
05
GAKUTO MIKUMO
Illustration by
MIYUU
HOLLOW REGALIA
WHEN THE HEAVENS BREAK AND FALL

HOLLOW REGALIA

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When the Heavens Break and Fall

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Illustration by MIYUU



Runa & .....


Avaritia's Medium
Iroha Mamana
Karura Myoujiin
Rosetta Berith
Giulietta Berith
Avaritia's Lazarus
Yahiro Narusawa


Tristitia's Medium
Kaname Kashima
"Very well. I shall take them on."
"Get rid of those pests."
Tristitia's Lazarus
Toru Natazuka


Superbia's Medium
Sui Narusawa
Luxuria's Lazarus
Hisaki Minato
Luxuria's Medium
Nina Himekawa

Opening Act: **Prologue**

Act 1: **End Point**

Act 2: **Rebellion**

Act 3: **Realm of the Dead**

Act 4: **The Hollow Desire**

Act 5: **The End and the Beginning**

Final Act: **Epilogue**

Afterword

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Gakuto Mikumo

Illustration by MIYUU

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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HOLLOW REGALIA—When the Heavens Break and Fall Vol. 5

UTSURONARU REGALIA VOL. 5 When the Heavens Break and Fall

Gakuto Mikumo

Translation by Sergio Avila

Cover art by Miyuu

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Yen Newsletter

To the 23
Wards—where
it all began.

STORY/CHARACTERS

In a world where the Japanese nation has been decimated, a dragon girl and a dragon slayer boy—the last of the Japanese people—cross paths in the ruins of the 23 Wards. The fight to slay all eight dragons and choose the king of the new world begins here.

Galerie Berith

Trading company based in Europe. They mainly deal with arms and military technology—death is their trade. They have their own private military company for self-defense. Funded by the House of Berith.



Iroha Waon



Yahiro Narusawa
Lazarus

He became a Lazarus after being bathed in dragon blood. One of the few surviving Japanese. He lived on his own as a salvager, retrieving antiques and artwork from the quarantined 23 Wards. For years, he looked for his younger sister, Sui Narusawa, who went missing after the J-nocide. Now he travels alongside the Berith twins.



Iroha Mamana
Moujuu Tamer

A Japanese girl who survived near the center of the quarantined 23 Wards. She lived with her seven brothers and sisters in the former site of the Tokyo Dome. Sentimental and quick to cry. She has the power to control Moujuu and is targeted by private military companies because of it. Galerie Berith has now taken her and her siblings under their wing.



Giulietta Berith
Simpleminded Martial Artist

Executive of arms dealer Galerie Berith. Older twin sister of Rosetta. She's of Chinese descent but a citizen of Belgium, home of the House of Berith. She overpowers Yahiro in hand-to-hand combat with superhuman skill. She is friendly and respected by her underlings.



Rosetta Berith
Coolheaded Sniper

Executive of arms dealer Galerie Berith. Younger twin sister of Giulietta. She has superhuman physical ability and a natural talent for weaponry, especially firearms. The opposite of her sister, she is always calm and collected and rarely shows any emotions. She usually takes command of the troops. She always dotes on her sister.

Ganzheit

Supranational organization that aims to protect humanity from disaster brought about by dragons. They have passed on records and memories of past dragon appearances, and own many divine instruments.



Sui Naruasawa
Earth Dragon Medium

Younger sister of Yahiro Narusawa. She is a medium with the power to summon dragons, and responsible for the J-nocide. She fell into a deep slumber after getting injured during the aforementioned event. Currently in Ganzheit's custody, acting as their guinea pig in exchange for protection.



Auguste Nathan
Ganzheit Agent

Japanese doctor of African descent and agent of Ganzheit. He uses the dragon medium for his experiments, giving her protection and granting her wishes in exchange.



Nina Himekawa

Researcher at the European Organization for Graviton Research (CERG). A genius who skipped grades and obtained a PhD at a young age. She is the medium of the marsh dragon, Luxuria, and is investigating the dragons' powers through the lens of physics.



Hisaki Minato

Lazarus under contract with Nina. He obeys her every command like a loyal dog, but his true aim and intentions are unknown. He seems rude and unsociable, but is actually an honest young man.



Miyabi Maisaka

Medium of the wind dragon, Ira. An aspiring journalist who worked as a newscaster before the J-nocide. She was blessed with not only wit, but looks, too: she won a beauty contest in university. She uses a cane and has kept her right eye covered ever since she was injured.



Douji Yamase

Lazarus under contract with Miyabi. He was known online as Yamadou: someone who exposed issues in various corporations and organizations. Professional news cameraman. He believed the truth must always be revealed, no matter what it took, and this philosophy eventually led him to bend the truth itself. Lost his life during the incident in Yokohama.



Sumika Kiyotaki

Medium of the water dragon, Acedia. She is cheerful and a positive thinker, but also a realist. It took a long time for her powers as a dragon medium to awaken, and she lived in a brothel as a regular survivor for two years after the J-nocide.



Zen Sagara

Lazarus under contract with Sumika. He is straightforward and has a strong sense of justice, but is also stubborn and obstinate. He attended a prestigious international boarding school before the J-nocide, and went through hell when coming back to Japan.

Myoujiin Clan



Kaname Kashima

Medium of the thunder dragon, Tristitia. Member of the Kashima clan, which is a branch of the Myoujiin clan. Held captive alongside her contractor, Toru Natazuka. She loves plants and has a calm nature, but hides a ferocious side that is unleashed when facing someone who opposes the Heavenly Imperial House.



Toru Natazuka

A Lazarus under contract with Kaname. He once took advantage of his immortality to commit all sorts of violence, and is now imprisoned in a detached palace of the Heavenly Emperor's clan alongside Kaname. He is lazy and hates going out, but the fact remains he's a dangerous individual who wouldn't pass up a death match with another Lazarus.



Karura Myoujiin

The eldest daughter of the Myoujiin clan, who are direct descendants of the Heavenly Imperial House's bloodline. Candidate to be the next Heavenly Emperor. Sociable and cheerful, but her true thoughts always remain obscured. She owns the Heavenly Imperial Treasure, the Crimson Magatama.

Prologue

Paris, France.

People gathered on the banks of the Seine flowing through the city center to enjoy a weekend afternoon. Tourists took in the scenery while strolling. Young artists held sketchbooks. Couples flirted on the benches. Old folks chatted over coffee. Everyone had smiles on their faces; even the ones who were unemployed and complaining to each other lacked a somber air of sorrow.

The country was finally showing signs of recovery after a long recession. The effects of the J-nocide—the sudden collapse of Japan—four years prior had been detrimental to the international economy.

Logistics were in chaos, exports declined, and there were industrial supply shortages globally, not to mention the military expenses for the Japanese Hunt—many countries were in a bad financial spot.

Even though its economic power was not in its prime, Japan held one sixty-fourth of the global population that went extinct in a matter of months. Even faraway countries in Europe could not go unscathed.

However, four years had passed since the J-nocide, and the world was beginning to recover from the loss of Japan. Logistics had picked back up, job opportunities were rising along with the stock market, and one could find more smiles out in the streets.

As the memory of the country of Japan faded away, the threat of the Moujuu began to feel like a fairy tale about a faraway world.

It was around then that a certain Japanese streamer's account vanished from a major video website.

"I think she really got banned. I only pull up fakes on my searches."

A young man was sitting on a grassy bank with his smartphone in hand. He sighed. The search window on his

phone screen showed the name “Iroha Waon.”

“Oh, that Japanese girl? I heard she could summon dragons.”

The man’s friend was mocking her. Both of them wore replica uniforms of the local soccer team. The man had the number 7 on his back, and his friend had jersey 33.

“I don’t know about dragons, but it looks like it’s true that she can tame Moujuu. There are lots of photos of her riding a giant monster,” Number 7 replied solemnly and calmly.

Jersey 33 sighed. “It’s gotta be ’shopped.”

“But Yamadou’s the source.”

His friend pensively tapped his chin.

Yamadou was a streamer who specialized in exposés. He had made a name for himself by revealing the ugly truths behind entrepreneurs, celebrities, politicians, and even government and religious organizations. He was criticized for his aggressive methods, but he had credibility.

Surely he wouldn’t slander a nameless streamer without irrefutable evidence. Doubly so when it was a fellow Japanese person.

“Moujuu tamer or not, it’s a shame her account is gone. She was so cute.” Jersey 33 shook his head mournfully.

Number 7 nodded in agreement. “Yeah, she had a cute face. Her videos were boring, though.”

“Yup. But she was cute.”

They chuckled. They reminisced on Iroha Waon’s dull yet endearing videos, then winced when a shrill scream came from behind them.

It didn’t sound like something from a minor accident or plain surprise. It was something serious.

“Wait, what’s that?”

Number 7 stood up on reflex. His gaze was set on a bizarre, unworldly shadow, the size of a small car. Its silhouette resembled a bipedal animal’s. The dark form leaped silently and crushed the woman who was shrieking and running away.

Her head burst like ripe fruit, scattering flesh and blood all around.

“What’s that black animal? A bear…?” The man muttered, frozen in place.

The dark monster did resemble a giant grizzly. However, it was obvious this was no regular bear.

No bear was three meters tall with the head of a tiger and

the horns of a bull.

“A Moujuu?! In France?!”

“Don’t ask, just run!”

“R-right!”

His friend pushed him ahead and they dashed away. What in the world was happening in France? There was no time to check. They had to get out of there.

These mysterious monsters had decimated Japan. Just one of them could overpower a fully armed soldier, and a group could destroy a military troop. The men knew about them, of course. But seeing one in the flesh was an entirely different matter. Japan was over eight thousand kilometers away from Paris; he could have never foreseen one appearing here.

The fear pushed them to run for their lives. They had no destination in mind. They simply wanted to get as far away from the Moujuu as possible.

Then, a car in their path flew up into the sky.

A monster ran over from the other side, mowing down the trees along the street. This Moujuu looked like a giant horse with eight legs.

“Shit, there’s another one!”

“Where are they coming from?!”

The two men stopped in place, their faces twisted in fright.

It wasn’t just one Moujuu in Paris.

Car horns and crashes filled the streets, and smoke plumes rose as fires burned all over the city. The Moujuu were the source of the chaos. All of Paris was under attack.

A police officer ran to the sound of the screaming and shot at the horse Moujuu. None of the bullets missed, and yet the monster seemed to feel no pain.

Even so, it perceived the officer’s hostility. It let out an eerie roar before tackling and trampling the officer. People screamed in response to the brutal scene, but the next moment, something changed in their despairing expressions. Bones creaked and cracked as they took inhuman shapes. They took on the dreadful appearance of the Moujuu.

“People are turning into Moujuu?!”

“So the rumors were true…!”

The soccer uniform–clad men screeched.

The Moujuu had been humans all along. The dragons’ emergence in this world transformed the people. That rumor

was the talk of the internet for a time. The source of it appeared to be a PMC security guard deployed in Japan.

Video proof was shared, but out of nowhere, the rumors vanished. Unnaturally so. But now, a scene just like that deleted video was replaying right before their eyes.

“We… We gotta run…”

His friend pushed him forward again, but the man stayed in place. He was frozen by the sight of what emerged behind the people undergoing transformation on that downtown Parisian street.

“What the…?”

A pitch-black stain spread slowly over the ground, like a gigantic ink spill. The darkness absorbed the cars and buildings around as it encroached on the city itself.

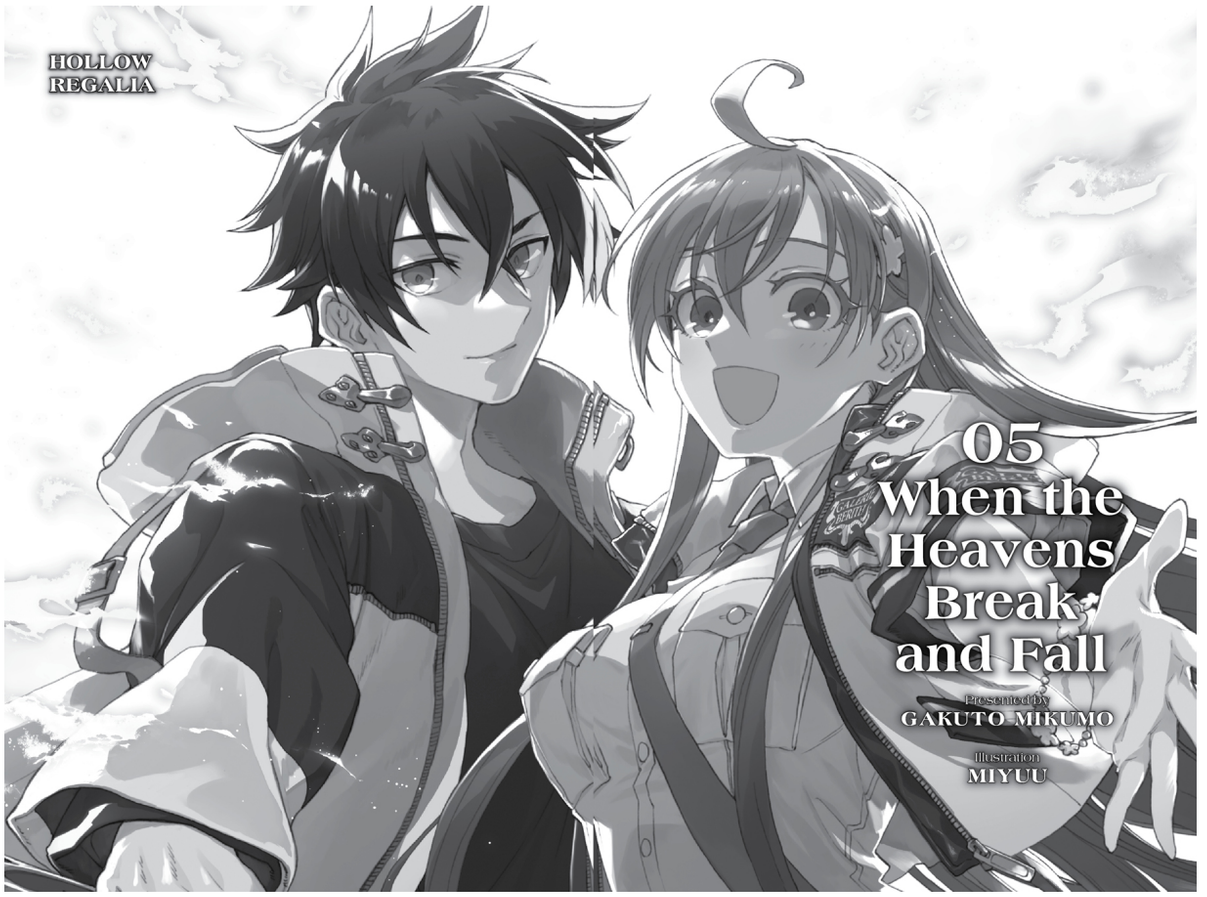
It was no stain—it was a hole. A cavity connected to an endless abyss.

“The Ploutonion…!”

The men wailed in despair.

They had no idea what was behind the Ploutonion’s emergence, nor that this phenomenon was not isolated to Paris. London, Berlin, Madrid, Rome, Delhi, Beijing—the gates to the underworld were appearing in densely populated areas all over the globe.

The only thing they were certain of was that this was only the beginning. The beginning of the end. The real disaster was yet to come. They shivered at the thought of the apocalypse as they stared blankly at the giant pit swallowing their world.


HOLLOW
REGALIA
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When the Heavens Break and Fall
Presented by
GAKUTO MIKUMO
Illustration
MIYUU

Act 1 End Point

1

Yahiro stared blankly out the window of the lounge on the Yáo Guāng Xīng armored train.

The train ran toward a ruined city, accompanied by the shrill noise particular to diesel engines. The destination, the former Kyoto Station, inched closer. The ordeal in Nagoya had stalled them for three days, and it ended up taking a week to reach Kyoto from Galerie Berith's base in Yokohama.

That said, one could argue they had a surprisingly swift trip considering the current state of Japan's infrastructure. There was only one attack from mercenaries-turned-bandits, and there were no more than ten Moujuu battles. Nobody from the Galerie died. It was a win.

However, there was a small change within the Yáo Guāng Xīng: Ayaho Sashou's attitude toward Yahiro.

"Yahiro, you must be tired from restoring the rail tracks."

Iroha's sister was carrying a tray with two coffee cups on it. Her voice cracked a little from nerves; it was unusual for the introvert to approach him.

"Y-yeah. Thanks for the consideration, but I'm sure you had it rougher, pushing all the dirt and smashing the rocks. I just burned some trees."

"Oh, it's nothing. I have to thank you for showing me how to use my powers. And you gave me this Relict to begin with."

Ayaho showed off the jade-colored pattern on her wrist while placing a cup in front of Yahiro.

She sat down to his right. He thought she was a bit too close, but maybe he was simply being self-conscious. She wasn't *too* close, but definitely not far enough.

In any case, Ayaho had made good use of the Relict Regalia. Vanagloria's power to shape the ground was a godsend for construction work. The Yáo Guāng Xīng would have taken another two days to reach Kyoto if it weren't for Ayaho. That was reason enough to thank her.

“Me, too! I did a great job, too! I protected the Yáo Guāng Xīng from the Moujuu!” Iroha butted in on the conversation, burning with jealousy at the sight of Yahiro and Ayaho praising each other.

Yahiro shot her a cold glare, however. “Don’t take credit for Nuemaru’s efforts.”

“Not to mention you tried to feed them instead of driving them away. Rosé was mad.”

“A-aww… I may or may not have tried that…”

Iroha pouted in response to their scolding.

Futile battles against Moujuu had been avoided thanks to Iroha’s mysterious taming powers, but they had also been dragged into trouble due to her excessive affinity with the Moujuu. Hence Yahiro’s and Ayaho’s cold tones.

“Please try this. Honoka and the guys baked it.”

Ayaho broke the moment of silence to offer him the dish on the tray: modest, clearly handmade butter cookies. They were still warm, and the scent of butter wafted over the table.

“I was just getting hungry, actually. Thanks, it looks good.”

“Hee-hee… I hope you like it.”

Yahiro reached out to the cookies while Ayaho stared at his lips.

Iroha puffed out her cheeks in a deeper pout, feeling left out of the nice mood they had going on. “Umm… Yahiro, aren’t you too close to her?”

“Am I?” Yahiro ignored her complaint. He was already sitting when Ayaho arrived. Either way, he was not at fault.

“Sorry. I wanted to eat some, too.” The usually reserved Ayaho showed some uncharacteristic resistance.

“It’s okay, I don’t mind.” Yahiro shook his head.

“That’s good to know.” Ayaho smiled in relief and got even closer to him.

Iroha frowned at her sister’s questionable behavior. “Uhh, Ayaho, just so we’re clear, Yahiro’s *my* fan, okay?”

“A streamer shouldn’t be playing favorites with one of her fans, Iroha. Isn’t Waon everyone’s idol?”

“I—I mean, yeah, but…” Iroha gulped as she couldn’t think of a counterargument.

Ayaho grabbed a cookie from the bowl. “Would you like another cookie, Yahiro?”

“Yeah. They’re pretty good.”

“Here, say *ahh*.”

Ayaho held the cookie up to his mouth. Yahiro was taken aback by her boldness but went with the flow and opened his mouth.

“Urgh…!” Iroha snarled and shoved her way between them. Then she leaned back on the seat and threw a tantrum. “No fair! Why’re you coddling him?! Coddle your big sister, too, Ayaho!”

“Wait, *that’s* your issue?” Ayaho’s eyes went wide.

Apparently, Iroha was more annoyed by being ignored by her cute little sister than her being chummy with Yahiro.

“O-okay. Here, Iroha, say *ahh*.”

“Yay! Now it’s your turn! Say *ahh*!”

Ayaho fed Iroha a cookie with a crooked smile, then Iroha returned the favor with a huge grin. One would think Ayaho was subject to Iroha’s whims all the time, but this showed that they actually had some balance in their relationship.



Yahiro snickered before looking up as he felt a gaze. A girl holding a white Moujuu like a plushie was standing right beside him. She was Iroha's youngest sister, Runa Senou.

"You want some too, Runa?" he asked her, confused as to why she was staring at him.

Runa nodded with a blank expression and opened her mouth. So she wanted him to feed her?

"Umm…okay?"

After she stayed in the same position for a while, Yahiro gave in. Runa munched on the cookie like a little critter. Yahiro smiled at the sight and gave her another. Runa nibbled on the cookie again.

He had heard she was about seven years old, but no one—not even Iroha—knew her exact age. Her small body made her seem even younger, but she was too smart and collected for such a young girl.

Also, for whatever reason, she seemed fond of Yahiro from the moment they met. In a way, she was the most mysterious character out of Iroha's siblings.

"Grooming little girls now?"

Yahiro heard a scathing accusation as he watched Runa silently chow down on the cookie with a smile on his face. Rosetta Berith had popped out of nowhere to glare at him.

"Can you not malign me for innocently giving her a snack?"

"The grin on your face hides some dark intentions."

"I am not grinning."

"Yahiro, Yahiro, me next. *Ahh*." Giulietta Berith, standing beside Rosé, opened her mouth to receive a cookie.

The annoying part about this girl was that he couldn't tell whether she was serious or joking.

"Sorry, there are no more cookies for you. Get your sister to make some."

"Wha…? Save some for me!" Giuli pouted as he pushed the empty bowl her way.

Yahiro paid her no mind and looked out the window as he realized the train was slowing down.

"Is it your first time in Kyoto?" Rosé asked as she saw him look at the sights with interest.

Yahiro shook his head. "I came here once in grade school for a trip."

"A school trip… Was Sui Narusawa with you?"

“No, she didn’t go. She’d always been sickly, so Dad didn’t let her.”

“I see.” Rosé nodded as though she understood everything.

Yahiro found her reaction strange, but he couldn’t ask anything before Iroha cut in excitedly.

“Yahiro, look! Wow! Now *that’s* Kyoto!” She pulled his arm and drew up close to the window.

Right away, he understood why she was so excited. The view beyond the window was unlike the ruins he was expecting. One could see the shrines and temples typical of Kyoto, but what caught his attention the most were the common houses and buildings. It was the same city landscape he’d seen once before.

“What in the world is going on here?” he mumbled.

“Huh? What’d you mean?” Iroha looked at him with a furrowed brow.

Yahiro shook his head hard in confusion. “It’s the same as when I came here on the field trip! Why wasn’t Kyoto affected by the J-nocide…?”

“Ah… Maybe they were lucky?”

“How lucky you gotta be for this?!” Yahiro sighed with exhaustion in response to Iroha’s unfazed reaction.

It had been four years since the J-nocide and its effects extended throughout Japan. The Moujuu’s emergence and the international armies’ attacks turned all major cities in the country into ruins. Yahiro saw that firsthand on his way here.

Yet Kyoto was the exception.

There were no people around, but the city itself was intact, as though the center of Kyoto alone had been split from the flow of time.

“That’s because this is the Heavenly Imperial House’s turf,” a man responded to Yahiro’s question.

A former Ganzheit agent and the Heavenly Imperial House’s envoy, Auguste Nathan. He was the Galerie’s prisoner, but he was able to freely roam around the Yáo Guāng Xīng. Giuli and Rosé had no intention of stopping him.

“What do you mean, Nathan? Did the Moujuu not appear in Kyoto?” Yahiro asked with suspicion.

Nathan shook his head. “No, of course they appeared here. Kyoto is unharmed, thanks to Myoujiin.”

“What?”

“Karura Myoujiin *can control the Moujuu*, just like Iroha

Mamana here," Nathan explained while staring at her shocked face. The armored train came to a screeching halt inside Kyoto Station, and Nathan continued, "She protected Kyoto. You can ask her for further details. That is why you came here, isn't it?"

Nathan smiled at Yahiro and Iroha, who were at a loss for words. They could do no more than nod in silence.

2

"We're here…!"

Iroha's siblings cheered in the armored train's lounge. Once stopped at the dark and desolate Kyoto Station platform, the Yáo Guāng Xīng deployed its spades to anchor and prepared its main cannons to fire, precaution for any possible enemies or bandits. However, the station was terribly silent. The building itself was oddly clean, without a hint of dilapidation. The only abnormal thing about it was the eerie lack of sound.

"What country has control of Kyoto Station?" Yahiro asked as he equipped his precious Kuyou Masakane.

"Kyoto is a buffer zone. The Heavenly Imperial House maintains the facilities, but it's not under anyone's official control," Rosé responded stoically but thoroughly.

Yahiro felt a little relief. He was thinking of the conflict with the Chinese Federal Army a few days prior in Nagoya.

"No need to worry about local armies pestering us, then."

"That also means we have no one to defend us in case of an attack, though."

"No one to count on but ourselves, eh?"

"Exactly."

Makes sense, Yahiro thought. No wonder the Galerie was on high alert, even after reaching their destination.

"Where's Karura Myoujiin?" Yahiro asked Nathan.

The former Ganzheit agent had told the Galerie that she waited for them in Kyoto, but gave no exact location. Nathan's response was simply an unabashed headshake.

"I only know that she's in Myoujiin territory somewhere in the mountains of Okusaga."

"Isn't she your boss? Shouldn't you know?"

"All six families of the Heavenly Imperial House are cautious, but the Myoujiin are especially so. There's a barrier around

their territory preventing people from approaching it without a guide."

"They summoned us all the way here and it turns out they're hermits?" Yahiro frowned.

Nathan nodded. "She should be notified of our arrival. Someone should be coming for us soon."

"So now we gotta wait."

"She is waiting, too. Lady Karura has been waiting for you for a long time."

"Okay, but we were all the way in Kanto. Just a week is a short time, if anything."

"No, no. She's been waiting for you ever since that day *nine years ago*," he said ominously.

Yahiro blinked in confusion.

Obviously, nine years ago would refer to before the J-nocide. Back then, Yahiro was but an ordinary child, far removed from the powers of the Lazarus. Why would someone in Karura's position even know about him?

And yet, he couldn't dismiss that Nathan specified nine years ago.

A big event in Yahiro's life happened that year: Sui Narusawa became his little sister. The same girl would one day become Superbia's medium and cause the J-nocide.

"Lady Giulietta! Lady Rosetta!"

The train's speakers cut off any addition to Nathan's foreboding comments.

It was Milo Aldiss, captain of the Yáo Guāng Xīng.

"Milo? What's got you so riled up?" Giuli asked to the comms monitor, her blithe voice in contrast to the captain's.

"We got a video feed from the survey drones! And a report from Squad Two scouting the area!"

"Oof… Looks like we're surrounded." Giuli raised her eyebrows while looking at the picture on the monitor.

The aerial view of the area around Kyoto Station showed a large group of armored vehicles, easily over forty. The army had to consist of over five hundred operators.

"A PMC?! But whose?!" Josh Keegan, member of the PMC division of Galerie Berith's Far East Branch, interjected with a

crack in his voice. His Squad One oversaw security in the Yáo Guāng Xīng. *“Captain, call the survey squad back! We can’t let those operators in the station!”*

“I know! Send Squad One’s reinforcements to cars four and nine! Seal off the stairs to the platform!” Milo ordered.

“Wait, Milo. Stop the remote weapons system. Josh, keep your men where they are. Everyone, stand by on alert level two. Code orange.”

