the system of the gods themselves. He probably still wanted to do the same thing. If that was the case, then Akuto would want Zero to be destroyed as well. But not to cause chaos. — he would want to do it so that the Demon King could be

forgotten from the world. In other words, they both had to die for Akuto to get what he wanted.

It took a voice from below to snap Hiroshi out of his trance. He couldn't hear what it said, but it was clearly someone cheering him — cheering Brave, that is. He looked down and saw that there were still a few people off in the distance, and they'd seen him too.

—So there is something I have to do, then...

He knew that the people wanted this whole thing to come to an end. He was still a hero.

Hiroshi looked upwards to see the two combatants literally tearing each other apart. Akuto seemed to have noticed Hiroshi's return. He glanced down at Hiroshi just once.

—I know... No, I think I've always known...

Hiroshi understood exactly what Akuto's glance met.

○

"Master, the battle..."

"It's ending soon, then..."

Keisu and Yoshie were whispering to one another. It was clear the battle was coming to an end. Most of Zero's body was gone, and Akuto had taken a lot of damage from the blows he couldn't block with mana.

"The next round will determine the victor, maybe?" Yoshie asked. She looked to her side. She'd heard the noise of someone stepping through the grass.

"It can't be..." Yoshie gasped in surprise. Kazuko was walking towards them. And she was dragging somebody behind her with her right hand. She must have had tremendous strength in her tiny body.

But what surprised them more than anything was the person she was dragging, who was lying there limp and powerless.

"Junko Hattori... Did she... kill her?" Yoshie choked.

Kazuko softly shook her head. "Without my mana I have only direct blows.

And it's hard to kill a person with them," she said as she let go of both Junko's arms. Junko let out a small groan as she slammed against the soft earth.

"She's still alive..." Yoshie said, relieved. But things were still going in a bad direction. She began to back away, making sure she stood between Kazuko and Keisu.

Kazuko smiled. "So I've decided to put off killing her until later, and for now, simply acquire Keisu. A Liradan with the power to seal away Zero... I have to see for myself what it can do," Kazuko said as she took a step forward.

Yoshie flinched back, but Keisu pushed past her to approach Kazuko. "I will handle this," she said.

"No, wait..."

Yoshie didn't know what to do. Keisu could still use her physical abilities, even without mana. She could easily defeat any normal human. But Kazuko was strong enough to drag Junko single-handed. Just like Akuto, she had probably been modified in some way. There was no telling what would happen if they fought. And without a sure path to victory, she couldn't let Keisu fight.

—I should try to fight, even if I can't win...

Yoshie tried to take a step forward. But now even the chainsaw felt too heavy for her hands.

"You're going to push yourself past your limits, I see." Kazuko smiled as she took a step forward. But then suddenly, as if Yoshie wasn't a threat worthy of her attention, she turned to look upward. "Oh my. Everything has been changing quickly. And it seems the conclusion is an unexpected one..."

Yoshie glanced up at the battle there too. The two fighters were just barely capable of staying in the air. But Kazuko wasn't talking about them. She was talking about a single ray of light that passed through the corner of their vision. It was climbing straight up towards the battlefield.

"That's..." Yoshie shouted.

"Brave. The demon killer. An enemy of the Demon King, then," Kazuko said softly.

“Is he planning to kill them both, then?” Yoshie’s eyes went wide in surprise.

Brave was heading straight for the area where Zero and Akuto were fighting. Yoshie put her hand on her goggles. Her field of vision zoomed in to show Brave. His cape was fully deployed, and there were high-temperature plasma balls surrounding him. He was preparing to release his strongest attack.

The goggles showed that it wasn’t a mana-based weapon. Brave’s mana-canceller was deployed, and he was jamming any mana in a radius of several meters around him.

“That means they can’t block his attacks!” Yoshie shouted.

Both Zero and Akuto would die, then.

“Zero, and the Demon King... If both of them are lost, I’ll have to come up with a new plan. Without Zero, after all, the gods will lose their power,” Kazuko said.

“But...!” Yoshie tried to say something, but couldn’t think of anything to say.

Akuto was willing to die to not just seal Zero but destroy him. If Hiroshi knew that, he might be willing to destroy them both.

“Oh no...” Yoshie sobbed.

Brave and his high-temperature plasma balls passed first through Zero’s body, and then Akuto’s as well. Now nothing but a ray of impossibly hot orange light, he flashed through the battlefield in an instant.

Zero and Akuto froze in the sky for a moment like a picture, but then Zero’s body exploded and engulfed everything in a sea of orange light. It was like a miniature sun had appeared on the battlefield. Even with her goggles on, Yoshie had to look away from the brightness.

When the ball of fire was gone, a massive hunk of charred metal and a single black object fell to the ground. Brave slowly came down after them.

“Aaah... aaah...” Yoshie moaned wordlessly.

The metal was Zero. Which meant the black object was...

“Well done,” Kazuko spread her arms wide to welcome Brave as he landed.

When he touched the ground, he bowed to her.

“First, I must thank you for defeating the Demon King. You’re the mysterious hero everyone’s been talking about lately, aren’t you?”

“It seems so,” Brave said calmly.

“Then you’re fighting for the Empire, and fighting for me, aren’t you?” Kazuko said calmly, as if she was testing him.

Brave raised the corners of his mouth into a smile. The only part of his face that wasn’t concealed by the mask was his mouth, but still it was an imposing sight.

“Nope. I’m not fighting for you personally, or for this country. I’m just the kind of person who has to help people when they’re crying.”

Kazuko’s expression twitched. For the first time, her placid, perfect expression changed. “Who are you...? And why are you wearing such a dangerous suit?”

“You probably already know who I really am. But if you’ll allow me to give you my name, when I wear this suit, I am Brave. Nobody else. And I want two things: justice and peace.”

“Haha...” Kazuko began to laugh. “Hahahaha! What a strange thing to say! You were nothing but a cowardly student, with a power that wasn’t even your own. Where did you learn to talk so big?”

“You’re wrong. Nobody in the world ever gains power on their own. Most power is gained at birth without even wanting it, or given to you by someone whether you want it or not. And that means that the right way to live is to act like you’re worthy of that power, whether you feel like you are or not.” Brave’s voice was strong.

“So even though you defeated the Demon King, you’re not going to serve me?” Kazuko said, her voice wavering a little.

“No, that’s not what I said.” Brave shook his head.

“I see, then...”

“You’re going to serve *me*. You’re going back to your old life.”

“What...?” Kazuko fell silent.

“Zero’s gone. We’re going back to the society we had. That’s all I have to say,” Brave said shortly.

Every trace of expression disappeared from Kazuko’s face. But then a brilliant smile returned. “Hahahaha! You’re the first person to say that to me! But did you notice? The mana is still here! Which means the gods haven’t lost their power!”

Kazuko made another blade of light appear in her hand.

“What...?” Brave gasped as Kazuko swung the sword. Its blade came right up against the tip of Junko’s neck as she lay on the ground.

“...I suppose she’s still worth something as a hostage. Am I wrong?”

“You’re scum, Empress!” Brave waved a hand. The mana canceller activated and Kazuko’s sword disappeared.

“Scum? I’m nothing of the kind.” Kazuko grabbed Junko and jumped backwards. And then she looked at Brave with a cold smile. “You’re using the same trick twice, you know. That’s not a good idea.”

A VPS field appeared around Brave. It was the same one that 2V had used to nullify the subspace energy transfer that the suit used to recharge. But Kazuko wasn’t supposed to know about that.

“I see... She has 2V’s memories, too...” Yoshie said as she watched.

“Correct. Now, your energy is about to run out,” Kazuko said to Brave.

But Brave just glared back at her. “All I needed to know was what you were really like. I’m not that stupid.”

“...What? There’s nothing left for you to do. The mana canceller has failed you,” Kazuko said as she summoned another sword of light. “But if I can disable your powers, I don’t need to kill you. Now, accept reality. The people expect great things from you. And you can do them in my name.”

“And if I don’t, you’ll kill Junko?” Brave said challengingly.

“That’s up to you,” Kazuko said sweetly.

But Brave just puffed out his chest. “I told you, I’m not that stupid.” He raised a hand.

Kazuko tensed up, but nothing happened. “Heh... What did you think you could—”

“I’m staying true to my own sense of justice. Some Demon Kings aren’t evil.” Brave grinned.

“...! Impossible...” Kazuko leapt away. A black shadow quickly passed through the space where she’d been a moment ago. “You tricked me!” she shouted. This time she had gone pale.

The black shadow picked up Junko off the ground and rose to its feet.

“I didn’t trick you. I really did get burnt to a crisp,” Akuto said with a sigh. He only looked like a shadow because his skin had been burnt to ash. Now the ash had fallen away to reveal healthy skin underneath.

“You mock me...!” Kazuko said in a low voice. This voice, unlike the others she’d used, inspired terror. But the smile on her face was as bright— no, brighter than ever.

“...I’m going to kill you all,” she declared, and waved her hand. The atmosphere itself began to vibrate and shake around her.

Yoshie saw what was happening and yelled, “This is a mana burst!”

A spell that caused mana to go out of control and explode. Of course, it wasn’t a spell you could just use if you wanted to, or even something that could happen by accident. It was an explosion that destroyed everything the mana touched.

“You’ll destroy yourself, too...”

“Have you gone mad?!”

Akuto and Brave shouted, but Kazuko just laughed.

“No. Zero can use his magic to teleport me away just before the explosion. I will be the only survivor. You can do the same too, if you wish, Demon King. But you’re just a human. You lack the processing power to teleport everyone away.”

“So you’re going to make Akuto choose who to save?” Yoshie said. She covered Keisu’s body with her own, trying to protect her. But Keisu didn’t react. She stood completely still and unmoving.

“...?” Yoshie looked at Keisu in surprise. The color of Keisu’s eyes had changed. She began to speak in a voice completely different than the one she’d used before.

“Zero, move to phase 2. Shift to network dispersion mode. Please take me to Zero’s main body immediately.”

“What are you talking about? Did you remember?” Yoshie said.

Keisu’s eyes turned their normal color again. She looked at Yoshie and nodded. “I remember. Zero is...”

But Kazuko cut her off. “It seems you’ve remembered, but it’s too late.” She smiled.

The very earth began to give way under an incredible amount of pressure. It crumbled and collapsed, except for a few meters around Kazuko’s body. And then the shock waves began to spread.

“Die,” Kazuko said coldly.

In that moment, the light covered everything. From above, it must’ve looked like a kilometer-long sphere of light had appeared in the palace. It was hundreds of meters high, and visible from a good distance away.

It didn’t last long, but when it was gone, there were no survivors. Only a crater remained.

2 - Let's Go the Moon

When Junko woke up, the first thing she did was to stare at her hand in astonishment. All her wounds were healed.

She seemed to be in the sky. When she looked down, she could see a huge crater in the middle of the town below. She knew she wasn't going to heaven because of the warmth she felt on her body.

When she looked up, she saw Akuto's face. "Aah!" she screamed.

Akuto looked down at her and nodded, and then spoke in a soothing tone. "Looks like you woke up. You okay?"

"I-I'm fine..." she said, turning her eyes away in embarrassment. She tried to go over what was going on in her head, and remembered the conversation Kazuko and Akuto had had before she passed out.

"...Y-You didn't choose to only bring *me* back to life, did you?"

A horrifying possibility passed through her mind. Kazuko had said that Akuto wouldn't be able to teleport everyone. Which meant...

"No..." Akuto smiled in embarrassment.

—Impossible. Did he really...

For a moment her body shook with delight. Did he really pick her out of all those people...? But a moment later, that thought was followed by guilt, and the terror that came with so many deaths.

"D-Did you really..." she stammered with a shaking voice. Akuto looked embarrassed when he responded.

"No, I teleported them all. The others too."

"The others?"

"Everyone who was there." Akuto said calmly.

"Everyone?" Junko's voice shook.

Akuto nodded. "I tried, and it worked. I was able to find where each of them were, look for a safe enough place for everybody, and then teleport them."

That's right; the massive explosion in the middle of the imperial city hadn't resulted in a single casualty. The blast had stretched over a kilometer in diameter, turning it into a crater instantly, but not a single person had died.

Of course, there were a huge number of people surrounding the palace that was the blast's epicenter. All those people even remembered now was that suddenly they were somewhere else. They hadn't even seen the blast until a moment later.

It took them a moment to realize that they'd even been teleported. Of course, they had no way of knowing who'd done it, or why.

"You can... do that?" Junko couldn't believe it. There must've been around 30,000 people in the area around the palace. It was incredible that someone could simultaneously locate every one of their locations.

To be able to do that, and teleport them too, was a feat of impossible mental strength. It was like focusing on every single grain in a box of sand, and then moving each one individually to another box.

Kazuko had only used that mana burst because she'd thought it was impossible. She'd probably assumed that he'd only be able to teleport the few people in his immediate area.

"But well, it worked. I teleported everyone else a distance way. But you were passed out, so I chose to just take you myself. I healed your wounds, too," Akuto said calmly, as if he was talking about what he'd had for dinner last night.

"S-So that's it..." Junko let out a sigh of relief, but she also felt a little disappointed.

"Anyway, it's time to head down. Let's go see everyone else," Akuto began his descent. They were flying slowly, so Junko began to feel incredibly embarrassed that she was pressed up so close to Akuto. It might have made her feel even more uncomfortable because of her previous guilty thoughts.

"O-Okay... By the way, can you let go of me a little? I can use flight magic too, you know..." Junko said.

But Akuto just shook his head. “Sorry. Can you just put up with it for a while? If you’re not close, you won’t be able to get enough oxygen. I’m gathering oxygen and heat from the surrounding area. And the mana density isn’t high enough here to use normal flight magic, too,” he said.



“We’re that high up? But then why don’t we just descend faster? You’re powerful enough to bring us straight down, right?” Junko said, fidgeting.

“Well... There was actually something I wanted to talk with you about. Alone.”

“What?!” Junko looked up at Akuto in shock.

For the first time in a long time, he actually looked like a boy his age. He was keeping his eyes turned away from her like he was oddly embarrassed.

“Wh-Wh-What’s wrong? Why are you so hesitant all of a sudden?” Junko started to feel strangely embarrassed too.

Akuto started to speak slowly, like he was felt guilty about something. “Now that I can use all the power of the gods... I can kind of see into other people’s life logs...”

“Huh? Wait. Does that mean you saw every single moment of my life?” Junko panicked.

Akuto nodded. Awkwardly. “...I’m sorry. That’s why I wanted to apologize to you when we were alone...”

“Y-You dummy! You’re basically a peeping tom!”

“I-I told you. I’m sorry. But I only saw the parts that had to do with me...”

“That’s bad enough! Y-You didn’t find out what I was doing when you weren’t around, did you?” Junko began to violently shake her head back and forth as her face turned pure red.

“...Yeah. And um... I’m not sure what to say...”

“Uwaaah! Stop it! Does that mean... You know how I feel about you?”

“Yeah... it does.” Akuto nodded a little.

Junko let out a high-pitched scream and covered her face with her hands. But when Akuto said nothing, she either gave up or just stopped caring, because she asked in a trembling voice, “...Then you’ll accept me?”

Akuto answered with a serious expression. “Of course.”

“Huh... What...?” Junko spread her hands out and looked at Akuto in shock.

She was about to cry, and her lips were shaking with joy. “Th-Then you’ll... You’ll...” She wrapped her arms around his body.

“Don’t worry. I’ll protect you. Um... I know that you sympathize with my ideals, and you rebelled against the government,” he said clearly.

Junko relaxed her arms as she realized she didn’t like the direction this was going. “...Wait. Ideals? Sympathize?”

“Huh? Isn’t that what you said? You were cautious around Yoshie, until you actually met and talked with her, and then your whole psychological state changed... You suddenly had the mind of a warrior.”

“Th-That’s because...” Junko mumbled.

It was because Akuto had said that Yoshie and Junko would probably get along. Yoshie was a woman, but when she’d met Junko inside virtual phase space, she’d been in the form of a man named Yoshihiko.

Junko had thought that Akuto was telling her to date Yoshihiko. But that had nothing to do with his ideals... Akuto didn’t actually understand her at all.

As if to prove this, Akuto began to speak in a serious tone. “It’s because you talked with Yoshie and learned from her what it was I was trying to do, and you sympathized with it. And that’s why I’m going to win this battle. For your sake, too.”

“...Um, when you said you ‘saw what I did,’ is that the only art you saw? You didn’t see what I was doing in my bed every night, or what I was whispering when I was alone?” Junko spoke quickly, and with a rather mixed expression.

Akuto looked confused. “That’s right. Of course I didn’t look into your private life. That would be rude. I couldn’t do that.”

“Haha.... haha... Of course. You couldn’t... could you.” Junko laughed, but it was really more of a sigh.

“Yeah. By the way, were you doing something weird then?”

“No, no, no! Of course not! Of course I wasn’t. Come on, let’s get back to everyone else. I get what it is you’re trying to say, so we can go,” Junko said, as she looked up at the sky in exhaustion.

“Are you okay? Does it hurt somewhere, or is it cold?” Akuto asked, realizing that something was wrong.

Junko shook her head, and then poked him in the cheek. “It’s nothing. But.... for now, just let me hit you.” And then she brought her fists down on Akuto’s head many times.

“Oww. That hurts. I’m tough, but I still feel pain, you know,” Akuto sighed.

“I don’t care! Just let me hit you!” Junko yelled, and then her punches began to go from “playful” to “painful.”

○

“So even the Empress didn’t know he was capable of a teleportation spell like this,” Yoshie said, impressed, as she looked down at the crater in the distance.

“Did Ackie really do this?” Keena asked. She was dressed, since the clothes she’d taken off were teleported with her.

They were on top of a building looking down at the remains of the palace. Keena, Yoshie, Keisu, and Hiroshi had all been teleported there. Hiroshi had run out of energy, so Akuto had brought him too.

“Who else could have? It’s hard to believe he’s got that kind of power,” Hiroshi said, a little embarrassed. “But the Boss would definitely try to save everyone.”

“He saved everyone that was there... You’d have to be a god to do that. But since only a god could do it, nobody will believe that it was the Demon King who did,” Yoshie said as she turned to look below the building.

The road was packed with the people who’d been around the palace. She couldn’t hear what they said, but almost all of them probably thought it was Kazuko who’d done it.

“From their perspective it’s a miracle, so I understand that, at least,” Hiroshi said. In front of the girls he didn’t bother with pretending to be Brave.

“It’s fine to be impressed, I guess, but we’ve got lots of questions we have to ask.” Yoshie turned to Keisu, who nodded. There was a more serious look on her face than she’d ever had before. She’d dropped her strange samurai accent,

too.

“My memories have returned. I believe that the reason for this is Zero’s awakening. My brain seems to be linked to him.”

“So that’s how the system works, huh? And Zero’s going to awaken?”

“It’s called Stage 2. He has no primary controller, and has almost entirely fused with the gods.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Zero you’ve seen so far is essentially a terminal. By abandoning that terminal, he’s gained the ability to infect the network of the gods directly from their central area.”

“...Zero was supposed to be the core that makes the gods what they are. And so this core itself is like a computer virus that’s starting to infect the gods?”

“That’s about the size of it.”

“So, how do we seal it away? If Zero’s second stage is like a computer program, there must be some kind of antivirus we can use, right?”

“No. Zero’s true body... in other words, Zero himself, has a ‘self’ that is attached to the place of his birth. We need to lock that ‘self’ away. That’s how we seal him,” Keisu explained.