“Princess?! Are you sure?! The Yáo Guāng Xīng is being ambushed!” Josh objected to the unbelievable order.

Giuli was telling them not to take any measures against forces ten times their number that had them surrounded. The parked train would be defenseless if the enemy entered the station. It was like waiting to be executed.

Yet the expression on Giuli’s face was a fed-up, wry smile.

Her twin sister Rosé sighed. “They’re definitely ambushing us, but not for a fight. Consider it a hidden camera prank.”

“What?” Yahiro furrowed his brow at Rosé’s uncharacteristic jest.

Giuli shrugged and shook her head. “That’s HQ’s uniform.”

“HQ? You mean they’re Galerie Berith, too?”

“Yeah. Operators from the HQ in Europe. Our father’s men.”

Giuli pointed at a corner of the screen. It showed the operators holding up riot shields—in lieu of a banner—that displayed the message, WELCOME.

The troops encircling Kyoto Station received them with open arms.

3

“What in the world…?”

Astonished, Yahiro stopped in his tracks after he warily stepped outside the station. Armored vehicles and nearly a hundred operators filled the ample space in front of the station that used to serve as a tourist bus stop.

They held a banner welcoming the Galerie’s Far East Branch. Accompanied by a musical performance, to boot.

Yahiro let go of his katana’s hilt, stupefied by the odd scene. Josh and the rest of the escorts were clearly confused, too.

“Welcome, Lady Giulietta, Lady Rosetta.”

One man stepped forward from the group of operators, a middle-aged man in a morning coat. Though he appeared to be over fifty years old, his bearing was graceful and youthful. His silver-gray hair was combed back, making him look like the perfect picture of a gentleman.

“Huh, Cyrille?”

“If you’re here, then that means his lordship is here, too?”

Giuli and Rosé responded to the gentleman. They seemed to be acquaintances. Based on their demeanor, he had to be a butler for the Berith house.

“I will show you to him. Please, follow me. Miss Iroha Mamana and Mr. Yahiro Narusawa as well, if you please.” He looked at them.

“We can go, too?” Iroha asked with surprise.

“Who did you mean by ‘*his lordship*’?” Yahiro asked Rosé, a bad feeling in his gut.

Despite her inoffensive tone, Rosé was never truly polite with anyone. It was rare to hear her refer to someone so respectfully. “Marquis Eusebius Berith. Galerie Berith’s owner. Try not to be rude.”

“Marquis Berith… Your dad?” Iroha looked at Rosé with wide eyes.

Rosé nodded inexpressively. “Yes, you wouldn’t be wrong to infer that, although we aren’t his daughters biologically. We’re only about seven percent related.”

“…Biologically? But you’re not adopted, are you?”

“You can say that he is our real father in the sense that he *created* us. And indeed, we are allowed to call him so.”

“Doesn’t sound like a very pleasant history.” Yahiro sighed.

Yahiro had already guessed they were fabricated through genetic manipulation, going by their past words and deeds. He could tell that the relationship between the twins and their father would be complex.

He couldn’t jump to the conclusion that they were unhappy with it, but it didn’t seem like they loved their father. He couldn’t help but pity them.

“Do you have any right to say that?” Yahiro heard Rosé whisper.

He looked at her. “Huh?”

“…Nothing. Just saying it’s nothing special to be related to Ganzheit.” She smiled stiffly before following Cyrille.

Iroha remained confused as Yahiro pulled her along behind the twins. The security operators watched as Cyrille escorted them to an armored motor home: one exceedingly sturdy camping trailer.

A white man sat in the luxury office inside. He was tall and wore a suit. His features were so fine one would think he was an actor, and he had the elegance of a nobleman.

This was the current head of the House of Berith: Eusebius Berith.

“My lord, I’ve brought the Far East Branch executives,” Cyrille reported courteously as he walked to his master’s side.

Eusebius put down the documents he had been reading and raised his head. He glanced at Giuli and Rosé by the entrance before looking at Yahiro and Iroha.

“Thank you, Cyrille. And they are…?”

“Guests, Miss Iroha Mamana and Mr. Yahiro Narusawa. Japanese survivors, sir.”

“I see. The medium and the Lazarus, then. So young.” He looked them up and down with an amicable smile on his face. “I’ve heard about your feats helping my daughters.”

“Oh, no, they’ve been the ones helping *us*!” Iroha bowed her head, unusually nervous.

She pulled a square tin container out of nowhere. Cyrille scowled, suspicious that it was an explosive, but Iroha opened it cluelessly and the strong smell of butter filled the space in an instant. It was more of the kids’ cookies.

“Would you like to have some? My sister baked them!” Iroha offered Eusebius the cookies with a proud smile on her face.

Yahiro felt a vague sense of déjà vu. Apparently, Iroha had a personal rule of offering food to important people she met.

“Thank you, they look delicious. Cyrille, get some tea.”

Eusebius took a cookie and brought it to his mouth. The circumstances warranted being cautious of poison, but he must’ve felt it was ridiculous to be on such high alert in light of Iroha’s behavior. Or perhaps he was trying to build trust with Iroha.

In any case, Eusebius Berith didn’t seem to be the cold, haughty aristocrat Yahiro had imagined.

“Good to have you here, Giulietta, Rosetta. Are you well?” Eusebius spoke to his daughters after finishing the cookie.

Giuli and Rosé remained in place with solemn looks on their

faces as they nodded.

“Yes.”

“You seem very well yourself, my lord.”

“Good. Let’s skip the formalities. It’s our first family reunion in a good while.” Eusebius smiled and urged them to sit down on the sofa.

Cyrille brought enough teacups for everyone and, with refined motions, served black tea.

“Now then, you’ve done well. The family is greatly satisfied with the Far East Branch’s achievements,” Eusebius said once everyone had their share of tea. “You hired the Lazarus and got the fire dragon’s medium under your wing. You captured the earth dragon’s medium and Auguste Nathan. I heard you even found a Relict Regalia Deserver. The Galerie has obtained more sway in Ganzheit thanks to you. Marvelous work, truly. Shame about Andrea, but your gains more than make up for that loss.”

“We only fulfilled our duties, Father,” Giuli answered with detached tone.

Eusebius shook his head with a warm smile.

“Still, you deserve due recompense for your work.”

“Recompense…?” Rosé’s expression stiffened in fear.

The marquis nodded cheerfully at his daughter’s reaction.

“The Galerie has decided to promote you. First, Rosetta, you will oversee operations in South America. I expect much of you in the weapons business as vice president.”

“Vice president? Me?”

“And Giulietta. You will be commissioner of the Galerie’s intelligence department. You’re rising in the ranks, ladies. Of course, you may take personnel from the Far East Branch with you. I know how important it is to have subordinates you can trust.”

“Wait! Wait a minute!” Iroha stood up in objection.

Yahiro also glared daggers at the marquis.

“What is this? They’re leaving Japan? What about negotiations with the Heavenly Imperial House?”

“Don’t worry about that. We, the Galerie’s European HQ, will take over the Far East Branch’s operations. That is why we’re here. That means there are bigger numbers to mobilize now,” Eusebius responded promptly without being disturbed by their rudeness, as smoothly as if he were following a script.

“But that’s… It’s too sudden…” Iroha failed to find the words

to object.

Galerie Berith was a corporation; it was nothing strange for Eusebius, as its owner, to decide his employees' jobs. Not to mention this was a promotion for the twins. Yahiro and Iroha had no right to weigh in.

"That's all. Avaritia's medium, we will be helping you from now on. If you have any questions, please ask Cyrille," Eusebius said, satisfied when Iroha remained silent.

"My name is Cyrille Ghislain. It's a pleasure to meet you." The silver-haired butler bowed to her.

Eusebius continued with small talk afterward, but Yahiro forgot what he talked about.

The twins did not say a thing in the end.

4

"Boss, we don't have enough drinks. Bring some more over here."

"Oh, beat it. You've drunk enough."

Josh's men were enjoying themselves with food and drinks under the tents placed inside Kyoto Station. Eusebius Berith was throwing a feast to welcome the Far East Branch's operators.

The battalion-size army gathered there gave the operators a sense of security and they let themselves spread their wings. HQ's soldiers guarded the surroundings so the Far East members could drink to their hearts' content.

"Wanna drink, Yahiro?"

Yahiro was watching the operators party it up from afar, when someone called his name. Squad Two's captain, Paola Resente.

"No. I'm underage." Yahiro declined with a smile.

There was no reason to follow the law now that the country of Japan was no more, but even so, he refused to drink so he could keep himself in check. No matter how small the crime, if he got used to breaking the law, he feared he would eventually feel no reserve in killing.

Besides, the Lazarus had absolute resistance to poison—he wouldn't get drunk even if he drowned in alcohol.

"Good boy. Here's your prize." Paola gently slapped his back

before offering a different bottle.

Did you even hear what I said? Yahiro thought as he looked up.

“I told you I’m not drinking. Are you drunk already?”

“No. I’m sober.”

“You look hammered, though!”

“I am not. Take that back.”

Paola chugged her drink and leaned on Yahiro’s shoulder. She had taken off the uniform’s bulletproof jacket and wore only a tank top and shorts. She had an exotic seductiveness to her as it was; seeing her flushed from the alcohol made her extremely alluring.

Yahiro was thinking hard about how to escape this drunkard, when he spotted Wei.

Wei had to be drinking, too, but the dashing young man looked fresh. He noticed Yahiro’s eyes pleading for help and chuckled before walking up to them.

“Thank you, Wei. Should everyone really be getting drunk like this?” Yahiro sighed.

Wei was used to drunk Paola and pulled her off Yahiro. He smiled awkwardly.

“It’s our first night off in half a year. Please let them have some fun.”

“Uh-huh.”

“We got a huge bonus, too. Gotta thank you, Yahiro.”

“I didn’t do anything.” Yahiro cocked his head.

He did nothing in the meeting with Eusebius Berith. The only impact he and Iroha had was offering him her sister’s cookies.

Still, Wei shook his head with a serious look on his face. “The owner didn’t tell you? Giuli and Rosé were promoted thanks to your and Iroha’s achievements. House Berith really liked you crushing Melora Electronics.”

“I see…” Yahiro avoided speaking more on the topic.

Galerie Berith had more sway within Ganzheit thanks to the Far East Branch’s contract with Yahiro and Iroha. Eusebius had said as much. But Yahiro couldn’t just be happy about it if it meant saying good-bye to the twins. Despite everything, Yahiro trusted them and the rest of the team.

“Iroha! Look!”

Yahiro heard the children's cheery voices as he wandered around the venue after leaving Wei and Paola. Iroha's siblings had caught her enjoying the food as she walked.

"Rinka? What's with that uniform?" Iroha's eyes nearly popped out of her head at the sight of her sister.

Rinka wore a vintage school uniform that looked like something out of an old wizard movie. She seemed to like it a lot herself; she twirled in place while beaming. The other kids were wearing the same uniform, too.

"It's the boarding school uniforms. They finally arrived," Rosé explained, accompanying the children.

"Why…are they wearing them…?"

"Your contract with Galerie Berith was to secure the kids a safe life outside of Japan in exchange for your help. We delayed the completion of our contract due to the kids' strong wishes up until now…"

"…But you can't do it any longer now that you're leaving?" Iroha lifted her head and stared at Rosé, realizing why the twins had hurried to get them into school now.

"Yes. I wouldn't recommend expecting that to go on indefinitely." Rosé looked down.

Despite her usually blunt personality, Rosé was sweet to Iroha's siblings. However, no one could guarantee that Cyrille would be as accommodating after he took over. Rosé was trying to get the children to safety while she was still in charge.

"They'll be going to a prestigious school in Switzerland. We've asked a trustworthy organization to look after them, and given them enough money for tuition and daily necessities. They should be fine."

"Yeah, I can trust you with that. But Ayaho can't go with them, can she?" Iroha grimaced as she looked at the older girl among the children.

Ayaho was the only one wearing her usual sailor uniform among her siblings in their new clothes. She wasn't able to go to school now that she'd ended up compatible with a Relict Regalia.

"No. In fact, I don't think she should leave this country. Without the Galerie's protection, some other army or intelligence agency would try to get hold of her."

"Yeah… You're right…" Iroha nodded sadly and bit her lip.

Then she slapped her cheeks and raised her voice to try and

rouse herself.

“Everyone, form a line! I’ll take your picture one by one!”

“Whaa?!”

“No way! How embarrassing!”

“They said we were only trying them on! It doesn’t fit and my hair’s a mess!”

Her siblings protested as Iroha held her phone up to snap their pictures, but that would not stop her.

“No, kids. This is an order.”

“Tyrant!”

“Oh well.”

“Whaa…? I guess if Kiri says so…”

In the end, the pictures were taken even as the kids made a fuss. Then the drunk members of the Far East Branch gathered around and it turned into a group photo shoot. The contrast between the rugged operators and the innocent children was bizarre, but there was an odd sense of unity within this unlikely bunch. It had only been a couple of months, yet they’d become comrades in arms.

“Any objections, Yahiro?” Rosé asked with a dubious expression as he watched the kids solemnly.

Yahiro turned to look at her and replied with uncharacteristic sincerity. “Oh… No, not really. Thank you, Rosé.”

“Huh?”

“You’ve been a great help this whole time. Thanks a lot.”

“I only fulfilled our contract… W-well, I accept your gratitude…”

Rosé’s gaze wandered as she stuttered for once.

Giuli popped up behind her twin as though she had been waiting for this moment. “Oh, what’s up, Rosy? You’re blushing?”

“G-Giuli?! That’s not true!” Rosé denied it and cleared her throat repeatedly.

The corners of Giuli’s lips rose even higher. “What were you talking about with Yahiro?”

“Nothing…!”

“Uh-huh…”

Rosé evaded the topic for whatever reason while Giuli kept teasing her little sister. It was a sight Yahiro had grown familiar with by now.

A sight he would never see again after they left Japan.

Yahiro was surprised to realize that he was sad about that.

5

“Aww… Yahirooo… I’m so saaad…!”

Iroha buried her face, a teary and snotty mess, in Yahiro’s chest. She’d put on a strong facade in front of her siblings, but she really had been shocked to hear she would have to say good-bye soon.

“Yeah, I get you…”

Yahiro dragged Iroha toward the Yáo Guāng Xīng, exhausted by her endless crying. The party at the station kept going, but he thought it’d be better not to let the kids see her like this.

However, the entrance to the platform where the armored train was parked was blocked by a few armed operators. The guards noticed the pair walking their way and warned them sternly.

“Stop. This place is off-limits.”

“…What?” Yahiro frowned as he questioned the oddly threatening operators.

They wore Galerie uniforms, but he didn’t know their faces. They had to be from HQ, brought by Eusebius Berith.

“You didn’t hear? What’s your post?”

“Wait. That’s the Lazarus.” Another operator stopped his buddy, who had pointed his rifle at Yahiro.

“The Lazarus? But that’s just a kid…”

The operator kept his finger on the trigger as he eyed Yahiro with obvious suspicion.

Yahiro was used to this sort of scorning glare.

“We were just thinking of going back to the Yáo Guāng Xīng. What do you mean it’s off-limits?” Yahiro forced a smile and asked with the friendliest tone he could muster.

The twins hadn’t said anything of the sort. It had to be HQ’s decision.

They had welcomed the Far East Branch with open arms and served them drinks while seizing the Yáo Guāng Xīng behind the scenes. Something was up.

“Excuse me, Mr. Narusawa.”

A silver-haired gentleman appeared from behind the

operators and bowed gracefully. Eusebius's butler, Cyrille Ghislain.

"…Mr. Ghislain?"

"Please, just call me Cyrille. We're in the middle of procedures transferring operation of the Yáo Guāng Xīng from the Far East Branch to HQ. I'm afraid we can't allow you inside, due to confidentiality concerns," Cyrille said politely.

There was nothing odd about his explanation; Yahiro was unable to say anything more. "That's good and all, but where are we supposed to sleep?"

"Apologies for not notifying you sooner. We've prepared a motor home for you."

"A motor home? You mean like that huge camper back there?"

Yahiro remembered the armored trailer where Eusebius's office was, confused. Surely they wouldn't get something that luxurious, but it would be far better than the operators who were sleeping in tents. Too good even then—what was the catch?

"Indeed. This is the key. And a copy for Miss Mamana."

"Okay… Thanks."

Yahiro gave up any further resistance and accepted the key cards. He had no reason to complain about good hospitality, after all.

"We'll have someone show you the way. Have a good night's rest," Cyrille said with a perfect smile.

A female operator approached them and then led the way to the trailer.

The operators blocking the way to the platform did not lower their guard until Yahiro was well out of sight.

"Car nineteen… Here it is."

Yahiro sighed in awe at the size of the armored trailer marked with that number. It was far bigger than he had expected.

"This thing's huge! It's freaking gigantic! This isn't a car! That's a whole house!" Iroha's sobs were replaced by a dropped jaw.

Her reaction was not overexaggerated. If it didn't have any wheels, one would think it was a luxury apartment showroom.

“This is the motor home House Berith uses for its guests. Milord says to please enjoy it,” the guide said courteously.

“I mean, thanks, but should we really be in such a fancy place?” Yahiro asked with an uncomfortable expression.

Things like this were normally reserved for Hollywood stars or F1 drivers on world tours. It was far beyond Yahiro and Iroha’s status.

“No need to hesitate. Members of the House use cars of even greater dignity.”

“You’re telling me there’s something fancier…?”

Yahiro gaped, beyond stupefied by the smiling operator’s comment. Rich people’s spending habits were beyond his comprehension. It was better not to think too much about it.

“Okay, got that, but why only Yahiro and me? Can I get my siblings in here?” Iroha asked while rubbing her swollen eyes.

Sure enough, this motor home was big enough to shelter all the kids and then some. However, the operator shook her head with that cold, practiced smile still on her face.

“I apologize, but we ask you not to bring in anyone else, for security reasons.”

“Security? You don’t need to protect us anyway. We have Nuemaru with us…”

“No, Iroha.” Yahiro stopped her from insisting. Then with a cynical tone he continued, “We’re the ones they’re keeping an eye on. Right?”

“HQ’s operators are still not used to handling the dragon mediums and the Lazaruses, not to mention we have the head of the House in camp here. Please understand.” The woman confirmed Yahiro’s suspicions.

House Berith thought of the dragon medium and the Lazarus with their Regalia as a threat. They had to isolate Yahiro and Iroha and keep them under surveillance. The luxury motor home was compensation for that—an opulent cage.

“I see… I guess that makes sense.” Iroha puffed out her cheeks in a pout and reluctantly resigned herself.

“That’s why they’re giving us this nice camper in return, I guess.” Yahiro sighed as he opened the door with the key card.

Bright light fixtures reminiscent of chandeliers illuminated the room. An antique-style table and spacious sofa. A mirrored ceiling and marble floor. It was almost impossibly luxurious, like a suite in a five-star hotel.

“Yup, this is reeeally nice. Aww… I could make a cool video about this if I still had my account…” Iroha’s voice shook as she gripped her phone tight.

She hadn’t been able to get her account reinstated after the mystery ban. It was a most stressful situation for the content junkie. Still, she took pictures of every corner of the car and squealed at the sight of the novel furniture.

“Whoa, look at the size of this TV! And the kitchen’s squeaky clean! And there’s a bath!”

“…Why does the bathroom have glass walls…?”

Yahiro felt a headache coming on when he noticed the shower room across the living room. They could see right through the walls of the circular shower.

The guide operator answered most seriously, “Those were the demands.”

“What demands?!”

“The bedroom is there in the back.”

“*The* bedroom? Only one?”

“Don’t worry. We’ve prepared a big enough bed,” she said as she opened the door to the bedroom.

Yahiro’s expression twisted in distress at the sight of the pastel-colored room. The bed had two pillows next to each other and, with extreme consideration that nobody asked for, even a see-through babydoll nightgown. Not even honeymoon bedrooms were this blunt.

“The size isn’t the problem here…”

“And, Mr. Narusawa, please don’t forget these.”

“These what?”

Yahiro accepted the little box the guide handed him and his eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. Condoms.

“Wa-wa-wait!”

“My job here is done. Please enjoy yourselves.”

“Enjoy ourselves how?!”

The woman ignored Yahiro’s shout and darted away.

Yahiro fell to his knees, box in hand.

“What’d they give you? Nothing for me?” Iroha asked innocently after finishing her photo session.

Yahiro hid the box in his pocket in a hurry. “Oh, no… Nothing. You don’t need to know!”

“Why?! Show me! Now it’s gonna bother me all night!”

“For pity’s… Screw this. Iroha, you take the bed. I’ll sleep on

the couch," said Yahiro, his voice cracking in outrage.

Iroha looked at him with confusion and tilted her head. "Why? There's enough space for both of us."

"No, there isn't!"

"What, you toss and turn a lot or something? Oh, right. There should be enough space for Nuemaru, too, yeah?"

"Do what you want."

"Okay. Wait, but where did he go?"

Iroha looked around in search of the white Moujuu that always followed her around.

Then the motor-home door opened and someone entered. Yahiro expected the guide to be back again, but it was someone much smaller—a girl holding a dog-sized Moujuu in her arms.

"Runa?"

"Huh? Why are you here all alone? What about the guards?" Iroha asked in surprise.

Iroha's youngest sister, Runa Senou, looked up at them and quietly shook her head.

"You have a guest."

"…A guest?" Yahiro's brow furrowed.

Runa handed over the Moujuu.

Yahiro's and Iroha's expressions froze as they realized it was *not* Nuemaru. Runa's pure-white guard sat by her feet. The one in the girl's arms was a similar size, but an entirely different creature.

Nuemaru resembled a fox or a wolf, while this one was more like a tanuki. Its fur was a lustrous black.

"Th-there's two Nuemarus?!" Iroha eyes darted back and forth between the two.

"Where did you get that Moujuu?" Yahiro crouched down to Runa's level.

There was no way Nuemaru could have multiplied, but it was equally unbelievable that this little Moujuu could've snuck into the Galerie HQ's camp alone. Discarding the possibility of coincidence, was it intentional?

The black Moujuu shot Yahiro an intelligent stare, basically proving his suspicion. Then, it spoke:

"Heh. So we've finally met."

"Wha…?!" Yahiro gasped.

The black Moujuu narrowed its golden eyes and stared at the shocked boy with amusement.

“The Moujuu…spoke?!” Iroha’s voice went up one octave.



“Who are you?!” Yahiro reflexively reached for the hilt of his katana.

He had met a lot of Moujuu up to now, but never one that spoke. The same seemed to go for Iroha. In stark contrast, Runa and the Moujuu were calm.

“Is that how you greet someone? Didn’t you come to Kyoto to meet me?”

“What…?” Yahiro was shocked further by the Moujuu’s question.

This time it wasn’t confusion for the unknown—he was shocked because he had an idea of what it meant.

“I suppose I can’t expect you to not be surprised if I show up like this. I apologize for not introducing myself sooner.”

The black Moujuu bowed, still in Runa’s arms. It was too humanlike.

“Don’t tell me… You’re…” Yahiro’s voice was hoarse.

The black Moujuu cleared its throat before grinning and solemnly announcing:

“Indeed. My name is Karura Myoujiin. I am the descendant of the dragon slayer clan of old—the Heavenly Imperial House.”

6

“You’re…Karura Myoujiin…?”

Yahiro felt faint as he stared at the black Moujuu in Runa’s arms.

Nathan did say that the Myoujiin would send someone to get them, but he couldn’t have possibly expected them to come like this.

“Don’t tell me that’s you…”

“That*? Oh, Kuro?”*

The Moujuu calling itself Karura seemed to frown.

“…Kuro?”

“This is one of the Moujuu under my control.”

“What? So…you have the same power as Iroha…?”

Yahiro looked at Iroha, who shook her head fiercely.

“I can’t control Nuemaru like that. I’ve never taught a Moujuu how to speak, either…”

“No, I don’t teach them how to speak. I am simply borrowing Kuro’s body. You should be able to do the same, Iroha Mamana.”

“I—I can?”

“Yes. Perhaps you didn’t have the need to do so because you’re not trapped in the forbidden zone.”

Iroha tilted her head, confused by the black Moujuu’s sad comment.

“The forbidden zone…?”

“I mean the Myoujiin territory protected by the illusory barrier. If I leave this place, the barrier’s blessing is lost.”

“I see… So that’s why you called us to Kyoto.”

“Yes. As you know, the Heavenly Imperial House’s standing is in peril, although it can’t be helped. We are a pest to Ganzheit, I’m sure.” Karura chuckled dryly as she spoke through the Moujuu.

Her mysterious clan, descendants of the rulers of the now-lost country, survived the demise and knew the dragons’ secrets. Ganzheit intended to monopolize such knowledge, so it was only natural that the Heavenly Imperial House would be a thorn in their side.

“Nathan said you know how to resurrect the Japanese. Is that true? There’s a way to turn the Moujuu back into people?” Yahiro asked with a serious expression.

Galerie Berith had captured Sui instead of killing her and risked themselves on their way to Kyoto for this exact reason. This piece of information Karura supposedly had was the last thing that Ganzheit would want to be known.

“Yes. At the very least, I believe there is a possibility.”

“Really?”

“Really,” Karura confirmed without hesitation, then glared at Iroha, who was reaching out to Kuro’s chin. *“Iroha Mamana, why are you petting me?”*

“Oh, sorry. It just looks so fluffy…”

“I am not complaining. Pet if you want. Yahiro Narusawa, you’re free to do so as well.”

“Uh… No, it’d feel awkward to do that when it’s speaking like a human…” Yahiro averted his gaze.

Karura seemed hurt. *“But it really is very fluffy… Oh well. There’s no time. Let’s cut to the chase.”*

“Please do.”

“Now, then. I request that you rescue me.”

“…Rescue?” Yahiro parroted in confusion.

Karura paid no attention to his bewilderment and continued.

“I want you to help me escape Kyoto. I am surrounded by

Ganzheit forces inside the Myoujiin territory."

"Wait, you're under attack?" Yahiro asked with a grimace.

If the Myoujiin territory was under attack, Karura's life was at risk, yet she sounded calm and composed as she continued.

"Yes. It's not fatally urgent, but I cannot escape on my own. The illusory barrier prevents the enemy from approaching, but if an army encircles us, simply muddling their sense of direction won't be enough to keep them at bay."

"Hold on. Wasn't the Heavenly Imperial House collaborating with Ganzheit?"

"No. At the very least, we cannot call them comrades. We weren't enemies publicly, but it would be more precise to say a conflict wasn't possible until now."

"Then why are they attacking you now?"

Yahiro tried to put things in order in his head. If Karura was telling the truth, then Ganzheit had overcome whatever discouraged war against the Heavenly Imperial House—something had changed within their organization.

"Because that man…Eusebius Berith came to Japan," Karura replied.

Yahiro and Iroha were silent for a second before exclaiming in sync.

"Eusebius…!"

"Wait, the twins' dad?!"

"Eusebius Berith is part of the warmonger faction of Ganzheit. They intend to use the power of the dragons to rule the world. The Moujuu stampede in Yokohama—they were behind Douji Yamase back then," the black Moujuu explained calmly. There was no hint of a lie or deceit in her words.