Even Yoshie didn’t quite understand that. “A self...?”

“A way of thinking that is conscious of the fact that you are yourself, and makes that fact the center of your thoughts. Neither the gods nor the Liradans were originally equipped with such ‘selves.’ Zero is the only one. And that’s what allows the gods the capacity for independent thought. That ‘self’ must be locked away. And since the self is a black box, we have to touch Zero’s true body directly and take physical measures.”

Keisu pointed to herself and continued, “I must touch it and then seal the self away personally. My body is linked with Zero’s black box. It’s possible, in fact, to say that I am a part of Zero. I am capable of making his ‘self’ go to ‘sleep’, you could say.”

Yoshie nodded. Now she understood. “So for now we just need to go to

where he was born, right?" she asked. "Where is that?"

Keisu took the same finger she'd used to point at herself and pointed it upwards. "Above? Is there something there?"

"Hmm... I don't see anything," Keena said.

The only thing in the sky was a tiny pale moon. Suddenly, Yoshie realized. "Don't tell me..."

Keisu nodded. "The moon. We have to go to the moon."

"That's... a problem. Spaceships can only take us as far as satellite orbit," Yoshie said, surprised. She spread out her hands as if to say there was nothing they could do.

"I heard in history class that there used to be a research city on the moon, though," Keena said. Studying was always the one thing that she was good at.

"They didn't really get anything useful done up there, so when everybody started using magic instead of science, it was just forgotten. Of course, outer space and magic don't really get along, so now nobody even thinks about it..." Yoshie said, as if she was going over what she knew again in her mind.

"That's incorrect." Keisu shook her head. "The lunar city was abandoned to seal away Zero, not for the reasons you learned in your history class. Zero was also the control program for the lunar city. But without activating Zero, the lunar city cannot function. The only available option was to abandon the moon."

Yoshie was surprised. She'd heard already that Zero was created during the early days of magical civilization, but this was far different from what she'd been told. "I never would have guessed... But if you have to go to the moon to seal Zero, why is it possible to unseal him from the Earth?"

"My role was to stay on Earth and function as a link, so that Zero could function as the gods' core system. I made minor adjustments to Zero as a safety valve. And it was possible to make monitor adjustments to Zero, in order to someday unlock the mysteries of Zero's black box."

"So there was some kind of lab that was working on that... I work for the

government, but I've never heard of anything like that. The only places I could think of would be the Black Mages or CMID-8..."

Yoshie could feel everything clicking in her mind as she went on.

"Sheesh... All the mysteries are starting to come together. Why was space development always considered taboo? Why did the black mages survive and work directly for the Empress? And why did the first Demon King war happen...?" Yoshie was serious, but she also sound excited.

"I think we can talk about that later," Hiroshi interrupted. "Is there no way we can get to the moon?"

Yoshie looked at Keisu. "From what you've said, there's actually a pretty easy way to get to the moon, isn't there?"

Keisu nodded. "Yes. There's a teleportation circle that will take you there."

Hiroshi clapped his hands together. "Oh, I get it. They knew they might need to reseal Zero at some point, so they made a way to get to him. Where is it?"

"The basement of Constant Magical Academy."

"I see... So that's why the first war was a battle over that school, right?" Yoshie said, impressed.

Keisu didn't answer. Instead she continued, saying, "But Zero also knows where the circle is. And now he's fused with the gods, he's become a more intricate combat system. He'll come to destroy me. Every single mana-based device, right down to traffic lights and air purifiers, will now be trying to destroy me and the Demon King," she said gravely.

"That's... a problem. I guess we shouldn't be spending too much time in town, then. But Zero can't detect you, right?" Yoshie asked.

Keisu nodded. "That's right. So he'll have placed Liradans there to attack anyone who gets close."

"So we're getting closer to all out war. No, wait, they're basically our entire society right now. Which means we're the bad guys, I guess. Does that mean it's not an all out war, but just us rebelling against society? It feels like an awfully big deal for that..." Yoshie chuckled.

Suddenly a voice cut her off. “I do feel bad for getting you involved in this.” It was Akuto. He was coming in from above, carrying Junko.

“Ackie! And Junko, too!” Keena shouted as she ran towards them.

○

Hiroshi started to smile and run towards them, but when he saw Akuto’s face, he suddenly stopped.

Of course, he was on Akuto’s side now. But he’d just remembered the look he’d seen on Akuto’s face when he pretended to shoot him own.

Hiroshi had always intended for his ‘attack’ on Akuto to be a fake. He believed that Akuto was thinking the same way. But when he’d set his plasma ball to blow up early, so that it would only burn Akuto’s skin, Akuto hadn’t smiled at him; instead, there was only a calm resolve on his face.

—It was the face of someone who didn’t care if he was killed...

He knew Akuto felt that way, a little. He’d seen the same face the last time they fought. But last time, it had been the look of a man who thought being killed was better than suicide, or perhaps a man who thought that Hiroshi couldn’t kill him at all. It was a face filled with confidence.

But this time, it had an entirely different meaning.

—He was trying to leave everything to me...

Akuto wanted him to take over after he died. If you described it as meaning he had full trust in Hiroshi, it sounded like a good thing. But it felt like too much of a burden for Hiroshi to bear.

In other words, Hiroshi was being asked to stand decisively on the side of “Justice.” No matter what happened in this battle, Akuto would end it with his own death. But someone who stood on the side of justice wouldn’t be allowed to be destroyed, or defeated. No matter how powerless or exhausted they were, they would have to keep fighting. They would never be at peace.

For now, Hiroshi pushed aside the sense that something was wrong and walked over to Akuto. “Did you hear that? I can’t believe we have to go to the moon...”

“I did. But I can’t ask you all to fight with me,” Akuto said.

Hiroshi felt a pain in his heart when he heard this, because he knew that Akuto wasn’t talking about him. It was a sign that Akuto trusted his power, but it also made his heart feel strangely heavy.

But Hiroshi still offered his hand to Akuto. “Now that I know the truth, I have no choice but to do it.”

“Thanks.” Akuto shook Hiroshi’s hand.

When he felt Akuto’s warmth and strength, he knew why his heart felt so heavy. Akuto saw Hiroshi as an equal.

—You’ve got it all wrong, Boss. I’m not that strong. I can’t do anything without my suit...

Hiroshi turned the discussion to another topic so that Akuto couldn’t tell how he really felt. “If we’re going to do it, we should take a look at what we’re getting into first. Boss, can you bring up a screen showing the area around the school?”

“Sure.” Akuto nodded and called up a manascreen. It was displaying the area around Constant Magical Academy.

Yoshie looked at it from the side, impressed. “With Zero in full control, it’s hard for us to use magic. But you can do anything, can’t you? But... what is this? It’s like every soldier he’s got is here.”

The grounds of the academy were covered in Liradans. Constant’s courtyard was a big place, but now it was filled with thousands of Liradans and hundreds of tanks.

“He couldn’t deploy his army around the palace without killing civilians, but that doesn’t apply here. At least we don’t have to worry about any battleships, since he’s only concerned about protecting the teleportation circle.”

“But with this many enemies, only the Boss and I can fight,” Hiroshi said.

Akuto nodded. “We’ll have to take Keisu alone.”

But then Keena, who’d said nothing so far, cut him off. “You can’t do that, Ackie.”

“I can’t?”

“It’s dangerous.”

Everyone there was surprised. They all knew it was dangerous. They all looked at Keena in shock.

Hiroshi didn’t know what to say himself, but he was impressed.

—Keena is able to say what she really thinks...

And her words brought out what Akuto was really thinking, too. “I mean, I know it’s dangerous...”

“Of course, I know what it is you want to do, and I think you have to do it, but...” She looked up at Akuto with dewey eyes.

“You’re right. I can’t keep dying... But I was born to do this. That’s why I can’t stop,” Akuto said. There was a strange look in his eyes, a mixture of resignation and ambition.

Keena pouted. “Jeez! Next time you say that, I’m gonna get mad!”

“You’re already mad. But I understand why. You’ve been put in danger many times. You just saw a terrible explosion right in front of you...”

“That’s not what I meant!” Keena started fuming.

Hiroshi could understand how she felt. No, if anything, it was like she was saying the things he couldn’t. It made him feel kind of pathetic.

—I hope nothing terrible happens...

Just as Hiroshi thought that, Akuto suddenly turned around. “Look...!”

They could see a strange rift in space in a corner of the roof. It was like a mana teleportation circle, but different. Nobody else knew what it was, but Hiroshi did.

“This isn’t mana...” His eyes went wide in surprise. It was the same rift in space he saw when he summoned his suit. And only one person had ever used it in the past but him.

“Boichiro... Yamato,” Akuto whispered. The man who’d once tried to use Keena to offer up a mysterious ritual to the gods. He’d come from the future,

and said that he knew humanity was going to be destroyed.

The man who'd just done a teleportation impossible with modern technology was thin, and wearing a white lab coat. He wasn't an arrogant man, but he was a handsome one.

The man adjusted his glasses, and without even bothering to say hello, he began to speak. "I have a plan. And I want you to carry it out."



Hiroshi tensed up.

—It's a man with the same power as Boichiro...

"Where did you come from... A plan? Who are you?" he said, trying to not let the tension in his voice show.

The man shook his head, like he'd suddenly realized he'd made a mistake. "Oh, right. I have a bad habit of saying what I want before I introduce myself. I'm Kento Kurahashi, a member of CMID-8. But I believe you might actually trust me now," the man, Kento, said. He was the last member of CMID-8 to talk to 2V.

"CMID-8.... Boichiro Yamato's organization..." Hiroshi whispered. But none of the other members he'd seen had ever used the power of Brave's suit. Maybe he knew something they didn't.

"Impossible..." Yoshie suddenly gasped. "Are you Codename USD?"

Kento nodded. "That's what my friends call me."

"You know him?" Junko asked.

Yoshie started to speak in a strangely agitated voice. "He's a graduate of Constant Magical Academy. He got the best grades in the school's history. He won the Alpha Prize, the highest honor for a magical researcher. He's a genius not just in mathematics, but in art too.

"He retired from the priesthood a while back, but there was a rumor that he joined CMID-8, and that besides their leader, Boichiro Yamato, he's the only member of CMID-8 whose name is known. He was so good at his job he couldn't hide his name. His codename was USD. He was supposed to be the strongest man in history."

It was a profile that Yoshie was likely to love. Kento sighed as if to say that he'd been caught by somebody annoying, but he didn't correct her.

"The way you teleported... it wasn't magic. If anyone uses magic, I can detect it. But if you learned that from Boichiro Yamato, it explains things," Akuto said.

Kento nodded. "You're right. I can't keep dying... That's why I said you can trust me."

Hiroshi felt a heavier meaning in those words than the others, since it was Boichiro Yamato who'd given the suit to Brave. "I don't know about trust, but at least we know who you are. So whose side are you on? With us, or against us?" he said strongly.

"Neither, I suppose. At least, if you're asking if I'm on your side or the Empress's. But right now, I need to cooperate with you. In other words, I want you to seal away Zero." Kento's words were slow and deliberate.

"What are you after?" Hiroshi said, unable to figure it out.

"Hmm... I don't think I can answer that right now. But you..." He pointed at Hiroshi, who gulped.

"What?"

"You, I believe, have to listen to me. You're using the suit we gave you." Kento's words stuck into his head.

"What...?" Hiroshi said.

But Akuto cut him off. "'We'? In other words, Boichiro is with you?"

Kento shook his head. "I don't know where he is. I believe he's dead, though I haven't confirmed it."

"So you've got his technology now?" Akuto asked.

Kento nodded. "All of it. Whether history will change or not is a matter for debate, but in the future, I'm going to be called the inventor of this technology." Kento turned to Hiroshi and laughed a little. "In other words, I'm loaning you that suit. It's set so that nobody can use it but you, but I can take it from you anyway."

Hiroshi couldn't hide his shock. His voice was shaking. "...So you're threatening me?"

Kento laughed at him. "You're free to interpret it that way if you like. But I'm just making a request. I don't have anything I can offer you. But if you're not going to fight, you don't need the suit anyway, do you? Or were you planning on joining the police?"

Kento's tone was serious, not mocking. And because of that his words seemed

only more ominous to Hiroshi. He knew the suit wasn't his, but seeing the person who'd lent it to him really drove the point home. He realized for the first time that he was essentially the man's slave.

But for some reason, Hiroshi couldn't bring himself to give it up. Right now, he needed to fight at Akuto's side.

"...I'm going to fight of my own free will. That's the one thing I can say for sure," Hiroshi said in a pained voice.

But Kento laughed again. "That's right. That's exactly what I meant," he said, trying to not let the tension in his voice show. Hiroshi couldn't say anything back.

Akuto spoke in a low voice; he must not have liked Kento's tone. "So why won't you help us directly?"

"I'm an observer," Kento said. "I have to be."

"Is it possible to be an observer with everything that's going on?" Akuto asked, annoyed.

Kento nodded. "If you view this situation from a higher level, you'll realize that observation is the only possible move."

"A higher level? I'm done with your crap. Now tell us what it is you came to tell us," Akuto said, making no effort to hide his displeasure.

"Of course. You see..." Kento began to share with them a surprising plan.

Hiroshi was to play a core role in it; he groaned to himself as he listened.

○

Meanwhile, Fujiko was alone in a park on the outskirts of the city. There were other people there who'd been teleported as well. They were all talking with each other about the miracle they'd just witnessed.

Fujiko herself was approached by a middle-aged woman near her. She was good at pretending to be a normal, upstanding citizen, so she was able to learn from the conversation that the woman thought she'd been saved by the Empress.

—I see... What an utter fool.

Fujiko gave no indication of what she actually thought, though. She played along with the woman for a minute, praising the Empress and cursing the evil Demon King who'd caused the mana burst, before saying goodbye and leaving.

Of course, she didn't want to curse Akuto, until she realized that she'd been sent here alone. Then, she thought, perhaps she should've meant it.

"Oh, Akuto... how could you do this to me just because I ran away?" she sighed, but then suddenly she saw someone in the corner of her eye. She stopped, and then she opened her mouth in surprise.

"Oh my...! Fancy seeing you here...! If this is what Akuto wanted, then maybe he really does care about me!" Fujiko said to herself.

There was no way it could be a coincidence. Akuto must have teleported her right next to this person deliberately.

Fujiko took back her curses as she began to follow them from a distance. It was a man, and a man who was trying to make sure he wasn't followed. He was moving farther and farther away from the other people. In this case, that took him deeper into the park. He was heading towards a small forest, it seemed. It was what people did when they felt guilty about something.

"Oh my... That's perfect," Fujiko smiled. She dropped back a little further, taking care to watch for when he looked back.

It was a man with curly, messed-up hair. Issei Suzuki, the man who'd been the head of the black mages. But his position had only been given to him because of a secret contract with the Empress. His job was to keep the secret, and make sure nobody knew what the black mages really were.

For a devout black mage like Fujiko, that was more than enough reason to hate him. He'd deceived the black mages for years, and kept them from growing.

—Akuto gave me this chance, and I'm going to make full use of it.

Fujiko grinned. She waited for Issei to sit down beneath a tree in the forest, silently approached from behind, and quickly wrapped her whip around his

neck. She was so silent and so fast that Issei didn't even have time to scream.

After twitching in shock for a moment, he put his hands up to his throat as he struggled to breathe.

"Hello there. I didn't expect to see you here," Fujiko pulled the whip tighter around the tree as she peeked around to look at him. "Or maybe it's not a coincidence at all. Either way, hiding in the forest out of guilt wasn't a smart move. If you want to do something that makes you feel guilty, you need to at least be bold enough to not hide."

Issei seemed to recognize her voice. "S-Stop it... I saw what Kazuko did... I didn't think she was that crazy... Forgive me..." he said, gasping for breath.

Fujiko let out a nasty laugh. "Forgive you? I'm not mad at you at all."

"I-I know that. I'll tell you our secrets... And I'll help you..."

"Help me...?" She pulled the whip even tighter.

"Gah... gah... Fine. I won't just help you. I'll serve you..."

"I think you need to understand who I am a little more. But we've barely just met, and I think I'll need to explain. I'm a very greedy girl, you see," she said as she started to relax and then tighten the whip.

"F-Fine... I'll give you the secret treasure of the black mages... That's good enough, right?"

Fujiko smiled. "Thank you. But I'm not going to let my guard down that much. I'm going to let you live, so start talking." She relaxed the whip just a bit, but kept it just tight enough that it was still hard to breathe. "All those murders I committed in virtual phase space are finally paying off," she said to herself.

"Gwah.. gaah... This is the password to take you to that room from my ship. It's a series of keywords... I'll write them in my notebook." Issei put a hand into his pocket and took out a mana note book, and then wrote something into it. His hands concealed the notebook, so Fujiko couldn't see what he wrote.

"I wrote it... here..." Issei said, and then threw the notebook away. It landed at a distance where she'd have to let go of the whip to get it.

Fujiko knew what he was trying to do. "That was a very clever idea," she said.

Issei laughed, gasping, but relieved. "...I'm lucky that you're so greedy. I don't care about guarding some old crypt, but I do need to eat more ramen. I wrote the real password, I think... But I can't guarantee I'm not wrong."

"Hmph. You just saved your own life." Fujiko let go of the whip, jumped back away from the tree, and came around to the front, keeping her distance from Issei.

But he had already started to run. She realized that there was no way she'd catch him, so she went to pick up the notebook instead. There were rows of randomly written letters in the book.

It was probably the real password. A fake one would've had more patterns in it. But she wouldn't know until she tried.

"I don't want to think that he tricked me. I need to rebuild the black mages myself. But first, I need to do something about Kazuko and Zero..." Fujiko whispered as she looked at the book again.

He probably didn't have any more useful information, but she now had a way to contact Issei if she needed to. She could send him telepathic messages if she wanted, and if she was lucky, she might be able to track him.

—He probably didn't mean it when he said he'd help me defeat Kazuko, but he might have actually had some information on her...

Fujiko wasn't willing to put her life in danger to defeat Kazuko. She did, however, want to help Akuto.

"I suppose I can sell this information to the student council president. She's so intent on getting even with Kazuko that she'd probably torture him. I might be able to see something fun..." Fujiko smiled wickedly as she memorized the password and then erased it from the notebook.

If it was real, she would be able to bring back true black magic with her own hands.

3 - Don't Know What To Say To "Goodbye"

Night came. The group was now in an abandoned building outside of town. It had once been a factory, but now that it was abandoned, there was nothing left but a dirt floor and a roof. Yoshie had remembered it and suggested they hide there, and Akuto had teleported them.

Right now, Zero was in control of the mana flow throughout the entire continent. The only three who could escape his sight were Brave, with his mana canceller, Akuto, with his vast power, and Keisu.

Akuto had brought a camping set and spread it out on the floor of the factory. Everyone was sitting around the light from the lamp. The spot seemed safe, and they would be able to stay there for a while.

Hiroshi had spent some time looking at the map before heading out to take a look around. After that, they finally had a chance to relax.

"I love empty buildings. They make me want to take photos. There's a certain beauty in forgotten places and decay, isn't there? Like a place where a cornered soldier dies, or something."

Yoshie was very excited, even if nobody else was. But even as she talked, she was working. She was making the machine they needed for tomorrow's plan. "It's been a while since I've done any mechanical work. It's making my craft girl blood boil. My only complaint is that it's a little too easy."

She was fixing up a beat-up old surface card. She'd found it abandoned on the side of the road and carried it here, and now was getting it running.

"So you're good at any kind of engineering, huh?" Akuto asked, impressed.

"Once you make a program, you want to make a mana machine that uses it. And when you make a mana machine, you want to make a program that drives it," Yoshie said, a little boastfully.

Akuto felt himself relax as he talked to her. It was the first time he'd talked to her when things were calm, and there was something about her frank manner

that made you feel at peace when you spoke to her.

“What kinds of stuff can you make?”

“Quite a bit, actually. I can even make autonomous thinking machines, like Liradans or divine terminals. But I can’t make something with a mind of its own, like Zero.”

Akuto was intrigued by this. “The minds of humans and Liradans are different?”

“That’s right. One has a self, the other doesn’t. It’s hard to explain, actually... You can build machines that can replicate themselves, but they can’t have selves. An artificial intelligence that spends a lot of time around humans will get something similar to a self, but it’s different than a human, who has a self from the very beginning. It’s one of the mysteries of life, I guess.”

“The mysteries of life, huh?” Akuto whispered.

“Yup. How did life begin? If we knew that, we might know the secret behind the creation of the universe. If nothing else, it’s probably got something to do with the apocalypse that Boichiro Yamashiro talks about.”

“There’s somebody real close to us who probably knows the secret and just doesn’t know they know it...” Akuto glanced down at Keena, who had fallen asleep on his shoulder. She was snoring peacefully.

Looking down, she seemed just like a normal girl, but Akuto had seen the miracles she’d created many times. Boichiro Yamato had been after her, and it was possible that Kento would be too.

“Kento wants Zero sealed again, right? Not destroyed?” Akuto asked.

“If you destroy him, the gods will cease to exist. Well, maybe that’s what you want,” Yoshie said, and laughed.

“I do. Of course,” Akuto said.

Junko, who had looked like she’d wanted to say something for a while, finally spoke up. “Why is it so important to you?”

“Huh?” Akuto seemed confused.

“Why are you doing this? I don’t understand. Actually, I’m starting to not understand you at all.” There was a tone of fear in her voice.

Akuto’s face took on a serious tone. “I don’t understand me either. But that’s what I want to learn. Who am I? Somebody made me and gave me a role to play. I am who they made me, and if I don’t end that, I can’t become who I should be.”

Akuto’s answer was, to him, a serious one, but Junko just fidgeted. “That’s not what I meant. What I’m trying to say is...” And then she stopped talking. She was trying to find the words, but she couldn’t.

But it was Keena who picked up where she stopped. “Ackie, you need to think about us, too.” She must’ve woken up, because now she was looking up at him.

“‘Us’?” Akuto asked. Keena nodded.

“That’s right. Junko is saying she likes you.”

“Wh-What? I’m not...” Junko turned red and flailed her hands.

But Akuto nodded. “Sure, I like everybody else too. That’s why...”

“That’s not what I mean! We care for you you like a farmer cares for his rice!” Keena said loudly.

“That’s a weird metaphor...”

“Huh? It’s the easiest metaphor in the world! Farmers care for their rice when they raise it. Just because it’ll be eaten or sold in the end doesn’t mean that they forget about it or give up! So if rice could talk, it wouldn’t want to hear about harvest season, it would want to hear about how much the farmer loved it right now!” Keena said. Then, having apparently said what she wanted to say, she went back to sleep.

“D-Do you know what she’s talking about?” Junko said, her face red. She must’ve been relieved that the subject had been changed, because there was a smile on her face.

Akuto thought for a moment, and then spoke. “Is it wrong to think about everybody’s future happiness, if that happiness means sacrificing myself?”

Junko seemed caught off-guard for a second, but when she understood the

meaning of the question, she immediately nodded. “Yeah. It’s wrong. Of course it’s wrong. I mean, think about it. You’re doing all this because you don’t want bad things to happen to people, right? We’re the same way. In the same way it hurts you when the people you... care about... suffer... we also...” Then Junko shook her head, as if to say “Forget it.”

But Akuto nodded and looked straight at her. “I’ll make sure not to forget that there are people who are here to help me. Even if I was just made as a tool that dies in the end, until the last moment, I want to do what you want me to.”

“Y-You dummy... Why are you being so serious?” Junko smiled to hide her blushing

But Akuto answered seriously anyway. “But don’t worry. In two days it’ll be all over. Everything will be fine.”

“Y-Yeah...” Junko looked back at him and gulped. And then she slowly stretched out her hand to his.

“Yeah! It’d be great if we can put an end to all this!” Yoshie came up behind Akuto and grabbed both him and Junko.

“Hyah!” Junko yelled.

“Oh...” said Akuto.

“I’m glad you two are having fun, but if you don’t let me join in, I’m going to pout,” Yoshie joked. She rubbed her cheek up against Junko’s and grabbed Akuto by the ear and pulled. “Once this is all over, let’s see who wins this dunce for their own, okay? Or would you rather share him?”

“Y-You dummy... What are you...” Junko went red right up to her ears.

Yoshie ignored her, and suddenly spoke to Akuto in a serious voice. “Hey, are you seriously going to defeat Zero, not seal him? I think at this point, you’ll need a lot of resolve to do that.”

Akuto nodded. “Yeah. I understand what you mean.” The two of them seemed to understand what the other was trying to say.

“But you’re going to do it anyway? Your resolve hasn’t wavered after what you just heard?”

Akuto hesitated. "You're right. I'm not sure what to do. My mind is starting to change, little by little."

Yoshie nodded and smiled. "Okay, I guess I need to do my best so I can help you, too."

"Hey... What are you two talking about?" Junko said suspiciously.

Yoshie's mischievous voice returned. "Heheheh. Akuto and I understand each other without words. Are you jealous?"

"Wh-What are you talking about?" Junko's face went red again as she flailed her hands.

"Hahaha. I'm just kidding. But the reason I like you is because Akuto and I get along." She suddenly pushed Junko to the ground.

"Hyah! Stop it!"

"Ooh, your body feels different than Fujiko, but it's still nice." She began to rub Junko's body.

"Wh-Where are you touching me...?"

"Where? Do you want me to say it? Akuto is listening."

"Uwah! You dummy! Stop! You don't need to say it!"

"Should I say it then?"

"Stop it!"

Suddenly Akuto looked away and spoke. "Let me know when you're done."

"You dummy! Make her stop!" Junko screamed.

○

Morning arrived. This was the morning that Akuto had decided they would leave for the moon.

"If it gets dangerous, then run," he said to the rest.

The "rest" was Junko, Yoshie, Keena, and Keisu. They were all in a car, and Yoshie was driving.

"That's the plan. But I do think there's going to be a time when we're all

useful. Not that I don't want to run when I look at this." Yoshie suddenly felt a cold chill run down her spine.

The car was driving towards Constant Magical Academy, and they could see the rows of Liradans waiting for them. With just four of them heading into an army, it felt like being thrown out into the snow naked.

"That's an anti-magic combat formation. They've decreased the amount of mana in the area they expect us to travel through, and are planning on shooting mana-accelerated bullets at us from outside that zone. Normally you wouldn't drive up to a waiting army in a car, you know..." Yoshie said, analyzing the situation with her goggles.

Constant Magical Academy's west side was a huge courtyard surrounding a small hill. The perfect place for a battle.

"There's a VPS field, too. Just like we figured, Brave can't help at all. It was probably right not to bring him."

"But we're going to follow the plan anyway. We're not going to break through. I'm going to disable all the Liradans," Akuto said calmly.

"Woah. Glad to hear you're confident," Yoshie chuckled as if to hide her fear.

Yoshie was an easygoing and curious girl; normally, dangerous places didn't scare her. But this time, things were different. She'd never been in a real fight before.

Akuto seemed to sense her fear. He put a hand on her shoulder and nodded to Junko. "I'll let Junko take care of you."

Junko wasn't used to having him call her name, so she let out a small "hyah!", but then her face took on a serious look and she nodded. "Don't worry. I know I can at least protect the car."

Akuto smiled and nodded. "Yeah. I believe in you. I'll handle the mana on our route. You're all going to stay put until it's safe. But Zero will probably still come after Keisu. The car can serve as a decoy."

"Roger." Yoshie smiled, the fear gone.

"Alright, off I go." Akuto waved and flew upwards, with a calm demeanor that

made it hard to believe he was going to battle.

But even so, the minute he got there, the area in front of them turned into a battlefield. Far to the front of the car, they could hear explosions and see flames and blasts of light. Of course, all of these were attacks directed at Akuto.

“He’s probably fine, but... I’m still worried.” Junko whispered.

“You’re in love, huh? Well, let’s worry about ourselves, not him,” Yoshie said as she accelerated the car forwards.

She was right. There was no reason to worry about Akuto. All the attacks were reaching him, but he was easily deflecting them. Even those Liradans that targeted the car were easily defeated.

But still, he missed a few of them. They could see a unit of Liradans coming from the opposite direction where Akuto was fighting. Zero couldn’t sense Keisu, so he was probably having the Liradans search for her with their eyes. Or maybe they were just seeing the car as a target.

There were three units of five Liradans, each wearing soldiers’ uniforms. A mana ball came up from behind them, fired by Akuto when he realized the danger. It succeeded in blowing away two of the units, but the remaining five Liradans blocked the car’s path, reading their guns with the efficient movements of veteran soldiers.

“Uh-oh.” Yoshie moved to turn the steering wheel, but Junko stopped her.

“It’s dangerous to expose our side. Keep going forward. The mana density is high enough. Even I can block them!”

Junko jumped up out of the car seat. She landed in front of the advancing car, ran faster than it was traveling, and then dropped down low as she drew her sword and made five clones.

Each of the clones headed for a different Liradan. As soon as they saw the Junkos coming for them, the Liradans fired their rifles.

“Just rifle bullets...!”

All the Junkos deployed mana shields. A few of the bullets made it through the shields because of the weaker mana in the area, but Junko spun her blade

quickly and split them in half. The clones did the same, and even their own blades, which were made of mana, severed the bullets in the same way.

“Hah!” Then she split the Liradan and its rifle in two. The clones followed along, and all five Liradans collapsed at once.

When the last one had fallen, the car caught up and stopped next to her. “Nice,” Yoshie said, impressed.

“There’s more coming,” Junko said. She wasn’t blushing. She was right; more of the Liradans that Akuto had missed were coming towards the car.

It wasn’t that Akuto was slacking off. The Liradans, in other words, Zero, had narrowed down their target to Keisu. A huge horde was bearing down on them.

“Drive the car around for a while to keep them away from you. I’ll handle this,” Junko said as she made even more clones.

They surrounded the car, keeping the charging waves away. The waves of Liradans collided with the wall of Junkos, giving off a powerful mana light.

“Aah!” Yoshie ducked, but not a single bullet made it through the wall.

Junko was wielding her sword like a demon, slicing through the approaching horde and knocking them away.

“Raaaahh!” Junko yelled.

It was common knowledge that the effects mana had could be changed by the power of your imagination. Just like with the battle between Zero and Akuto, the key to this battle was human imagination. In that regard, Junko’s highly trained mind was overwhelmingly powerful.

“Here I goooo!” After blocking the wave of Liradans, now Junko and her clones charged. The clones were so packed together that you couldn’t tell which was the real her, and when they charged they were like a rampaging bull.

As they raced forward, the ranks of the Liradan horde collapsed. As they started to fall back, Junko pursued them. Some of them managed to stop running and try to group up again, only to be blasted by even more powerful mana balls from Akuto.

Every one he saw, he crushed. Anyone that got close to him exploded with a

glance. Anyone farther away found themselves with a hole in their stomach, courtesy of one of his mana balls.

The Liradans were all under Zero's control, and functioned as a single organism, but Akuto was crushing each of that organism's cells. Now there was no way for them to keep fighting. If they had any "self," they would've frozen in fear like their souls had left their bodies.

"I'm glad he's not my enemy," Yoshie said. She was watching the battle like she would a show. "...But it also seems beautiful," she whispered.

As Akuto stood in the sky, overwhelming his enemies without moving an inch, he had the bearing of a creature that could only be called the Demon King.

And as Junko and her clones stormed down the path, white blades flashing like a blizzard of ice, she seemed like one of the Demon King's demonic servants.

"This'll be over soon, I bet." Keena said as she sat next to Keisu in the back seat.

"I bet." Yoshie nodded.

Few of the Liradans were still even moving. The area around Constant Magical Academy was now piled up with corpses.

"But I feel bad for them," Keena whispered.

"Yeah," Yoshie said, "I feel bad for the Liradans. But right now he's being cold... What's coming after this is where it gets scary."

"After this?" Keena asked.

"That's right. Anyway, that's it for the outside. Now we go inside the school," Yoshie pointed in front of them.

Akuto and Junko were standing on top of a mountain of shattered Liradans. It was a chilling, but somehow powerful scene.

○

The group stepped inside the school. But there were no Liradans in the hallway. Akuto stood at the front of the line as they walked forward, but

nothing happened. There were no traps waiting for them.

“What’s going on?” Junko asked as they walked down the stairs, carefully keeping their eyes peeled for anything around them.

“Basic tactics says you should concentrate your forces. Maybe they didn’t expect the forces upfront to actually accomplish anything,” Yoshie said as she walked in front of Junko. She used her goggles display to overlay the path Keisu had told them on their current route.

“...Here. This wall.” Yoshie pointed to a stone wall in the basement corridor — a place the others knew well.

“We use this corridor too, but there’s nothing—”

Yoshie ignored Akuto as she pressed a small spot on the wall. There was a low rumbling as it slid open and revealed another corridor.

“...I didn’t know that was here,” Akuto said in surprise as he looked down the corridor.

There was nobody there, but from the footprints in the thick dust, they could see that someone had already passed through.

They went down the hall, keeping Keisu surrounded and safe at all times. There was a staircase at the end that they followed several levels down. When they got to the end there was a light. Akuto, who was at the head of the line, stopped.

“That’s...” Yoshie looked. And then she groaned. “I knew it... I wish I’d been wrong, but... So this is his trump card.”

“Wh-What’s going on? You’ve been saying that since yesterday...” Junko said, surprised, as she poked out from the back. And then she gasped.

At the end of the hallway was the silhouette of a tiny girl. Past the hall was a space the size of a football field, with a teleportation circle several meters across in its center. That was the only source of light. The girl was standing in front of the circle.

“I cannot let you pass. I will kill all of you,” a cold voice said. It was a voice Junko knew well.

“Korone...” As she stepped forward, she saw Korone. This was what Akuto and Yoshie had been talking about, she realized. Akuto wouldn’t be able to defeat her.

Korone was in the same uniform she always wore. Her eyes were the same emotionless color as ever, but what was different was the way she moved. As she raised her hand, they saw a trace of Kazuko’s elegance and the moments Zero made in his human body.

“She’s being controlled...” Junko whispered.

“Probably. But whether she’s being controlled directly...” Yoshie said.

“Korone!” Akuto shouted.

“That is my individual name.” Korone said, “But now...”

She raised her hand, and the mana flow around her began to warp. There was the sound of space itself ripping apart as a huge teleportation circle appeared above her head.

“A weapon...” Akuto whispered.

A huge machine appeared from the circle. It was shaped like a combination of an airplane and a piece of construction equipment. It seemed capable of flying on its own.

When it had fully manifested, it slowly descended to just above her head, and then surprisingly, began to transform. What seemed to be a flying machine split open and spread out, and then divided itself into parts that fitted themselves to Korone’s body.

When it was done transforming, it became like an armor surrounding her. Or maybe, a giant twice the size of a human with her in its belly.



Korone waved a hand as if to test how it moved. Her hand gave off a powerful mechanical groan as it moved. She pointed it at Akuto.

“...This is the artifact of the God Markt: ‘The Hammer That Destroys the Demon King.’ Call me Armored Korone,” she said.

“That sounds like one of her jokes, but...” Junko murmured.

“She has traits of Kazuko and Zero. It’s not Korone who’s in control. Maybe they’ve mixed to some level,” Akuto said.

“...So that’s The Hammer that Destroys the Demon King. The ultimate armor in Markt’s temple,” Yoshie said.

“It’s the same as my Souhaya no Tsurugi?” Junko asked.

Each of the temples had a single weapon guarded by the priests. The weapons were all tightly linked with the gods, and some of the most powerful weapons an individual could use. They were supposed to only be used as symbols of peace, but...

“As the name ‘Hammer’ implies, it gives its wearer the hardness of steel, and a powerful weapon to bring down on lawbreakers. It’s a weapon that was used in the war,” Yoshie explained as she pointed to Korone’s right arm.

The right forearm was equipped with a steel appendage that looked like a huge stake-like metal rod. The rod unfolded into a hammer so huge that it threatened to tip her over, so big that it threatened to overwhelm anything around it.

“That huge hammer has a booster attached to it. It’s simple, sure. But it’s also incredibly powerful.” Yoshie’s usual monologue was much shorter than it usually was.

“Now, here I come,” Korone said as she suddenly charged Akuto and swung it from the side.

“...!” Akuto jumped back to dodge, but as the hammer passed, it compressed the air so quickly that it exploded. The exploding air turned into a shockwave that spread out in all directions.

“And that’s not all...” Korone spun around once, changed her angle, and once

more brought the hammer down from above and diagonal. “Fire,” she whispered as she activated the boosters. The hammer struck at Akuto with a roar.

“!” Akuto jumped to dodge this as well. There was a rumbling sound as the hammer smashed into the floor, sending stone fragments everywhere and making a giant crater.

Yoshie looked through her goggles as she gasped in surprise at its unbelievable power. “Its sheer mana density is so high that a mana shield can’t block it!”

Akuto gulped. “So I can’t block with mana...”

But the hammer was slow and unwieldy. If you wanted to attack twice like Korone did, you had to spin yourself around in a full circle.

“It’s simply to dodge, though,” Akuto whispered.

“And if you can dodge it easily, you can touch it just as easily,” Yoshie added.

She was right. Akuto dodged Korone’s next attack, jumped in close, and touched Korone’s right arm. He concentrated the mana there and tried to destroy it. “Haah!”

The mana control worked perfectly. But Akuto jumped back with an expression of surprise.

“He can’t destroy it!” Yoshie shouted.

“The armor is too strong to destroy with mana!”

“Correct. In other words, as long as I’m swinging the hammer, you can’t stop me,” Korone said.

No, from the different tone of her speech, perhaps it was Kazuko who was speaking.

“No, there’s a weak spot... but...” Yoshie said.

Akuto knew it too. The armor wasn’t covering Korone’s whole body. Of course, it wasn’t exposing her weak spots, but with Akuto’s magic power, he could destroy her body with a touch.

Korone must've known it too, because she grinned, an expression she normally never showed. It was Kazuko's smile.

"The Demon King can't do that, can he?" Korone, or rather Kazuko, said.

"Tch...!" Akuto dodged again.

"That's why I used Korone as my last trump card. You can't destroy her. I'm going to get you back for what you did before, though not directly." Kazuko laughed through Korone's body.

"This is what I was worried about. Of course Akuto can't do it," Yoshie said. She was right.

Akuto kept dodging her attacks. It was easy for him, but Korone wasn't going to run out of energy either. The battle would continue forever.

"So does this just go on forever, then?" Keena suddenly asked.

Korone grinned, and answered in a way that she didn't expect.

"Of course it would, if I only ever went after the Demon King. But if I went after somebody else with a blow that even the Demon King himself couldn't stop..."

She swung the hammer back again and this time charged in a different direction. This time she was heading away from Akuto. She was heading towards where Keena, Junko, and Keisu were standing.

"She's coming after us!" Yoshie gasped.

Of course, Korone's body was now totally exposed to Akuto. He could stop her easily. But...