Iroha shook her head in confusion. "B-but the Galerie's Far East Branch was under attack that time. Why would he put his daughters in danger like that?"

"Wasn't it Galerie Berith who attacked the Far East Branch?"

Iroha's eyes grew wide at Karura's calm remark.

The man who attacked the Galerie in Yokohama, Andrea Berith, was an executive for the Oceania Branch of Galerie Berith.

"Eusebius didn't care who came out alive. The only thing he wanted was to show the world the threat of the dragons and cause an international catastrophe."

"…You make a good point, if that's true," Yahiro said bitterly.

Karura's reasoning was logical, but there was no proof. Believing her blindly and making an enemy of Eusebius Berith was too risky.

"I understand you can't simply trust my words." Karura shook her head with amusement. *"But why do you think Eusebius came to Japan now? You don't suspect he might be stalling you there?"*

"Stalling… You mean that's why he threw that party?" Yahiro frowned.

Eusebius Berith promised the Far East Branch a promotion and a break to reward their achievements. That was the pretext for the extravagant feast. He came across as a nice boss keeping them in mind.

However, the Far East Branch would be dissolved, and Giuli and Rosé would be kicked out of Japan. This clearly got in the way of Yahiro and Iroha's goal of meeting Karura Myoujiin and resurrecting the Japanese.

If they meant to destroy the Heavenly Imperial House, that would explain the large army sent from HQ to surround Kyoto Station.

"I suspect they mean to keep you there while they end us. The dragon medium and Lazarus are wild cards even for Ganzheit. They wouldn't want you to interfere."

"…Is House Berith trying to get rid of the Heavenly Imperial House because you want to resurrect the Japanese?" Yahiro's voice trembled.

Karura paused for a moment to think. *"I believe you can take it that way. In any case, the Heavenly Imperial House's Relict Regalia is indispensable for either resurrecting the Japanese or bringing about the worldwide genocide they want."*

"The Relict Regalia…"

"Yes. A special Relict also called a divine instrument."

Now that she mentioned it, Yahiro remembered Melora's divine instrument.

Ganzheit sent dragon medium Miyabi Maisaka just to collect the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi. They valued the divine instrument that much.

If the Heavenly Imperial House had a divine instrument on the level of the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi, that would be reason enough for Ganzheit to attack.

"But why now? I'm sure they must've had other opportunities to attack you before. Why would they wait for us

to come here?”

“The situation has changed after what happened in Yokohama,” Karura responded immediately.

Yahiro understood right away. “Sui…!”

“Exactly. Ganzheit’s warmongers not only failed to manifest Superbia, but allowed Sui Narusawa to be captured.”

Sui had tried to summon the earth dragon through Yahiro, the Lazarus she blessed, but Iroha wrecked Sui’s ploy. Ganzheit hadn’t expected that, either. Their plan failed primarily due to betrayal.

“Auguste Nathan was supposed to oversee Sui Narusawa, and he turned his back on them. This was the straw that broke the camel’s back. The warmongers lost control and were forced to take action.”

“We gotta stop wasting time reasoning all this!” Iroha shouted, unable to take any more.

Eusebius’s forces were advancing into Myoujiin territory as they spoke. They had no time to waste indeed.

“Yahiro, where’s Sui?!”

Yahiro raised his head and pondered the question. Sui was in a coma inside the life-support system in the Yáo Guāng Xīng, and the Galerie’s HQ was currently in control of the train. The warmongers could snatch Sui without breaking a sweat. Cyrille had sealed off the area around the train to get her back.

“Iroha, you stay here! Take care of Runa and Karu…that Moujuu!”

Yahiro didn’t wait for her response before jumping out of the motor home.

Runa just stared silently at him while holding the Moujuu in her arms.

7

The Kyoto Station blockade was tighter than it had been an hour prior, when they’d turned Yahiro and Iroha away.

Still, Yahiro didn’t need to worry about how to get to the platform because the moment he entered the station, the butler appeared with ten or so operators following behind. They were carrying a stretcher connected to a life-support module. Sui was on the stretcher.

“Cyrille Ghislain!” Yahiro shouted, his breath short from the running.

The operators raised their guns, but Cyrille raised a hand to stop them. He smiled at Yahiro.

“Oh, Mr. Narusawa. What is the matter?”

“You gotta ask?! What’re you doing with Sui?!”

Yahiro glanced at his sleeping sister before walking up to the older man.

“Miss Sui Narusawa will be taken to proper medical facilities. We heard that she is in a coma for unknown reasons.”

“Medical…?”

“Yes. They will give her careful treatment, so please do not worry yourself.” Cyrille’s expression remained unchanged even under Yahiro’s point-blank glare. He showed no remorse or disquiet as he continued. “Superbia’s medium is an important resource for Galerie Berith. Wouldn’t you want your sister to recover consciousness?”

“Of course. If you can be trusted, that is.”

“You can’t trust us? But we are Galerie Berith, too.”

“How can I trust you when you’re taking her away behind our backs?”

Yahiro smirked mirthlessly.

Cyrille shook his head in disbelief.

“That was not our intention. You were already informed that we would be taking over the Far East Branch’s operations, too.”

“Sui is a necessary factor in our negotiations with Karura Myoujiin,” Yahiro stated.

“We realize.”

“Myoujiin said she can resurrect the Japanese, and we need Sui’s power for that,” Yahiro revealed.

“That is wonderful. However, we are merchants in the end; we act in our own best interests—profits. Hopefully the Heavenly Imperial House can pay us more than what we would gain from handing her over to Ganzheit,” Cyrille asserted with a chilling smile.

Yahiro’s eyes grew wide and he unsheathed an inch of his katana before he knew it.

“Please don’t. You mean to become an enemy of the Galerie?” All warmth had disappeared from Cyrille’s voice.

The operators behind him were already aiming their guns at Yahiro. He may have been immortal, but receiving a

concentrated storm of bullets like this would put him down for the count. Still, Yahiro kept his hand on the katana. They couldn't shoot him while Cyrille was right in his face.

"I can't let you hand Sui to Ganzheit."

"Well… That is an unexpected request."

"Why?"

"I heard you hated Sui Narusawa."

"You got that right. I'd love to kill her here and now," he spat while lowering into a fighting stance.

Cyrille was already within Yahiro's reach. He could take Cyrille hostage to take Sui back. If he could steal one of the train's cars, worst-case, he could go to Myoujiin on his own. Decided, he kicked off against the floor.

"I can't have you taking her out of the reach of my sword!"

Yahiro drew his katana and circled around to Cyrille's side. He aimed the blade at the butler's neck, but winced. His right arm was frozen in the air. His left arm and legs were also no longer under his control.

Wires, thin like hair, invisibly bound his body.

"Stop it, Yahiro."

"Giuli…?!"

Yahiro frowned at the short girl as she appeared from the darkness behind him.

Giulietta Berith had wrapped him in wires. Her twin sister Rosé stood beside her, too. He had thought they were unconditionally on his side, but then remembered they were members of House Berith. Yahiro gritted his teeth.

"Hand over the Kuyou Masakane. Iroha's kids won't be safe if you go up against the Galerie," Rosé stated matter-of-factly.

Understanding the implications, Yahiro's blood boiled.

"You're taking them as hostages?!"

"Why do you sound so surprised? You knew our relationship with them from the very beginning." Rosé shook her head with a sigh.

Yahiro was at a loss for words.

"Excellent, Lady Giulietta, Lady Rosetta. No wonder they call you the most excellent of the sisters," Cyrille praised them apathetically. Then, he looked at Yahiro as though one would a piece of broken tableware. "What a shame, Lazarus boy. We will be detaining you."

Act 2 Rebellion

1

After being restrained, Yahiro was taken to a hotel room near the station. The ruins of a hotel, that is, abandoned for over four years since the J-nocide—but other than the dust, it was in good shape. It had a portable toilet and a bed. Not bad treatment for a prisoner.

“Bizarrely nice cell, isn’t it?” said Yahiro, looking around with his hands still cuffed.

“The Galerie doesn’t want to make an enemy of you. At the very least not when there’s still a chance of smoothing things over. The powers of a Lazarus are pretty valuable, after all,” Giuli responded.

After they captured him, she had followed all the way to the room, along with four or five operators from HQ, who were the real watchmen.

“Why did you escort me all the way into the room, anyway?”

“To make a deal. There’s no point locking you up once you get serious about escaping. Seducing you would be more effective, wouldn’t it? Oh, or would you rather have Rosy charm you?”

“Yeah. I think it’d be easier to bargain with Rosé.”

“You’re smart. Yeah, she is a sweetheart.”

“I just meant that she’s easier to understand than whatever goes on in *your* head.” Yahiro sighed, baffled by how she acted as whimsical as ever, despite having just betrayed him. A biting remark or two wouldn’t shake her, though. Yahiro cut to the chase. “Why are you getting in my way, Giuli?”

“Let me ask you first: did you really think you could leave with Sui under those circumstances? What would you do after, if you had succeeded?”

“I…” Yahiro looked away from Giuli’s serious expression.

He was sure he could get away with it if he took Cyrille hostage, but dragging around an unconscious Sui during the Galerie’s subsequent attack would have been impossible. As

much as it pained him to admit it, he'd been reckless.

"You don't have to worry about the Galerie being rough with Sui. She's special among the dragon mediums. Trust Cyrille when he said they want to treat her. Nathan trusted them enough not to do anything, right, Nathan?"

Giuli turned around to call over the Black man in a suit.

"Nathan? They got you, too?" Yahiro asked in shock.

He had wondered why he hadn't seen Nathan since the Yáo Guāng Xīng reached Kyoto, but Yahiro didn't think they had him confined. After all, the Relict Deserver could have escaped at any moment.

"Technically. The Galerie couldn't let me roam around the camp. I let myself be caught to maintain the Berith sisters' reputation." Nathan shrugged and sat down on an empty sofa in the room.

"Thanks for your understanding. Very mature of you, Nathan." Giuli smiled in satisfaction.

Apparently, she meant to monitor the both of them at once—but why? Either way, it was convenient for Yahiro. He had to tell Nathan something.

"Listen, Nathan. Karura's here."

"…I see. She used a Moujuu, didn't she? With her Regalia." Nathan nodded, unsurprised.

Yahiro was shocked to hear him reveal Karura's power where Giuli could hear him, but the girl didn't say anything; she just kept a smile on her face.

Yahiro sighed and shook his head to rouse himself. "Ganzheit's troops are surrounding the Myoujiin territory. We have to get her out of danger."

"I see."

"Aren't you worried?! You can get us out of this cage, can't you?!" Yahiro raised his voice, taken aback by Nathan's lackluster reaction.

Nathan shook his head and pulled down the collar of his shirt. He had a crude ring around his neck.

"Breaking out would be easy, and Galerie Berith knows this. You'd be too optimistic to think they wouldn't take measures against that."

"Don't tell me that's a bomb?!"

The device around his neck was as thin as a watch strap, but it should have enough power to blow his head off.

“You would be fine after a while, even if they blew off your head, Lazarus. Relict Deservers do have some regeneration capabilities, but I would not want to test this,” Nathan said without a shred of sorrow.

“Your Goreclad can’t protect you?” Yahiro suggested in confusion.

Nathan used the dragon factor to create a dragon-scale armor called the Goreclad, which was capable of deflecting bullets. Yahiro had seen Nathan using this power once before, but the Goreclad was not invincible. It was not enough to stop an explosion’s shock wave. Still, it would be better than no defense.

“I suppose it would be worth a try. That said, we aren’t in that desperate a situation in this moment. The Myoujiin barrier hasn’t broken yet, has it?”

“No. Karura said so.”

“Then there’s no reason to fret. To begin with, it is not Ganzheit’s entire force attacking the Heavenly Imperial House. There would be no reason to stall the Far East Branch with a party if that was the case.”

Nathan recrossed his legs and smirked. He’d known the party was a distraction from the very beginning.

“You mean someone is resisting the warmongers within Ganzheit?”

Yahiro remembered that Karura said the warmonger faction had their hand forced. They were in a bad spot after failing to summon Superbia and losing Sui Narusawa.

“All organizations have inner conflict between factions, and Ganzheit is no exception. Au contraire, the group has been far removed from any sense of unity or loyalty since its inception.”

“But in any case, the warmongers win if the Heavenly Imperial House falls, right?” Yahiro objected.

The faction took Sui away and captured the rebel, Nathan. Once they got their hands on the Heavenly Imperial House’s divine instrument, there would be no one to stop them. Hence why Eusebius Berith mobilized an army to destroy them without care for the losses.

“On the other hand, they would have no standing if they failed to destroy it,” Giuli interjected.

Her remark was cold and merciless, even though it concerned her father. Yahiro was surprised. “Giuli…?”

“Indeed. More precisely, if you got hold of the Myoujiin divine instrument and Sui Narusawa, the tables would turn.”

“Sui… Her again…” Yahiro clenched his fist in response to Nathan’s comment. “Why do Eusebius Berith and the Heavenly Imperial House fixate on her? What’s her deal?!”

“Heh…” Nathan chuckled at the sight of Yahiro punching the wall.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing. I just found it curious. You shared a childhood with her, yet you ask *us* that?”

“What?”

“She is a special dragon medium. Why does she keep falling into the death slumber when the other mediums don’t? Why did she kill your father? Why did she start living with you to begin with? All of this is connected, you see,” Nathan declared as though telling a riddle.

Yahiro didn’t have any answers to those questions.

“You said you needed Sui to resurrect the Japanese, didn’t you, Nathan?”

“Yes.”

“And Nina fought us to get Sui back. There’s a reason for that. A reason they want Sui back.”

“Yes. Sui Narusawa’s secret,” Nathan affirmed.

Yahiro looked devastated. He was overcome with wrath and hatred for Sui to the point that he hadn’t cared to learn anything about her, and that fact was slapping him in the face now.

“Do you know what it is?”

“Yes. I am pretty certain after investigating her. Do you want to know?”

“No… I think that’s something I should find out for myself.” Yahiro shook his head after a moment of hesitation.

He was just being stubborn. He felt it was dishonest to Sui to have an outsider divulge his own sister’s secrets.

“Good judgment. Allow me, though, to give you some help. I’ll tell you how to wake Sui Narusawa up.”

“You…you knew that all along?!” Yahiro glared daggers at him.

If they could wake Sui, there would have been no need to keep her connected to the life-support system, and they could’ve interrogated her on the way to Kyoto. However, there

was a high chance that trouble would arise on the way, and Nathan would have wanted to avoid that. A selfish decision, but not a wrong one.

“Sui Narusawa falls into the death slumber due to a shortage of dragon factor. This is because Iroha Mamana’s purifying flames burned the dragon factor she sent to you when she summoned Superbia. We simply need to compensate for it to wake her up.”

“Compensate for it how?” Yahiro asked. Nathan said it as though it was so easy.

Nathan looked at him and narrowed his eyes.

“You should know how already. By taking it from the Lazarus.”

“…You’re telling me to kiss her?” Yahiro grimaced.

To help them stop Vanagloria’s rampage, Sui asked for Yahiro to kiss her. Her request made sense now if it was meant to replenish her dragon factor.

“Be careful whenever in contact with Sui Narusawa. Ensure she doesn’t take something away from you that you don’t want to give,” Nathan warned vaguely.

Yahiro nodded.

2

“Rosé! Is it true they captured Yahiro?!”

Iroha rushed to the party venue—which was still full of the Far East Branch members—with the black Moujuu in her arms. She looked frazzled when she found Rosé under a field battle tent inside the station.

“Why?! The only ones who did anything wrong are the Galerie people who tried to take Sui away!”

“Calm down, Iroha. Giuli is with him. There’s nothing to worry about,” Rosé responded flatly.

Iroha was nearly overwhelmed by the girl’s cold stare before she started raising her voice again.

“How can I not worry?! What about Sui?!”

“She’s being isolated for treatment.”

“What?”

“She is Galerie Berith’s prisoner and a valuable dragon medium, after all,” Rosé responded as though she was reading

from a script. Then, she looked at the creature in Iroha's arm. "More importantly, what is with that black Moujuu?"

"Huh?! O-oh, this is…Nuemaru's friend… C-cute, isn't it?" Iroha looked away, trying to gloss over it.

Then, she noticed that something was off about the place. There were plates of food untouched—a pretty common feature in parties like this—but there were more unopened bottles than one would expect. The Far East Branch operators got hyped up at the beginning, but they were already sober, quietly chatting while checking their weapons as though they were getting ready to launch an attack.

"What's everyone doing?"

"They're disassembling their weapons. The Far East Branch is disbanding."

"The branch…is disbanding…?" Iroha parroted, tilting her head. The explanation didn't quite match up with the scene, but maybe it made sense to clean their trusty weapons before doing away with them. "Oh, right. You're leaving Japan."

"Yes. The Yáo Guāng Xīng will now be HQ's property. The troops left back in the Yokohama base will be going home, too."

"Everyone's leaving… The kids are going to school, too…"

Iroha sniffed, feeling a sting behind her eyes as she was reminded of the fact that she would have to say good-bye to the operators and her siblings.

"Iroha." Rosé gazed at her with an unusual show of emotion.

Iroha shook her head right away. "I'm okay! I have to help Karura resurrect the Japanese… Ah…"

"What is it?"

"Karura asked us for help. The Myoujiin territory is surrounded by Ganzheit troops, and she said it was your father who sent them…"

"…I see. So he did it."

Iroha thought for a moment that maybe she shouldn't have told Rosé, but the other girl's reaction wasn't what she expected. Rosé mulled it over with a serious look on her face, as though analyzing Eusebius's actions.

"That's sooner than expected. So he is that desperate."

"You're not surprised, Rosé?"

"I imagined something like this from the moment I heard he was in Japan. He must've dissolved the Far East Branch as a precaution."

“What do you mean?”

“He fears that Giuli and I might betray him.” Rosé smiled.

“He does? But he praised you so much, and even gave you a promotion.”

“That was just an excuse to seize the Far East Branch’s achievements. His only skill is his cunning for self-preservation.”

“R-Rosé…?”

Iroha stared at Rosé, taken aback by how critical she was of her father. It sounded as though she hated Eusebius.

“There were eighteen of us.”

“Huh?”

“The Marionetta series—that’s how many artificially created sisters we had.” Rosé placed her hand on her chest as she spoke. “Only Giuli and I survived. The rest were worked to death. The ones who were sent to hopeless battles were the fortunate bunch; there were more than a couple pairs who were forced to kill each other in the name of testing our skills. And I killed the last of them with my own hands back in Yokohama.”

“And you still work for House Berith?”

“Yes, of course. There’s no other way for us to survive.” Rosé closed her eyes. “There was no other way. No chance for revenge—until today.”

“Huh?”

Rosé’s aura changed the moment she opened her eyes again. The unexpressive, machinelike mask fell off as the light of joy filled her eyes like never before.

“Josh, tell everyone that it’s dinnertime.”

Josh raised his head in surprise, his humming cut off as he paused in cleaning his gun. “Milady…”

The next moment, his lips curved up like a predatory beast’s.

“Yes, ma’am! Everyone, listen up! Word from Milady! Our food is finally ripe for the eating!” Josh shouted as he stood up to look at everyone.

The operators went silent right away and, after a pause, they shouted with delight.

“Wh-what…? What’s going on?!” Iroha froze over as she saw the operators’ cheer.

She had no idea what was happening within the Galerie’s Far East Branch. The only thing that was clear was that they had been waiting for this moment. That they had hidden a boiling

rage within them, away from sight.



Rosé recovered her calm and joyfully sang, "*La vengeance est un plat qui se mange froid.* Revenge is most satisfying when served after you've forgotten about it, Iroha."

"Huh?"

Rosé, normally reserved, muttered with a flood of emotion:

"It is time for revenge."

3

The first change Yahiro noticed was a quake. There was an intermittent shaking like an omen before a big earthquake, but the thunderous roar that followed told him it was caused by an explosion. Someone was bombing the armored vehicles in the Galerie's camp.

"Cannon fire? No…bombs? What's going on outside?"

The hotel's windows rattled from the blast's shock wave.

The explosions filled the night sky with bright white flashes from time to time. A disaster was taking place around the Kyoto Station. One could also hear a scattered noise like rain—probably machine-gun fire.

"Sounds like Rosy began the revolt," Giuli said.

"Revolt?" Yahiro was worried, but the girl was smiling.

"The Far East Branch betrayed HQ. No, that's not the right term. We never were on that man's side."

"What?" Yahiro looked at her with confusion.

Giuli was a Galerie executive, and the owner had just praised her achievements, but now she declared the company was their enemy. How could he not be confused?

Before Yahiro could process it, gunfire sounded in the hotel hallway. The wall immediately began crumbling. The guards screamed as rubble fell over them in a shower of bullets. They were nonlethal rubber bullets, but enough to neutralize.

Yahiro was frozen in place as the attackers who defeated the guards came into the room. He yelped at the sight of them. It was Yang Wei's squad, and Iroha's siblings.

"There he is! Yahiro!"

"Ayaho, over here!"

The first to find him were Ren and Rinka. The older girl in the sailor uniform hurried behind them when she heard her name called.

“Yahiro, are you okay?!”

“Ayaho… Why are you here…?” Yahiro was bewildered by the dagger drenched with scarlet in Ayaho’s hand.

It was Ayaho’s Regalia that had wrecked the wall and taken down the operators. They were there to help Yahiro escape. He couldn’t believe that they would make such a dangerous decision on their own.

“Giulietta asked me to wait for her signal, then break through the wall of the room you were locked up in.”

“Giuli…? Why?” He glared at her.

Giuli shrugged with a chuckle. She seemed to be enjoying Yahiro’s confusion. “Nathan told you, didn’t he? There’s no loyalty in Ganzheit.”

“But your efforts were recognized. They gave you a promotion… Even Josh was happy to hear you got a bonus.”

“Josh was a cop.”

“Y-yeah?” Yahiro was taken aback by the change in topic, but Giuli paid no attention as she continued.

“Josh had this childhood friend who was drugged and locked up by a cartel. As an undercover cop infiltrating the cartel, he found her and tried to save her.”

Giuli paused and shook her head. That was enough to know how the story ended. Josh quit the police and became a PMC operator.

“You know who was behind that cartel? Eusebius Berith.”

“So Josh…joined the Galerie for revenge…?”

Josh had been friendly with Yahiro and attentive with the kids from the moment they met. Hearing about the man’s tragic past left Yahiro at a loss for words.

“Paola’s hometown was razed in a coup by an armed group Galerie sold weapons to. Wei’s brother was a politician before he was jailed on false charges and killed in prison because he tried to uncover the corruption of a minister backed by Eusebius. Everyone in the Far East Branch has been through something similar. Rosy and I gathered people like this on purpose. Including you.” She looked into his eyes. *Right?*

If Ganzheit’s warmonger faction provoked Sui to cause the J-nocide, then Giuli was right—Yahiro was also a victim of Eusebius Berith. And that would explain why they insisted on getting him to join them.

“Let’s go then, Yahiro. It’s time for revenge. We’re gonna help

Karura Myoujiin, right?”

“…All right. But what about Nathan’s bomb?”

“Bomb? Oh, you mean this?” Nathan stood up and grabbed the collar on his neck, then pulled it off before Yahiro could stop him.

“Nathan…?!”

A flash dyed Yahiro’s vision white. The sensor in Nathan’s collar activated and triggered the explosion. A blast shook the air.

Yet the shock wave was far smaller than Yahiro imagined. The explosion was contained in a sphere floating before Nathan’s eyes, then the remaining fragments fell to the floor. Only the smell of gunpowder remained.

“I can’t stop the explosion, but I can suppress the impact. I wouldn’t use this method to escape unless in the middle of a commotion like this, though. It’s too flashy,” Nathan said, like it was nothing.

“Your Regalia again… You’re crazy, man…” Yahiro sighed in bewilderment.

The power of the Relict in Nathan’s body was that of an invisible repelling barrier. He contained the shock wave of the explosion by shaping it into a sphere. He could have taken off the bomb and escaped at any moment. He simply didn’t because he found it unnecessary.

“No troubles now. Let’s go meet with Rosy,” Giuli said once the bomb was dealt with.

Yahiro nodded with a frown. Gunfire could still be heard outside the hotel, the sound of Galerie operators—humans—fighting each other.

Yahiro asked himself, could he fight a normal human? Not even a Lazarus, let alone a Fafnir soldier. Should he be taking lives when he couldn’t die himself?

Giuli read his mind and poked his back. “Don’t worry. You don’t have to kill any humans.”

“Huh?”

“HQ’s operators are all pro mercenaries. They don’t do any job outside their contracts. They were hired to fight Moujuu and rival organizations. There’s no reason for them to join a House Berith infight. Not unless they’re attacked first.”

“Then who is Rosé fighting against?”

“That man’s—Eusebius Berith’s direct subordinates. And it

sounds like that's done already."

A bigger gunshot sounded and one man on the street was blown away.

A precise sniper shot from an anti-materiel rifle. The bullet pierced the authoritative-looking man during a momentary opening as he tried to board a tank.

Naturally, it was Rosé's doing. Only she could shoot a bullet with the precision to hit in the small gap of a tank's hatch.

The fight ceased with the commander's death. HQ's operators threw away their weapons one after the other, and silence returned to the surroundings.

"Is it…over?" Yahiro muttered, worried that it seemed to end a little *too* quickly.

Even if the Far East Branch was meticulously prepared, could they really defeat HQ so easily?

Wei, who had escorted Ayaho and the kids there, responded to Yahiro's question. "There's little resistance because Eusebius himself isn't here. He is commanding the attack on the Myoujiin."

Come to think of it, there were few operators and tanks in the camp. Eusebius had already taken half of his troops to encircle the Myoujiin.

"And that's how the revolt succeeded?"

"Unfortunately, yes. We must admit that the revolt only took place because victory was assured."

"Rosé."

Rosé jumped off the building she had sniped from, holding the rifle in her arms.

"Well, our revenge is only beginning. Good job, Rosy."

"Thanks. Once we finish negotiating with the operators who surrendered, we'll go after Eusebius. You're coming, right, Yahiro?"

"Of course," he replied without hesitation.

The rest of the operators moved on to prepare for the following operation without a moment to rest. Eusebius didn't know about the twins' revolt yet. The Far East Branch would be at an overwhelming disadvantage if he noticed and called for reinforcements. They had to take care of him first. They were running against time now that the rebellion had begun.

"Yahiro!"

Iroha ran through the crowd of operators busily moving

every which way, two Moujuu following behind her. Without stopping, she threw her arms around Yahiro.

A vein appeared on Ayaho's temple and Ren and Rinka gasped. Iroha didn't notice the kids behind him and just looked up at Yahiro point-blank with teary eyes.

"Thank goodness you're okay. I was so worried…"

"Y-yeah… Good to see you're fine, too," Yahiro replied nervously, hyperaware of his contact with Iroha's surprisingly delicate body and her sweet smell.

"I had Nuemaru and Kuro with me, after all."

She let go of Yahiro and proudly picked up the two Moujuu at her feet. Suddenly, she frowned and looked around.

"So where's Sui? Is she okay?"

"No… She…"

"She isn't here, unfortunately. They already took her," Rosé responded instead. "According to the transmitter on her life-support device, she is heading in the direction of Osaka. They must be taking her to the Melora Electronics lab."

"Melora… The bunch who were researching the Relicts in Nagoya, right?"

"Yes. After Liu Ryland's failure, the research department of Melora fell under Ganzheit's control. That would be the best place to treat Sui Narusawa."

Melora Electronics was a multinational corporation from the Chinese Federation that investigated technology to artificially reproduce Relict Regalia.

They got on the Galerie's bad side after trying to steal Ayaho's Vanagloria's Relict. They had already dissolved as a company, but the technology they were researching was useful. Ganzheit went for it and bought their research division.

"Can we reach them in time?"

"Paola's squad is already following them. We're sending reinforcements, too, so they should have enough manpower," Rosé reassured Yahiro.

He was still terribly desperate, but he sighed and tried to relax.

The current priority was Ganzheit's attack on the Heavenly Imperial House. He understood the focus wasn't on Sui. There was also no guarantee that he would be able to reach them in time, so it was better to leave that up to Paola.

Then, the black Moujuu in Iroha's arms began to tremble

horribly.

“Whoa?! Wh-what happened, Karura?!”

The Moujuu left Karura’s control for a moment and tried to escape Iroha’s arms, but she held it tight. It quickly calmed, but the twins did not let Iroha’s comment slip by.

“Karura? Are you Karura Myoujiin?”

“Huh, you’re hairier than I expected. And what a big mouth you have.”

Rosé and Giuli weren’t particularly surprised as they addressed the black Moujuu.

“Not to eat you with, so don’t worry. Giulietta Berith, Rosetta Berith.” Karura concluded there was no need to hide it any longer and spoke through the Moujuu. Despite her joking response, there was a hint of anxiety in her voice. *“I would’ve preferred to introduce myself over some tea, but there is trouble.”*

“Trouble?” Rosé repeated, looking at Kuro.

The trouble must have had to do with why she lost control of the Moujuu, meaning something had affected her Regalia in the Myoujiin territory.

Karura sighed and confirmed it. *“It appears Miyabi Maisaka has joined the Ganzheit troops surrounding the Myoujiin.”*

“Miyabi Maisaka… Ira’s medium?”

“She can cancel the illusory barrier with her power to control the wind. We cannot stop Ganzheit’s invasion.”

“So there isn’t much time left before the Heavenly Imperial House falls?”

“There is some history between Miyabi Maisaka and the Heavenly Imperial House…or rather, me, personally.” Karura’s tone turned self-deprecating.

Miyabi Maisaka had said she once invaded Heavenly Imperial territory. She met Karura and went through a battle so fierce it draconized her right eye and left leg. This was the history between them. Now, with the help of Ganzheit, she had Karura cornered.

“Got it. Let’s split up, Rosy,” Giuli decided with a clap. She knew there was no time to waste.

“Yes. You take Yahiro and Iroha to the Myoujiin, then. I’ll wrap things up here in the camp before going after Sui Narusawa. Is that okay, Yahiro?” Rosé looked at him.

Honestly, he couldn’t stop thinking about Sui, but his Lazarus powers were indispensable for fighting Miyabi Maisaka.

“Okay. Take care of her, Rosé.”

Yahiro felt weird after saying that. He sounded like a brother worried about his sister.

“Let’s go, Kuro… I mean, Karura,” Iroha told the black Moujuu and smiled broadly.

Karura looked at Iroha with fascination through the Moujuu’s eyes.

4

Paola Resente found the corps transporting Sui Narusawa near the border between Kyoto and Osaka.

The university ahead had a medical facility used by Melora Electronics. Eusebius’s men meant to take Sui Narusawa to the former university site for experimentation.

“We caught up to them, ma’am,” said a big, tough-looking man.

Paola’s subordinates were mostly men too chivalrous for this day and age.

I wish they would stop calling me that, Paola thought while asking for details.

“How many?”

“Three Strykers, one of which is equipped with a medical module.”

“That’s…fewer than expected.”

“There are no more vehicles within three miles. Let’s just be grateful for this blessing.”

“Okay. Send the drone to attack, but don’t hit the one with the medical module.”

“Roger.”

Paola’s subordinate sent the orders to the AI-controlled drone, which was already airborne. It shot two explosive air-to-surface missiles that had been developed to assassinate dignitaries. Still, they were over 45 kilograms and flew at nearly 400 kph, making them capable of neutralizing armored vehicles.

The two missiles equipped with laser guides hit the two vehicles. One of them overturned. The other, at the rear, spun into the road shoulder. The center vehicle with the medical module stopped as the others were incapacitated.

Paola's armored vehicle accelerated toward the enemy squad.

"Everyone prepare for combat. Take them down," Paola commanded as she picked up her trusty rifle.

Squad Two pursuing Sui Narusawa consisted of only nine people, Paola included. Although the enemy forces were smaller than expected, they couldn't afford to let the battle drag on. Better to subdue them in the chaos from the surprise attack.

"Galerie's Far East Branch Sergeant Major Paola Resente here. Cyrille Ghislain, can you hear me?"

Paola called the enemy commander via radio while her men left the vehicle to surround them.

"Giuli and Rosé order you to disarm and surrender. We'll give you thirty seconds," she added while calculating how long it would take to encircle them.

She didn't seriously think Cyrille would surrender. She was only buying time to secure their advantage. However, contrary to her expectations, the enemy counterattacked. An operator came out of the armored vehicles with a giant gun in hand. They fired without aiming at Paola's soldiers—and they didn't fire bullets. The ground they shot at rose explosively, countless blades emerging from below.

Paola jumped off the vehicle before the blades pierced it.

"Boss!"

"I'm fine. Return fire."

Paola shot at the enemy without hesitation as soon as she stood from the cracked asphalt. Her subordinates attacked at the same time. The gunner was hit by dozens of bullets and blown away.

And yet, the operator survived. They rose like a zombie drenched in fresh blood. Lazarus-tier regeneration.

"Goodness… Lady Giulietta and Lady Rosetta have rebelled? Are you here for Sui Narusawa?"

A butler jumped down from the medical module–equipped armored vehicle. Cyrille Ghislain looked at the encirclement and shook his head.

"I am surprised at the timing, but infighting in House Berith is basically tradition. You think Monsieur Eusebius wouldn't be prepared?"

"Relict Deservers…" Paola muttered as she shielded herself behind the armored vehicle.

Their opponents were operators with the power of a pseudo-Regalia achieved by mass-producing artificial copies of the Relict. Their combat skills far exceeded those of regular soldiers. It was only natural that Galerie Berith's HQ would have obtained the artificial Relict technology after seizing Melora's lab.

Sui Narusawa's transport forces only seemed thin because they had Relict Deservers with them. Indeed, multiple. Four more operators exited the vehicle to join the first. All of them held giant handguns equipped with artificial Relicts.

"I will give you a warning. Disarm and surrender. We don't intend to hold you accountable for Lady Giulietta and Lady Rosetta's orders," Cyrille said calmly, sure of his overwhelming advantage.

Yet Paola only glared glacially back at him.

"We're not just…following orders."

"Hmm?"

"We're from the Darren Republic. Are you familiar with a place called San Cabezas?"

"Cabezas… I see, so it's a personal grudge." Cyrille sighed, unamused.

He remembered the name of the town that had been wiped off the map with the weapons they sold. The massacre there had left that big of an impression.

"Then I shall try to persuade you no more. We'll show you mercy by sending you to your fellow countrymen. Die."

"Only one dying here is you." Paola pointed her gun at Cyrille.

The Deservers guarding Cyrille all aimed at Paola and pulled their triggers. The armored vehicle would not save her and her men from their Regalia.

But the attack didn't work.

A giant explosion blew them away before it activated.

"Wha…?!" Cyrille scowled in pain under the boiling vapor.

An explosion of steam blew his underlings away. The water that had accumulated in the ditch on the side of the road boiled, expanded suddenly, and blew up.

"Yes. Just as Rosetta Berith said, artificial Relicts lack power and precision compared to the real thing."

"But don't you think their guns look kinda cool? Look at that sick shine!"

A man and a woman appeared from behind Paola, commenting casually as they regarded the Deservers thwarted by the explosion.

One was a tall boy with a serious look on his face. The other was a girl wearing a flashy school uniform. The boy shot liquified cold from the point of his Western-style sword to freeze the Deservers before they could regenerate.

“Acedia’s medium and Lazarus…! What are Sumika Kiyotaki and Zen Sagara doing here?!”

Calm disappeared from Cyrille’s face for the first time. This pair was unrelated to the Galerie; there was no reason to expect them to be here.

“What do you think? They hired us. You think we weren’t gonna help a friend in need?” Sumika replied, baffled by the question.

“I personally don’t like helping Narusawa, but I owe Iroha Mamana,” Zen grumbled.

Zen and Sumika had been pursuing Miyabi Maisaka on their own and ultimately arrived in Kyoto around the time the Far East Branch began their revolt. Somehow, Rosé had been following their movements and asked for help to take Sui Narusawa back. Zen and Sumika’s ties to her left them with no choice but to accept.

In the end, they joined Paola’s troop to face Cyrille.

“Help a friend in need…?” Cyrille glared at them in disbelief. House Berith used even its own flesh and blood as mere tools; he could not understand why they would act without regard for loss and gain.

“The twins had already considered that Ganzheit had mass-produced Relicts. Of course we would take countermeasures. Ready to die now, Cyrille Ghislain?” Paola gave one last warning.

“You guarantee my safety if I surrender?” Cyrille asked with resignation as he reached for his pocket handkerchief with his right hand.

“Of course,” Paola said while simultaneously pulling the trigger.

She aimed not for his right, but his left hand. It was obvious he was trying to call attention to his right while drawing his gun with his left. Before he could, Paola’s bullet blew it off, wrist and all.

“Y-you whore…!” Cyrille shrieked while holding his bloody left arm.

The artificial Relict–encrusted handgun fell to the ground. He tried to pick it back up, but Paola fired again.

“Giuli and Rosé said not to trust you in the slightest, Cyrille Ghislain.”

Paola’s subordinates fired in unison as soon as she finished talking.

Cyrille’s body spun in the air as dozens of bullets ravaged him.

And still he did not die. In fact, his body doubled in size as hard, reptilian scales grew over it.

“He lived… That’s no Relict…! The F-med…?!” Paola scowled as she observed the transformation.

The forbidden drug that draconized a soldier’s body by utilizing the dragon factor extracted from a medium’s blood—the Fafnir med. Cyrille took it to extend his life and obtain supernatural power.

“You…plebeians…!” Cyrille roared, baring his giant fangs.

He dashed forward, charging at Paola as soon as there was a pause in the concentrated gunfire.

“Zen!”

“I got it! *Icefall!*” Zen used his Regalia again.

He liquified the air current and manipulated it to smash into Cyrille. The butler-turned-Fafnir soldier’s body froze over until he became an ice sculpture. Still, he fought containment, determined to attack Paola.

“It’s over.” Paola put a bullet between Cyrille’s bloodshot eyes.

The butler’s frozen body was smashed to pieces at the cellular level. Not even a Fafnir soldier could survive that.

“You okay, ma’am?”

“Yes. What about our objective?” Paola asked her worried subordinate.

“We’ve secured the target, but would you mind making sure it is her?”

HQ’s operators had surrendered after Cyrille’s death. Paola’s subordinates captured them and opened the hatch of the medical module in the armored vehicle.

“Sui Narusawa. She’s still asleep?” Zen frowned. He had mixed feelings about seeing Sui connected to life support. She

was not an object of protection for him—she was a target of hatred.

However, because he had heard she was the key in resurrecting the Japanese, he could not kill her. Spitting curses at her would do nothing, either, as she was unconscious. Zen was having trouble sorting out his clashing emotions.

“We won! Gotta tell Iroha and put her at ease.” Sumika grinned and took out her phone. She snapped a picture of Sui and added a filter while Zen and Paola watched, baffled.

Then their expressions stiffened in fear. Paola didn’t need to be a dragon medium to physically feel the potent dragon aura.

“Sumika!”

“Huh?! What?!”

Zen grabbed Sumika and threw himself to the ground with her.

Paola dropped subconsciously—her instincts honed in battle told her she would die otherwise.

A thunderbolt dyed the surroundings white. The ground shook. The blast blew the armored vehicle with the medical module away, and Sui was thrown to the ground, along with her stretcher and life support.

“Argh…” Paola grimaced in pain as debris rained down on her.

Galerie Berith’s operators were equally taken down by the blast.

Paola had no idea what happened. It was as though lightning had struck, but there was no rain or storm clouds. Dust whirled madly after the blast and someone appeared from the eye of the storm. A young couple.

“Ha-ha, she’s really here. Sui Narusawa. I told you, Kaname.”

“Yes. I suppose we could trust that old man’s intel after all.”

The two of them spoke with inappropriate glee, enveloped in dense dragon aura. A gaunt, short boy and a pretty girl in a hakama skirt were relaxed enough to seem defenseless, and yet they struck fear in Paola. It was as though she was staring at a wild beast free from its cage.

“Who…are you…?” Still hunched with one knee on the ground, Paola glared at them.

The girl in the hakama glanced at the boy beside her before bowing gracefully.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Galerie Berith. Acedia’s medium.

My name is Kaname Kashima. This is Toru Natazuka. We are Tristitia's medium and her Lazarus."

"We're taking Sui Narusawa off your hands. Oh, but first…"

The boy looked at them with a languid expression that changed into an eerie, hollow smile.

"How about we take this opportunity to kill you?"

5

A bluish-white flash enveloped Toru Natazuka's body the moment he finished speaking. High-voltage lightning ripped through the air as it scattered indiscriminately.

"Sumika, come!"

"Zen?!"

Zen pulled Sumika close and unfolded all the dragon aura he could to resist Natazuka's inescapable lightning strike. He pulled a mass of water from underground and created a giant ice wall. The water on the ice's surface worked as a conductor to divert the lightning to the ground.

Zen exhaled heavily, pale in the face. He was lucky that the battle took place by a river. The pair with the water dragon's powers would have been defeated had they come across Natazuka somewhere dry.

"Oh, you blocked that? Impressive." Natazuka stared at Zen, his eyes glowing in response to the resistance. "Let's see how you deal with this, then…"

Natazuka raised his hands in front of his chest and created an electric sphere between his palms. The tremendous voltage turned the air within the sphere into plasma, taking the shape of scorching flames.

One could only imagine the amount of heat that would spread to the surroundings were this fire released.

Driven by terror, Zen launched a stream of liquified air at Natazuka. The lukewarm water spear missed Natazuka as he dodged with lightning speed.

"What was that? That's it?"

Zen was paralyzed with fear when he heard Natazuka's voice come from behind. Natazuka's movements, enveloped in lightning, were too fast for Zen's attack to keep up.

Natazuka reached his electrified arm toward Zen, who was

at a loss. Zen's ice wall would be useless if Natazuka poured the electric current into him directly. Nothing guaranteed that his Lazarus powers could regenerate his body if it burned on a cellular level. Even if he managed to survive, it would take him too long to recover.

However, Natazuka's right hand did not reach Zen's body. His whole arm was blown off at the shoulder before it could.

Paola Resente and her subordinates shot cover fire with their high-caliber anti-Moujuu rifles. Natazuka clicked his tongue while holding his razed right shoulder.

"Get rid of those pests, Kaname," he groaned as he looked at Paola's rifle.

Their fire continued, but no bullet hit him again. A powerful electric field whirled around him to divert their trajectories with electromagnetic induction.

"Very well. I shall take them on." The hakama-clad girl, Kaname Kashima, unwrapped the long weapon she held in her arms.

A jet-black *naginata*, a polearm with a beautiful mother-of-pearl inlay.

Zen and the rest were bewildered that one would try to use one naginata to fight PMC operators who were armed with cutting-edge rifles. But the next moment, Kaname launched herself with superhuman speed at the Galerie.

"Sumika!" Zen shouted. He noticed the attacking girl was aiming for her fellow dragon medium.

Sumika was ignorant in matters of battle; she could not keep up with Kaname's speed. She could only stay frozen in place, waiting to be killed, until Paola saved her. Paola stepped into Kaname's path and stopped the naginata with her rifle.

Sparks erupted at the clash, and Paola's rifle was sliced in half—too powerful a strike from what one would expect from Kaname's slight stature.

"Watch out. Stand back," Paola warned Sumika.

"Not bad, for a human." Kaname spun the naginata with the momentum of the recoil.

Paola dodged the butt-end strike coming from below while pulling out a handgun and knife. Her CQC stance was masterful. This style would compensate for the knife's short reach with her gun.

However, Kaname had the upper hand with the thunder

dragon's speed; she could easily dodge bullets, even at point-blank range.

"Ma'am!"

The naginata's blade made a shallow cut on Paola's right shoulder. Her subordinate yelled at the sight of fresh blood. The scream stole Zen's attention from where he was battling Natazuka, and the latter did not miss his chance.

"Looking away? Are you kidding me?"

"Argh?!"

Natazuka charged with lightning speed again and unleashed a flash before Zen's eyes. Zen's shocked muscles stiffened, making him unable to block. Yet, as though Zen planned this, he created a giant shock wave and an explosion of steam in an effort to at least bring it to a tie.

Natazuka was blown backward by the oppressive vapor.

"Zen?!"

"I'm…fine! What about him?!" Zen propped himself up with his sword, terrible burns all over his body.

Zen gave the explosion some directionality, and still came out injured. Natazuka couldn't possibly be unharmed.

"Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! So you can fight after all!"

Natazuka stood back up despite the foul smell of burned flesh, a smile of unbridled joy carved into his face.

"Zen, was it? You've killed, haven't you? And not just one or two people."

"Shut your mouth…" Zen's shoulders trembled at Natazuka's cutting remark.

Yes, Zen had killed before, during the intense era of the Japanese Hunt. Zen had been sheltered by a small religious organization in southern Europe and worked as a soldier there. He had given refuge to Japanese people stranded overseas, but the religious organization was run by a local criminal group. They gathered the Japanese to sell them as toys for the rich, workers in the sex industry, or organ donors.

The Japanese people Zen put his life on the line to save were tools for profit. When he found out, despair and wrath overtook him, and he swore revenge. He massacred everyone in the religious organization and took down the criminal group's top brass one by one.

Naturally, a single Japanese survivor couldn't annihilate a criminal organization. Zen would have run out of power and

died in the middle of his quest for revenge had he not met Sumika right after she awakened as a dragon medium.

These were terrible memories he could never forget.

Natazuka toyed with his pain as he cackled and asked, “What’re you mad about? Am I wrong?”

“I said shut up! What the hell do you know about me?”

“I know how fun it must’ve been. How good it felt, crushing the weak under your overwhelming power.”

“You bastard…!” Flooded with fury, Zen unleashed his Regalia.

Piping-hot steam surrounded Natazuka to boil him alive, but he escaped before the heat reached its peak.

“Zen! Don’t listen to that nut!”

“Nut…? You know we’re birds of a feather.” Natazuka had a hurt look on his face as he replied to Sumika’s attempt to calm Zen down. Then, he popped up behind Zen and whispered to him with lips curled. “Or do you think yourself a superhero?”

“—?!” Zen wavered.

He had thought himself a savior of Japanese people, but only ended up making their lives worse. The mistake left a scar deep within him that Natazuka was now gouging with precision. He struck at the Lazarus’s only weak point—his heart.

But…

“Zen…! Don’t forget you saved me, Zen!”

Sumika shouted as she witnessed tattered Zen stand against Natazuka’s fierce attack. She was only one person, but one person who was demonstrably saved by Zen’s actions. Without regard for his own life, Zen had rescued her from the brothel she had been sold to—in her eyes, he was undeniably a superhero. Her genuine feelings restored his will to fight.

Zen’s Regalia boosted its power in response to Sumika’s trust.

“Tsk. You’re stubborn. *Haah*… What a drag!” Natazuka sighed, unamused by this show of their unwavering bond.

What killed the “hero,” the Dragon Slayer, was the oath between a dragon medium and Lazarus. Once broken, it turned into a curse. The Lazaruses lost their immortality the moment they lost their dragon medium’s trust. Zen would not lose his oath to Sumika so long as he remained her hero.

Annoyed by the realization, Natazuka glared at Sumika behind Zen’s back. “Fine. I just have to kill Acedia’s medium first, then.”

Lightning enveloped Natazuka's body as he groaned. Electric Goreclad. In exchange for giving up all defense, it gave the Lazarus acceleration beyond belief.

"Stop, Natazuka!" Zen yelled as he noticed the man was aiming for Sumika.

Natazuka shook his head with a sadistic smile on his face. "No way."

Zen created an ice barrier to protect Sumika, but Natazuka broke through it with ease. Zen's Regalia wasn't fast enough to keep up with the attack. But just as Natazuka began to taste victory, his ears were greeted not by Sumika's death screech, but by Kaname's fearful cry.

"Toru!"

"Huh? What?"

Natazuka stopped for one moment, and a white flash pierced his torso.

It was a snake; a phantasm of a snake, without a real body. It had the girth of a human arm, and gnawed his side.

"What?! A snake?! What the…? Where did it…?"

Natazuka tried brushing it away with his electrified arm, but the snake squirmed before he could, as though swallowing something. In that moment, the electricity covering Natazuka's body weakened as all dragon aura left him.

"You… Sui Narusawa…?!" Natazuka turned around with a stagger.

The snake was a strand of hair.

Sui Narusawa was on the ground after Natazuka's attack blew her stretcher away. Strands of her long white hair turned into a snake, as though it had come alive. The snake cracked like a whip and pulled a chunk of muscle from Natazuka's side. All electricity surrounding his body vanished as a screech of agony escaped his throat.

"You…piece of shit! Fuck, fucking bitch!"

Natazuka fell to his knees and the white snake wrapped around him again. He tried to hit it with a lightning strike, but only a few sparks came out of his hands.

"Get away from him, you monster!" Kaname turned her back on Paola and charged at the snake with her naginata held high.

The phantasmagorical snake writhed as it released Natazuka's body, taking a huge reserve of dragon factor from the Lazarus with it.

“*Gwah*…” Natazuka spat out a clump of blood.

Kaname ran up to him and propped him up. “We’re leaving. Can you jump, Toru?”

“Fuck… You’re gonna pay…for this…” Natazuka glared vile daggers at Sui.

Sui opened her eyes and slowly stood up, unfazed by the glare.

Her characteristic red eyes looked down on bloody Natazuka with glacial scorn. The snake phantom was already gone, but the overpowering aura remained around her. Even Sumika and Zen, equal dragon medium and Lazarus, were overwhelmed.

“Guh…!”

Natazuka couldn’t move at lightning speed with his Regalia now. Kaname knew this and used her own bit of Tristitia’s power. She enveloped both of them in bluish-white lightning before running away at high speed.

Using that much power would be a huge load on her non-Lazarus body, but she had to do it to escape. Sui watched them go with an unchanging expression.

Then, barefoot, she took a leisurely step forward.

“Wait. Where are you going, Sui Narusawa?” Zen called out to her with a hoarse voice.

Sui just woke up from a coma; she shouldn’t have much energy.

And yet, Zen felt a chilling dread in the pit of his stomach.

Sui just dealt with Natazuka as if she were swatting a fly. There was no guarantee she wouldn’t do the same with Zen.

Sui looked at them with indifference, then laughed.

An array of small Ploutonions appeared around her, and Moujuu came crawling in droves from within. The Moujuu were driven by senseless ire to attack them.

“Sui Narusawa…!”

The howls of the emerging Moujuu drowned out Zen’s yell.

Sui disappeared with the mob into the dark.

Act 3 Realm of the Dead

1

Sudden rainfall dampened her white hair.

Sui Narusawa was walking through the ruins alone.

She was near what used to be Ibaraki, already over ten kilometers away from where Zen Sagara fought Toru Natazuka.

Covering such a distance should not have been possible for Sui right after waking up from a coma, but the mass of dragon factor she had stolen from Natazuka allowed her to walk through the night without a hint of fatigue.

Then Sui came to a halt. She noticed a silhouette of someone standing in the dark. It was a short old man wearing a gaudy shirt.

“A little girl like you shouldn’t be walking around in the middle of the night,” he said nonchalantly.

Instead of replying, Sui stared at the ground in front of him. The damp earth was replaced by a small Ploutonion, from which three small Moujuu emerged.

“Ho-ho-ho… Oh man, that’s scary.”

The old man remained unfazed by the sight of the howling Moujuu.

Sui’s expression changed for the first time. She noticed something was off about this man. The three Moujuu resonated with her hostility and launched a synchronous attack, but their claws did not reach him. A young man jumped out from behind his back and struck the Moujuu down with a huge sword.

“…!” Sui frowned.

The Moujuu disintegrated and were washed away by the rain. The young man who slayed them put his sword down in disinterest. Then, a young, university-aged woman walked up to Sui. Dragon aura enveloped the girl. She was a fellow dragon medium.

“Long time no seeee. We finally meet again, Sui Narusawa,” she said with a friendly double-peace sign. She had a soft, even tender vibe, but her dragon aura was powerful.

“Nina Himekawa…” Sui muttered.

Medium of Luxuria, the marsh dragon. Then the young man with the sword had to be her Lazarus, Hisaki Minato.

But Sui didn’t know the old man with them, nor why they were waiting to ambush her there.

“Let’s have a talk, yeees? I’ll get you something warm to drink, too!” Nina smiled and spoke sweetly. Then she produced a long, thin object wrapped in cloth and narrowed her eyes mischievously. “And look. We even have a real Relict Regalia.”

Nina held a rusted sword.

Sui gasped the moment she saw it, smiling so brightly it could’ve glowed in the dark.

2

The Galerie’s Far East Branch’s troop carrier ran carefully across the Sagano mountains amid a thick veil of rain and mist.

Yahiro was headed to one of the six sacred territories of the Heavenly Imperial House in Kyoto—the Myoujiin territory.

Normal people could not approach, as it was surrounded by an illusory barrier. It was not far away from Kyoto’s city, yet no one knew it existed.



However, Ira's medium, Miyabi Maisaka, had already broken through the barrier. Ganzheit's warmonger faction led by Eusebius Berith concentrated their forces around Sagano, and Yahiro's group had to move carefully to avoid alerting them.

"It seems Galerie's HQ alone has a big enough army surrounding the Myoujiin. There must be five hundred operators at minimum."

Wei placed pieces representing the enemy troops on a map while parsing the enemy's comms. The situation seemed critical, but Giuli only shook her head with a sigh.

"Oh my… They're disregarding earnings entirely. The shareholders are not gonna be happy about this."

"Not to mention they have at least four other big PMCs involved. Then there are two unidentified units; I imagine they are some country's special forces."

"Ganzheit's warmonger faction is spending everything on this operation. Facing them head-on would not be smart. They're gonna find out about our revolt soon, too. Should've blown that guy's head off when we had the chance," Giuli said, her tone making it hard to tell whether she was joking or not.

Iroha frowned with complicated feelings about her remark. "But you have a plan, right? We wouldn't be here otherwise."

"Not a *plan* plan. We're infiltrating in small numbers and snatching Karura. Simple."

"And realistic. I think it's a good plan," Karura replied through the black Moujuu's mouth.