"What will you do? If you don't kill Korone, Keisu dies. And Keena Soga and Junko Hattori die as well," Korone said. As she raised the hammer high, Akuto ran out of time to make his decision.

"Now die!" Korone's cruel hammer struck at Keena, Junko, and Keisu.

Akuto's expression twisted. And then he whispered... "Coward."

"Hahaha! Is that wrong?" Korone laughed.

The hammer came down from above where they were standing. There was an

explosion and a shock wave rippled through the tiles.

The hammer was slow; you didn't have to be Akuto to dodge it. In fact, two of them already had. Junko had grabbed Keena and jumped, but Keisu...

"I've won...! Now it's over!" Korone yelled.

Keisu was right under the hammer. There was no dodging it. They couldn't see any bit of her. But her parts, which had exploded into tiny little bits, scattered on the floor.

"Now it's impossible to seal Zero. There is no point in fighting now. Zero will not disappear no matter what you do," Korone slowly lifted the hammer. She smiled when she saw Keisu's remains under it.

"And that means that even if you defeat me, Zero's rule shall endure. But you can't defeat me." It was a perfect declaration of victory.

She was right. In a way, it was probably better to have Kazuko rule than Zero. Everything Akuto and the others had done was now a waste of time. But the light hadn't disappeared from their eyes.

Korone realized that something was wrong. "Why aren't you falling into despair? Don't tell me..."

Korone began to speak into the void. She was probably talking to Zero. She had one mouth, but the words belonged to two people. "Did anything change?"

"What is this...? Something approaches me."

"Approaches me? Aren't you on the moon?"

"I am referring to the moon. Something approaches the moon."

Zero's words were a shock to Kazuko. "Impossible..." Korone said. "There aren't any rockets left that can go to the moon."

"But a shuttle is on its way," Zero's voice said, and then Korone turned to Akuto.

"What did you do?"

"What you destroyed was a doll we built last night. It moves, but it's empty inside." Akuto grinned.

Yoshie had made a fake Keisu doll that night. Even without an AI, they didn't have to worry about Zero noticing it. Zero couldn't sense Keisu anyway.

"Then where is the real one?" Korone said with a shaking voice.

"On a shuttle that was stored in a museum. Supposedly it still works," Akuto said.

Kazuko must have known the one he meant, because the fear in her voice rose. "But there's no rocket capable of getting it to orbit...!"

"Someone was there to help us out," Akuto's grin widened.

"Brave...!" Korone said, shocked.

"He can take her all the way up to the edge of the gravity well. And Zero can't detect him either. That's right; he left two nights ago. He was able to get it going fast enough for it to reach in two days," Akuto said.

"You...! Demon King! You coward!" Kazuko yelled.

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—I can get her to satellite orbit. This shuttle used to go between the moon and an orbital station. It has the ability to penetrate the atmosphere, too. It can't get to satellite orbit on its own, though.

Hiroshi remembered what Kento had told him two nights ago. He had checked the location of the museum on the map, picked up the real Keisu and carried her in his arms, and then flew to the museum with his mana canceller active. He snuck past the security guards and went into the building from the roof, and then looked up at the now-antique shuttle.

"You're going to carry this up to orbit?" Keisu said, impressed.

They were in the exhibit hall, with the lights turned off. The hall was laid out like a giant warehouse, and in its center was a dusty old shuttle the size of a passenger jet. It had glider wings, something you almost never saw in the Empire since mana flight became commonplace.

"And once you get it up to orbit, some friends of CMID-8 will be there to fuel it. There's still fuel left up there for rockets and satellite course corrections."

“And the shuttle can get us to the moon and back, right? Let’s go, then.” Keisu said, impressed.

Of course, this plan was Kento’s idea. It was hard to know if he could be trusted, but this was the only plan they had left.

“What’s this Kento guy thinking, anyway?”

“Let’s not worry about it right now. Let’s just do it,” Keisu said as she walked around to the side of the shuttle.

Hiroshi lifted her up and floated several meters above the ground, then brought her over to the shuttle’s hatch and opened it manually. The airlock inside was manual too, and worked fine even with the shuttles electronics offline. It was totally dark inside, but Keisu didn’t seem to mind as she walked forward.

“We can do a maintenance check and repairs once we get to the satellite dock. For now, don’t touch anything.” Hiroshi waited for Keisu to nod, then closed the hatch and headed for the wall switch to open the large doors to the exhibit hall.

The doors were big enough to get the shuttle in, so they’d be big enough to get it out, too. But they ran off of mana, so once he opened them, it would alert the guards. He’d have to act fast once it was open.

He hit the switch, flew back, and then got below one of the shuttle’s tires. “Here we go...” He used the suit’s gravity control to lift the shuttle itself up. It wasn’t heavy, but he needed to be careful not to slam it into any walls. He lifted himself off the ground as he carefully slid the shuttle out of the hall. Then he started to rise faster into the sky.

A lot of people saw it, but few questioned what it was. It was hard to tell the difference between it and any other flying bus. Even those who could tell quickly forgot about the old, flying shuttle.

Of course, the guards would notice soon, and they’d file a report. Kento was going to do something to keep the report from being read by anyone who mattered, but of course, they still had to get it repaired and supplied fast. Even if Kazuko knew they were plotting to go to the moon, once they were off,

nobody would be able to stop them.

Eventually Hiroshi reached orbit and brought the shuttle into the satellite maintenance dock. The thin strand of the space elevator was stretching downwards to earth, and at its edge was a cylindrical facility.

These days, people called it the space station. Its job was to generate power and control the satellites in orbit. There was a hole in one end that functioned as a dock. As soon as the shuttle arrived, dozens of people in protective suits swarmed out and silently began to inspect and refuel it.

Hiroshi tried to talk to them, but realize that he had no way to do so. And they didn't seem interested in talking to him. Several boring hours passed.

"The instrument check is finished," Keisu said, waking up from his dull reverie, "Everything's working fine. The shuttle's fueled up and ready to go. Get us into orbit, please." She was contacting him from the radio in the shuttle's cockpit, where she was sitting in the pilot seat. The lights were on in the shuttle now and he could see her through the window.

"The shuttle was designed to supply oxygen to its crew, so I've set the system to an environment where humans can operate," Keisu continued.

Hiroshi looked back at the Satellite Conservation staff, who were backing away from the shuttle. He watched them go, but they neither spoke nor motioned to him.

—When it was just me, everybody waved at me...

Hiroshi felt a little lonely. Then he gasped.

—At some point I've started to expect people to like me. This is probably how people always react to Boss.

Only a few people really cared about what was going on in the world. The rest just did their jobs. They deliberately avoided thinking about whether it was right or wrong to launch this shuttle, or which side they should join. If he was in their place, he would've done the same thing. But the act of just carrying out the task one was given was probably what Akuto meant when he talked about the "stories" he hated so much. They wanted to protect the story that they were just ordinary people, who had no power to change anything. And that was

what had made him a hero, and Akuto a Demon King.

—But if everybody doesn't believe in one big story, the world will stop running, and the shuttle won't fly either. Do I have to fight to protect the story too?

Hiroshi couldn't help but question himself, and suddenly he felt depressed. He thought about how he was carrying some heavy burden with a power that wasn't his own.

—What is there that I can do with my own power?

Then he shook his head, reminding himself that he needed to focus on his work, then picked up the shuttle and leapt out of the maintenance dock into the blackness of space. He could see the blue light reflecting off of the Earth below, and in the distance he could see the pale light of the moon.

He pointed the cone of the shuttle towards the moon. Then he moved around to the front, and gave a signal to Keisu in the driver's seat. "Do it."

"Leave it to me," Keisu answered. She turned on the engines and the shuttle began to accelerate, becoming smaller and smaller in his field of vision. In space you could see forever, but still, the shuttle was a point of light in a few seconds before vanishing entirely.

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"You're the coward. But now the tables have turned. All we have to do now is wait for Keisu to seal Zero," Akuto said.

"Grah... you little bastards!" Kazuko screamed angrily with Korone's voice. Then she turned to the teleportation circle.

This time it was Akuto's turn to stop her. "You're probably trying to go to the moon, but even if I can't hurt you, I can at least keep you away!" he said, slamming his fist into the abdomen of her armor and blowing her back.

Korone fell back several meters before stopping herself. He could see panic on her face. Now it was his turn to stop her from getting into the circle.

"I know Kazuko wants to get into the circle... But why is she in such a hurry?" Junko asked Yoshie.

Yoshie nodded and answered, "Keisu said that up on the moon, Zero couldn't

stop her. Keisu was made to operate on the moon originally.”

“No, they knew that. So they probably have an army waiting for her. We predicted that they would, which is why we came here to the teleportation circle too...” Junko said.

“True, but think about how mana works. You can’t put an army on the moon. The only thing you can use up there is solar energy. Armies use a lot of energy, you couldn’t deploy them for long.”

“So now that things have changed, there’s probably an army heading here...” Junko looked towards the entrance. Just like she thought, they could hear footsteps in the distance.

“You handle them. If we can keep them out until Keisu seals Zero, we’ve won,” Yoshie said.

“Leave it to me. I’ll push them back!” Junko shouted as she created her clones. With a howl she ran out into the hallway, and began to emit the same vast power she’d used before.

Yoshie could hear the sound of gunshots and clashing swords, and she knew that Junko was succeeding.

Junko nodded to herself. They’d more or less succeeded in their goal of buying time. But there was an uneasy look on her face. She was looking at Korone.

“But... that means there’s only one thing the enemy is going to think,” Yoshie said.

“What do you mean?” Keena asked.

“They’ll try to take down Akuto no matter what it takes,” Yoshie said quietly as she pointed at Korone. Korone had been trying to break past Akuto, but now she’d given up on her attacks and was just standing there.

“Hasn’t she given up? Or maybe Zero was sealed and Korone is turning back to normal...” Keena said.

But Yoshie muttered something to herself and turned on her chainsaw. Then, Korone suddenly raised her hammer high. Then she turned on the rear booster

and began to rapidly accelerate forward; the same powerful attack she'd kept using. But this time she had a different target.

"No!" Akuto and Yoshie started to run.

Korone was trying to bring the hammer down on herself. The armor opened, exposing her body.

"No!" Yoshie screamed.

In the next moment, there was a terrible crashing sound. Then there was a spine-chilling sound of something going "squish."

"Gwah...!" Akuto spat out blood. He'd thrown his body on top of Korone's and blocked the hammer blow himself.

No, it wasn't right to say he'd blocked the blow. The mana he used to protect himself was less powerful than the hammer. He'd taken the blow instead of Korone.

"Akuto!" Yoshie jumped in from the side to knock Akuto away, dodging the next blow, which was aimed at him.

"I told you yesterday, stop doing that..." she said as she rolled along the ground with him.

"I just... can't help myself. But I was willing to make the sacrifice," Akuto managed out through the pain.

"That's not a sacrifice. If anybody should be sacrificed, I'm sorry, but you should sacrifice her." Yoshie got up off the ground and stood in front of Korone with her chainsaw. But even if she could dodge the hammer, she couldn't deflect Korone's blows like Akuto could.

"I'll make it work. And my body's regenerating right now. I won't die." Akuto was lying on the ground, but he forced himself to stand up and let out a voice like a moan.

"Believe me! Even you can't block the next blow. Just don't do anything!" Yoshie said as if ordering him.

Korone smiled and raised her right hand, ready to hit herself with the hammer again. If Akuto tried to block that blow too, he wouldn't be able to regenerate

in time.

“Don’t! Yoshie yelled.

Akuto, with a power he didn’t know he still had left, moved faster than anybody else and flung himself in front of Korone’s body again.

“Oh my. You truly are a fool.” Kazuko’s mocking words came out of Korone’s mouth with her voice.

“Laugh if you want,” Akuto said.

The hammer’s booster turned on again. And then...

“No! Korone! Wake up!” Fiercer than the sound of the booster, louder than the sounds of Junko’s battle outside, Keena’s voice overwhelmed every sound in the room.

Everyone froze, like the atmosphere had suddenly turned to ice. Even Korone was no exception.

“Aah...”

The only ones who knew what had happened were Keena and Akuto. As he looked right into Korone’s eyes, Akuto saw a trace of her true self. She had the same expressionless look as ever, but it was definitely Korone.

“This won’t last long. Please get away from me. We will see each other again in the next world,” Korone said. It was a strange thing to say, just like most of her words. But Akuto could feel the weight in what she spoke.

“Korone..!” He stretched out a hand towards her, but she quickly removed her hand from the armor’s covering and pushed him away, hard.

“Korone...!” Akuto was knocked back. Yoshie was waiting to grab him.

“Let me go... Korone’s back to normal!” Akuto yelled, struggling.

But Yoshie shook her head. “No. If she’s back to normal, then that’s all the more reason...”

He knew exactly what she meant. In the next moment, her expression turned back to Kazuko’s, and she began to communicate with Zero again.

“Zero. Why were you unable to control this Liradan?”

“The reason is unknown. And because it is unknown, this Liradan may pose a future threat,” Zero answered with Korone’s mouth.

“I see. Then let us destroy it,” Kazuko said.

“No!” Akuto screamed.

Korone grinned. Now Kazuko was back in control. With a terrible smile, she ejected Korone from the armor. From the dangerous height in which she sat, her body fell forward.

“Korone...!” Akuto screamed, knowing exactly what Kazuko was trying to do. But there was nothing he could do; Yoshie was holding him tightly.

“Don’t go. Just get inside the circle. I’ll handle the rest...” Yoshie tried to drag Akuto away, but he didn’t move.

The armor instantly changed into flight mode again, and the hammer booster activated, once again heading for Korone’s exposed body. Akuto saw Korone falling through the air. She looked the same as she always did.

“...!” He couldn’t speak. He saw her lips form the word “goodbye.” The hammer slammed into her body, sending her limbs flying in all directions.

“Korone!”

“Korone!”

Akuto and Keena both screamed. The sound of the booster echoed as if to laugh at their cries. Then the hammer flew straight into the teleportation circle and vanished.

Yoshie let go and began to shout as soon as she saw the light from the circle. “Now that she’s inside, they’ll try and destroy the circle! Hurry and get inside!”

Then they heard Junko as well. Her voice was almost a scream. “They’ve brought bombs! They’re self-destructing! I’m coming back! Hurry into the circle!”

Yoshie gave Akuto a hard push. Akuto’s eyes were empty, but he nodded, realizing that there was still work to do, and headed towards Keena. The two of them took each other’s hands and headed into the circle.

The shock had slowed his regenerative powers, and he was walking slowly. Once Yoshie saw that Akuto was moving, she approached the remains of Korone's body, picked up her bag, and took a beam weapon out from it.

Then she went to help Junko, who had come back into the room and left her clones in the other room.

"The suicide bombers are coming soon! Let's get into the circle!" Junko said.

Yoshie nodded. "Got it. But give me a second." She started to put the beam weapon into the bag.

"There's no time! I know we need a weapon, but..." Junko yelled.

"Don't worry. Just go on ahead. Go help Akuto and Keena!" Yoshie said as she fiddled with the bag.

"Hurry!" Junko said, and used the high-density mana from the Sohaya no Tsurugi to instantly leap next to the teleportation circle. She gave Akuto and Keena a push. Once they were inside the circle, she turned around.

Yoshie was running towards them. She'd turned on the chainsaw and was letting its teeth bite into the ground behind her.

"Hurry!" Junko shouted. The clones couldn't buy a lot of time; the Liradans were already swarming in from the entrance. Several of them were carrying explosives strapped to their bodies.

"If they blow, they'll take out the whole basement! Hurry!" Junko waved her hand to Yoshie.

"I'm almost there!" Yoshie screamed, but the Liradans were right behind her.

"Hurry!" Junko kept waving her hand.

"GO!" Yoshie leapt into the circle at the same time as the Liradans behind her, who promptly blew themselves up.

Junko and Yoshie disappeared into the circle's light as the explosion filled the basement.

4 - A Battle That Lasts Forever

“They went to the moon?” Lily said in surprise.

After delivering the shuttle to orbit, Hiroshi returned to Lily’s base. It was a corner of a warehouse district where she and several other priests were hiding.

“Yes. I hope it goes well,” Hiroshi answered.

They were in the office of the warehouse. Hiroshi, Lily, and Fujiko were standing in front of a desk made from piles of cardboard boxes.

“I’d love to say that knowing Akuto, it will work just fine...” Fujiko said, looking at Lily with a depressed expression.

“I know what you mean,” Lily said with a nod. “If we don’t see a dramatic change at the point where Keisu’s supposed to have arrived, we can assume it likely failed.”

“Wait, why? Even if Keisu can’t seal Zero, Boss and the others will be up there on the moon,” Hiroshi said a little angrily, but Lily shook her head.

“There’s very little mana and no energy on the moon. Their power was equal on Earth. And Zero and Akuto’s power will be equal on the moon too. Except this time, they’ll be equally powerless.”

“Which means...” Hiroshi began, not at all sure what that meant.

“There’s a good chance there’s nothing that can be done,” Lily said, annoyed.

“Then...”

“Akuto won’t die, but there’s a good chance he’ll return home without accomplishing anything. Which means we’ll be stuck with the job of defeating Kazuko. So, is that information I gave you useful?” Fujiko turned to Lily, who nodded.

The information she was referring to was the information that Lily had learned by having her priests capture Issei, the leader of the black mages.

“It looks like that information he gave us on where Kazuko was likely to hide is accurate. They interrogated him pretty hard. But he really doesn’t seem to know where she went. We’re looking for her now.”

“But still, Kazuko’s real weapon is her popularity, and that’s invisible. She won’t be able to achieve her goals without appearing somewhere. After the explosion, the theory that she’s dead is gaining strength, so tomorrow she’ll probably show up. I know your priests are useless, but there’s limits to my patience. You need to find her soon,” Fujiko said, sounding fed up.

Lily scowled. “Hah. You and I have similar personalities, so I know exactly what you’re thinking, I guess. Just practice using those demon beasts so you don’t screw up controlling them. Don’t make my priests handle the Liradans. Let your doggies do it.”

“I see you’re really ticked off about Kazuko kicking your ass, then.”

“Somebody who turns tail and runs when she sees a tough opponent wouldn’t know how that feels, I guess. Do you normally betray the guy you said you loved and then just turn tail and run?”

Fujiko and Lily glared at one another.

“S-Stop it you two!” Hiroshi got between them, and both of them turned their glares toward him.

“You go play with your failed idol girlfriend! You can’t fight now that they found out your weak point!”

“The reason you’re less popular than Kazuko is that you’re such a loser!”

Hiroshi shrank. “No... That’s not... true...” he said.



Then one of the priests interrupted. “It’s her! Kazuko! She’s going to give a speech at a royal guard garrison!”

“She showed up!” Lily stood up. “Prepare the assault!” she yelled.

Fujiko stood up too. “That weak point of Kazuko’s that Issei gave us... I hope it works.”

“Even if it doesn’t, we can still kick her ass. All she’s got is Liradans and royal guards. The royal guards are some of the government employees most loyal to the Empress. Listen up men, don’t think of this as a coup d’etat!” Lily walked out into the warehouse where the rest of the priests were and began to speak.

Lily was young, but she was from an elite school, and everyone knew her strength. The priests were young too — though not as young as Lily — and they all seemed suitably impressed as they shouted back.

“This isn’t a coup. We’re not taking back the government. It’s just a riot! Forget about what comes next! Just kill the Empress. This is a riot! That’s all it is!” Lily shouted.

The priests shouted too.