"What about everyone else? Are we leaving them for dead?" Yahiro asked with a scowl.

Naturally, Karura wasn't the only person in the Myoujiin territory. Whisking everyone away would be impossible, but they would fall victim to Ganzheit's assault if left behind.

"If I leave the forbidden zone, no one will have any reason to stay. The Moujuu should be able to help them escape."

"The Moujuu…eh?"

"Yes." Karura stared at Yahiro.

The Myoujiin hadn't fallen despite the broken barrier because they had hidden in the deep, dark forest. The Galerie HQ operators were having a hard time fighting them on unfamiliar turf.

"Yeah, and I doubt that guy would risk it to pursue noncombatants. I think they have a fair chance of running

away as things stand now."

"Let's hope that is the case," Karura prayed in response to Giuli's composed analysis.

They realized they were being optimistic, but they had no choice but to believe. Yahiro fell silent as he picked up on the determination in Karura's voice.

"We're here. Let's go."

Karura ordered them to stop the vehicle in the middle of a mountain road surrounded by a bamboo grove.

"Here? Pretty rustic house, isn't it?" Giuli said sarcastically as she looked out the window.

"I'm sorry to say this is only the hidden passage's entrance. People in power always have an escape route in place. Betrayal and uprisings are commonplace throughout history."

"There's a path…here?" Yahiro looked around with confusion as he exited the car.

In the darkness he could see only a dense bamboo thicket and the ruins of a small shrine.

The black Moujuu escaped Iroha's arms and walked up the stone stairs to the shrine. Giuli instructed Wei and the rest to stand by, taking only Yahiro and Iroha with her to follow the Moujuu.

Karura stopped upon reaching the top of the stairs. A half-wrecked torii gate and altar remained beside the entrance of a cave that was so small it could only fit one person at a time. Two gray Moujuu stood before the entrance, blending in with the scenery.

"Moujuu?!" Yahiro reached for his sword on reflex.

They resembled small tigers. They sat before the cave like a shrine's lion-dogs, glaring at the approaching group.

"They're the passage's guards. Don't worry," said the black Moujuu under Karura's control as it approached the cave's entrance.

The two beasts guarding the cave stood up in silence to let her through. There was something solemn about the sight.

"Huh… They really protect you, just like Iroha," Giuli said as she looked up, impressed by the two Moujuu.

"I just ask them for favors. I can't do what Karura does." Iroha placed a hand on her cheek.

Her white Moujuu wasn't with them. Nuemaru stayed back at the camp with Runa to protect the kids.

“That’s not true, Iroha Mamana,” Karura objected cleanly. *“As I told you, you’ve lost most of your real power. I can only control the Moujuu because I inherited part of it.”*

“Inherited…? What, you’re part of the Heavenly Imperial House, Iroha?” Yahiro’s brow furrowed.

“Huh?! Then, we’re relatives?!” Iroha looked at the black Moujuu in shock.

“No, that isn’t it, although you could say we’re old acquaintances.”

“R-really?!” Iroha’s eyes sparkled.

Karura’s comment implied that she knew Iroha before she lost her memories. Iroha took it as such and got her hopes up. Then Karura came to a halt and sighed deeply.

“I intended to explain that to you here…but it seems we’ve already had another visitor.”

“What?” Yahiro followed the black Moujuu’s gaze and gasped.

Someone stood by the entrance, protected by the two Moujuu. She was a beautiful woman whose long forelocks covered her right eye. Yahiro recognized that face.

“Sorry, I took the liberty of entering without permission.” She smiled at Karura.

The Moujuu guards showed no intention of attacking her. They did not attack dragon mediums.

Yahiro glared at her. Why was she here?

Karura sighed and shook her head, but welcomed her.

“No, it’s fine. We know each other, after all… Ira’s medium, Miyabi Maisaka.”

3

“What is the meaning of this, Miyabi?” Yahiro asked her as he moved to guard Iroha and Giuli. “Why are you here? Did you bring Ganzheit?”

“No way. I only used Ganzheit to get near this place.” Miyabi shook her head, chuckling at Yahiro’s hostility. “I showed them half the way, but I left *some* layers of the barrier. It’ll take them a while to get here.”

“You used Ganzheit…? Why?” Iroha asked with a furrowed brow.

Miyabi had been acting under Ganzheit's orders until now. She was clearly an enemy of Yahiro's group, and she knew that, yet now she stood on her own, defenseless before them. It was basically suicide. Why did she take such a risk to enter the forbidden zone?

"It's a bit embarrassing to have someone ask that to my face, but my goal has been the same since the beginning." Miyabi smiled with self-derision. "I want to tell the truth. The truth I reached after you drove me away two years ago… Will you show me this time, Karura Myoujiin?"

"Very well. The situation is unlike back then, after all." The Moujuu in Iroha's arms spoke calmly. *"Now that the forbidden zone's master has returned, there is no reason to turn you away. And besides, she should understand quicker if we have more dragon mediums with us."*

"I see… I knew it." Miyabi nodded, her gaze stuck on Iroha.

"Huh? What do they mean?" Iroha whispered to Yahiro.

Yahiro sighed. "Don't ask me. How could I know if you don't?"

"Right… Sorry…"

"Is that something worth apologizing for?"

"As chummy as ever. I'm jealous." Miyabi smiled at the sight of Yahiro and Iroha's slow back-and-forth.

"Ah…" Iroha's lips trembled. Miyabi's Lazarus, Douji Yamase, was no longer around, and it was none other than Iroha and Yahiro who had killed him. "Miyabi… I…"

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean anything about Douji, don't worry. For starters, I abandoned him first." Miyabi narrowed her left eye mischievously. "But I couldn't allow it. I wanted the truth, and he covered it in lies to try and spread it around the world. I was not going to stand back and let him."

Yahiro felt chills run down his spine. Upon breaking the oath with the medium, the Lazarus's dragon blessing turned into a curse that ended him or her. Yamase broke his promise to Miyabi to report the truth. As a result, his power of immortality was taken from him and he died.

"What is this truth you pursued? It doesn't sound like it was just the existence of dragons," Iroha asked with a serious tone.

Ganzheit had ordered Miyabi and Douji to reveal Iroha's identity as a dragon medium to the world, but that couldn't possibly be what Miyabi was looking for.

“It isn’t, obviously. I have no interest in Ganzheit’s goals or reign. What I want to know is what we are.”

“We?”

“Yes. Nina Himekawa asked me if I remembered what happened nine years ago.” Miyabi looked at Iroha as though asking her the same question.

“Nine years ago…?”

“How old were you then? Can you remember where you were before that?”

“No… I…” Iroha shook her head weakly.

“You don’t remember?”

“No.”

“I guess it’s expected. You were too young.” Miyabi narrowed her eyes with a sense of jealousy. “But I remember. I died.”

“What?”

“I was in the middle of a news coverage when I died in the most stupid accident,” she said with a jesting tone. “I wasn’t killed. They were peaceful times. Not to say there was no war or crime, but I lived in a relatively peaceful country, in a different world from this.”

“A different…world…” Yahiro listened to her confession with a stern look on his face.

Miyabi lived in a different world and died there—an unbelievable story. Any normal person would laugh it off, and call it a delusion, but Yahiro could not doubt what she said. He already knew about the existence of a different world, a different ruined Japan that he had seen in the ancient dragon’s memories at the bottom of the Ploutonion.

“Yes. I wasn’t born in this world. Nor was Nina Himekawa. We’re all dead.”

“But… Then that means I’m also…?” Iroha asked, placing her hand on her chest to check her heartbeat.

Miyabi only stared at her in silence.

“Very interesting.” Giuli broke the silence and spoke in Iroha’s stead. “So you’re saying the dragon mediums reincarnated here after dying in a different world.”

“Reincarnated? I wonder… That is what I’m here to learn.” Miyabi looked at everyone’s faces with a meaningful stare.

Yahiro frowned as he got a bad feeling about her look of resignation.

“Kuro…?!”

The black Moujuu wiggled out of Iroha's arms and ran farther into the cave. A person emerged from the darkness and picked the Moujuu up. It was a woman with long black hair that reached down to her hips. She wore a luxurious Japanese dress—a long hakama reminiscent of the Heian era. Her coat was adorned with Garuda, the emblem of the Heavenly Imperial House.

"I believe I can answer that, Miyabi Maisaka, although I am not sure it will be the answer you seek," the woman spoke with a familiar voice.

"Karura…?" Iroha's eyes went wide.

"Yes. It is nice to meet you in person, Iroha Mamana." The woman, Karura Myoujiin, nodded. Her grin was reminiscent of a mischievous kitten.

She was far younger than they expected, around twenty years old. Her shapely face was dignified but graced with a soft expression.

"Oh no, Yahiro. She's so pretty…!"

"Why are *you* getting worked up over that?"

Yahiro sighed as Iroha hid and fidgeted behind him.

Karura's lips curved at their exchange. "I would love to welcome you with some tea, but I don't think we have the time. And I did have some wonderful snacks prepared."

"Heavenly Imperial Snacks…"

"Wipe the drool off your face. We gotta move." Yahiro hit Iroha with a soft chop on the head.

Karura couldn't contain her laughter.

"I'll get them ready while we walk. But first, let's go recover the Relict."

"The Relict? Isn't that magatama your Relict?" Yahiro stared at a big gem on Karura's chest.

It was crimson like hardened dragon blood. He could feel the gem's dragon aura even from afar. It was a real Relict Regalia, no doubt, and one as powerful as Vanagloria's, which was currently wielded by Ayaho Sashou.

"This is a Relict, but it is not the divine instrument heir of the Heavenly Imperial House. That is why I called you here. Only a real dragon medium can carry out the divine instrument," Karura said while looking at Iroha.

She couldn't leave Myoujiin territory despite Ganzheit's invasion because the divine instrument remained within it. So,

she called Iroha to the forbidden zone to entrust it to her.

“And will I find the truth I’m seeking there?” Miyabi asked, cutely tilting her head.

“Yes, most likely.” Karura nodded with a sad smile on her face. Then, she reached out to Iroha. “Welcome, Kushinada. Iroha Mamana. Mistress of the Afterlife.”

4

On the other side of the cave, Yahiro’s group reached a Shinto shrine in the *shinden-zukuri* style, similar to a noble mansion of the Heian era. Its size was far from majestic, but the vermilion-lacquered building was as elegant as the Heavenly Emperor’s palace.

The building was named “Myoujiin”—Karura’s clan had no official last name and used the residence’s name for convenience.

“I would’ve loved to give you a tour around the temple…” Karura sighed with regret as she led them.

Despite everything, she commanded her retainers to get snacks for Iroha. She was quite courteous, though one couldn’t deny the possibility that she just wanted to snack herself.

The buildings surrounding the Myoujiin’s main shrine were beautiful and magnificent, but there was no sign of people inside. It was a ghost town. The people had already evacuated the territory, leaving only Karura and a few of her retainers. Her retainers feared not for their lives as they were dedicated to serving her until the very end, and they solemnly welcomed Yahiro’s group. Karura instructed the retainers to open the door to the worship hall at the heart of the shrine. The immense wooden gate needed multiple people to open.

Purification ropes guarded the door’s surroundings, refusing anyone without proper status. Everyone understood upon seeing the gate: the Myoujiin clan existed to guard whatever was beyond.

“Karura… What is this…?”

On the other side of the door was a clearing with one round rock sitting in it. The stone was about Yahiro’s height, with a circumference well over ten meters. It was an unbelievably huge disc.

Despite its general roundness, its shape was irregular on a finer scale. It was not polished nor refined. It was a mossy, natural rock, but there was something pure and divine about its enshrinement, as though it were an altar.

“This is a lid. A seal blocking the passage between this world and the Afterlife—the *real* Ploutonion. The Ploutonions you know are but imitations of this Gate to the Afterlife.”

“This is the *real* Ploutonion?”

“Yes, but what lies below this rock is a dried Afterlife that already accomplished its role. It only holds a memory, like a fossil.” Karura looked at the rock and smiled sadly.

Yahiro knew this “Afterlife” was a name for the world opposite to theirs. It was commonly understood as the world of the dead, but that was not the essence of the Afterlife. It was an unchanging world, a space liberated from the flow of time and the law of causality.

It was a perpetual sanctuary. Yahiro had no idea what this meant, but Karura’s explanation of the Ploutonions being imitations of the Afterlife sat right with his understanding. Yahiro met the ancient dragon and a mysterious dragon medium at the Ploutonion in Nagoya, and he thought that they might be trapped in an incomplete eternity.

“We have no time. Let’s go.”

Karura approached the rock sealing the Ploutonion without hesitation. Miyabi and Giuli looked around with curiosity while following behind her.

“…Iroha? What’s wrong?” Yahiro followed a few steps behind Karura, then stopped when he noticed Iroha remained in place.

Iroha grabbed his sleeve with a trembling hand. Her eyes were wide and unfocused. He had never seen her frightened like this. “Oh no, Yahiro… I’m so scared…”

“Why?”

“I feel like we shouldn’t be here… No, more like, I don’t want to see what’s ahead,” she whispered.

The way she weakly shook her head made her look even younger than Runa. Yahiro exhaled quietly before grabbing Iroha’s hand. He looked into her surprised eyes and pulled her toward him.

“Yahiro…”

“It’s okay. I’m here. I promised I’d stay with you.”

“…Yeah.” Iroha nodded hesitantly.

Yahiro held her hand as they walked toward the entrance to the Afterlife.

Karura giggled at the sight of them. “Yahiro Narusawa… I thank you for being by Iroha Mamana’s side. Hopefully you remember what you’ve said until the very end.”

“What do you mean?”

“Hee-hee… Watch your step.” Karura ignored Yahiro’s question and climbed atop the rock.

The top was quite high up, but she seemed used to it. The rest searched for footing to follow her. Above was a small altar of piled rocks and a tree in the middle. The tree was big and twisted, probably hundreds of years old. It grew from a deep crack in the middle of the stone—which meant its roots extended below, to the bottom of the Ploutonion.

A rock was embedded into its trunk: a faded-gray jewel the size of a fist. Although unshapely, it had the general form of a magatama. This was the Relict Regalia, but it emitted no divine instrument power.

Then Karura touched it, and it changed.

“Huh?” Yahiro felt terribly dizzy at that moment.

Darkness overtook his eyesight and the giant rock at his feet disappeared. Light, sound, sense of direction, and gravity itself faded away. He was thrown into nothingness, unable to know where he was, and it didn’t stop there: he felt himself blur together with the emptiness.

Yahiro then realized that he had passed through the rock blocking the Ploutonion and was thrown into the Afterlife. This had to be the memory Karura talked about. All he could feel were the tree branches reaching from the bottom of the endless darkness, and Iroha’s presence.

The world she saw flowed into him from her hand, which he held tight. Yahiro would have been unable to comprehend the gigantic Afterlife without the dragon medium’s senses.

It was a vast space like a starry sky. The bright stars were lives. Surrounding it was a giant dragon—no, he wasn’t sure if he could call it that. The world was a boundary defined by the dragon, and at the same time, the dragon was part of the world. The dragon formed a circle by biting its tail, and time flowed within it through the tree.

Yggdrasil and Ouroboros.

The world tree and world dragon were not perceptible to

humans, and the Lazaruses were no exception, but Yahiro was able to share Iroha's dragon medium senses.

"What is this place…?!"

"The Afterlife. The root and trunk of the world. Perhaps it would be easier to understand by calling it the system that manages the world. Ganzheit calls this system 'the Corpse.' The world dragon's—Ouroboros's—cadaver."

Yahiro heard Karura's voice from afar.

At the same time, vertigo struck him.

He could still see Ouroboros, but it was no longer the overwhelming being he felt before. He was sure they were on the borderline between Life and Afterlife. Karura explained it at a level barely understandable for humans.

"The world dragon's…corpse…" Yahiro exhaled deeply as he drifted in the outer-space-like darkness.

The world humanity inhabited was born of a dragon's corpse—many populations had such creation myths. Yahiro understood then that it was the truth; or rather, part of the truth. Humans could only understand the world through such a vague image.

"This…is a dragon? And the dragon…surrounds the world…?"

"If that is how you perceive it, yes, it's a dragon. The Corpse has no physical body, naturally. This is not even a place that humans are capable of grasping to begin with."

Karura's voice became clearer as the vision of the dragon faded away. Yahiro stumbled as he felt the weight of his own body. Gravity returned. He clung to the world tree's branches to stand up and looked around.

"The world we live in is but a tiny box surrounded by the giant dragon. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to call it an illusion born from Ouroboros's Regalia."

Karura exhaled harshly, in pain. The magatama in her hand beat like a heart with a dull glow. The divine instrument showed them the Afterlife in exchange for Karura's vitality.

"I know…"

Yahiro heard a voice beside him. Iroha was pale, eyes wide as she trembled.

"Huh?"

"I know this place… I know this dragon…"

"Iroha…?!"

Yahiro held her up as she collapsed. She held her head with

both hands as her body went cold and limp, as though it was about to disappear.

“You, too, Miyabi?” Giuli stared curiously at the woman.

If Iroha knew about the world dragon because she was a dragon medium, then Miyabi should have the same memory.

However, she shook her head quietly while observing Iroha’s reaction.

“As far as I remember, this is my first time seeing this. But I understand now. As much as it pains me to admit, Nina Himekawa’s theory was right.”

“Nina’s theory?” Yahiro repeated while holding Iroha.

Iroha’s shoulders quivered. She looked at Miyabi with fear, as though asking her not to answer.

“We… That is, everyone in this world…is dead,” she said as plainly as if she was stating the solution to a riddle.

Iroha shook her head with a look of despair while Miyabi looked up at the Ouroboros filling her entire field of vision. She smiled with satisfaction.

“Nobody was alive to begin with. The world we thought to be the real one was the underworld—the land of the dead.”

5

“The world we thought to be the real one…is the underworld…?”

Yahiro stood on the branch of the giant world tree and stared at Miyabi in bafflement.

The Afterlife. Ouroboros. The giant mechanism behind the world. He felt as though he would faint under the pressure of the bird’s-eye view of this illusion. The entire world was artificial and they were puppets. It was all a tasteless corpse puppet show.

“By the land of the dead, do you mean this is hell? Are we sinners or something?”

“No. If hell is a place meant to punish the dead, it’s different from the underworld. But that doesn’t mean this is heaven…”

“Hades, Purgatory, *Yomi-no-kuni*… There are many names for it, but they are all places where the dead are sent to purify their souls from sin or regret,” Karura added to Miyabi’s answer, indirectly accepting Miyabi’s statement as true.

“We… Everyone in the world…are ghosts…?”

“You can’t believe it?”

“How am I supposed to…?!” Yahiro pursed his lips.

Yet, he could see it, in a corner of his mind. Why wouldn’t he die? Why did the Lazaruses exist?

They weren’t immortal—they were already dead. The dead don’t die again. They were just living corpses fueled by the dragon factor. That was the truth behind the Lazarus.

“So the Moujuu were born because this is the underworld?”

“Considering the theory that some people reincarnate as animals, it would make sense to say that the Moujuu are souls who lost their memory and were unable to retain human form. That also explains why they come from the bottom of the Ploutonion.”

“So the Ploutonions are portals connecting the levels of hell.” Giuli accepted Karura’s explanation casually.

Karura called the Ploutonions imitations of the Afterlife. Moujuufied souls were unable to go to the underworld or the Afterlife, and were sent to the boundary between worlds—the bottom of the Ploutonion.

“That still doesn’t make sense. If our world is the underworld, how come it’s so…lively, so earthly?”

“Are you saying the underworld is too much like the living world?” Karura wore a faint, bittersweet smile.

“Yeah. There’s good food and hunger. There are people who live in prosperity their whole life and those who suffer from poverty and illness. There’s killing between humans. If it’s just a box, a phantom created by Ouroboros, then why is it so real? Wouldn’t that only leave us with even more regret?”

“That is because someone wished for the world to be this way.”

“And who’s that busybody? God?”

“One could call her that. The Mother Goddess of Creation.”

Yahiro was shocked to hear her say that so seriously. Karura looked at the world tree with a sad look of pity. Yahiro noticed something embedded in the trunk with the Relict Regalia, coated in thick ivy.

“But she is only human. The first dragon medium, whom Ouroboros created, and who gave life to the ideal world with the Regalia. We call her Kushinada…”

Iroha’s slim shoulders quivered in Yahiro’s arms.

“Kushinada…?” he whispered hoarsely.

Yahiro remained stock-still as Iroha escaped from his arms and walked to the world tree’s trunk. She tore off the ivy covering its surface. Behind it was a piece of amber, a golden gem created from crystalized sap. It was gigantic, well over six feet in circumference.

Yahiro and Iroha were at a loss for words at the sight. Not at its size—it was small compared to the tree itself—they were shocked to see a person inside: a young girl wearing a rough *miko* vestment.

“Hundreds, maybe thousands of years ago, she was offered as a sacrifice to the Afterlife system. In exchange, she created the world we live in,” Karura said gently, like singing a song.

“We should be grateful to her. Without her, we inhabitants of the underworld would live in perpetual darkness, eating dust and mud.”

“Then why were we summoned as new dragon mediums?” Miyabi asked with suspicion.

It was the obvious question. The dragon mediums were meant to summon new dragons, but they shouldn’t be necessary if this world was created by Kushinada. Dragons already existed there.

“Too much time passed.” Karura looked at the world tree with sadness. “It is the wish created by the dragon medium and Ouroboros that is maintaining the underworld, but centuries have gone by. The dragon medium’s soul has worn out and Ouroboros’s power has decayed. So, the Afterlife looked for a new sacrifice. A fresh soul with vivid emotion and a strong wish.”



“Well, that’s a nuisance.” Miyabi frowned.

“Yes. I’m in no position to say so, but I agree.” Karura nodded with a smile.

Ouroboros eats its own tail. The circle symbolizes an endless loop: an image of eternity. As time passed, Ouroboros would destroy the old world it created and give birth to a new one. For that, it needed a sacrificial dragon medium.

“It’s the same with the Lazarus. To create a new world, one has to devour the world dragon from inside and erase the old one. This is what the power of the Dragon Slayer is meant for.”

“Oh… So that’s what Nathan meant…”

“All the Regalia, when mastered, can control the world itself.”

That’s what Nathan said, once Yahiro reached the Eight Trigrams stage of Avaritia’s power. A Lazarus who awakened their dragon powers to their full potential would eventually reach the Supreme Absolute—the world itself. That was Nathan’s real intention.

That meant that the world dragon before their eyes used to be a Lazarus—a human. And the dragon medium who blessed this Lazarus was the Kushinada—the girl offered as a sacrifice and trapped inside the world tree.

“No way…,” Iroha said with a voice so small one could barely hear it as she looked at the girl inside the amber.

She shook her head hard and pulled away more of the ivy covering the amber.

“No, you’ve got to be joking…!”

Karura, Miyabi, Giuli, and even Yahiro said nothing. They all understood why Iroha was so disturbed.

“If the Kushinada’s really a sacrifice for the dragon that created it…! If she’s fading away…! Then how come I’m here?!” Iroha yelled, her hair standing on end.

The sacrificial medium in the amber resembled a girl they knew all too well.

A beautiful girl holding a pure-white Moujuu.

It was as though Iroha was staring into a mirror.

6

Karura let go of the magatama and the air seemed to shake roughly again.

The borderline with the Afterlife was closed. They were back to standing on the rock.

Iroha was limp in Yahiro's arms, eyes closed. So shocking was the sight of the sacrificial girl, she had fainted the moment she recognized the Kushinada trapped in the amber.

Yahiro understood. Simply knowing that this world was the underworld was shocking enough, and now she was told she might have created it. How could she stay calm and composed?

Yahiro carried the unconscious Iroha from the altar. They left through the unsealed door and returned to the temple.

Karura's retainers were holding trays with hot tea and *dorayaki*. It was no time for leisurely snacking, but they had only followed Iroha's request. Perhaps it was only natural that the Heavenly Imperial House's servants would revere her if she really was the goddess of creation.

Fortunately, Iroha didn't remain unconscious for long. She woke up after tossing and turning, as if she was having a nightmare.

"How are you feeling, Iroha?" Yahiro looked down at her with relief in his gaze.

"Yahiro, I…" Iroha's lips quivered as she looked up at Yahiro with fear.

She felt she had to say something, but the words wouldn't come to her.

"Are you thirsty?" he asked with utmost gentleness.

"Ah… Yeah, a little…" Iroha nodded with some confusion at the sudden question.

Yahiro pressed a teacup into her hands. While taken aback by his forcefulness, she timidly accepted it.

"Th-thanks."

"It's nothing."

"What's that?"

"They're the snacks you were dying to try."

"O-oh."

Yahiro held a dorayaki up to her face as though feeding a baby. Iroha went with it and opened her mouth. She bit into it like a squirrel and her eyes went wide in surprise.

The snack had a flavor worthy of the Heavenly Imperial name. Iroha recovered her energy immediately and wolfed the whole dorayaki down in a flash.

"You like it?"

“Give me one more.”

“Here you go.”

Yahiro smiled at Iroha’s audacious gluttony. Maybe the sugar got her back to her usual self. The rest watched Iroha chomp on the dorayaki with curiosity, too. It was satisfying just watching her eat with such vigor. Iroha ate all the dorayaki on the tray in no time and took a sip of tea before exhaling with delight.

Then she came back to her senses and stood up in a hurry. “S-sorry, I just wasted everyone’s time…!”

“There’s nothing you need to apologize for. It’s only natural that you would be disturbed.” Karura gave her a soft smile.

“Yeah. My head’s a mess, too, knowing you’re dead,” Yahiro concurred.

While not to Iroha’s extent, Yahiro was confused seeing the Kushinada with the same face as Iroha. He could only keep his cool because she was even more panicked.

“Did you know everything from the beginning, Giuli?”

“Our bloodline has a similar legend that’s only different in the little details. I’m sure the families of Ganzheit have the same understanding, too,” she replied while side-eyeing Karura.

When he thought about it, Giuli and Rosé called Iroha “Kushinada” from the very beginning. They also told Yahiro that the dragons were behind the creation of the world. It hadn’t felt real to him, but they were telling him the truth all along.

“But you can only see the Afterlife, or, well, an illusion of it, here. That’s why Ganzheit and that man obsess over the Heavenly Imperial House.”

“So they’re after the real Ploutonion…”

“Yes, or rather, the divine instrument to open the Ploutonion. That Relict Regalia is the only key to accessing the Afterlife.” Karura looked at the altar on the giant rock.

They could close off the Ploutonion entirely by removing the magatama embedded into the world tree’s branch, hence why Karura called Iroha and Yahiro to the Myoujiin.

“What’re they trying to do with it?”

“Eusebius Berith and the warmongers want to create their ideal world. Do you remember the events in Yokohama surrounding Sui Narusawa?” Karura asked.

Yahiro nodded with a scowl. “How could I forget? I almost turned into a dragon.”

“But in the end, Superbia was not summoned. Sui Narusawa no longer has the power to create a new dragon, though we knew that since the J-nocide ended halfway through four years ago.”

Yahiro and Iroha looked at each other. It was Iroha who had stopped Sui from summoning the earth dragon, this time and four years ago. Iroha’s purifying flames burned Superbia’s dragon factor, freed Yahiro, and shaved off Sui’s dragon medium powers.