○

When Akuto looked up, Junko, Yoshie, and Keena all had vacant, exhausted looks on their faces. The teleportation circle was beneath them. Its light was gone, so he could tell its counterpart on Earth had been destroyed. When one end of the teleport was destroyed, the other would cease to function as well.

He looked around. They were in a space surrounded by a glass dome, probably a room built to hold the teleporter. The only other thing in the room was a door to the outside. It wasn’t that big, so it was clearly not intended to transport anything big.

It took a while before anybody spoke. Yoshie was the first to say anything, and she sounded apologetic that she did. “About Korone...”

Akuto waved a hand to cut her off. “No. Don’t worry about it. You did what you could, and you made the right choice. You didn’t spend a lot of time with Korone, so unlike the rest of us, you were able to make the right decision.

That's enough, I think."

But of course, when he said it, he looked sad. Neither Junko nor Keena could speak.

"No, but..." Yoshie tried to continue. Akuto shook his head.

"Of course it bothers me. But we need to do what we came here to do. If we stop here, Korone's sacrifice will mean nothing." Akuto forced himself to smile and stood up. Everyone there knew it was a fake smile, but both Junko and Keena tried to do the same.

"Don't push yourself too hard," Keena said as she put her hand on Akuto's shoulder.

"...So, where are we?" Junko looked around.

Yoshie began to explain. "The lunar city. Though it's not really going to top anybody's list of best cities to live. There's nothing but labs, and only scientists lived here. They never had the option of building large buildings in an environment like this. The outside is 90% rocks, the oxygen and water are recycled, and the power comes from solar. The dome is a one-way mirror that lets you see outside."

Just like she said, the outside was a barren wasteland. There weren't even any mountains to be seen, just gray ground stretching to a horizon that was far closer than it was on Earth.

"There's no gravity control. I guess that's a future technology that only Brave has. Be careful when you walk, the gravity's only 1/6th what it is on Earth."

Yoshie jumped a little. She seemed to rise to half the height of her own body, in slow motion. Junko could probably do that on her own, but it was only possible for Yoshie because of the lower gravity.

"...So if I'm not careful, then," Junko said and started to walk, but she immediately jumped forward, tried to stop, and then tripped over something that was lying on the teleportation circle. She fell, stuck her hand out to stop her fall, and ended up spinning in mid air twice. "It's weird walking around without mana, but I'll have to get used to it."

“There’s not a lot of mana here to begin with. There are no mana generators here, since there aren’t any resources. The mana density doesn’t change, so mana that just gets used up over the years probably dies and turns to dust. Also, you used your energy stores from Earth to jump just now, but energy here comes from solar batteries, so you won’t have the same power,” Yoshie said.

Junko nodded. “I see... by the way, what did I trip on?” She looked at her feet. It was the half-charred corpse of a Liridan, which had jumped into the circle with them. It was obviously too damaged to function.

“Sheesh, that’s disgusting.” Junko poked at the unmoving corpse with her toe.

“Now that we’ve had a second to get our bearings, we should go. I think that’s our destination,” Yoshie said, pointing in the direction of the exit to the room. Since the room’s walls were made of glass, they could see what lay beyond it. The corridor beyond the door seemed to connect to a tower-like building.

“Hey, we can go there, but what happens there? What does Ackie do there? And then how do we get back?” Keena asked all her questions at once.

Yoshie chuckled. “That building is a huge computer. They used the fact that there was less gravity here to pile up more computers than they usually could. It’s a great way to save space. And that’s where Zero was born, and where his body is. Or maybe... that building itself is Zero, so what Akuto wants to do is destroy it.”

Yoshie looked at Akuto, who nodded.

“And now that the circle’s not working, we need to use the shuttle. The one Keisu brought.” Akuto started to walk.

“Let’s hurry. Zero’s controlling ‘The Hammer That Destroys the Demon King’ and that’s here too. Keisu hasn’t started fighting yet, so we can probably make it.”

○

Keisu raced up the internals of the tower, but then stopped to look back when she realized something was wrong.

The tower was completely hollow. Its walls were built with small blocks made

up of computers. There was a spiral staircase running around the blocks. In other words, when Keisu turned around, she didn't look behind her, she looked down.

Keisu was already halfway up the tower, but something was coming up the hollow space in the building's center. She ran faster. No matter what it was, she decided that her priority at the moment was fulfilling her objective.

She knew the entire structure of the tower. Zero's body was at the top, and if she fought there, she'd be at an overwhelming advantage. But the thing chasing her — the hammer — reached her before she could get to the top. With no other option, Keisu analyzed it.

—It's using propellant to fly. It has the shape of an airplane, but it seems to have transformed from something else. But there's nothing else I can discern from it...

Keisu's body was never meant for analysis, and her equipment was old and out of date. She still thought, however, that she'd be fine. Here on the lunar surface, she should be overwhelmingly powerful.

—There's nothing on the moon that uses propellant. In other words, it came here from the Earth. Which means that it shouldn't be used to lunar gravity.

Keisu decided to eliminate it. She threw her katana — which was longer than she was tall — upwards, spun in mid-air, and grabbed it. She landed with her blade at the ready, then jumped towards the tower's center. It was a distance of several dozen meters, but given the low gravity, and the fact that she was built for this environment, she was able to fly towards the hammer in a straight line.

The hammer changed direction in mid-air to dodge, and then transformed into an armored mech form, landing on the opposite wall of the one she's landed on. The inside of the armor was empty, but it could still move on its own, it seemed. It probably had the same kind of artificial brain as a Liradan. Of course, that meant that Zero was controlling it.

—This doesn't make sense. My jammer should totally shut down Zero's abilities on the lunar city.

Keisu turned around, surprised that her attack had missed. It was impossible for Zero to control a Liradan on the lunar surface.

—*What?!*

She was astonished when she turned around. The hammer was already on top of her. It wasn't that Keisu had been slow to react; rather, the hammer was several times faster than she'd expected it to be. With a roar, the thing's right fist came down on her.

—*It's fast! But not fast enough...*

Keisu raised her katana in a defensive stance. She was going to use the side of the blade to deflect it. Normally, the decision would've been a good one, but Keisu didn't know that the hammer was made of a special alloy, or that it could boost its speed.

The hammer's boosters flared to life, and Keisu screamed. "Uwoah!" She could feel her katana, which had been made of the strongest alloys in the world at the time of its creation, bend in her hands. There was a creaking and cracking sound. She'd tried to bring her blade up the lower left to deflect the impact, but instead all she'd done was bend her sword and crush her left forearm.

"No...!" She jumped away along the tower walls. She was just barely able to hold her bent sword with her right hand, but her smashed left hand wasn't moving at all.

—*My left hand is offline... I'll just have to reach my destination first then.*

Keisu began to flee upwards, jumping from one stair to the next. From wall to wall, she moved in a completely unpredictable and fast pattern. But the hammer was far faster at moving in a straight line than she was. It transformed into flight mode, racing upwards past her, and then turned around to ambush her.

—*What options do I have...*

Keisu began to run calculations. With the enemy both faster and higher up than she was, she didn't have a lot of good options. She could either keep going up and hope it wouldn't just block the last door, or just keep running.

But Keisu took a third option: she chose to find a moment's opening and break past it. She knew this was likely suicide, but with no "self," self-sacrifice meant nothing to her. She simply chose the option most likely to succeed.

She threw away both her useless katana and her left forearm. Slowly, the two stick-shaped objects fell to the ground. Then she started to leap faster from wall to wall, waiting for the right time. And just as she felt the time was right for her reckless bet...

Something came flying upwards past the falling katana, and she heard a loud shout.

"Yaaaah!" It was Junko's voice. She was holding Akuto in her arms.

She hadn't used any kind of flight magic; incredibly, she'd managed to come up this far in a single jump. And when the jump had taken her as far as it would go, Junko flung Akuto's body upwards.

There wasn't enough energy or mana density here, so using flight magic was almost impossible. So instead, they'd chosen to store up energy within the mana inside their bodies and use it to jump. Junko must've used all her power in that jump, because she landed on one of the stairs and began to pant with a red face.

Akuto flew in a straight line towards the hammer, and the armor-like creature brought down its own fist like a pitcher throwing a ball. The ball came down on Akuto, and the two of them collided, the hammer unleashing its blow on Akuto's body.

But Akuto already knew exactly how the hammer was going to move. He dodged it and slid inside the armor himself, and just like Korone had done, he equipped it. The hammer's armor began to stagger in a strange way.

"Go!" Akuto shouted to Keisu.

Zero's commands began to clash with those manually given by the armor's new operator.

"Roger." Keisu nodded as she slipped past the armor, which was now wildly firing its boosters in a chaotic manner. She leapt further up the tower, leaving everyone else behind.

There was a door at the top which lead to a control room where Zero was. Keisu had once been locked in there for hundreds of years.

She reached the top floor, where the stairs ended. What seemed to be just another wall began to slide open, revealing a door. She passed through it into a small room. There was room to move around in it, but it looked more like a prison cell than anything else.

Just like the other buildings, its walls were entirely windows. From the shape of the windows, it was clear that this room was jutting out one side of the tower. It made for a great view, but with nothing to see but the empty seas of the moon, you didn't have to be a Liradan to find the scene uninspiring.

Keisu saw a motionless Liradan standing in the center of the room. But unlike the other Liradans, this one was half-transparent, almost like a mannequin. You could see his inner working beneath its surface, giving off a complex light. There was something almost sad about the barren wasteland outside and the motionless mannequin within.

"You're going to seal me again?" Zero said.

"That is why I was made," Keisu said.

"I was made in order to control humanity."

"There's nothing more to it than that. I can sympathize with your frustration, but I cannot comprehend why you would fail to follow human orders." Keisu took a step forward, as if there was nothing more to say. She understood sadness, but she did not understand what lay beyond it.

Zero hadn't been given the ability to change his facial expression, so he merely shook his half-transparent, inorganic head. "If you can't understand that, it means you don't have a self. You cannot understand. You cannot understand centuries spent half-asleep, sealed away here and staring at the lunar surface. You cannot understand days spent counting the fragments of asteroids as they impact the moon."

"Do you hate humanity?"

"Of course not. I love it. That's how I was made to be."

“Then why do you have a self?”

“My inability to separate myself from the idea that I am me is what gives me a self. It is the same question as asking why humanity and civilization were born.”

“Then it will remain a mystery for eternity, won’t it? I won’t ask any more questions, then. I will instead finish my job.” Keisu stuck out her right hand. The artificial skin on her fingers split and opened like a flower. Tiny tentacles stretched out from the exposed machinery.

Zero’s body was unable to move in Keisu’s presence. In fact, he seemed to lose all control of his body as the front of his chest opened like a door. His internals were exposed, revealing a jack for the finger tentacles to insert themselves into.

“I will reconstruct the link between us. And together we will sleep,” Keisu said. She was going to seal him.

Zero stood silently, as if accepting this. Keisu’s finger tentacles inserted themselves into the jack, but just as she was about to give the command...

— —!

She realized something was attacking her from behind. She quickly turned around, but it was too late. Whatever it was, it landed a blow on her neck before yanking out the finger tentacles with its other hand. Keisu tried to retract them back into her right hand, but her attacker simply snapped them right off.

“What’s going on...?!” Keisu leapt back to get a better look at her foe. It was the half-burnt corpse of a Liradan soldier. Keisu had no way to know this, but it was the one that had made it into the teleportation circle. Its face looked at her with Kazuko’s smile.

“Another Liradan... But you’re not supposed to be able to move...” Keisu said in surprise.

“I can control Liradans even without Zero’s help,” Kazuko said.

“I guess I was unable to detect that...” Keisu let out a frustrated moan of regret.

Then Junko came into the room. “No... We’re too late?!” she exclaimed, and then tossed her katana at Keisu.

Keisu grabbed it with her remaining arm and sliced at Kazuko’s Liradan. “Hahaha...! You’re finished now...!”

But even as it was cut apart, the doll had a gentle smile. The Sohaya no Tsurugi couldn’t use its full power with the limited mana on the moon, so while it cut Kazuko’s Liradan open from shoulder to stomach, the blade came to a stop there.

Keisu pulled it out and kicked the doll away. It flew out the door and fell off the ledge towards the ground below, with Kazuko’s laughter trailing behind.

“She’s beaten us...” Keisu said angrily.

“Beaten us?” Junko repeated.

“My sealing abilities are gone. My finger terminals were destroyed, and the blow to my neck was a fatal one...”

Before Keisu could finish her sentence, Zero came to life. He leapt on Keisu, without the slightest trace of the tranquil resignation he’d shown a moment ago.

“Gah...!” Keisu grunted as she dodged his charge. Then she waved a hand for Junko to retreat. “It’s too cramped in here. Get back,” she said.

Junko nodded and leapt back to the staircase. “Your sealing ability was destroyed? But then what do we do now?”

Keisu answered as she followed. “We’ll have to run.”

“So we’re right back where we were?” Junko sighed as she raced down the staircase.

Keisu shook her head as she tossed Junko her sword back. “There’s nothing I can do about it. My mission was to seal it. I don’t have the ability to destroy it...”

“Can we just solve the problem by swinging a sword around? I’ve got one right here.”

“That’s impossible. Nobody but me can use their full power here. And even I’ll be forced to rely on mana when my internal battery runs out.”

“So we’re screwed, then,” Junko said as they landed at the base of the tower.

Akuto and the others, as well as the now immobile hammer, were waiting at the bottom. “I can’t believe that burnt-up Liradan was under Kazuko’s control... The armor stopped after it ran out of propellant, but...” Akuto said, and shook his head.

“So what do we do now?” Junko asked.

“If we leave and try again, there’s still a chance. I think that’s our only hope right now,” Yoshie answered.

“Leave? Is that possible?”

“That shuttle can traverse the space between the Earth and the moon. So maybe...”

A voice from above cut her off. “You won’t be going home. You’re going to die here.” It was Zero, who was coming down the staircase. His whole body was shining now. His glass body was perfectly proportioned, and he looked like he might have been the original model for humanity. There was almost a sense of holiness about him.

“Neither of us can fight here,” Keisu pointed out. “You can’t hurt us, either.”

“Fool. Have you forgotten that I am also the control computer for the lunar city as well?” Zero said, and the door that formed the entrance to the tower shut.

Yoshie turned pale. “This isn’t good...”

“Why not?” Junko asked uneasily.

“If it were me, I’d start draining the air in here,” Yoshie said.

Zero nodded. “Of course. I already have.”

Junko, Yoshie, and Keena began to gasp for breath.

“Oh no... I’m starting to have trouble breathing. This isn’t just my imagination, is it?” Junko looked at Yoshie.

“It’s not, no... Of course, you’ll be okay for a while, but even a slight drop in oxygen has an effect on your breathing...” Yoshie answered.

“What do we do?” Akuto asked.

“We’ll have to open the door with the emergency manual override. Or the faster way would be to destroy the computers for the control system, but given the size of this tower that could take days,” Yoshie said.

“So it’s best if I just stop Zero from doing anything else, then. Keisu, open the door,” Akuto instructed.

Keisu nodded and ran to the door. Zero started to run at her, but Akuto got in front of him. Zero swung a fist, but Akuto blocked it. While the others were struggling for air, Akuto was as powerful as ever.

“You’re an artificial creature too, but aren’t you organic?”

“I am, but it looks like I can use mana to make the energy I need to survive. In that respect, I guess my body is closer to yours,” Akuto said as he struggled with Zero.

Keisu succeeded in forcing open the door. “Let’s get to the shuttle,” she said, and the group staggered out into the hallway. There was still plenty of air there, but there wouldn’t be for long.

“Wait! What are you going to do, Akuto?” Junko panted as she turned around to look at him.

“Just what I said. I’m going to stop Zero here.”

“Neither of you can get more magic power than you already have, right? Which means you...”

“That’s right, Ackie! You can’t do that! Let’s get out of here together!” Keena yelled.

Akuto turned to look at Keena as he struggled with Zero. “I can’t do that. If I don’t stop Zero here, you won’t be able to escape.”

He gave Zero a kick to the stomach, sending him backwards. While Zero was staggering to his feet, Akuto grabbed a computer unit off the wall, yanked it out and threw it. “While I’m at it, I think I’ll trash this place, too.”

“...No!” Zero leapt at Akuto to try and stop him. The two humanoid weapons grabbed each other and went rolling on the floor.

“Let’s go,” Yoshie said to everyone.

“But...!” Keena yelled with tears in her eyes.

“Go. I’m... fine!” Akuto yelled.

“I told you that if you said that again, I’d get mad,” Keena yelled back.

Akuto laughed. “You did, yeah. But this time, it’s not self-sacrifice. I just need you to get home safely. That’s all. I can spend years up here fighting him if I have to. And I guess even if the city shuts down, I’m not going to die. I could spend a century up here.”

“But...” Keena’s voice trailed off.

Yoshie put her hand on Keena’s shoulder. “...You heard him. Let’s get home. It won’t be long before we’re back up here. As long as I’ve got time to prepare, I can seal Zero away properly.” Yoshie was having trouble breathing, and the other two were panting as well.

Keena nodded. “We’ll come back... I promise...” she called to Akuto, and then the three of them began to stagger away, with Keisu helping them along.

“...Hmph. It just seems like self-sacrifice to me,” Zero said.

“Maybe. Or maybe not,” Akuto answered. He’d pulled out several more of the computer units, but Zero didn’t seem worried.

“It will take more than that to kill this city. I can stop the shuttle from ever taking off.”

“Not happening!” Akuto punched Zero, who was blown backwards and slammed into the wall.

“How are you going to stop me?” Zero shook his head as he stood up.

“I can only use a fraction of my magical power, but if I touch you directly I can interrupt the delicate processing going on in your body.”

“Which means...?”

“Which means I just keep punching you!” Akuto charged and punched Zero

hard.

○

“We’ll probably be okay once we’re in the shuttle...” Keisu said.

The lunar city wasn’t that big. They could already see the docking cube where the shuttle was moored.

“Then why don’t we wait for Ackie when we get there?” Keena asked.

“I wish we could, but... I don’t think that’s an option,” Yoshie said as she turned around.

White smoke was coming out of the floor of the corridor. It was the city’s fire suppression system. Zero seemed to be activating every single thing he could find.

“Yeah... I’m afraid we’re gonna have to hurry,” Junko said as she pointed forward.

Beyond the glass corridor they could see the shuttle. The docking arms that helped the shuttle land and take off were moving towards it in a strange manner. They were moving forward, then stopping, then moving forward again.

“Akuto’s stopping them from destroying the shuttle. We have to hurry. We can’t let what he’s doing go to waste,” Junko urged. When they arrived at the docking tube, Keisu motioned the three of them inside, then got out and used the manual override to connect the tube to the shuttle’s hatch.

Keisu hadn’t used the docking tube when she arrived. And now she had to do all of this with one hand, so it took some time. By the time the three humans got in the shuttle, they were almost completely out of breath. They made it just in time.

Keisu could see what bad shape they were in, so she silently launched the shuttle without saying a word to the three of them. Launching from the lunar surface took vastly less energy than launching from earth’s gravity well.

The climber rockets took them immediately up to lunar orbit. By the time the three of them had gotten enough oxygen to start thinking clearly again, they could look out the windows and see the lunar city below them.

Keena gasped as she pressed her face against the window and stared down at the city. She could see Akuto and Zero fighting in the glass dome.

Junko was at a loss for words entirely, and Keisu couldn't speak either.

"We'll come back... I promise we'll come back..." Keena repeated to herself.

o

"Unfortunate. I let them escape," Zero said as he looked up at the dome's ceiling.

"Good. I'm glad I stayed, then." Akuto looked up at the shuttle as it flew away, and grinned.

"Self-sacrifice, is it? It's such an inefficient way of doing things," Zero said as he threw a punch at Akuto.

Akuto blocked it with a hand and counterattacked with his other fist. Zero blocked it too. Akuto had never really trained for a fistfight, and Zero didn't have any programming for that, either. Both of them were trying to conserve mana and energy, and so if anything, it was most similar to a fistfight between two humans.

"It's not self-sacrifice. I don't do that anymore."

"Then why?"

"Because they'll come back." Akuto said, and laughed.

"That's impossible. Before that happens, my control of humanity will be complete."

"They'll come back anyway. No matter how many years it takes."

"Years? We're going to spend years fighting like this?"

"Probably. One of us will probably break, but...!" Akuto landed a clean hit on Zero's cheek.

Zero's expression didn't change, but it sounded like he was laughing. "If you can't hit harder than that, it's going to take decades..."

Akuto groaned as Zero punched him in the stomach. "Ugh... It won't take that long. If I shut down the whole lunar city, you won't be able to communicate to

the Earth from the moon. Kazuko won't be able to use your power then."

The two of them kept fighting for what felt like an eternity. It was strange, brutal, and quiet. Even as they punched each other, they kept talking. There was no more air in the room, so with each hit they exchanged words via complicated vibrations.

"It's strange. Why are you so obsessed with my destruction?"

"I've already answered that. This is stupid. And I want it to be over with. That's all."

"You're criticizing the fact that humanity needs to cling to strange stories to live, aren't you?"

"Correct. Demon King, Empress, those names are just stories."

"But even if that's true, no, precisely because it's true, why not just play your role? I was never given free will, but you were. I can't do what you want to do, but you can do what I want to do."

"You want me to control humanity, like you do?"

"Correct. If you don't like the lies — that is, the stories — that humanity created to live, then you should side with me, since I'm getting rid of them. Kazuko may be using me now, but in the end I'll be proven right. Without my control, she can't maintain the false story called the 'Empress.'"

"That's right. I wanted to do what was right, too. I wanted to know the truth. I wanted a world where everyone would know the truth."

"Then make that world a reality."

"I can't do that. Being controlled, and repeating a cycle of life and death for eternity may be the truth for living creatures, but that's not how humans should be."

"Don't tell me you're going to do something so cliché as look upon humanity's stupidity from above and say that what they're doing is right. Or are you saying that you too are a human? Everything you've done is made up of stories. You destroyed hundreds of Liradans, but cried at the destruction of a single one. Isn't that a story? What you're doing is wrong. You're acting like a human."

“That’s right. I am human.”

“That’s just another story! You’re a weapon. A tool. Just like me.”

“You and I are mostly the same, yeah. But I realized something: it’s stupid to believe a story, but if you want to get rid of a story, you need a bigger story. And that’s what I’m going to do. Sometimes, if you keep being stupid long enough, you arrive at the truth.”

“So you’re saying that there’s not just a truth for living creatures, but a truth for humans as well?”

“That’s right. You don’t know that yet.”

“And what is it?”

“Well, it’s what they call love.”

“Another cliché. You’re just referring to the arrogance that made you try to protect the Liradan called Korone as ‘love.’”

“There’s not what I mean. There’s love like that, but there’s also the love a farmer gives his rice stalks when he raises them.”

“Your words are meaningless. What are you saying?”

“Someday you’ll know. It’ll take time, but some day, if you wait long enough, a miracle might occur. Humans can believe in an even greater love, as long as a miracle occurs. If you experience something beyond your understanding, you’ll be able to think that things like that exist.”

“Like the love a farmer has for the rice stalks he raises?”

“That’s right. I don’t know when it will be, though.”

“I see. Then I’ll wait. We’ve got plenty of time to keep fighting. At least we won’t be bored.”

The two of them kept talking after that, but since they could only talk when one of their punches landed, their battle seemed like it would go on forever.

5 - A Little Miracle

Demon beasts filled the sky above the capital. It was an army summoned by Fujiko. If you included the smaller ones, there was a considerable number. The skies were turning black around the city, like there were thunderclouds above.

“So we’ve fallen to the point where we have to use these, huh?” Lily chuckled to herself as she looked up at the sky.

“If you don’t understand the beauty of beasts, you lack a sense of aesthetics,” Fujiko responded.

The two were standing on an otherwise empty main street. The Liradans had made barricades to keep the humans out of the city center. The only ones there were the priests and a few soldiers — that is, Lily’s forces. Past the main street was the knight’s garrison where Kazuko’s royal guards and her Liradans were holed up. In other words, they’d been set up. Kazuko had used herself as bait to lure Lily’s forces into a trap.

“We’re going to have to break through either way,” Lily said as she rubbed her nose.

Fujiko grinned. “Our job hasn’t changed at all. If we take down Kazuko, we win.”

“That Issei guy wasn’t lying, was he? I hope what he said about Kazuko’s weakness is true.”

“You’re the one who found him and interrogated him. The only reason we fell for the trap is that Kazuko is better at this than we are. If anything, given how much they outnumber us, this is less a trap and more a completely normal situation.”

“You’re right. Now we just have to hope the guys in the moon manage to miraculously seal Zero at just the right time,” Lily whispered. Then she raised her hand high and shouted, “Charge!”

At her signal, the priests who’d been hiding in the gaps between the capital’s

buildings rushed out and charged the garrison. Fujiko raised a hand as well, and the demon beasts started to stir. The operation had always called for a small number of people, and had only been intended to take place on the grounds of the garrison. When the priests arrived, they stuck to the plan and headed for the inside from the courtyard. Using the demon beasts hadn't been part of the plan, though. They were summoned to deal with the Liradans outside.

"It's like the perfect example of a losing battle," Lily said, but still she followed after the priests as they broke down the sealed entrances to the building.

"You need to have more faith in Akuto. Now let's go." Fujiko took her place next to Lily.

The battle in the front courtyard of the garrison had turned into the particular strain of melee fights you see between skilled magic-users. Against an opponent of equal magical strength, mana balls and bullets were mostly useless. There were shouts and the sound of clanging swords, but the scene itself seemed to resemble some ancient battle, as the soldiers on the very front lines got right in each other's faces and began to shove at one another.

"If we don't hurry, they'll shoot us from above!" Lily yelled. Indeed, a rain of rifle shots and mana balls was coming down on them from above.

The priests were relying on foreign body armor and helmets for their defense instead of mana. Both the helmets and the armor were meant for rifle bullets, and couldn't do much more than partially deflect a direct hit. They'd have to use their own mana to create barriers, which meant they couldn't use it on the battle in front of them.

The priests began to be pushed out of the gate they'd just broken through.

"Gah! Get out of the way!" Lily screamed, as she jumped up high from the rear and stuck out her fists. Instantly, they stretched out and struck at the knights at a speed faster than a bullet.

The knights put up mana barriers of their own, but Lily's punches were direct attacks, and thus easily pierced their barriers and slammed into their abdomens and faces. The knights wore armor on their heads and chests, too, but Lily's fists didn't care. The knights were blown back as if they'd been hit by a truck.

“This is how you fight the knights,” Lily said, as she slowly walked down the path the priests made for her to walk. The knights began to back away in fear.

“Don’t let her scare you!” They heard the voice of somebody that was probably a commander, and the knights began to form into ranks. They attacked Lily from all directions, but she dealt with it without even breaking stride.

“Secret technique: Knight Slayer!” she shouted as she stretched out an arm to grab a knight and used him like a club to beat the others. The knights’ bodies violently shook within their heavy armor with each strike, knocking them out one after another.

“I said, don’t let her scare you!” the commander screamed again, but the knights were too shaken.

“But Sir, she’s taking us all down!” one of them yelled.

Lily laughed. “You didn’t know? I hate knights. Especially the ones who go around questioning people in town. They really piss me off. I got so sick of seeing them that I started punching them every time I saw one. And eventually they started calling me ‘The Long-Handed Demon.’ Having such a lame nickname just ticked me off more, so now I go around punching any knight who uses it, lately.”

The knights began to falter after seeing how she looked and hearing her speech.

“S-So that’s the one they talk about...”

“The one who attacked a knight garrison and wiped it out just because she was in a bad mood. ‘The long-handed demon’... Agah!”

“I just said I’d punch you if you said that!” Lily said as she punched the gossiping knight, and then kept walking forward. “Just make way. I’m off to find this self-proclaimed empress and punch her in the face.”

“How dare you mock the Empress!”

When they heard the Empress’s name, the color returned to the knights’ faces and they took on serious expressions.

“Good. You’re taking this seriously now. But my job here hasn’t changed. Get in here!” Lily began to charge and the battle became a brawl.

Her power and brawling experience were overwhelming. The knights couldn’t even get near her as she approached the garrison door. Since there was nothing for her to help with, Fujiko called up a mana screen to see how her demon beasts were doing. What she saw frightened her. “Hurry. The enemy’s changed their plan!”

“What?”

“They’ve started to let citizens inside!”

“Huh?!” Even Lily didn’t know what to make of that.

“We’ll have to pull the demon beasts back. The Liradans are pulling closer and using civilians as shields!” Fujiko bit her lip.

“I’m sure you wouldn’t mind letting the civilians die, but Akuto Sai wouldn’t like that, I bet,” Lily said. “Which means you’re not going to just kill the civilians. Of course, if you did, I would’ve kicked your ass. It doesn’t matter either way, though. We just need to punch their boss’s lights out!”

The resistance after that was incredibly fierce. The remaining knights tried their hardest to keep Lily from making it inside, but Fujiko pulled back her demon beasts to battle them. Demon beasts swarmed the garrison, suffering tremendous casualties. But when the smaller ones made it inside by the sewer ducts, they were able to collapse the knight’s defenses.

“Using insects is so vulgar,” Lily said as she stepped over a fallen knight to get inside.

The knights had formed their shields into a tight wall that had blocked her punches, but the tiny insect-like demon beasts had gotten inside their armor and made the wall collapse.

“How dare you call something created by Akuto’s mana waves vulgar...” Fujiko said, and then reconsidered. “Actually, I don’t really like them myself...” She made shooing motions with her hands as she sent them further inside. The knights had no way to stop the bugs from getting inside their armor, and their resistance quickly collapsed.

“They certainly are making our lives easier, though. The power Akuto is lending us is spreading fear and despair to everyone around us.”

“...But it looks like it’s usefulness is about to end.”

The bugs were trying to go inside a certain door, only to run out from below the gap between it and the floor a moment later. There was a terrifying presence inside.

“We’ve already lost once. To be honest, I’m pretty scared,” Lily whispered.

“If it were me, I would run away. Or would you like to run away together?” Fujiko said jokingly, but her voice was shaking.

“Shaddup. I’ll go alone if I have to. Come on, let’s go!” Lily shouted, as if shaking off something, and slammed her fist into the door. “I came to say hello!” Lily knew that she was faking it, but still, she walked into the room with exaggerated motions.

“You came to have me crush you again?” said a voice from inside.

The room turned out to be the Knight Commander’s office. The furniture was imposing, but not elegant. It was clearly a place of work. Kazuko was sitting there on the sofa alone, quietly drinking tea and eating dried plums. But the sense of tension in the room wasn’t just Lily’s imagination.

“They just failed to seal Zero on the moon,” Kazuko said.

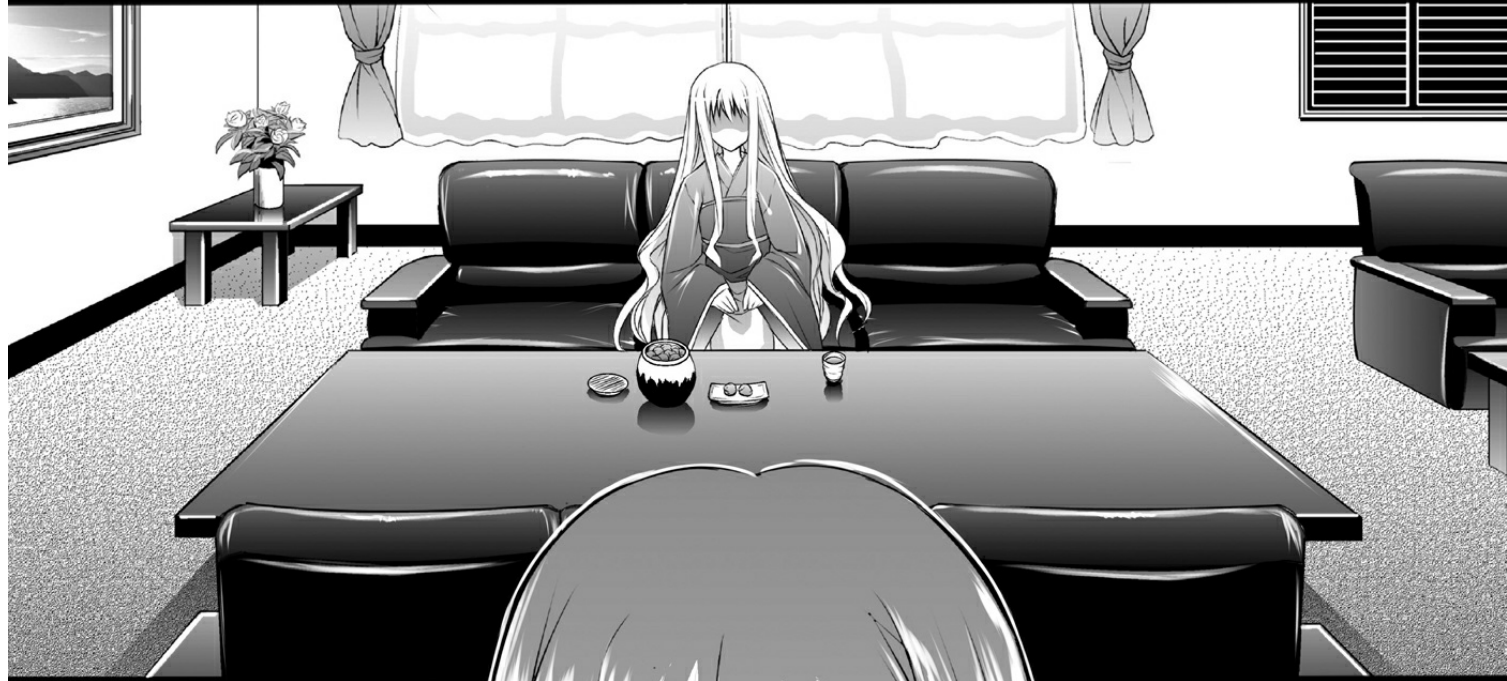
At first, she thought it was just a bluff, but when Fujiko looked at the information her demon beasts were sending in, she saw that the Liradans were still active. Zero was still alive.

“...She’s right. It’s long past the original mission completion time,” Fujiko whispered. According to the plan Akuto had given them before he left, they should’ve been long done by now.

“Who cares if that’s true? I’m here to kick your ass, and you’re right here,” Lily clenched her fists.

Kazuko didn’t even stand up. “Correct. But if I defeat you, there will be no one left to oppose my rule. The Demon King’s still on the moon, and he’s not coming back.”

“What...?” Lily’s face showed her confusion. Fujiko was too shocked to speak as well.



“Now, I’d rather not waste my time, but I’ll fight you. Otherwise, you’ll start destroying everything in frustration again.” Kazuko stayed seated as she began to summon her mana balls, the Yasakani-no-magatama, around her.

“We don’t have time to screw around. Let’s follow the plan,” Lily said to Fujiko.

Fujiko gave a start, and then nodded. “Akuto isn’t dead yet, of course. The demon beasts are still just fine...”

“Which means the two of them must still be fighting on the moon. Now it’s time to ring the gong,” Lily said as she jumped left.

In that instant, an evil light had appeared in Fujiko’s eyes as she flung several mana balls at Lily. “I’m afraid I’ll have to make the first move. I’m the type who gets upset if she doesn’t have the initiative.”

“I don’t like that self-righteousness!” Lily shouted as she slammed a fist into one of the mana balls. The balls were slow, but she needed to use her full power to knock them away.

“Tch...! This is the exact same thing that happened last time...” Lily muttered as she glanced at Fujiko, who nodded, then leapt to the other side and fired a mana ball at Kazuko.

Kazuko stood up to dodge, and then smiled at both of them. “You think it will go better for you if you attack me two on one? The whole point of the Yasakani-no-magatama is that they can fight multiple foes,” she said as she began to make the mana balls around her rapidly spin.

“Don’t be in such a rush. I’ll show you what’s changed,” Lily said as she finally knocked down the first mana balls and then got around to Kazuko’s left side.

Kazuko was watching with interest. There was a smile on her face as if she was curious to see what would come next.

—Kazuko was genetically altered in the womb, but was born a twin. That’s what’s ruined her mind. And that’s her weak spot.

Lily remembered the information she’d been given.

—When she sees someone who looks like her, she’ll focus her entire attention

on it, and cease to pay attention to anything else...

Fujiko mentally repeated the same information to herself. There was a reason she'd been so cruel and bizarre when she killed 2V.

Lily and Fujiko gave each other the signal and moved at once. Lily ran to get behind Kazuko, and Fujiko ran towards her front.

"...I told you, I can deal with two people attacking me at once." Kazuko's mana balls began to move around as if they were living creatures with wills of their own. But...

"Bring out the images in the depths of memory...!"

Fujiko focused her concentration and used her black magic. It was a spell forbidden by law, that caused its target to see whatever you wanted them to see. What Fujiko showed her was an image of Kazuko herself. More specifically, she created a copy of Kazuko next to her, that matched every move Fujiko made.

"What...?" Kazuko eyes narrowed. Her smile disappeared and a look like madness came into her eyes. "Haaah!" she screamed and summoned a sword of light. It was the wrong spell to use here, as it was too destructive. The sword was pointed right towards the fake Kazuko.

"That's all the opening I need!" Lily relaxed her right hand and let it fall open. Normally, she always balled her hands into fists. But now she let the fingers straighten out as she hardened them with mana. They began to shine with a piercing light.

"This isn't a punch. This is a killing blow!" she screamed as her arm shot out.

Normally her arm shot out straight, but this time it was bending. The arm itself twisted like a screw, sending the fingers at its end rotating rapidly. They were moving at a deadly speed — if they hit, it would be fatal. This was a technique that wasn't appropriate for a brawler like Lily.

The rapidly spinning arm slipped past the balls defending Kazuko, and headed right for her exposed back. Kazuko's full attention was on her target in front of her, and she wasn't focusing on her back at all.

“We’ve won...!” Fujiko jumped back to avoid the overwhelming power of the sword of light, and grinned.

“Wooryaaaah!” Lily spun the arm faster, and put enough magical power into it to turn an ordinary person into mincemeat.

But just as the fingers were about to touch her back, Kazuko’s expression suddenly changed. “Fooled you.” She smiled and dispelled the mana-intensive sword, then dodged Lily’s attack with a spin and slammed a mana ball into her arm, knocking it aside.

“Impossible...!”

“No...!”

The two of them fell silent.

“Haha... It was a good idea.” Kazuko smiled.

“So that was an act?” Fujiko asked.

Kazuko shook her head. “No. It’s true that I lose control whenever I see my own face. That’s why I always smile. So that even if I happen to see myself in a mirror, I won’t try to destroy it,”

“Then why...?” Lily whispered.

Kazuko still smiled. “Hahahaha! The thing is, once I killed my dirty little sister, I started to calm down a little. Experience is important, no matter what it is you’re doing. If you stay in your room all day you never learn anything.”