“So they were left with no option but to go after the divine instrument itself. With it, they can reach the Afterlife without summoning a new dragon. They must mean to rebuild the world there.”

“Can they do that? Isn’t it just the sacrificial medium who can create a new world?” Miyabi’s brow furrowed.

Even if they reached the Afterlife, they needed a sacrificial medium to give birth to the world dragon. Her wish became Ouroboros’s power to recreate the world.

“They have a medium. An artificial one,” Karura responded with pity and a sigh.

“Artificial…?” Miyabi blinked.

“You mean Sui?” Yahiro asked sternly.

“So you’ve realized, Yahiro Narusawa.”

“With that many hints, yeah.” Yahiro sighed bitterly.

Her hair was naturally white, unpigmented. Her body was too small and sickly for her age. She kept falling into the death slumber. Ganzheit treated her like a guinea pig and resorted to using Nina Himekawa to get her back. If Sui had been created by Ganzheit, it all made sense.

“Ganzheit created Sui Narusawa as an artificial dragon medium, and it seems to put her body under heavy duress.”

“Was my dad related to Ganzheit, too, then? That’s why she killed him?”

Yahiro’s father brought Sui home with him one day out of nowhere. She was treated like his sister, but his father never explained her past or anything about her mother.

In the end, she stabbed his father to death before causing the J-nocide.

“It is very likely that finding out about her origins drove her to kill him, but we can only imagine what really happened that day.” Karura didn’t deny his suspicion.

Iroha's and Miyabi's eyes were round in surprise, but Giuli's expression remained unchanged. She must have realized the secret behind Sui from the moment she saw her. After all, the twins were also designer babies.

"That man—Eusebius Berith—wants to get his hands on the divine instrument to reach the Afterlife and use Sui to create his ideal world," said Giuli with a sharp tone critical of her father.

Yahiro looked at her and shook his head with a sigh. "Ridiculous. He thinks Sui will listen?"

"That guy thinks he can hypnotize her or control her with drugs." Giuli shrugged with a cold smirk. She took a smartphone-sized comms device from her bulletproof jacket's pocket and looked at the screen. An emergency notice. "And speaking of Sui, it sounds like there's some trouble."

"Cyrille Ghislain got away?" Yahiro grimaced.

It would be trouble if Cyrille reached the Ganzheit warmongers with Sui asleep. There was a chance that Eusebius could take her to the Afterlife.

"No. Paola's team already caught up to and dealt with him."

"They killed him?" Yahiro furrowed his brow, wondering, *What's the problem, then?*

"Well, after that, Tristitia's medium and Lazarus showed up."

"Tristitia's Lazarus?! Natazuka?!" Yahiro growled.

A shadow fell over Karura's expression, too.

Yahiro knew how deadly Toru Natazuka was. He had seen him kill another Lazarus, Amaha Kamikita.

"Is Paola's team okay? Don't tell me…"

"They're fine. A few were wounded, but no casualties. Sui woke up and drove Natazuka away first."

"Sui woke up…?" Iroha asked in Yahiro's stead, as he was at a loss for words.

There was too much to process in such a short time.

"It sounds like they couldn't clearly communicate with her, though. After she injured Natazuka, she disappeared."

"That…doesn't sound good." Miyabi closed her eyes in an expression of concern.

Yahiro found her reaction odd. "I mean, that is trouble, but that's better than the old man getting hold of her, isn't it? And they got away from Natazuka, too…"

"Eusebius Berith isn't the only one after Sui, remember?"

“Ah… Nina…”

Iroha covered her mouth and Yahiro bit his lip.

Luxuria’s medium, Nina Himekawa, tried to snatch Sui just a few days prior. With Lazarus Hisaki Minato at her side and backed by Ganzheit, in a way, she was more trouble than Eusebius or Natazuka.

“Alfred Salas, the leader of the biggest faction in Ganzheit, is behind Nina Himekawa. They already have a divine instrument in hand.”

“What? Oh, right… Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi!” The blood drained from Yahiro’s face.

Sui could create Ploutonion, but only incomplete imitations. The Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi was different. With it, Sui could probably open a true passage to the Afterlife. Not to the one already dried and ended, but the womb to birth a new Ouroboros—the next generation’s Afterlife.

“It sounds like we really are running out of time,” Karura said gravely.

Sui already lacked the power to summon Superbia. Her reaching the Afterlife alone would change nothing.

But she had Nina Himekawa and Hisaki Minato with her. Luxuria’s Lazarus could become the vehicle to summon the dragon. Nina must have been trying to become the sacrifice to evolve Hisaki into Ouroboros, and to destroy the old underworld and create a new one. Sui would definitely help them. Destroying the world was her wish, as she hated all of it.

“Iroha Mamana, please come with me. We’re taking the magatama,” Karura said.

“…You sure?”

“Yes. A normal human could not stand the dragon factor density, but a true dragon medium like you should be able to take it away. Yahiro Narusawa, please guard her.”

Karura walked back to the rock sealing the Afterlife, and Iroha and Yahiro followed behind. Karura pointed at the magatama in the world tree’s branch, and Iroha reached out nervously.

“There are three divine instruments handed down in the Heavenly Imperial House. The mirror was used and lost four years ago in the J-nocide. Melora took the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi, and now it is in Salas’s hands. The magatama is the only divine instrument we have left.”

Iroha nodded back and grabbed the magatama. It left the world tree's branch with ease, and at the same time, the branch cracked and decayed. The leaves lost their color and broke down as the branch became dust. Karura watched the world tree's end in silence, then closed her eyes for a moment.

She raised her head and smiled as though nothing had happened.

"The Ploutonion has now lost its function. We have nothing more to do here. Let's leave."

7

When they left the shrine, the sky was a deep red.

The Sagano Forest was burning in the middle of a soft rainfall.

The fire came from the battle between Ganzheit's invading forces and the Moujuu. The ammunition and fuel leaking from the destroyed armored vehicles burned the forest's vegetation. The effects of the battle had already reached Myoujiin territory. Unending cannon fire shook the earth, and the Moujuu's howls ripped through the air, echoing all around.

The flames lit up the area like daylight, and the wind carried the nauseating smell of blood. Even Yahiro, with all his experience in battle, gasped at the disaster, which far exceeded his expectations.

"Ganzheit…! They broke through the barrier?"

"Yes, they're inside the barrier… But something is wrong. They're taking so many losses. Why would they run this risk…?!" Miyabi frowned in confusion, her eyes closed to read the flow of the wind.

Ganzheit had the overwhelming advantage after surrounding the Myoujiin territory with a big army. They could eventually break the illusory barrier if they kept advancing carefully. There was no need to hurry. But now they had lost their line of command and the troops were clearly in chaos. Now they fought a war of attrition, simply shooting the Moujuu before them without a plan.

"It's the Moujuu…," Iroha said with a trembling voice, glaring at the burning cityscape. "Ganzheit didn't break through the barrier, the Moujuu attacked them… But why…?"

“The Moujuu? Either way, there are so many of them. How many Moujuu do you need to reduce Ganzheit’s huge army to this…?”

Then Yahiro gulped. He knew of another case of a big encirclement falling instantly under a Moujuu attack. It happened half a month ago in Yokohama. The Moujuu hadn’t appeared from the Ploutonion—they were *born* there from the enemy surrounding Galerie Berith’s Far East Branch.

“Yahiro! Giuli! Thank goodness you’re okay!”

Yahiro came back to his senses at the sound of a serious voice and a diesel engine. A familiar armored vehicle cut through the flames on the road. The transport was soaked in Moujuu blood and driven by the Galerie’s operators.

“Wei?! What’re you doing all the way out here?!”

“Forcing our way through, as you can see. Ganzheit’s forces are in shambles. They can’t do anything to us at this point.” Yang Wei ran up to them, out of breath and a light machine gun in his arms. “Just get in, quick. We have to leave this place. They’re turning into Moujuu.”

“Really?”

“Yes, it’s the same as what happened in Yokohama. Ganzheit’s operators are transforming. The mountain will be full of them soon.” Wei, always calm and composed, couldn’t hide his restlessness now.

“Was that really it? But why? I didn’t feel any dragon being summoned.” Yahiro looked at Iroha, looking for an answer.

The Moujuufication in Yokohama happened because Sui tried summoning Superbia, but there was no sign of a dragon near Myoujiin. There had to be another reason Ganzheit’s operators were turning Moujuu.

“Don’t tell me it’s because we grabbed this…” Iroha looked at the magatama in her hands with fear.

Taking the Relict Regalia from the world tree on the altar closed the passage to the Afterlife, and she worried this could have also caused the Moujuufication.

“No, Iroha. This must be the effect of a new Ouroboros being born. The order of the old world is crumbling,” Karura said confidently.

Yahiro looked at her with shock. “You mean Sui did this?”

“Yes. At the very least, Sui Narusawa would be able to create a new Afterlife. She has the power to open Ploutonions and

devastated the Afterlife four years ago…”

“So Sui Narusawa has already reunited with Nina Himekawa,” Miyabi pointed out matter-of-factly.

She could be sure of it because she knew Nina had the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi. Miyabi had given it to her after stealing it from Melora in exchange for Nina’s help escaping. Yahiro had a bone to pick about that, but he couldn’t waste time protesting.

“I don’t know how long it takes for a new Ouroboros to be born, but the fact is that the world is already being affected. Ganzheit’s main faction—Nina Himekawa’s goal will be achieved at this rate.”

“Main faction?”

“Yes. Those who wish for a new world, regardless of their own fate.”

“That…doesn’t sound very good.” Yahiro ruffled his hair.

He did not hate Hisaki Minato, but he dreaded that the young man would do anything Nina wished for. Yahiro couldn’t hope he would try to stop her. Nina, too, would sacrifice anything to satisfy her curiosity. Together, they would run to the literal ends of the world if they weren’t stopped.

“What happens if Minato becomes the Ouroboros?” Iroha peered into Karura’s eyes.

She shook her head with a wry smile. “That depends on what Nina Himekawa wishes for. At the very least, you can be sure the world we live in will disappear.”

“How can we stop them?”

“Kill them. Follow Sui Narusawa and Nina Himekawa and kill both, please.”

“…!” Iroha glared daggers at the young woman’s nonchalant response; the most expected reaction, knowing Iroha.

Karura looked at Iroha with emotionless eyes. “Of course, you could also try to convince them, but considering their history so far, I find that improbable.”

“…There’s no way other than killing them?”

“Just one, but that would be even more unrealistic than trying to persuade them.”

“Tell me. What is it?”

“You could change the world before they can.”

“…Huh?” Iroha blinked at Karura’s unexpected reply.

“You can create a new Ouroboros and wish for this world to continue. That will stop its collapse—or more precisely, it would

create a future that connects to this world.”

“I…would sacrifice myself…” Iroha stared blankly at the magatama in her hands.

Karura smiled softly at her reaction. “But I think that would be impossible. You have no wish left to grant after you already created this beautiful world full of light…”

“Ah…” Iroha’s voice trembled.

She had no memories of her childhood, but if she really was the Kushinada’s reincarnation, she wished for this underworld herself. If she already created it, she had no new wish to offer Ouroboros.

Iroha’s face scrunched up like a child on the edge of tears. Yahiro pulled her forcefully toward him.

“It’s okay, Iroha. Don’t worry yourself.”

He hugged the trembling Iroha’s head and smiled at her.

Then, partly to himself, he showed a dark, ferocious grin.

“Killing Sui is my job.”

8

“Either way, we have to catch up to them first. Any clue where they might be?” Giuli asked Karura, her tone as bright as ever.

Karura shook her head again. “If they aren’t here, they have no intention of using the Myoujiin’s Ploutonion. After all, Sui Narusawa’s Regalia can create a hole to connect to the Afterlife anywhere.”

“So we gotta find the gate they used and pursue them from there.”

“Yes. It should take them a while to turn Hisaki Minato into Ouroboros, but who knows if we can reach them before it happens…”

“Maybe we should think about getting out of here alive first. It’s pandemonium out there,” said Wei while looking around impatiently.

The battle between Ganzheit and the Moujuu had intensified, with the former clearly on the losing side. Ganzheit lost forces with every Moujuufied operator, and the dreadful sight turned more operators into Moujuu. It was a cycle of defeat.

“Yeah. We’d be done for without Iroha’s blood, too,” said Giuli while placing a hand on Iroha’s left shoulder.

The Galerie's Far East Branch's operators had vaccinated themselves with an anti-Moujuufication serum made from Iroha's blood, hence why Wei and his team hadn't turned.

That said, the serum was a prototype—they didn't know how long it could last. They could not afford to be optimistic.

Still, the danger of being attacked by Moujuu was greater now than the fear of Moujuufication. They already had the divine instrument, too. There was no reason to remain in the Myoujiin territory.

"Let's move. Miyabi Maisaka and Karura, get in the car. Yahiro and Iroha, clear up the fog, please?" Giuli instructed.

Yahiro and Iroha looked at each other and nodded. They were useless fighting Ganzheit's operators, but taking on Moujuu was their job. Thanks to her power to control them, Iroha was their trump card in escaping the encirclement of Moujuufied operators.

But then, Karura objected to Giuli's instructions. "No, don't you worry about me. Just go."

"Karura…?!" Iroha looked at her in disbelief.

Karura pointed the palm of her hand at Iroha and launched bright, pure-white flames of purification that passed her and burned a Moujuu that had appeared behind them.

"They are not the Kushinada's children. They were transformed under different principles. Your voice won't reach them, Iroha."

"No…" Iroha bit her lip as she saw the Moujuu disappear in the flames.

She had been able to talk to the Moujuu because she was the Kushinada—the goddess of creation who gave birth to the Moujuu. But the mother of these Moujuu were not the sacrificial medium. They would not listen to Iroha, and she knew Karura spoke the truth.

The Moujuu who would normally not attack the dragon mediums had charged against her, and she did not notice until it was too late.

"I will contain the Moujuu. You go and break through Ganzheit's encirclement."

"And how are you going to escape…?" Yahiro asked impatiently.

"I've done my part. I will share my fate with the Myoujiin." Karura smiled peacefully.

The dozen retainers who followed her to the end welcomed her declaration with serene looks on their faces. They were prepared to die as martyrs.

“No… If your job here is done, then that’s more the reason for you not to die here! You finally got your freedom!” Yahiro drew close to her with a grave expression.

Karura carefully rolled up her right sleeve.

Yahiro gasped.

Her thin arm was clear like crystal, reflecting the flames around them. Crystallization represented the limit of adaption to the Relict Regalia.

“I’ve used too much of the Regalia, despite just being a human. It appears I will leave this world before you.”

“Karura…” Yahiro became speechless at the sight of her satisfied smile.

Karura wasn’t long for this world, and she meant to use her last moments to let them escape. And yet, there was no sadness in her face. She had fulfilled her duty. She entrusted Iroha with the divine instrument, sacrificing her own life in the process. The best thing they could do was leave as soon as possible so as to not let her determination go to waste.

“Let’s go, Iroha,” Yahiro said fiercely, to push back his hesitation.

Iroha, still biting her lip, nodded. Karura closed her eyes with contentment.

“Sorry. We’ll have to wait a little. Gotta take care of this first.” Giuli sighed listlessly while putting on her combat gloves.

Sharp wires shot out of her fingertips to pierce the Moujuu that had been lurking in their blind spot. It fell as blood spurted out of its sliced neck, and a man bathed in blood crawled out from under the Moujuu’s corpse. He was a white man wearing a suit too expensive for a battlefield. Giuli had saved him from the Moujuu attack, and yet her eyes were cold with disgust as she looked at him.

“It’s good to see you well, Father. You look dashing.”

“Rosetta… No, Giulietta…?” The bloody man, Eusebius Berith, twisted his lip at the sight of her.

He had led the Ganzheit warmongers to attack the Myoujiin territory, but his operators had turned into Moujuu and his troops were about to be annihilated. He, too, was in a predicament. Being a marquis wasn’t of any use now. Here,

Eusebius was but a powerless man.

“This indiscriminate Moujuufication on such a large scale… Is this part of your plan, Giulietta?”

“No way. I hear it’s from Ganzheit’s main faction—Salas. He got you good, Father.”

Giuli shook her head at her father’s question, and he ground his teeth loudly.

“Do not call me that, doll.”

“What a shame… I looked forward to killing you with my own hands my whole life, but now that I’m seeing you in such a poor state, I feel like I’m over it.”

“Shut up!” Eusebius yelled and pulled out a handgun.

A wire wrapped around his wrist and sliced it off before he could pull the trigger. It was all Giuli. Wei and the other Far East Branch operators were not even aiming their guns at him. They knew that he wouldn’t be able to hurt her.

“Gwoooh!” Eusebius screamed, holding his right forearm, which was spurting fresh blood.

Giuli looked down at her father kneeling in the mud and sighed tediously. “That’s for Rosy. As for my revenge, I don’t care anymore…”

Giuli turned her back on him, all interest gone. As she tried to get on the Galerie’s armored vehicle, Eusebius shouted desperately. “W-wait, Giulietta… Wait, please!”

“You stay here to feed the Moujuu. What better end for you after aiding in the J-nocide and turning so many people into them.” Giuli shot her pleading father a cold glare.

Eusebius’s face twisted in despair, and he shouted curses at Giuli, insults a father would never say to his daughter. But it didn’t last long. A Moujuu appeared from beyond the flames, annoyed by his screeching, and charged at him. Eusebius was pulled into the fire without time for one last scream. Giuli did not care to look back at him.

“You sure about this, Giuli?” Iroha asked meaningfully.

“Yeah. I feel that weight off my shoulders.” Giuli smiled.

Considering Iroha’s compassionate personality, she was protesting Giuli’s choice to leave Eusebius for dead. But he had pulled a gun on her and got his just deserts. There was no reason, nor time, to save him. Giuli’s revenge was fulfilled, clearing her grudge against her father. Now she looked forward to surviving—the silver lining.

“Let’s go, then. Ganzheit must be nearly annihilated if he ran all the way here. There’ll be more Moujuu coming,” Giuli urged.

Yahiro and the rest got in the car.

As Giuli said, countless Moujuu avalanched into the Myoujiin territory. They were new-generation Moujuu that Iroha and Karura could not control. The Galerie fired at them with the armored vehicle’s machine gun, but it did nothing but stall them a little.

Yahiro leaned out of the vehicle’s hatch and glared at the Moujuu tsunami with katana in hand. The armored car’s great firepower was not enough to break through them. Yahiro had to use his Regalia to open a path, but he felt the pressure, unsure that he would be able to take them down.

Then he saw a beautiful woman in Japanese clothes in the corner of his eye. Karura Myoujin.

“Karura…!”

She stood in front of the car and pointed her hands at the Moujuu. The gem on her chest shone dazzling crimson. The shine turned into a violent stream of fire.

The flames extended like the wings of a phoenix and engulfed everything: the Moujuu, the Myoujiin territory town, even Karura herself.

“Go, Yahiro Narusawa. Best of luck…”

He felt like he heard Karura’s impish voice right in his ear.

Karura’s flames created a path for them. The armored car’s engine roared and it accelerated through the crowd of confused Moujuu.

Yahiro looked back and saw the beautiful woman smiling in the flames.

It was the last sighting of Karura Myoujiin.

Act 4 The Hollow Desire

1

You're special, she said.

She took it to heart that she was a special dragon medium.

Tristitia's medium, Kaname Kashima, was indeed special. After all, she was the only medium not connected to Ganzheit, with the only exception being the heavenly dragon Gula's medium, who had yet to appear.

The boy Kaname blessed also had tremendous combat prowess, deserving to be called the strongest Lazarus. Kaname's role was to keep him in check and keep him under the surveillance of the Heavenly Imperial House.

Diligently, she did her part. Toru Natazuka went on a fair number of rampages, but the instances of indiscriminate killing were dramatically reduced. He was generally cooperative with the missions the Heavenly Imperial House assigned them.

It was also largely in part thanks to Natazuka being tamed that the Heavenly Imperial House was able to remain neutral with Ganzheit. Natazuka would be able to inflict lethal damage on Ganzheit's investors' forces if he got serious. Ganzheit feared him.

And the Heavenly Imperial House, too, feared him. Despite being part of a clan like the Myoujiin, his temper was too irregular. He was fickle, hedonistic, and cruel like a child who had yet to learn the value of life. At the same time, he was clever and thorough. Even without the J-nocide or his becoming Lazarus, he would have left a mark on history, whether as a hero or an extraordinary mass murderer.

Only Karura Myoujiin did not fear him.

On top of her abilities with the Heavenly Imperial House's Relict Regalia, she had the majesty of a future empress; she did not panic nor deprecate herself when facing him. Natazuka, too, seemed to like her for whatever reason. Kaname respected Karura from the bottom of her heart for being able to talk on equal terms with the monstrous Lazarus. And it was Karura

herself who had called Kaname special. Kaname's goal in life was to live up to her expectations.

And yet. And yet…

She chose not Kaname, but Avaritia's medium.

Iroha Mamana and her Lazarus were summoned to the Myoujiin and granted the divine instrument directly from Karura's hands.

"How are your wounds, Toru?"

Kaname carried warmed military rations to Natazuka. They were hiding in an old house in Kyoto. Natazuka sat on a futon as he looked up at her with annoyance. He had a terribly long sword in hand, an ancient katana with barely any curvature.

Its name: Kotofutsu-no-Mitama.

It was a Relict Regalia with Tristitia's blessings temporarily sealed within it. The Heavenly Imperial House linked it to a barrier to keep Natazuka prisoner. That said, Natazuka could sync with the power inside it and boost Tristitia's blessings. It was simultaneously binding and the ace up his sleeve.

Natazuka didn't bring out the Kotofutsu-no-Mitama frequently, however. Reason number one was that it was too unwieldy at well over six feet long. Reason number two was that he didn't find it necessary. He was powerful enough not to rely on the Relict Regalia. Yet now, Natazuka held it to his chest like a talisman as he stared into the void with darkness in his eyes.

"I'm tired, Kaname. I'm fed up with everything."

Natazuka grabbed the food with his hand and threw it into his mouth. Then he wiped his dirty hand on a bloody bandage.

The immortal boy was hurt and continued bleeding even now. Sui Narusawa had gouged a piece from his side. The wound was healing, but his Lazarus power could not keep up with the speed at which the wound kept opening. It was too deep to fully heal, like a curse.

"This wound! It stings! That Sui Narusawa bitch! She'll pay for this!"

Natazuka threw a fit like a child, scattering the unfinished food all over.

Kaname bit her lip in silence as she looked at him. Natazuka was suffering from dragon factor deficiency.

Sui Narusawa had little of it after she awoke from a long death slumber. The great volume of Superbia's dragon factor she had poured into Yahiro Narusawa was burned away by Iroha Mamana's purifying flames. She also suffered from the effects of that.

In order to refill her dragon factor, Sui stole it from Natazuka. The wound carved into him continued robbing him of dragon aura like a curse, wearing him out. The only way for him to escape this pain was to get rid of the source and kill Sui Narusawa.

He had to get a rematch to escape the suffering, and to clear the humiliation of his defeat, that much was obvious. But Kaname was confused. This wasn't how the strongest Lazarus behaved. He was no longer killing out of pure whim, attacking indiscriminately like a natural disaster—he was no longer a monster. To kill for his own benefit was the behavior of a human.

"Let's go, Kaname. Staying here is pointless."

Natazuka held his bloody side while using the sword as a cane to stand up.

"Yes…"

Kaname followed behind him, though befuddled by an emotion she hadn't felt before. Tristitia's medium was special. She could only believe that because Karura had said so, and because her Lazarus was the strongest.

But now?

If her strongest faltered…what could she believe in?

2

The first to notice and run up to Yahiro and Iroha as they returned to camp were her siblings.

"Ah, Yahiro's back!"

"Mama!"

"Iroha! You're back!"

"Kyouta! Kiri! Honoka! You all okay?"

Iroha hugged the three youngest at once.

The outside of the Kyoto Station seemed calm under the Far East Branch's control. The Moujuufication effects hadn't reached the camp.

“We’re okay. Zen protected us,” Ren, the oldest of the three, replied bashfully.

“…Zen? Zen Sagara?” Yahiro asked.

“Yeah. He’s over there.” Rinka pointed at the station.

A Japanese boy and girl in school uniforms were having a meal among the Galerie’s operators. Zen Sagara and Sumika Kiyotaki.

Sumika noticed them and waved her hand emphatically, still holding a barbecue skewer.

“Welcome back, Yahiro! Iroha!” Her short skirt bounced as she ran over to them with a wide smile on her face. “I heard you met the princess. Did you? What was she like?”

“We did. She was pretty. So pretty…” Iroha nodded with a sad smile.

Sumika needed no more to understand what was behind her reaction. She hugged Iroha quietly and gently rubbed her back like she was comforting a small child.

“Sagara, what’re you doing here?” Yahiro asked as Zen came up to them.

His skeptical tone was expected. Although it was unlikely Zen and Sumika would antagonize them at this point, he couldn’t help but feel weird about seeing them mingle so naturally with the Galerie’s operators.

“Rosetta Berith hired us to take Sui Narusawa back and to guard Paola Resente as a countermeasure against the possibility of a Relict Deserver.” Zen didn’t take offense to Yahiro’s tone; he realized he was out of place.

Yahiro frowned. “You ran into Natazuka?”

“Yeah. He’s just like they say.” Zen sighed with loathing, before putting on a serious face and lowering his voice. “But Sui Narusawa beat him like it was nothing. She’s a monster.”

“A monster…?”

“I’ll be honest, Yahiro Narusawa. I’m scared of her. It feels weird to say this to her brother, but I regret not killing her when we had the chance.”

“…Yeah.” Yahiro nodded sincerely.

Killing her would have been easy while she was in a coma. They had enough of a chance to do so.

“But who knows if we could’ve done so even if we tried.” Zen sighed with self-deprecation.

Yahiro was disturbed. He had heard she drove Natazuka

away, but he didn't expect Zen to find her so dangerous.

"Do you know where she went?" Yahiro asked to try and brush aside the fear.

Sumika answered, "Rosy said they're looking for her, but it looks like they're having some trouble. Can't be easy with all the Moujuu hubbub all over the country, I guess."

"All over the country…? It's not just Kyoto?" Yahiro raised his eyebrows and drew closer to Sumika.

Sumika took half a step back in alarm and nodded. "Uh, yeah. Not that I checked personally, but Rosy said so. Sounds like chaos over at the military bases around Kobe and Yokosuka."

"All over Japan, huh… Hopefully that's the extent of it…" Miyabi chuckled as she heard their conversation from behind the car.

Zen glared daggers at her upon noticing her presence. "What do you mean, Miyabi Maisaka? And why are you here now?"

"Whoa, calm down, Sagara. She's not our enemy. Sumika, help." Iroha panicked as Zen reached for the sword on his back but stood before Miyabi.

"I don't know, girl. She's been after us the whole time…" Sumika grimaced.

Miyabi was Zen and Sumika's enemy after she used them for her own benefit. It was hard for them to believe she was no longer against them.

Miyabi wore a look of composure and brushed aside their hostility. "Relax, I won't be messing with the dragons or the Regalia anymore. My wish has already been granted."

"And what was your wish?" Zen froze, taken aback by her comment.

Miyabi shrugged. "I wanted to tell the world the truth, but there is no truth in this fake world. That is the truth in itself."

"Fake world? What do you mean?" Zen glared at her, confused.

She looked back at him with amusement. "This is the underworld—the land of the dead. An illusion the Corpse system shows us."

"You're saying we live inside a delusion? Don't be ridiculous!"

"Sumika Kiyotaki, you should have some relevant memories as a dragon medium. That we're already dead."

“No… There’s no way… That was just…a dream…” Sumika shook her head, her voice trembling under Miyabi’s stare.

“Sumika…?” Zen was taken aback. “Yahiro Narusawa! Iroha Mamana! You accept this nonsense?! You’re not gonna say anything about that crap that everyone in the world is dead?!”

“Think, Sagara. How are we, of all people, supposed to object? We’re Lazaruses. We’ve survived death many times already,” Yahiro remarked coldly.

“But…!” Zen couldn’t find the right words to argue.

Yahiro recognized he was dead because he had died several times. How could he deny it? Zen had the same experiences. Everyone in this world was already dead, they just forgot and acted as though they were still living, continuing like it was the real world, an illusory boxed garden.

That was why the Lazaruses could revive. They weren’t special, they were simply puppets chosen for the role.

“Then what’s the point in everything we’ve done up to now? We’ve been killing corpses, getting killed by the dead?!”

No one answered Zen’s question. It was too cruel a reality, but everyone had considered it previously.

Miyabi gently said, “Even if the world is full of lies, the memories and feelings of those living here are real. That is why I’ll do my job from now on.”

“Your…job?”

“Tell the world the truth. Not my job as a dragon medium, but as a human—as Miyabi Maisaka.”

She took out her phone.

Although Japan’s communications infrastructure was wrecked, one could still access satellite internet connections. One didn’t need large-scale broadcast equipment to transmit video to the entire world. A phone was enough.

“You’re gonna tell the whole world what you just said?! It’ll be chaos!” Zen yelled.

“I doubt anyone will believe it to begin with…,” Sumika cooly pointed out.

An unexpected character denied their comments.

“No, that broadcast might be surprisingly important at this moment.” Rosé cut into the conversation as she arrived to greet Yahiro and Iroha.

“What’d you mean, Rosé?” Yahiro scowled, a bad feeling in his gut.

“Want to see what Manhattan looks like right now?” She handed him a tablet.

The screen showed a satellite news channel, broadcasting live from New York. The scenery there was unlike anything Yahiro could have expected.

Screams, gunfire, the smoke of buildings on fire, overturned cars, people running every which way. Bizarre, unnatural monsters attacked them. Moujuu.

“What the… This is happening in New York?!” Yahiro shook his head in disbelief.

Moujuu had appeared outside Japan—in New York—if the images were real. Like what happened four years before in Japan.

“Why’s there a Ploutonion in the US…?” Zen asked in bewilderment.

The feed showed a pitch-black hole on Fifth Avenue. Eerie miasma and Moujuu came crawling out of what was undeniably a Ploutonion.

“Not just the US. Central and South America as well as Canada, of course, but also Asia, Oceania, the Middle East, Africa, Europe… The same thing is happening in major cities around the world. The Ploutonions are small so far, but I expect them to grow in size and number.”

“A world-scale genocide… No, at this point, we might as well call it mass extinction,” Miyabi whispered.

Only Japanese people had died in the J-nocide four years prior, and that was enough to damage the world economy so badly it took years to recover. If the same thing happened all over the world, humanity itself could be headed to its demise.

“Did Sui do this…?” Yahiro growled.

“If she really got access to the Afterlife, it wouldn’t be odd for her to do something on a global scale like this. And I would say that this is only the beginning,” Miyabi pointed out.

The despair was solidified as the obvious was put into words.

“Where is she, Rosé?!”

“We don’t know where Sui Narusawa is yet. Ganzheit’s pacifist faction is asking all armies stationed in Japan for cooperation, but we haven’t got a clue yet.” Rosé shook her head.

Yahiro ground his teeth in silence.

They needed to find Sui to get to the Ploutonion to the

Afterlife. Otherwise, they would be wasting the divine instrument Karura gave her life to entrust to Iroha. But if not even the Galerie collaborating with Ganzheit could find her, it might be impossible. There was no better information network in Japan.

"Ho-ho! Looks like you're in quite the pickle, Yahiro."

Yahiro tensed back up reflexively at the sound of that familiar voice.

A man appeared—clearly out of place in the camp guarded by the Galerie's operators. Giuli showed the way to this old man with gray hair and an ostentatious shirt.

"Wha…?" Yahiro's throat closed up.

Even Rosé's eyes grew wide in surprise.

The old man showed no hostility. He smiled nonchalantly. "I'd be willing to sell you some intel. But it's gonna cost you a pretty penny." The old man bared his teeth with a smirk.

"What're you doing here, Ed?!" shouted Yahiro as he came back to his senses.

3

"Ed…? You know this old man, Narusawa?" Zen narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

Yahiro accepted his side eye with a disturbed sigh.

"Yeah, this guy's an informant. Professional scrooge, Eduardo Valenzuela."

Ed was a shady old man who ran a small shop on the outskirts of what used to be the city of Matsudo. He was privy to the internal situations of various PMCs and armies stationed in Japan, and sold the information to whomever would buy. Galerie Berith was but one of his many clients.

Yahiro used to be in touch with Ed while searching for Sui, and Ed gave him all sorts of jobs to pay for the info. They were mostly preposterous jobs, such as being a guide around the dangerous 23 Wards or salvaging art pieces left behind in the ruins. That was not for nothing—that work eventually led him to meet Iroha and Galerie Berith. In that sense, he owed Ed a lot.

But to be honest, he couldn't feel grateful. Ed basically scammed him with the jobs and irregular pay. Yahiro did not have a good opinion of Ed.

Then Zen objected to Yahiro's explanation.

"That's not true."

"What?"

"Narusawa, that man's name is *not* Eduardo Valenzuela," Zen growled.

Yahiro was bewildered by the other boy's reaction.

"What're you saying, Sagara? Then who is he?"

"Alfred Salas…"

Miyabi responded in Zen's stead, her voice also reflecting fear and hostility for the man.

"He's an affluent arms dealer who sold bombs in past wars. He's the chief of the Salas Foundation and board chairman of CERG, the European Organization for Graviton Research, Nina Himekawa's employer, and the leader of the neutral faction, the biggest of Ganzheit."

"Ed…is the leader of Ganzheit…?" Yahiro looked at Miyabi, then at Ed, flabbergasted. The old man didn't say anything, he only looked at Yahiro like a brat whose prank had landed. "Did you know that, Rosé?!"

"…No. It pains me to say this is the first I've heard this. We did expect him to have a powerful organization behind him, considering his intel-gathering ability, but…" Rosé spoke flatly, but with an unusual and obvious hint of annoyance. Giuli shrugged. It was the first time Yahiro saw the twins get bamboozled.

"It's nothing to get mad about, though, is it? I've helped you a lot, right?" Ed said condescendingly.

Yahiro scowled. "Helped me? You only used me!"



“Easy, easy. Let’s get back on topic. You buying or not?”

“You really know where Sui is?”

“Of course. I gave her the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi myself,” Ed confessed shamelessly.

“What the f—?!”

“Wait, Narusawa! Calm down!” Zen grabbed him by the shoulder before he could get his hands on Ed.

“Surely for a reason, Mr. Salas?” Rosé shot him a cold glare.

Ed caressed his chin. “I suppose there are many reasons. Would *‘because it was the dragon medium’s wish’* cut it?”

“The dragon medium’s? Doesn’t sound like you mean Sui Narusawa. Nina Himekawa’s?”

“Nina’s wish? What’s she trying to do?” Iroha asked while trying to calm Yahiro down with Sumika and Zen’s help.

Ed looked at her with great amusement. “You gonna cheer on the girl chasing her dreams if I tell you?”

“You son of a—!” Yahiro yelled at him in Iroha’s stead.

“Ho-ho! I’m being serious. The gate to the new Afterlife is already open. No one can stop the Ouroboros’s ring from spinning. The only question that remains is, who will dream up the new world? I believe you still have the right to that, dragon mediums.”

Ed shot a testing glance at Iroha before looking at Sumika.

“Acedia’s medium. If you wish, you could turn back time and undo the four years since the J-nocide. Your family and friends will revive, and those painful memories will disappear. How’s that sound?”

“Ha-ha, pretty nice.” Sumika cackled at the temptation.

Despite her usually cheery attitude, there was no way her life after the J-nocide was peaceful. She must have been through experiences too terrible to speak of.

Yet she laughed off Ed’s invitation to change the past.

“I would’ve been moved before, but I don’t care anymore. Don’t you think it’s lame to think about what you could’ve done and whatnot all the time? I’m not living in the past. I’m living in the present. And presently, Zen says I’m pretty and he likes me.”

“Hoh…” Ed exhaled in surprise, and apparent satisfaction. He nodded, impressed, before looking at Miyabi. She shook her head with annoyance before he could repeat the question.

“Not interested in building a world. Can’t call a reality twisted to my own convenience ‘real.’ I don’t care to move

anyone's heart doing that. I'd rather shut up and watch the world end."

"I see. Then what about you, Avaritia's medium?" He gave Iroha a naughty smile.

Iroha gasped in fear.

"What would you wish for if you could rebuild the world? A world where your kids were spared from the J-nocide and got to live in bliss with their real families? Or a new world where they become kings? Not that you'd have a place in either."

"I… I…" Iroha whispered weakly with her eyes closed.

The dragon medium could birth any world she wished for—but she would never experience it herself. Iroha would have to remain trapped in the Afterlife as the sacrificial medium to keep devoting her wish to the world dragon.

"I don't know… I'm not like Sui or Nina. I don't know how to make everyone happy. I can't decide what world would be best!"

"I see." Ed sighed with disappointment. "Then you have no right to get in Nina's way. Whatever her wish might be, she chose it of her own will."

Sumika, Miyabi, and Iroha refused to create a new world. They lacked the right to enter the Afterlife.

Ed no longer had any intention of telling them where Sui was. Although his goals were different from those of Eusebius and the warmongers, he, too, was a member of Ganzheit. He wanted a new world to be created, and Nina Himekawa was doing just that as they spoke.

"No. You're wrong, Ed." Yahiro wore a ferocious smile as he propped Iroha up. "I will make her wish come true. Tell me where Sui is."

"Yahiro…?" Iroha's eyes grew wide.

Ed raised his eyebrows in amusement.

"Giuli, Rosé, our contract is to kill all the dragons, right?" Yahiro asked the twins.

They nodded in sync.

"Yes, and we will give you and Iroha any support necessary to fulfill it."

"The contract still holds, then?"

"Obviously."

"Then that does it. Take me to the Ouroboros."

"You're going to sacrifice Iroha to make a new world?" Rosé's

brows furrowed in surprise.

Yahiro shook his head with a smile.

“No. We don’t need a new dragon medium. I’m gonna kill the world dragon. I’ll take down the Afterlife system.”

“Destroy the Corpse…huh? You realize what will happen if you do that?” Ed wiped the smile off his face and glared at Yahiro.

Yahiro glared provocatively back at him. “Yeah. It might erase all the illusions it created. The world.”

“And the world won’t be rebuilt without a new dragon medium.”

“Yup. No more worlds built atop someone’s sacrifice.”

Yahiro felt refreshed by the look of confusion on Ed’s face. It was the first time something like this had happened since he met the old man.

“Ouroboros eats its own tail, right? It represents the endless cycle of the old world falling and the new one being born. I’m gonna destroy that loop.”

“You’re saying you can free the world from the loop?”

“Not alone. But I think we’ve got a chance if Iroha wishes for it.” Yahiro smiled strongly.

Understanding filled Iroha’s wide eyes. The world had begun collapsing just because Sui and Nina reached the Afterlife because the Ouroboros was eating itself.

Yahiro had to kill the chain of autophagia. If he could kill the world dragon and keep only its corpse, couldn’t that stop the world’s collapse? That was Yahiro’s idea in simple terms. Killing the dragon that covered the whole world wouldn’t be possible, normally.

But there could be a nonzero chance if Iroha wished for it. After all, it was her past self, the Kushinada, who birthed it.

“Hoh… That’s funny. To think that shrewd weasel’s son would turn out this stupid. Maybe that would make you deserving of the Dragon Slayer title.” Ed’s lips curved cruelly as he glared at Yahiro.

“Shrewd weasel? Wait, you knew my old man?”

“Unfortunately, I couldn’t stop him from trying to use Sui Narusawa.” He sighed with what sounded like regret. “Sui Narusawa headed over to the first and biggest Ploutonion in the country. Nina Himekawa should be with her.”

“…The first Ploutonion?! The 23 Wards!”

Surprise filled Yahiro's and Iroha's eyes.

They were both very familiar with the biggest Ploutonion in Japan, which extended outward from the center of the former Tokyo Station. Sui chose the very first gate she created to use as a passage to the Afterlife.

"Why are you telling us? What's the price?" Giuli shot Ed a look of suspicion.

Ed chortled and rolled up his shirt to show a jade pattern like a tattoo on his back.

"I've lived too long. I'm tired of this world. The wishes of humans don't change much, no matter how many centuries go by."

"A Relict Regalia…?" Yahiro gasped.

The mark on Ed's back was the crystallization of the dragon factor, the mark of a Relict Deserver like Nathan and Ayaho.

The Lazarus had immortality, but not eternal youth. The same should apply to Deservers.

Still, that did not mean they had the same lifespan as regular humans. One could surmise from his comment that Ed had lived for centuries. Perhaps this was the reason he wished for the world to end.

"But when you say that you'll destroy the loop of the world, I start to think those boring days might've not been so bad. Yahiro, I want to see how you change the world."

"What a capricious old man you've been to the very end." Yahiro looked at him, flabbergasted.

Ed gave Yahiro a look of amusement as the wrinkles around his eyes grew deeper.

"Let me give you a warning. In order to destroy the world dragon, you're going to have to fight Nina to the death. Her wish cannot be granted without Ouroboros."

4

After ruffling everyone's feathers, Ed—Alfred Salas—walked off into the ruins without saying good-bye.

Yahiro felt no desire to stop him as, with complicated feelings, he watched the old man's back disappear into the night.

"So Sui Narusawa really is in the 23 Wards," a Black man in a

suit said to Yahiro.

He popped out of nowhere like always, now with a strange comms device in hand. The logo on its back read the name of Ed's shady store.

"Nathan… You called Ed here?" Yahiro glared at him.

"Is that surprising? I am a Ganzheit agent, if you recall." Nathan smiled at him.

He was Sui Narusawa's supervisor, affiliated with Ganzheit. It looked as though he had betrayed Ganzheit after handing Sui over to Galerie Berith and getting in touch with Karura, but he never explicitly said he did. In the end, he was only against Eusebius's warmonger faction, not Salas's main one.

"I thought you were with Karura."

"I did respect her. Shame about what happened." Nathan closed his eyes as if in prayer. He didn't seem to be lying, but it didn't take him long to lift his head and get back to his usual detached tone. "So, what will you do? Go after Sui Narusawa?"

"You need to ask?" Yahiro nodded right away, but there was some hesitation in his voice.

The 23 Wards were about 370 kilometers from Kyoto. Following the roads, it was 450 kilometers. It was a hopeless distance with the current state of Japan's infrastructure.

"That'd be about six hours with the Yáo Guāng Xīng at full speed, no stops. But with the Moujuu attacks and stops to switch points, that'll be a few days," Giuli said, reading Yahiro's mind.

The armored train had excellent specs, but it couldn't live up to its potential without a proper railroad. Indeed, it had taken them seven days to get to Kyoto from Yokohama. Even without the mess with the CFA, it would have taken them over three days.

"We can't use the Galerie's choppers?" Yahiro asked.

"That'd be tough with all the Moujuu activity around Japan," Giuli answered.

Nearly no one used flight routes within Japan due to the risk of flying Moujuu attacks. Although the Far East Branch owned two tilt-rotors, they would only use them over sea, where there was a low emergence ratio. The only exception was when a dragon medium was on the helicopter, as the Moujuu didn't attack them. This was how Sui and Nina had reached the 23 Wards so quickly. But now…

"Things aren't normal. I heard plenty of ships out at sea have

already been taken down. We can't be sure the Moujuu won't attack us even with Iroha on board. And, worst-case scenario, the pilots turn," Rosé explained thoroughly.

Yahiro couldn't argue.

The Galerie members had been injected with the serum made from Iroha's blood, and even without it, they had little fear of the Moujuu and the dragons as they were aware of the truth behind them. And yet, they couldn't be sure they wouldn't turn into Moujuu now that the Afterlife's influence had grown stronger. Their decision not to use the helicopters was the correct one.

"We've finished refueling the Yáo Guāng Xīng. We can leave at any time," Rosé said with a sigh.

No matter how long it took, they had no other means to reach the 23 Wards. The problem was that it was unlikely they would make it before Nina changed the world.

"Hold on. Our sponsor says they want to talk about our transport." Sumika stopped them in a hurry as they began moving to the train with an air of hopelessness.

"Your sponsor? You mean Noah Transtech?" Rosé asked with a surprised look on her face.

"Yup!" Sumika nodded as she pointed her smartphone at them.

The screen showed a middle-aged man with tanned skin and a rugged face reminiscent of a pirate.

"Hey. Long time no see, Berith twins. As pretty as ever, are we? And your chests have been developing well, I see."

The man spoke so loudly that the phone vibrated.

"What do you want, Noé Antonios Gionis? We don't have the time to deal with your vulgar jokes." Rosé glared at him.

"Oh, don't look at me like that, Rosetta. I've got good news. In return, I just ask that you give me Paola's number. What'd you say?"

"...This is not the time for jokes, Director," Zen reproved.

Noé groaned.

"Ease up a little, Zen. You're as stiff as my crotch! Also, I've told you multiple times not to call me Director, but Captain."

"Okay, Captain. Just cut to the chase, will you?" Zen sighed.

Noé shook his head dramatically.

"Fine, then. I don't know the details, but I heard you need to take your armored train to the 23 Wards ASAP, right? I can help

you with that. You are valued clients, after all."

"Help us how?" Rosé furrowed her brow.

Noé's lips curved into a smile.

"Supporting the train's operation and eliminating Moujuu and other obstructions. Also, how about I ask the international armies to assist? I think you can shorten your trip by a lot if things go well. Small potatoes if that fixes the shenanigans around the world."

"Huh. Doesn't sound bad. Please do help us. I can't give you Paola's number, but I'll ask her to dance to one song at a party."

"Ha-ha! Sounds good. So generous of you, Giuli."

Noé accepted her offer right away with a smile on his face.

Yahiro knew the name of the corporation behind Zen and Sumika: Noah Transtech. They were one of the top maritime transportation companies and took on all supply operations for the international armies and PMCs stationed in Japan.

Noah Transtech gained nothing from the collapse of the world. It was only natural that they would want to stop Nina.

"It's a deal. Give me thirty minutes. I'll get my henchmen on it."

Noé hung up as he let out a hearty laugh. Yahiro and the rest remained in silence for a few moments, overwhelmed by the man's character.

"What a guy your captain is, Sumika," Iroha said with a tight smile.

Sumika nodded with a giggle. "Yeah. But he's pretty nice. He messes with Zen all the time, though."

"Don't worry about me. Everyone, get ready to leave. Even with Noah's help, we have no ti—" Zen came to a halt in the middle of a step toward the Kyoto Station.

Yahiro noticed at the same time—the feeling of shocks running across his skin.

A piercing bloodlust. Bare malice enveloped in dragon aura emanated from the darkness.

"Phew, I caught up to you in time."

A listless, bland voice contrasted with the overwhelming aura.

It was a short, thin young man. His long, unkempt gray hair stuck damply to his cheeks. On his shoulder he carried an unsheathed straight sword, ghastly at over six feet in length.

"How mean of you to leave me behind."

"Toru Natazuka…!"

Yahiro and Zen raised their weapons on reflex.

Giuli, Rosé, and the rest of Galerie Berith's operators quickly dispersed and distanced themselves. Most of them didn't know his face, but they understood that this small man was more dangerous than any Moujuu.

"You're going after Sui Narusawa? Would you please let us join you, then?"

A girl in a hakama accompanying the young man bowed cordially.

Then she, Kaname Kashima, spun the naginata in her hands and smiled savagely.

"You're free to turn us down, but if you do…we'll have to kill you."

5

"Natazuka… What do you want with Sui at this point?" Yahiro got closer to him, katana in position.

Toru Natazuka. The strongest Lazarus.

Yahiro knew firsthand how dreadful the other Lazarus's Regalia was. The force of his wide-range electric shocks was monstrous, but the real threat was his frightening speed. There was no normal way to block the strikes he unleashed in a flash.

Running away was not an option, however. Any non-Lazarus would be killed with a single strike, so Yahiro had to step forward to get everyone else out of Natazuka's crosshairs.

Perhaps aware of Yahiro's decision, Natazuka replied casually. "You're Sui Narusawa's enemies, aren't you? Then you've got nothing to worry about. I'm just gonna kill her."

"Kill…Sui?"

"Yeah, she hit me when I was trying to save her. What a bitch. She asked for it."

"But you attacked Paola's team first!" Yahiro glared, unable to believe the young man's twisted logic.

He had figured already that Natazuka couldn't be reasoned with. Even if he was against Sui, cooperating would be impossible.

"Oh, right. There's someone with Karura's Relict here, yeah?" Natazuka ignored Yahiro's objection as he looked around. Iroha's shoulders trembled and he smirked at her. "Mind giving

it back? Kaname wants it.”

Natazuka reached his hand out to her, but Iroha stepped back in fear.

Nathan stepped forward to defend her.

Natazuka frowned, but Nathan paid him no mind.

“Kaname Kashima. Why did you take Natazuka out of the forbidden zone?” he coldly asked.

“Lady Karura left me first! She betrayed me! And all to give this random girl the Heavenly Imperial House’s divine instrument! I can’t look the other way!” Kaname screamed and glared hatefully at Iroha.

“She recognized Yahiro Narusawa as the new Dragon Slayer. By granting Iroha Mamana the divine instrument, she showed the will of the Heavenly Imperial House as a whole.”

“I can’t accept that!”

Bluish-white lightning enveloped Kaname’s naginata. Her Regalia activating subconsciously was a sign she’d lost her cool.

“You heard her, Nathan. Now get out of our way.” Natazuka swung his sword effortlessly.

Nathan blocked the shock fired by the long blade with an invisible barrier. Then, with the shrill sound of glass breaking, the barrier collapsed. The buildings around shook with the explosive shock wave and the tall man was blown backward.

Yahiro’s jaw dropped. He could not believe the power of Natazuka’s Regalia to break Nathan’s impregnable barrier with just one swing of a sword.

“Narusawa, you protect Iroha Mamana and the children! I will take down Toru Natazuka!”

Zen had activated his Regalia the moment Natazuka attacked Nathan. A pure-white stream of liquified air shot at Natazuka like a spear.

“Take me down? Are you kidding me? Know your place!”

Natazuka took Zen’s attack head-on. The high-voltage shock wave flicked off the low-temp stream and hit Zen.

“What?!”

The ice wall Zen pulled up to defend against Natazuka’s counter went up in smoke.

A dazzling flash dyed the night sky white. Natazuka was holding a nearly twelve-meter-long sword of light. The lightning itself took the form of a giant blade.

“Zen?!”

Ignoring the danger, Sumika ran up to her Lazarus as he fell to his knees, his whole body letting off steam.

The fallout of the attack was enough to blaze his whole body. That would have killed him instantly if he weren't a Lazarus. Its tremendous power pierced the Goreclad protection with ease.

"What the hell's with his Regalia?!" Yahiro growled as his hair stood on end.

The Regalia were absurd to begin with, but as a fellow Lazarus, he understood how truly preposterous Natazuka's was.

The dragon aura imbued in every one of Natazuka's attacks was on the level of draconized Yahiro and Douji Yamase.

There had to be a price to pay for using a Regalia this powerful.

"Kotofutsu-no-Mitama…" Nathan muttered as he stood up from within the debris and wiped the blood off his cheeks.

Yahiro turned to look at him. "Kotofutsu-no-Mitama? That's the name of that sword?"

"It's the Kashima family's Relict Regalia, the catalyst to bring Tristitia's blessings to full power. Right after the J-nocide, Toru Natazuka used that sword to annihilate an independent mixed brigade from Ganzheit that tried to subdue the Heavenly Imperial House. In just two hours."

Nathan said that was why Ganzheit couldn't lay a hand on the Heavenly Imperial House.

Natazuka swung the lightning blade again.

The Galerie Berith armored cars parked in the camp were sliced through like butter and exploded. The operators who couldn't get away were burned to ash without the time for a scream. This was no battle—this was a massacre.

However, the operators still put up a fight. Remote-controlled turrets rained bullets on Natazuka. Yet all of them had their trajectories redirected before they reached him.

The electromagnetic field surrounding him flicked them away.

"Damn monster…!"

Zen shot another sharp spear of liquified air. The rainy city was an overwhelmingly advantageous stage for Zen's water molecule control, yet Natazuka showed no care for his attacks. The ice that surrounded him turned to steam in the blink of an eye.

"He's boiling it with microwaves…?!"

Natazuka used electromagnetic radiation to stop Zen's attacks. The Kotofutsu-no-Mitama's overwhelming dragon aura allowed him to damage Zen's body with the lightest swings.

"Follow my lead, Sagara!"

"Yahiro Narusawa?!"

Yahiro leaped into reach the moment Natazuka swung his sword. He boosted himself with the flames around him to launch a kamikaze attack.

The purifying flames enveloping him slashed through Natazuka's electric shocks.

Zen saw the opening and charged at him, too.

"Blaze!"

"Vapor Cloud!"

Yahiro and Zen coordinated on the spot, both fully prepared to be struck themselves. The flames of purification and steam over two hundred degrees Celsius spread widely robbed Natazuka of a place to run to.

And still, he managed to avoid the attack. He moved like lightning and accelerated with the same principle of a linear motor to take himself to safety in the blink of an eye.

"Impossible…! How did he dodge that?!"

Despair spread across Zen's face as he realized the attack had failed. Yahiro was equally shocked. If their combo suicide attack didn't work, how on earth were they supposed to defeat him?

"Is that it? Eh, that's fine. I'm bored already."

Natazuka raised his sword high.

A bolt more terrific than any so far reached to the heavens. He meant to rain thunder all over the Galerie camp.

Yahiro and Zen's attack to prevent it was blown away easily by his thunder shock. The thundercloud overhead shook the air with static.

So, nobody noticed.

The other sound was too small to be heard.

"Huh?" Kaname muttered.

A hole opened in her chest. A small hole, like a stain.

Fresh blood gushed forth and dyed her chest stark red.

A handgun bullet, an object just a couple of grams in weight and with infinitely less power than Natazuka's Regalia, pierced Kaname's heart.

"Kaname…?" Natazuka whispered upon realization.

But then, a second bullet blew through Kaname's face.

The shots came from Rosé. Faint smoke rose from the barrel of her gun.