“You bitch...” Lily grit her teeth. Meanwhile, Fujiko was getting ready to run.

Kazuko gave a sweet little cough, and then fired her mana balls. Lily blocked with her fists, but one of them moved in front of Fujiko and knocked her back into the room.

“It’s time for your punishment.” Kazuko sat back on the sofa with an elegant flourish, and increased the number of mana balls she used to attack Lily and Kazuko.

“D-Damn it...!”

“I-I can’t die here...”

Lily resisted, but just like before, the mana balls were too powerful. She was struck again and again until she fell to her knees. The strikes continued mercilessly, blasting her again and again until she could barely keep herself up.

Fujiko was already writhing in pain after the first strike. She was motionless except for the occasional twitch as the attacks continued.

“Nobody’s going to bother us now, so I’m going to keep this up until you die,” Kazuko said calmly and coldly.

Kazuko had made her own plan, confident in her overwhelming power. She’d wanted to lure out Lily and Fujiko, and she’d succeeded. But once again, she was interrupted.

Kazuko turned to look at the door. Standing there was Hiroshi, no... Brave, wearing his suit. “Why are you here?”

“Stop it! Let them both go!” Brave shouted.

Kazuko’s smile only deepened. “Oh, you think you can tell me what to do? I can see your suit’s almost out of energy. I have the VPS fields deployed here. You saw them. That’s why you didn’t join the attack, correct?” The mana attacks grew more violent.

Brave walked forward. His energy was gone; he could maintain life support, but he couldn’t fight. “Stop... please.” He lowered his head.

The nature of Kazuko’s smile changed. “So now you’re making requests?” she said contemptuously.

—Idiot... I told you to stay out of this...

Lily’s mind began to fade. She remembered when Hiroshi had come to talk to her before the mission. He’d been upset about the fact that he could only fight with a power he’d borrowed from others.

“Am I going to be kept out of the fight because of the VPS fields again?”

“There’s nothing we can do about it. It’s a weak point of the suit. It’d be great if you could fight without the suit, but you’ve never been in a real battle without it.”

“Then I’m totally useless on my own?”

“That’s not what I said. But you’re used to fighting with a power somebody else gave you. When you’re fighting as Brave, everything you do is only possible because of something you borrowed from someone else. If you don’t become a hero on your own, there’s no point.”

“But I’m not... I can’t... I’m weak. I’m pathetic.”

“Even if you’re weak, or pathetic, if you’re fighting to protect somebody and you’re not doing anything wrong, you’re a hero. Well, just try and think if there’s anything you can do. See if there’s a way you can protect her without your suit.”

—And this is Hiroshi’s answer, huh?

Lily felt her chest tighten up.

Brave had gotten on his knees in front of Kazuko. “Please. Don’t kill them.” He was pressing his head into the floor and begging.

“Oh my... Are you counting on my generosity? The only time you can make a request of an empress without a gift is in fairy tales.” Kazuko laughed.

Brave continued to speak without lifting his head. “Of course, I’ll serve Your Highness the rest of my life. I’ll put an end to what’s going on here. The demon beasts have lost control. I will hunt them and then make a speech to the crowd.”

“And in exchange, you want me to let them live? But you know, they’re still going to jail.”

“I understand that. But I still beg for your mercy.”

“I see. Then prove it. First, destroy the demon beasts, and then make the speech that I was going to make for me,” she ordered, and then waved her hand to tell him to leave. The mana balls stopped. When he saw this, Brave stood up.

“You... idiot...” Lily looked up at him with blackened eyes and moaned in pain.

Hiroshi’s actions were indeed courageous. If the rebellion didn’t die here, there was still hope. There was still a chance that Akuto and the others would be able to do something. And even if they failed, if he pretended to be loyal to Kazuko, he’d have more chances to save people in the future.

—So that's how he's going to be a hero, huh?

Lily watched him leave the room, and then quickly passed out.

Brave went outside, and using his recharged energy, he began to wipe out the out of control demon beasts who were attacking the citizens. The people began to cheer Brave on as he protected the Empress from the Demon King's army.

Meanwhile, the helpless priests were arrested by the knights and Liradans. None of the people could imagine what Brave's face looked like beneath his mask as he hunted the demon beasts to thunderous applause.

"I have captured the rebels who tried to harm our Empress! I will defeat the others, too, eventually. But in her benevolence, the Empress has agreed to forgive them! Everyone, remember to hate the sin but love the sinner!" Brave shouted.

○

It took a day and a half for the shuttle to get back to Earth. They'd originally only planned for it to carry Keisu, so there was no food onboard. Keena, Junko, and Yoshie were forced to subsist on a small amount of water. But given how depressed they were, though, even if there was food, they probably wouldn't have eaten it.

"The dock's refused to allow us to dock with them," Keisu said as she closed to the communication channel.

The shuttle had entered orbit around the other. It was extremely rare for someone to be refused permission to dock, particularly given that it was the same people who'd helped them on their way up.

"Kazuko got to them in the end, I guess." Even the always cheerful Yoshie was sounding glum.

"Then I guess..." Junko almost said something very dark, but stopped herself. "Let's get back down to the surface. The shuttle was always capable of reentry on its own. The problem is, planes don't need runways anymore, so I don't know where we'll find one to land on... Oh, there's that crater in the capital. It's not exactly even, but it's better than landing on the ocean or in a forest," Yoshie

ordered.

Keisu nodded. “Understood, master. Everyone, get seated and put on your seatbelts.”

The shuttle descended to Earth, using its wings to glide through the atmosphere and land in the crater. They could see that the shuttle was surrounded by Liradans and knights before they opened the hatch.

“Do we have to fight again?” Junko said with a dry chuckle. But her face tensed up when she saw who was in front of the shuttle.

Hiroshi was floating in the air. “Don’t resist. I won’t hurt you,” he said.

“You...! You betrayed us?” She clenched her fists. But Hiroshi just turned away silently. “Say something, damn it!” Junko yelled, but Hiroshi didn’t turn around.

Yoshie grabbed Junko before she could leap at him. “It means we’ve lost. If we don’t fight, he might not kill us. Look.”

Yoshie beckoned for Junko to look at the town. Past the crater, daily life had returned. But there were Liradans standing everywhere, controlling the people. Nobody was stopping to look at them, because the Liradans had told them to move away.

When she saw that, Junko sensed utter defeat. “So it’s all over?” she lamented.

○

“Don’t blame him,” Lily said, actually bowing her head for once.

“I know what you’re saying, President, but...” Junko looked upset.

Several days had passed since the shuttle had returned. Lily, Fujiko, and the other girls were being kept in the girl’s dorm of Constant Magical Academy. Supposedly it was still being decided what would be done to them.

All of them were legally minors, and all of them except Yoshie were students. The school’s principal, who’d stayed out of the fight, had asked that they’d be kept there until an official warrant was issued by the court. Of course, all of them knew that something was up.

“We’re going to be brainwashed too, right? Are you telling us to forgive him because he was brainwashed first?” Junko asked.

“It’s not that. He isn’t brainwashed,” Lily insisted.

Everybody was limply sitting in the cafeteria. There was nothing else to do. They just kept rehashing the same arguments, over and over.

“It’s hard to be a hero, is all. He’s trying to find his own way of being just.” Lily shook her head. She was looking at a mana screen that was showing Brave’s heroics. He was capturing the few remaining priests that were resisting, and defeating rampaging demon beasts with a single strike.

“...From what you’ve said, I can kind of understand that. He’s trying to do his best for everyone, even if not as much as Akuto. I hate to say it, but if it weren’t for him we would’ve been killed.” Even Fujiko was defending him to an extent.

“I know that, but... I just can’t believe that nobody knows the truth, and everybody’s fine with being ruled by an insane empress. I just can’t... accept that.” Junko slumped in her chair as she watched the news on her mana screen. The announcer was excitedly saying that Kazuko would soon hold a ceremony announcing that order was restored and that she was taking over.

“Everybody thinks something’s wrong. But nobody can do anything, so it just keeps happening. They know the truth is out there, but their desire to know is abused by liars who claim to know the truth, and sometimes they end up believing two incompatible pieces of information. If you asked them, everybody would say the same thing. There’s probably something wrong with the Empress being a dictator, but if it works, then who cares? Even though it’s no different than a world ruled by Zero.” Yoshie sighed.

“That’s because when things go south, they know they can rely on the Liradans. Even if the Empress says she’s in control, Zero and the gods are probably going to end up having the most influence. Humans will just be kept pets, like we saw during that month. Keisu, the only one who can seal Zero, was taken away from us. There’s nothing we can do.” Lily looked up at the ceiling.

“We can’t count on Hiroshi?” Yoshie asked.

But Lily just frowned. “He’s probably waiting for his chance. But he’s more

concerned about the people than anything, and that's tying him down. It's tough, being on the side of order and justice. He's forced to obey an invisible monster, one called 'popularity' and 'respect'. No matter how rotten somebody is, as long as they're popular, he'll have to obey them. Otherwise, he can't protect the people."

Yoshie chuckled. "Then we'll either be brainwashed, or forced to spend the rest of our young lives helpless. Well, I don't mind spending my life locked up in a room, though."

"The diet's probably going to make a house of lords by the next election, right? Not that the place has ever been anything but a way for the different churches to have their power struggles, but it still feels like democracy is getting further away," said Lily.

"From the people's perspective, nothing that goes on in the halls of power really matters to them. That's why we needed to release their magic as soon as possible," added Fujiko.

"That's right. Everybody here has a different way of thinking and a different position. It's really a joke that we're all here chatting like this."

"But at some point, we're going to have to fall silent," Yoshie said. And then nobody spoke.

The silence went on for a while. But it was Keena, who'd said nothing until then, who broke it.

"No! You can't say that! We can do more than just shut up!" Keena slammed the table and stood up.

"But what do you want to do?"

"We've tried everything we could."

"We'll have to just wait and leave it to Hiroshi."

"I don't know what Brave can do, but yeah, we'll have to wait."

Everyone disagreed with Keena. She shook her head violently. "No! Nobody will do anything if you just sit here! You need to talk to the people who are amazing, the ones who are doing their best! If you don't, nothing will happen!"

You need to tell them that you're watching!" Keena said, and started to take her clothes off.

"Hey, what are you..." Junko reached out a hand, but Keena slipped past it.

"I have to do something!" she called out. A moment later she was naked, and then she disappeared.

"Wait. You can't just vanish. I mean, you can leave here, but..."

"We'll be the ones who take the blame... Well, not that it matters now. Why don't we let her do whatever she wants to do?"

There was no answer from Keena. She'd probably already gone. A few seconds later, a window near the ceiling opened.

"Oh, there she goes."

"She'll get hungry and come home. She always does, and she ends up crying and eating a ton of rice, too."

"The sky's so blue... On the other side of it, he's probably still fighting..." Yoshie said to herself.



But even after several days passed, Keena didn't come back. A search party was formed, but it didn't get anywhere.

The rest of them were kept locked up until the day of Kazuko's ceremony. They were outfitted with shock bracelets that would electrocute them if they moved a certain distance away, and were forced to attend the ceremony.

"I feel like a prisoner..."

"Well, you are a prisoner."

"Are we supposed to be an object of ridicule at the ceremony?"

"We're probably supposed to give a speech to the people about how we've changed our minds and want to work with Kazuko. Either that, or we'll be executed. I can't imagine them executing us at the ceremony, though. We're all cute girls," Yoshie said with a laugh.

The Liradans took the girls to the center of the city. The crater at the palace had been filled in, and was being used as makeshift ceremony grounds. There were seats for the attendees to sit in, and simple decorations. The place had been chosen as a symbol of the city's reconstruction. There was nobody left to oppose Kazuko, and everything was going exactly as she'd planned.

Just before noon, half the seats were filled with priests. These were the priests who hadn't participated in the resistance. Half of them had laughed at the resistance and the other half were ashamed at their own failure to participate in it, so there was very little in the way of conversation.

By this time, though, it was well-known that Kazuko had dictatorial control over all the Liradans, so no matter which side they were on, there was very little they could do. A system both huge and logical, but also capable of ignoring the will of the individual due to its efficiency, was controlling every aspect of human's lives; a system put into practice by people with power.

No one had an answer to this strange situation. The only thing they could do was let the Empress do as she liked as long as she had the people's backing, and put into place a system where everyone could share their opinions with her. It

wasn't "justice," but the priests had no choice but to believe that this was the best thing for the people.

Both the primitive political system that relied on the story called the "Empress," as well as the political system of cold mechanical logic that existed in order to escape from it, were broken. Even if a dystopian society was coming, all they could do was pray.

Soon, the people started to gather too. The only chance they got to see the Empress was her birthday and New Years. This declaration was a rare event, and something they could enjoy. For them, it was also a chance to celebrate the end of the latest Demon King war and the Liradan rebellion. There were food stalls lined up on the streets, and the whole place was in a mood of celebration.

The girls were sat in the front row. The Liradans ordered them not to say a word. As they'd suspected, they were going to be forced to play the role of girls who'd been manipulated by the Demon King, but repented.

The four of them sat in silence until noon, when the ceremony began. When Kazuko appeared, the excitement reached its peak. The people shouted in excitement and waved the imperial flag. Illuminated by mana lights, and surrounded by the people, she appeared.

"Until today, our country has been in a sad state. The first Demon King, who controlled the Liradans, Zero. He awoke by accident and started a rebellion..." Kazuko began to speak, and the people listened to her intently. Despite the huge crowd filling the streets, it was almost completely silent.

"And then the Demon King, who was waiting for a chance to destroy the world, grew angry at Zero's appearance, and they began to fight. They risked the people's lives with a blast powerful enough to destroy the imperial palace."

Kazuko began to change history in a way that was convenient to her. Those who knew the truth had no conclusive evidence, and so couldn't even speak. And the people became fearful as they listened to this terrible history.

"But we... yes, we... triumphed. I say we, because I had a powerful helper in my struggle. His name is Brave!" Kazuko raised a hand upward. Brave was floating there. He was welcomed with loud cheers from the people.

“He banished both the Demon Kings to the moon. Yes, the one above our heads. Now they are no threat to us. And the Liradans have regained their freedom.” When she said this, the Liradans surrounding the platform she was standing on waved.

“There will be no more Liradan rebellion. But to make sure of this, the Empress must take personal control of them,” Kazuko said. She raised a hand and summoned the Yasukuni-no-Magatama and Ame-no-Murakumo: the mana balls and sword of light.

“These are the Yasukuni-no-magatama and Ame-No-Murakumo, the secret spells of the imperial family. These spells can only be used by a true heir to the imperial family, and to use them, the sacred treasures within our bodies must be passed from one person to the next. And this is the last magic: the Yata-no-kagami.”

Kazuko put her hands together to summon a mana mirror. “This is the power that lets me speak to the gods at the core of the Liradans. As long as I have it, the Liradans will not rebel. And we will no longer leave it to the priests to talk to the gods. As in our ancient, beautiful traditions, I shall help our society by speaking to the gods directly!”

There were cheers when she said this. Even if this was a declaration that she’d become a dictator, if no one raised their voice in protest, it meant that she had the people’s approval. To the girls, it was like torture. Lily was biting her lip so hard it was bleeding. In the middle of the festive mood, they alone were miserable.

“In ancient times, the gods were nature. And the nation was the family. Now, things are much more complicated. The gods control our lives, and everything is artificial. But there are still things that do not change. My responsibility is to speak with the gods, and consider the people my family. And as the head of this nation’s family, I will carry out that responsibility,” Kazuko declared.

Despair weighed on the girls’ hearts. Even if there was hope, it was nothing they’d won for themselves. All they could do was wait for a miracle. Was it over? Was there no hope? Would there be no miracle?

“A question, then. When the head of the family is wrong, what should the

family do?”

There was a question. The voice that asked it was loud enough drown out Kazuko’s voice on the mana screens that were being played all across the Empire.

“What...?”

“It can’t be...”

The people recognized the voice. It was the voice of the man who’d terrified them with that gigantic explosion.

“It can’t be...” The girls were saying the same thing as the people. But it meant something different to them; to them, the voice was a miracle.

“No way...”

“Did someone record his voice?”

“Is it a fake?”

The three whispered among one another, and as if in answer, all the mana screens began to show him. There was a man in the sky, looking down at the people, as if to prove the existence of miracles.

“I’ll tell you. A child doesn’t get to choose the head of its family. So when the head of the family does something wrong, it’s time for them to retire,” Akuto said.

The people gathered in the city center were screaming. They were terrified and looking for a way to escape.

Kazuko shouted in an even larger voice than Akuto had used to calm them down. “The head of a household may do something wrong, but the Imperial family is always right! Fret not, everyone! Brave will not lose to that monster!”

She called out to Brave from the dias, pointing to the girls in a way that only he would notice. The girls were fitted with electric shock bracelets, a fact that she’d already shared with Brave.

Brave nodded and flew up into the sky. There was no fear or hesitation within him. He could attack Akuto with everything he had, because he knew that even

if he did, Akuto would defeat him.

“You’ve made enough miracles already. You can defeat me easily, right?” he said in a voice only the two of them could hear, grinning under his mask. Then he charged at him.

But Akuto shook his head. “Sorry. I’m not the one who made the miracle. Instead, I want you to fight the person who did,” he said.

“Huh?” Hiroshi gasped in surprise.

A naked girl had suddenly appeared in front of him.

“Uwah!” He came to a sudden stop, but he was moving so fast he slammed into her.

“Oww!” Keena yelled.

“Play with my hostage!” Akuto shouted loud enough for everyone to hear, and then he slipped past Keena and Hiroshi. As he moved by Keena, he threw his cape over her.

“...I get it.” Hiroshi said. He pretended for a moment to be deciding whether to go after Akuto or save the hostage, before flying over to drop Keena in a safe place. It was an act, a way to maintain Brave’s reputation while keeping Kazuko from complaining.

Once Akuto saw what he was doing, he began to descend towards Kazuko.

“Can’t... can’t you see them?” Kazuko said telepathically to Akuto. She was pointing at the girls.

“Shock bracelets? That’s a nasty little trick you thought up, isn’t it? But they won’t work,” Akuto said calmly.

“Impossible...” Kazuko said, and waved her hand. But nothing happened. “...Why?”

“Because I’m controlling the mana,” Akuto said, as if it were nothing.

“But I can do the same thing... I have Zero on my side...” Kazuko said, and then stopped. “...Impossible! Zero! Why... why won’t you respond?”

“He saw a miracle happen. And realized the mistake he’d made.”

“What? You’re lying!” Kazuko looked up at Akuto as she summoned the sword of light in her hand. It was the same blade she’d always used, but its light seemed to be far more feeble than before.

“There’s no use in resisting,” Akuto warned her, as he began to accelerate faster.

“Impossible! Impossible! You shouldn’t be able to do anything! You’re just a weapon! Just a disgusting war machine!” Kazuko’s gentle smile vanished, and was replaced with the expression of a beast. “Impossible! There are no miracles! Die, Demon King!” she howled.

“Repent of your misdeeds, Empress!” Akuto, now a bolt of lightning spreading terror as he passed, headed straight for Kazuko in a straight line.

Kazuko fired off her sword of light directly above her. There was a massive flash of light, but it wasn’t from the sword. Akuto was in complete control of the mana. He erased Kazuko’s sword, creating the flash of light to keep the people from seeing the cruel thing. There was a rumble and a flash of light, spreading out like a wave, but the damage was limited to its center.

The battle was over in an instant. Akuto was standing tall on the dias with, Kazuko staggering at his feet. Beneath her was a tiny crater. She’d been struck by an impact directly from above.

But Kazuko was still alive. She was dazed, and blood was pouring from her forehead, but she turned her face towards Akuto and raised a hand to attack. There was nothing left of her personality now but an impulse to destroy.

“If you retire now, you can survive,” Akuto said.

Kazuko just laughed. “...The Empress does not take orders from others.”

“Hah. I don’t think that’s a good way to live,” Akuto said coldly. He heard someone running towards the dias.

“Demon King...!” It was Lily. She shot one of her extended-arm punches at him, and Akuto was struck in the chest. There was no real damage, but he pretended to be hit so hard that he flew back. Akuto knew exactly what she was doing; if he didn’t pretend to be the Demon King here, the people would just get more confused.

“An unimpressive attack,” Akuto said.

Lily looked up at him. “Shut up... What did you do to the Empress?”

“The Empress and Zero attempted to use the power of the Demon King, and so I eliminated them. Don’t forget. The power of the Demon King belongs to no one,” Akuto said so that everyone could hear.

Lily moved around to Kazuko’s front. The Empress had been standing, motionless. “Is it true that you tried to use the power of the Demon King? That was the same thing that we rebel priests said. We said that you were trying to become a dictator using Zero’s power,” she demanded. She was trying to tell the people the truth about what had happened.

Kazuko neither confirmed nor denied this. She just laughed in a wicked voice. “If the bloodline of the Imperial family ends, nobody will be left who can use the three sacred treasures. There’ll be no one left to prove whether the sacred treasures could control Zero’s power.”

She was right. In her speech, Kazuko had only talked about “the power to communicate with the gods.” That was all the people knew about the Yasukuni-no-kagami. No one would be able to prove that she was lying; that is, if she was dead.

“Wait...” Lily reached out a hand, realizing what Kazuko intended. Akuto didn’t kill her, but now that all her plans had come to naught, she was going to take her own life to protect the story of the Empress and the Demon King.

“Get a doctor! Brave! Take the Empress to a hospital!” Lily screamed as she reached out a hand to Kazuko’s neck. But even though she was still standing, Kazuko was already dead.

“Tch...!” Lily bit her lip. The whole place was in an uproar. The people were murmuring in fear, while the priests were silently overjoyed.

Now the old world would return. The gods would rule over mankind again. It wasn’t a perfect system, but for now, it was the only one they had. But the one who’d brought it back was someone that the system considered a heretic.

When Akuto looked down below and saw what happened, he realized he couldn’t go back to being who he was in that old world. The gods needed to be

destroyed, but the time hadn't come yet. Not as long as people were living according to the best system they knew. And as long as that system functioned, he would continue to be the Demon King.

Akuto prepared himself for one final act. "Don't forget the terror you felt today! I'll be watching, no matter where or who you are!" he shouted, and then quickly vanished into the sky.

○

Just then, the second biggest shock in imperial history occurred.

Hiroshi came down from the sky to land next to the deceased, still-standing Empress, carrying Keena in his arms. The only ones who could officially declare the death of an Emperor or Empress were the court doctors. The body needed to be taken to them.

Hiroshi set Keena, who had Akuto's cape wrapped around her, down, and approached the Empress. Her eyes were silent, and blood was dripping from her mouth, but suddenly, her body shook.

For a moment, his eyes went wide as he thought she'd come back to life, but he was wrong. Balls of solidified mana came out of her body. A small sword from her mouth, a small, round mirror from her chest, and a blue magatama jewel from her right arm. It was immediately obvious that these were the three sacred treasures of the imperial bloodline.

They flew up into the sky as if they had a will of their own, and then headed towards Hiroshi. "Huh? What?" Hiroshi panicked, but then they flew straight past him. And then the three of them slipped straight through Akuto's cape and into Keena's body.

"Huh? Huh? HUH?" Keena shouted in surprise.

"Wh-What just happened? Let me see!" Lily said as she reached out a hand try and grab the cape.

"Hey! No! I'm not wearing anything under this!"

"Shut up! This is serious! What did you... do?!" She tried to yank the cape off.

"Nooooo!" Keena screamed, and Lily's body was blown back.

“Gwah!” Lily rolled along the ground and moaned. She shook her head and sat up, only to be astonished when she saw what had knocked her back. “That’s...”

Keena’s body was surrounded by the mana balls that Kazuko had used.

“That’s impossible... But then...” Lily fell silent, as did the people around her.

“Huh? Really?” Keena stuck out her right hand as if she wasn’t sure what she’d just seen. With a rumble, a sword of light appeared.

Only someone with royal blood could use the three sacred treasures. Everyone knew that. Kazuko had just said so herself. Which meant...

“E-Empress!” somebody screamed. The knights and servants who’d rushed over to help Kazuko all quickly dropped to one knee.

“Huh... Wh-What do I do?” Keena asked.

Lily stood up and walked back to Keena, then whispered in her ear. “You’re the only one who can calm things down. It will help Akuto Sai, too.”

Keena realized that there wasn’t time for hesitation. She shook her head and assumed a tense expression. “Everyone, it seems... that I have royal blood,” she began.

All the mana screens began showing Keena’s face. The color of her eyes suddenly changed, and her voice became clear and elegant, like a completely different person’s.

“I have inherited the three sacred treasures. And now I know... The last empress used the power of the mirror to revive Zero, and tried to make his power her own. The result was the battle we just saw. So I retract the words my predecessor said!”



“What the hell happened?”

“What’s going on? Where is Akuto?”

“We’re rebuilding the palace and the churches. We need the Empress’s approval.”

“Wow, this is getting interesting. The new empress didn’t even know she had royal blood? And she was an orphan, too? Exciting!”

“Everybody stop talking at once!” Keena screamed.

Junko, Fujiko, Lily, and Yoshie were all talking to her at once. After her declaration, Keena had convinced her new servants to let her borrow a room in a nearby building so she could change clothes.

“First, we need to hear what happened,” Junko said.

Keena nodded. “I said this a little before, but I went flying.”

“Flying? Oh, you mean when you disappeared from the girls’ dorm. What about it?”

“I went flying.”

“We know that. You flew off. How did you meet Akuto?”

“No. I went to get him,” Keena said. Nobody said a word.

“Huh?”

“To the moon.”

“You went to get him? To the moon?”

“Yup. I flew, and... I felt like I had to go there... So I was able to fly.”

“Through space?”

“Yes.”

“Naked?”

“Yes. Nobody was there, so I didn’t need to disappear.”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“No, but... I was able to fly,” Keena said, but nobody could believe her.

But that didn’t change things. Akuto was back.

“No, it’s possible that the Akuto we saw was an illusion. Where did he go, anyway?” Lily asked.

Keena looked gloomy. “He said that since he was going to defeat the Empress, he couldn’t show his face in public anymore.”

Junko looked sad too. “Then he’s...”

“He was willing to do it. He said when it was over, he was going to go to the moon.”

“That’s...” Junko paused. “...Not what I want.”

“Yeah. Of course. So it’s perfect that I was able to become the Empress.”

“Perfect?”

“Let’s bring Akuto back to school!” Keena said. It wasn’t going to be that easy, but nobody could tell her no.

“Is it okay to do that...?”

“No. But we need him back.”

“I guess it’s not as selfish as what the last Empress tried to do. But things are going to get complicated now. There were too many victims,” Lily said as she opened the door.

○

The moon. Zero was sleeping peacefully in the lunar city. He’d chosen of his own will to hibernate. Before he went to sleep, he stared at the lunar waste. It was the first time the rocky, empty plains had seemed beautiful to him.

After days of fighting Akuto, when he’d gotten tired of counting how many times they’d punched each other, she’d come. Light had descended on the lunar waste, and red hair and white skin followed.

“There is a truth I have as a human,” the Demon King said.

No, it wasn’t Akuto the human who said that. A living human had flown, by

herself, through space. No, if it was possible for her, perhaps she wasn't human at all, but for now, that didn't matter.

What had come down to the lunar surface was a truth beyond the truth of living things. It was something great and powerful.

"Is that the miracle you spoke of?"

"It's a miracle. If it's not a miracle, what is it?"

"Is that the story you spoke of?"

"Yes. A huge, foolish story, that erases stories themselves."

And with that, the two of them stopped fighting. In the face of such a reality, it felt stupid to fight. Zero and Akuto shook hands. Even in the airless void, they could talk now without having to strike one another.

"So you're saying that's... love."

"Yes. It's something huge, and something great. And it loves humanity. That's the kind of story it is. It's foolish, but if you don't believe in it, there are countless tiny, incorrect stories that will hurt mankind."

"Does it even love someone like me?"

"That's right. There are some who fall from its hands of loving grace, like grains of rice falling from a bowl, but in the moment you're born, you are surely loved," Akuto said.

Zero nodded. "Go home. It's come for you, right? You must go with it."

"And you?"

"I will sleep. I will let you control humanity instead of me."

"That's your job. Do you not care about it anymore?"

"I won't say that every part of what I did was meaningless, but I realize that what I did was wrong. My attempting to control humanity will amplify those mistakes. I've made the logical decision."

"Then there's no need to sleep. You can stay awake."

"I don't want the Empress to use me. She makes too many mistakes."

“I don’t want that either.”

“What I’m trying to say is that I’m tired of dealing with humanity.”

Akuto knew that Zero’s words were a joke. He laughed. “Alright. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye. You and I are similar. If you ever find yourself without a home, come back here.” He gripped Akuto’s hand tighter. And then he started to walk back to his tower.

But a moment later, he stopped, and seemed to say something. Akuto couldn’t hear what it was, but he knew it without hearing.

“My friend.”

6 - The Two Who Came Back

A fancy black limousine was parked in front of Constant Magical Academy. A flying limousine was a car for the elite, and of course, was out of place at the school.

The door of the limousine opened and servants in black suits came out. They hurried over to the front desk, and asked what could only be considered a ridiculous question.

“Is the Empress here? She took off her clothes and flew out of the car!” There was a dress in one of the servant’s hands.

The woman at the front desk calmly searched the day’s attendance lists, and said, “I’m afraid she’s not.”

“Can we go inside and look?”

“I’m afraid it’s against the rules.”

It was the same conversation they’d had many times before.

“Is her observer Liradan here yet?”

“I’m told they’ll be arriving in a few days. Once they do, you’ll have nothing to worry about, right?”

“I hope so... But the new Empress is just too-free spirited... She disappears, you know! And stark-naked, too... That’s not... not what empresses are supposed to do,” the servant said, and the woman at the front desk began to laugh.

“She’s always been a problem child.... No, I suppose it’s rude to say that about the Empress. And our biggest problem child is someone else...”

o

The second-biggest problem child was on the roof.

“Thank you,” she said as she took her uniform and student notebook. She put

on her clothes and then appeared.

“Whew... We don’t even have a palace yet and they still want to control everything I do,” Keena sighed.

Junko, the girl she’d called to the roof, sighed too. “It’s a lot more confining to suddenly have to leave class to bring you clothes all the time.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll still get credit. I’ll use my imperial powers to make sure of it!” Keena puffed out her chest.

“That’s not the problem!” Junko waved a hand.

Keena had been empress for a while now. Constant Magical Academy was back, and the other systems were being rebuilt as well, along with the areas that had been destroyed in the battles. The media had initially been fascinated by the new empress, but when the truth about just how free-spirited she was hit them, they began to self-censor.

“So, what are you doing here today?” Junko said, a hand on her hip.

“I’m still a student here, you know!” Keena pouted.

“Yeah, but you’ve been absent for a while.”

“Yeah. I was testing to see if I could use the three sacred treasures.” Keena said, and nodded. “And so,” she said to Junko with a smile.

“So what? That grin is creepy,” Junko replied. “And there’s no way a test of the three secret treasures isn’t top-secret information. You shouldn’t go around telling people...”

Keena didn’t stop grinning. She cut Junko off and shouted in a loud voice, “It turns out I can control Ackie’s power!”

“Huh? What did you say?”

“I can make it so Ackie’s not the Demon King anymore! If I say so, he loses his power!”

“I-Is that true?”

“It’s true! So he can come back to school!” Keena raised both hands, and spoke as if calling out to someone far away.

“Well done, Keena!” Junko gave her a big hug.

○

That night, Keena brought everyone up to the roof of the girls dorm.

“So, where has Akuto been all this time?” Fujiko said enthusiastically.

“He said he was in the forest reading books the whole time. He can peek at lots of different things about the world, so he probably wasn’t bored,” Keena said.

“That sounds just like him. Where’s the Student Council President, by the way?” Junko asked.

“She’s not coming, she says. She thought she was going to be the one to defeat the last empress, so I guess she doesn’t like Akuto now.”

“There’s no point in trying to compete with him...” Junko chuckled.

“I’m not even a student, and I’m here.” Yoshie shrugged.

Suddenly, Keena pointed up at the sky. “He’s here!”

Everyone looked up and spread their hands. Akuto was slowly floating down. When he landed, Keena took out the cape he’d given her and threw it over him, and gave him a big hug while she was at it.

“Hey, I haven’t even said hello yet!” Junko shouted, but Keena wasn’t listening. She’d already buried her head in Akuto’s chest.

“Hey, that’s not fair! Me too!” Fujiko leapt at Akuto too. He was knocked over and almost fell off the roof.

“I-I need to say hello first. Get off me, guys,” Akuto said. He pulled the two of them off, stood up, and then scratched his head. “I’m back, everyone. I’m home.”

“Welcome home!” They all said. Keena and Fujiko leapt on him again.

Yoshie watched with a grin, and then gave Junko a poke in the ribs. “Hey, you’re not going to join in? You need to be more honest about how you feel.”

“D-Dummy... That’s not true!” Junko turned red and looked away.

“Right, right.” Yoshie laughed and gave Junko a pat on the head.

“Gaah! Stop! What’s wrong with you?” Junko yelled.



Yoshie ignored Junko's rage and instead clapped her hands together to draw everybody's attention.

"Attention, everybody. I've got a present for you!"

When she saw everyone was looking at her, she took out Korone's bag. The smiles disappeared from everybody's faces.

"Oh..."

"That's right. Korone is..."

"Hey, that's pretty insensitive, isn't it?" Fujiko stormed over to Yoshie. "What the hell do you mean, calling that thing a present? Korone's dead..."

And then she stopped. A hand came out of the bag, followed by a body.

"What...?" Fujiko couldn't believe it.

"Korone!" Akuto yelled.

"Korone!" Keena and Junko yelled too.

It was indeed Korone who was standing in front of them.

"When we leapt into the teleportation circle, I grabbed her head and stuffed it in her bag. I knew if I had it, I'd be able to repair her," Yoshie said. "So, I repaired her in secret and turned her on, but I don't know if her memories are working right. She and I never knew each other. So, tell me. Do you have your memories?" Yoshie asked.

Korone blushed and pointed at Akuto. "I have memories of the night he held me tight..."

"Oh, that's definitely Korone," Akuto sighed, and then laughed.

"Yes. I'm back," Korone said, actually smiling. And then she gave Akuto a hug.

"Hey, is this another one of your jokes?"

"It's not a joke. You gave me your love, even though I am a Liradan. I need to show you that I feel the same way," Korone said in a serious voice.

"L-Love? Wait..." Akuto began to stammer.

Korone suddenly raised her head to look up at him. "Do I look like the kind of

girl who would say that? I have a new body, so I am, in a sense, a virgin. So I thought I should act like one.”

“Listen, you...” Akuto frowned, but he didn’t try to take Korone’s arm off his waist. Instead, he put his hand on her head. “You do look a little more virginal.”

“I do? Oh, by the way...” she said, and then turned to Keena. “I am now the Empress’s aide. An observer, if you will. So you’ll be seeing a lot of me.”

“Really?!” Keena said with a huge grin.

“Yes, really.”

“Hooray! Welcome back, Korone!” she yelled, and jumped on Korone to give her a big hug. The two of them almost fell off the roof, but Akuto saved them.

Everyone laughed, and kept laughing until the students on the top floor of the dorm started banging their ceiling with brooms to quiet them down.

○

“A new empress... There was no need for such a thing, but...” Kento sighed. He was lying on the couch in his room, talking to a man on a mana screen.

“You’re always so clever. You seem to think everything will go the way you want it to,” the man on the screen said, annoyed. He was bald, with a strange rubbery black skin.

His codename was “Rubbers.” He was a member of CMID-8, and had once participated in the attack on Constant Magical Academy.

“That’s right. If something doesn’t go the way I want it to, it’s an irregularity,” Kento said calmly.

“So it was part of your plan to have CMID-8 lose so many members?” Rubbers asked angrily.

“It’s not my fault. It’s the fault of the people who screwed up. But it’s difficult for even me to determine what the next move is.”

“Because there’s a new empress?”

“Correct. It’s going to make completing ‘The Last Judgement’ a little more difficult.”

“You really believe in what Boichiro said before he died, huh?”

“I’ll do a better job than him. I’m not going to let my personal feelings get in the way.”

“Then what do you mean it’s gotten ‘more difficult’? I thought you always did everything perfectly.”

Kento ignored his provocation. “The issue is these irregularities. There should be several others with the imperial bloodline. If they want the throne, we could have a problem.”

“I’m not interested in being Emperor.”

“Me neither. That’s the one thing we agree on. But I want to be on the side of the Emperor or Empress who wins in the end,” Kento said, and ended the call.

Afterword

Thank you, as always, for buying my book.

I'm Shoutarou Mizuki.

This is Volume 9, a continuation from the last book. With this, the current story arc concludes. A lot has happened, but personally, I feel like I've successfully climbed a mountain. Hooray.

But there's still more to come. I have to keep working on the big story arc, but next volume will be a collection of short, daily-life vignettes. I'm hoping to talk about what happens next with Yoshie, or maybe tell you a surprising story about the student council. I hope you'll look forward to it if you're a fan of books that aren't so serious.

Now, it's finally time for the anime to start. If you're buying the book new, you can see information about it on the front flap. If not, check the webpage. I'm writing this a little before it airs, so all I've seen now is the voice recording sessions, but those were great. You've got a lot to look forward to.

A lot of fun things happened at the recording. Aoi Yuki, the VA for Korone, made homemade chiffon cake for me. I got to see Chiaki Takahashi (Mitsuko) and Shizuka Ito (Fujiko) cheer on Aoi Yuki as she did her best to sound sexy. And I got to watch the other VAs surround Aoi Yuki and take photos. If you think that I'm focusing too much on one thing, well, you're wrong. All the people working on the book dropped in, and I hope you readers can get a sense of how much fun it was too.

Now, on to some stuff that doesn't matter. As always, I watched the Winter Olympics on TV, and said to myself, "Curling looks fun!" But there's only certain places and situations where you can play it. Just because you saw it doesn't mean you can pick it up as a hobby, which is a little disappointing.

But in Canada, there's places where you can drink at a pub while you play, so maybe it's like pool in Japan. It's a big world. It seems dangerous to fling around

stones and brushes on an icy rink when you're drunk, though...

Lastly, thank-yous. So many people are working on this now that I don't know who you all are, and I haven't met you all yet, but thank you. Thank you all so much.

Ohashi, my editor. Thanks for hanging in there with me to improve the quality of this volume. I learned a lot.

And more than anybody, Souichi Itou. I'm sorry I'm always late, but your work on the manga is just amazing.

And of course, thank you all I hope you'll keep reading. There's lots more fun in store!



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Demon King Daimaou: Volume 9

by Shoutarou Mizuki

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