“No… What the hell…? Why did you…shoot Kaname…?” Natazuka looked at Rosé in shock.

It shouldn’t have been possible to shoot a dragon medium that easily. Not when she was under the protection of the strongest Lazarus. Yet Natazuka had moved at lightning speed to escape Yahiro and Zen’s suicide attack, leaving Kaname defenseless. Although Yahiro and Zen’s attack didn’t harm Natazuka, their efforts were not wasted.

“‘Why’? Funny question, Lazarus,” Giuli said with a sigh.

Sharp wires entangled Natazuka’s whole body as he came to a halt from the shock. Dragon mediums did not die so easily. Even though their regeneration ability wasn’t on par with a Lazarus, the dragon factor within their bodies forced their bodies to live.

But by harming Kaname, they created a blank in Natazuka’s concentration. Giuli did not waste the opportunity given to them by the strongest Lazarus.

“You should’ve been prepared to die the moment you said you’d kill us. Right, Ayaho?”

“Y-yes!”

On Giuli’s signal, Ayaho Sashou raised her dagger in front of her.

Instinctive fear struck Natazuka and he tried to run away, but he could not move at lightning speed. Giuli’s wires kept his body tied down. And then…

“Saber Hills and Blade Groves!”

Ayaho stabbed the dagger into the ground. Metallic crystal blades shot up from Natazuka’s feet and pierced his body from all directions.

6

“Ayaho…!”

Iroha ran up to her sister, who lay weakened on the ground. Ayaho breathed heavily and shook. Her face was pale.

It was only a surprise attack, but the girl had never been on the front lines before, and she had struck against the strongest Lazarus. There was no way she could keep her composure.

Still, she dealt the decisive blow to the foe Yahiro and Zen could do nothing against.

Natazuka was paralyzed in the skewer of countless blades. Natazuka's thunder shock ran through the metallic crystal blades and into the ground. Try as he might to rip himself from the Regalia's reach, Ayaho's attack never stopped. New blades grew from the ground and skewered him there.

"Gwaaaaah…!" Natazuka yelled in fury.

Iroha and her siblings propped Ayaho up as her shoulders trembled in fear. Ayaho's Relict Regalia was a remnant of Vanagloria's Lazarus, Amaha Kamikita. It was none other than Natazuka and Kaname who had taken Amaha's life. Now it was Saber Hills and Blade Groves that pinned Natazuka to the ground. Natazuka and Kaname had not known that Ayaho had become a Relict Deserver. Giuli and Rosé saw their chance for victory there. They prepared for his next attack and told Ayaho the plan.

"Fuck off! You're not taking me down…! Shitheads!" Natazuka howled, spitting blood.

He could do nothing but writhe in pain as his electric powers were rendered useless. He glared with wrath and hatred emanating from every part of him.

Still, he did not die. His Lazarus powers did not allow him to die.

The pain was not dulled, nor did he lose consciousness. He would keep suffering so long as Ayaho's Regalia remained active.

"Yahiro…"

"I know." Yahiro nodded gravely when he saw Iroha's teary eyes.

The only thing that could give Natazuka the salvation of death was Avaritia's Regalia: the flames of purification. They had to burn every bit of dragon factor in his body. There was no other way to put him out of his misery.

But the slightest mistake could free him from the bounds of Saber Hills and Blade Groves. Yahiro had to go in ready to unleash the strongest, most thorough firepower possible in case Natazuka were to attack.

"Any objections, Giuli, Rosé?"

"We can't stay here like this forever."

"It's up to you. Just be sure to show no mercy."

They gave their permission.

“D-don’t…! H-help, Kaname! Kaname! Uwaaaah!” Natazuka’s face contorted in fear at the sight of Yahiro’s Kuyou Masakane.

Natazuka had trampled on so many people with his overwhelming power, yet now the strongest Lazarus trembled in fear of death. Kaname’s gouged head twitched, and then…

“Ah…”

The girl facing up on the ground lurched from the blood puddle.

Rosé noticed and shot a rapid-fire volley. Over five bullets hit Kaname’s torso with perfect accuracy. She did not try to dodge. The bullets pierced her body and gouged her heart, yet she did not scream. The spurting blood glowed and turned into an effulgent blue thunderbolt.

Her skin was revealed through the cuts in her tattered kimono—covered in transparent scales.

“Ah… Ahh… Aaaaaaah!”

A monstrous screech escaped Kaname’s throat—the roar of a dragon. A colossal dragon aura spread and shattered the crystal blades of Ayaho’s Regalia.

“She draconized?!” Zen scowled and held his sword tight. He threw a spear of cold, liquified air at Kaname on reflex.

Kaname’s draconized body froze, and her left arm holding the naginata shattered. And still, she continued walking. Toward Natazuka.

“Dammit… Not now…!”

Yahiro accelerated with a boom and stabbed his flaming sword into Natazuka. The Kuyo Masakane easily pierced the other young man’s heart and engulfed his body in flames. Natazuka’s wounded body carbonized and began collapsing in a flash. Yahiro prayed that he could finish the job, but then…

“The sky…!”

He heard Iroha’s frightened exclamation.

The rain clouds covering the night sky whirled like a giant tornado emitting light. Then devastating thunder struck the ground.

“Gah…!”

Yahiro was blown away like a weak leaf as the direct thunderstrike dyed his vision white. The flash seared his eyes and the boom blew out his eardrums. It took him a moment to realize what had happened.

All the blood in his body boiled, and all his veins tore apart. Even the Lazaruses' regeneration could not heal him so soon after that.

Zen received similar damage. The five-meter radius around where they had stood had turned into glass from the immense heat and pressure. The heat was astounding even for a Regalia.

The Galerie's armored cars blew up one after the other, and the buildings around caught fire. Lightning crawled on the ground like a giant snake and destroyed everything it touched.

The Galerie's camp would have been wrecked in one strike had it not been for the protection of Nathan's and Ayaho's Relicts.

The destruction was brought about by a dragon.

A golden dragon wrapped in lightning circled overhead.

Kaname's half-dead body became the source—she sacrificed herself to summon the thunder dragon, Tristitia.

"It…gobbled up Natazuka…?" Yahiro groaned as he looked up at the dragon covering the city's sky.

Tristitia was about forty-five meters long. It was quite small compared to Vanagloria, but the scope and brutality of its indiscriminate lightning matched or perhaps even surpassed the mountain dragon's.

In the golden dragon's maw was Natazuka's burned, dying body. Natazuka's screaming echoed among the unceasing thunder. Tristitia chewed and tore Natazuka apart without mercy, as though saying it could not forgive that the Lazarus it blessed had been defeated.

What killed a Lazarus was the oath—the hero's oath that, upon breach, turned into a curse. Upon losing the conviction that he was the strongest, Natazuka lost Tristitia's blessings and his Lazarus powers.

"Kaname Kashima… She reached the Four Symbols? But in this state…," Nathan muttered coldly as she looked up at the golden dragon undulating in the sky.

After it finished chewing Natazuka, an even more violent dragon aura enveloped Tristitia's giant body. But then its golden body shed its scales. Tristitia's front left leg disappeared suddenly, and its right eye was crushed. Fresh blood coated in lightning spurted out of every inch of its body.

Tristitia likely wasn't fully cognizant at the moment. A massive amount of power manifested with Kaname's forced

draconization while she was in a moribund state.

The dragon's body began to lose its foundation of self and collapse. It was without a mission, without a goal to live for—only a mass of meaningless power. If the dragon lost its form, all the vast energy inside it would be freed indiscriminately across the area.

The surroundings would not survive that. The entire city of Kyoto, or worse, maybe even a radius of over twenty-five kilometers, could be burned to the ground.

"Iroha, lend me your power."

"Yeah. Let's stop them." Iroha nodded to Yahiro's call.

They needed no more words. They knew what to do. If they didn't erase Tristitia, they would not be able to catch up to Sui and stop the world from collapsing. Iroha put her hands on Yahiro's left arm as though offering a prayer. Her dragon aura flowed into him as he, too, held his sword in a praying stance.

Flames burst from their bodies up toward the thunder dragon. Tristitia twisted its body to escape the fire. Thunder struck Yahiro and Iroha, but the whirling flames absorbed it.

Avaritia's flames of purification could cancel out other dragons' Regalia. They had no recourse other than betting on this power to save the surface from Tristitia's collapse. They had to burn away the golden dragon's massive dragon aura before it rained upon the ground.

The problem was, could they pull off such a feat?

"It's not looking good." Nathan frowned, uncharacteristically uneasy.

Lightning shot along with Tristitia's roars of pain from the purifying flames. Nathan blocked the thunderstrikes with a repelling barrier while Ayaho created lightning rods to ground the electricity, but the balance couldn't keep up for long. They were only delaying the arrival of certain destruction.

"Hurry, Yahiro Narusawa! We can't hold much longer!"

"Please, Yahiro! Iroha!"

Zen and Sumika protected the station and railway with giant ice walls, but they, too, were near their limits. Even closer to her limit was Kaname—Tristitia. A fissure ran across the golden dragon's body and the spurting blood turned into lightning that rained to the ground. Yahiro and Iroha's purifying flames could not cancel it all out.

"Gu…oh…" Yahiro fell to one knee under the pressure of

Tristitia's attacks.

"We're…not gonna make it…?" Iroha exclaimed in despair.

Tristitia's contour crumbled and glowed like the noon sun dying the night sky.

The thunder dragon exploded…

Or so Yahiro and Iroha thought, when someone gently placed hands on their cheeks.

"Runa?! Why…?!"

It was a young girl with a white Moujuu.

The youngest of Iroha's siblings gently called her name.

"Mama."

The light of fire engulfed Runa's whole body. A gentle light, like the soothing spring sun. A pure-white dragon. Her eyes as she looked at Iroha nearing the limits of her energy were so tender. Like a mother's gaze looking at her grown daughter.

"Take it…back."

"Runa?!"

The white light enveloping the young girl flowed into Iroha. In that moment, power filled Yahiro's body. It was a tremendously dense dragon aura, far beyond what he had felt before. Pure-white flames engulfed the blade of Yahiro's *uchigatana*.

It looked like Natazuka's Kotofutsu-no-Mitama, but the glow of its blade and the density of the Kuyo Masakane's dragon aura far surpassed Kotofutsu-no-Mitama. This was the gap in power flowing from the dragon medium, and the moment Yahiro touched it, he understood. This was Iroha's—Avaritia's—real power.

"Burn it down, Avaritia!"

Yahiro swung the light blade and slashed Tristitia's giant body in the air. A faint glow like the moment before a candle consumed itself enveloped the golden dragon for just a moment.

That was it.

There was no grand explosion or shock wave. Tristitia's dragon aura, which seemed to cover the whole night sky, instantly burned away without a trace in Avaritia's flames of purification.

Iroha's siblings, Zen, Sumika, and the Galerie's operators stood, mouths agape, at the sudden conclusion. A little bustle came moments after, followed by an explosive ovation.

Everyone shed tears of joy and hugged each other when they realized they had survived. Even grumpy Zen blushed as Sumika embraced him.

Among all that, Yahiro and Iroha remained unable to recover from the shock.

“Runa… What are you…?” Iroha asked her youngest sister.

Runa simply looked at Iroha in silence, the white Moujuu in her arms.

Act 5 The End and the Beginning

1

Galerie Berith's armored train rushed across the tracks through the ruins.

The Yáo Guāng Xīng's living quarters and freight containers were detached, resulting in a compact, six-car formation. The lighter weight brought out the train's full potential and achieved nearly impossible speeds on its way to Tokyo.

"Ha-ha-ha! Now this is what I'm talking about! The Yáo Guāng Xīng's true power!"

Josh sat in the driver's seat. He'd stolen the regular driver's job so he could enjoy the high-speed, nonstop drive.

Captain Milo Aldiss watched him, pale in the face. "Josh, please! Respect the speed limits! It'll all be for nothing if the train derails!"

"I know, geezer. Don't you worry! Hold on tight, kids!" He glanced at the children surrounding the driver's seat as he gripped the lever.

Iroha's siblings stuck their faces to the window as they cheered, "Whoooa!" "Look at that!" "It's so fast!"

Josh, being a big train enthusiast, was delighted to see their reactions.

However, the train ride at near-derail speed was not comfortable. Even Yahiro felt dizzy despite being a Lazarus.

"Woo… It's way faster than it was on the way here. It's impressive what difference a little help makes…," Iroha said as she heard her siblings' cheering through the comms.

Noah Transtech's Noé Antonios Gionis made good on his promise. He mobilized his operators and employees and got cooperation from the international armies in Japan to get rid of the Moujuu on the tracks and switch the points ahead of time.

The Yáo Guāng Xīng reached speeds over those of sleeper trains of the past. It would take them about five hours to reach the former Tokyo Station. They should be able to get to the giant Ploutonion in the 23 Wards before dawn.

“So… You’ll explain what’s going on?” Yahiro glanced at Iroha with a serious look on his face.

Those concerned with the dragon mediums were gathered in the small meeting room in the command car: Yahiro and Iroha; Giuli and Rosé; Zen; Sumika; Miyabi Maisaka; Ayaho and Auguste Nathan; as well as Runa with Nuemaru in her arms, too.

“Yeah. It’s okay. I remembered everything about me…and about Runa.” Iroha nodded firmly.

After they defeated Tristitia with the pure-white flames, Iroha had clung to Runa and wailed. She cried herself to sleep.

Now the commotion had passed and she had a clear look on her face. She even looked happy. Basically, she was back to her normal self.

“Runa was also a dragon medium?” Yahiro looked at the two girls sitting beside each other.

Iroha gave a surprising answer. “You see, Runa is my mom.”

She said this with pride, her eyes shining brightly. Silence filled the room.

“Wha?”

“Huh? And that’s it?”

Yahiro and Ayaho said after about ten seconds, at the same time.

Iroha frowned at their cold reaction. “Yes. She gave birth to me. I mean, not like, actually give birth, but she was supposed to give birth to me later on. Something went wrong when we got our lives as dragon mediums, and I ended up her senior.”

Iroha spoke rapidly with her chest puffed out and a smirk on her face.

“Sorry, Iroha, I don’t understand a word you’re saying.” Ayaho furrowed her brow.

“Can you be any worse at explaining things?” Yahiro sighed.

“Hey! But I’m just stating the facts!” Iroha puffed out her cheeks, exasperated.

Then Nathan, leaning on the wall, nodded with understanding, somehow.

“I see. So that’s how it is. You mean that there were two Kushinadas.”

“Huh? Nathan, you could parse what she said?”

“How in the world…?!”

Ayaho and Yahiro looked flabbergasted while Iroha pumped

her fist in victory. Zen and Sumika were equally confused. On the other hand, Giuli and Rosé seemed to understand after hearing what Nathan said.

"This world is a sort of virtual reality produced by the Ouroboros's Regalia, and its inhabitants are the souls of those who died in the world of the living. That is the Heavenly Imperial House's legend, right?" Nathan took over explaining things so the rest could keep up.

"Yes. That is what Karura Myoujiin said," Miyabi answered.

Yahiro and Giuli nodded in agreement. The people of this world had already experienced death, which was why it was called the underworld.

"Seeing as how the Regalia are born from people's wishes, the Ouroboros's power is limited, so one must create a new one before the old one's power runs out and it eats itself. That is this world's system. Is my understanding right, Runa Senou?" Nathan asked quietly.

He spoke thoroughly and without dumbing it down, like he was speaking to an adult.

Runa showed no confusion at his treatment and responded succinctly. "Yes. That is how I created the current world."

"Runa…?!" Ayaho looked at her with bewilderment.

Yahiro's eyes grew wide, too. If it was Runa, not Iroha, who created this world, then she was the real Kushinada.

"So it was you in the Afterlife, not Iroha?"

The girl inside the world tree's amber had Iroha's face. They naturally thought that Iroha was the sacrificial medium.

But looking at her closely now, Runa did have similar features to that girl. They never thought much of it since they called themselves sisters, but Iroha and Runa really resembled one another.

"Hold on. Then what are *you*?" Yahiro looked at Iroha with suspicion.

Even if Runa was the Kushinada, that didn't change the fact that they all looked similar—not to mention Iroha could also communicate with the Moujuu like the Kushinada.

"Huh? I told you, I'm her daughter." Iroha pursed her lips.

"Her daughter?"

"Yup. Runa's my mom. I was with her in the Afterlife the whole time."

"Wait… You mean that dog…?"

Yahiro slapped his knee as he remembered the white animal inside the amber with the Kushinada.

“Yep, ye—Wait, no! How?! That’s obviously Nuemaru!” Iroha shouted.

But there was nothing else there, Yahiro thought.

“There’s one more possibility. Think.”

“What possibility?”

“That the Kushinada was pregnant,” Rosé cut in, wanting to move the conversation forward already.

“Ah…” Ayaho covered her mouth with both hands.

Miyabi said nothing, but she was clearly just as surprised.

“Runa’s…pregnant?!” Yahiro felt like he had been punched in the face.

“Wait, that’s illegal,” Sumika whispered.

She didn’t know that the Kushinada inside the ember was closer to Iroha’s age; it wouldn’t be unnatural for her to be pregnant, especially if she was from an older time.

Even so, it was impossible not to feel weird about it, knowing the current Runa.

“And the father? Oh…the Lazarus that became the Ouroboros?!”

“Heh-heh-heh. In conclusion, I am the daughter of the goddess of creation and the world dragon,” Iroha bragged, pointing her nose at the ceiling.

Apparently, that was why she looked so merry. She had never had a family. No matter who they turned out to be, finally knowing her parents was worth smiling ear to ear over.

“Whoa, no way! Doesn’t that make you a goddess, too?!” Sumika took it at face value and sincerely commended her.

“Right?! Take a picture while you can, it’s gonna be worth a fortune.”

Iroha and Sumika began a photo session while taking “godly poses.”

Yahiro sighed. It was impossible to believe they were on the brink of the end of the world. “I don’t care about Iroha right now. Let’s keep talking about Runa.”

“You don’t care?! You’re telling your goddess you don’t care about her?!”

“Why is baby Iroha looking like *this* while the Kushinada’s just a kid?” Yahiro ignored Iroha while looking at Runa.

Runa nodded and began explaining, her voice still with a

childish lisp. “Seven dragon mediums were summoned to birth the next world dragon. Their souls were called forth from outside the underworld and granted the dragon factor.”

“…Outside the underworld? You mean the world of the living?” Miyabi cut in.

Runa shook her head. “I don’t know. There’s no guarantee that all of you come from the same world. There could be infinite Ouroboroses across the universe, each with their own world.”

“In any case, only someone from outside the underworld can birth a new Ouroboros, yeah? That’s why the dragon mediums have memories of their past lives?” Zen asked with a serious look on his face.

Runa nodded. “Yes, but there is an exception.”

“What?”

“The surviving previous dragon medium.”

“The Kushinada?” Nathan muttered.

The survivor from the last cycle had to be the sacrificial medium herself—Runa.

“Yes. Right before the world ends, the Kushinada receives a new body and is reborn as one of the dragon mediums. They are the medium of Gula, the heaven dragon.”

Despite her faltering pronunciation, Runa’s explanation was easy to understand. At the very least far easier than whatever Iroha spat out. It became more believable that Runa was the reincarnation of the Kushinada with memories of the previous world.

“Gula’s medium is insurance. Her duty is to prolong the old world’s life if no new mediums can create a new world dragon. So, she has no Lazarus. Instead, she has a special power.”

“What power?”

“To control the Moujuu.”

“Ah…”

Everyone present looked at Nuemaru on Runa’s lap. Iroha wasn’t the only one who could speak to Moujuu. Runa had the same power. Indeed, that power was meant for her, as the heaven dragon’s medium.

“Mama… Iroha Mamana was supposed to become Gula’s medium, but there was a mistake upon reincarnation.”

“It took the fetus’s soul instead of the Kushinada’s,” Rosé said while looking at the two girls.

“Erm… I…I’m sorry…” Iroha hung her head as she felt all eyes on her.

The mistake was not Iroha’s fault, but it was true that her existence confused a lot of people.

“The baby’s soul came from the Afterlife—outside the underworld. So Mama was given Avaritia’s power as a legitimate dragon medium. That is why she has no memories of her previous life—because she was never born in the first place.”

Everyone was convinced. The only memories Iroha had were fragments of the Afterlife. Even the unborn fetus could feel the presence of the world dragon. Or rather, that was the only thing she could recognize.

“The problem is that Gula went missing. Ouroboros only prepared seven bodies for the dragon mediums. It could get as many regular human bodies as it liked, but even with its powers, creating excess dragon factor is no easy feat.” Runa then met Yahiro’s gaze. “But the problem was solved in a surprising way.”

“Sui Narusawa?” Nathan muttered.

Runa nodded. “One of the souls Ouroboros summoned entered a vessel prepared by humans, so I created this body with the remaining dragon factor. I ended up looking like this because it was all so hasty.”

Runa looked down at her body in self-mockery.

Iroha hugged her tight and said, “Yup. So that’s the gist of it.”

“Shut up, you didn’t explain anything.” Yahiro narrowed his eyes at her.

There was nothing for her to brag about from Runa’s explanation, yet she smiled with pride.

“Runa protected me this whole time. She sealed Avaritia’s powers and let me live like a super-popular, ultra-pretty streamer.”

“Not sure about that last part, but I guess that explains why your powers were so poor,” Yahiro said curtly.

Raw power aside, Avaritia’s powers were inconvenient. They didn’t work for anything other than protecting herself from other dragon mediums and Lazaruses. It was a big difference compared to everyone else’s versatile powers.

However, thanks to that, she got to live unaware of her powers. Runa did protect her in that sense.

“Aw… Why? I mean, maybe I’m not as beautiful as Miyabi or Giuli and the rest, but I’m sure I’m decently pretty!”

“That’s your biggest concern?” Yahiro sighed.

“No, Giuli is beautiful, of course, but you’re not so bad yourself.” Rosé comforted Iroha politely after hearing her commend her twin sister.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t say you’re bad, even compared to Sumika.”

“Oh, you dirty dog…”

Zen and Sumika began flirting in public. Everyone got distracted now that the serious talk was over.

“Hopefully we can stop Nina with this power…” Yahiro looked at the palm of his hand.

Iroha’s power had increased far beyond what it was capable of before, thanks to Runa undoing the seal. It was so strong it could take him over if he didn’t keep his focus. Yahiro would have given in to the power and rampaged like Natazuka if he had obtained it back when only his hatred for Sui kept him going. He could tell there was good reason Runa kept it sealed.

“Yeah. I’d rather we talk things out, but we have to stop them at all costs. Runa’s doing her best, too, after all.” Iroha nodded with a serious look on her face.

Yahiro looked at the young girl with suspicion. “She is?”

“Gula’s power won’t help in battle, but it can restrain the Ploutonion’s encroachment of the world. It is my job to extend this world’s life.”

“So we can buy some time before the world collapses?” Giuli raised an eyebrow.

“Things are starting to look up.” Yahiro patted Runa’s head with a smile.

He realized she was technically older than him, but force of habit made him treat her like a child.

Runa didn’t object. In fact, she even got closer to him, as though asking him to continue. Ayaho and Iroha looked at their sister with jealousy.

Miyabi smiled at the heartwarming sight, then put her serious face back on and turned to Iroha. “We should do what we can, too. For starters, Iroha, take your clothes off.”

“Wha?! Why?!” Iroha covered her chest and took a step back.

Miyabi kept her expression unchanged. “You need to change and put makeup on to stream, don’t you?”

“Huh? Stream?” Iroha blinked.

There were still over two hours until the Yáo Guāng Xīng reached the 23 Wards. They had nothing to do until then. As addicted as Iroha might be to streaming, she couldn't think to do it in these circumstances.

"Fear is what causes people to turn into Moujuu. You need to tell the world what you're doing to calm the panic. You're the most famous dragon medium in the world, so I'm sure your message will reach somebody."

"Maybe, but…" Iroha glanced down with concern, despite accepting Miyabi's explanation. "But I can't, Miyabi. Ganzheit got my account banned. People will think I'm a fake if I create a new channel."

"Don't worry. I can get you an account. We still have access to a famous news channel with over 1.5 million subscribers." Miyabi winked with a mischievous smile.

"Wait… You mean…?!"

"Yamadou's channel!"

Iroha and Yahiro looked at each other and shouted. The channel Miyabi and Douji Yamase managed was popular for its exposé content. It was known worldwide, as it appeared on big media networks from time to time. It had also been a big source of problems for them as they had doxxed Iroha as a dragon medium.

Iroha's voice would reach the whole world with Yamase's account. And most importantly, appearing on his channel would lend credibility that she was the real thing.

"The channel shouldn't get banned now that Alfred Salas sided with you. What do you say, Iroha Waon?" Miyabi looked at her provocatively.

Iroha's answer was obvious.

2

"Waooon! Hi everywaon, Iroha Waon here!"

The first to notice the unannounced stream were a select few passionate viewers. They happened to have the app open and saw a thumbnail on their recommended feed showing a familiar Asian girl with furry ears.

“Long time no see! Today, we have a streaming special! Don’t Fear the Moujuu! Ploutonion Tour with the Dragon Medium! I’m borrowing the Yamadou channel to stream to you live from the armored train Yáo Guāng Xīng!”

Most of the channel’s subscribers knew her name. They also knew that she had to be related to the Moujuu chaos taking place around the world. News of her stream rapidly spread on social media and the number of live viewers skyrocketed.

“And today, I have a special guest! A journalist all of you know very well, Miyabi Maisaka, and our friend, Sumika Kiyotaki!”
“Whaaa?! Wait, me too?! No way, you didn’t just say that!”

Yes. That day, the streamer Iroha Waon returned to the internet, drawing the eyes of people around the world.

†

The Guild headquarters in Yokohama were hit with a flood of inquiries regarding the emergence of Moujuu all around the world.



Aside from the international armies stationed in Japan, only the PMCs under the Guild had experience fighting Moujuu. The Guild oversaw various PMCs with messy backgrounds and could not ignore its big sponsors' and government institutions' requests. In the end, the head of the Guild, Evgraf Leskin, had to take the lead and personally look after the heaps of work to do. Guild executive Akulina Jarova hurried to see Leskin.

"Excuse me, sir! Iroha Mamana… Avaritia's medium is streaming live! And she's with mediums of Ira and Acedia…!"

Akulina took out her personal smartphone without giving herself time to breathe.

"Calm down, Akulina Jarova. You mean this stream, don't you?"

Leskin looked at her without a change in expression and pointed at the monitor showing a girl with a furry-ear wig, a Japanese girl they knew very well.

"Yes. They're heading to the 23 Wards' Ploutonion to stop the global Moujuufication. They said they just passed Nagoya."

"I got a request from Gionis, Noah Transtech's CEO, asking me to help the Galerie's armored train pass as smoothly as possible. It seems Alfred Salas had a hand in this, although unofficially."

"Salas? Ganzheit is helping the Galerie?" Akulina couldn't hide her surprise.

There were various Ganzheit factions, but they all agreed on their wish for a global genocide. Salas's main faction was especially inclined to this end goal. They should have fought Iroha Mamana head-to-head, if need be, to stop her.

"I don't know what inspired this change of heart, but it's good news for us. There was even some conflict within the Galerie." Leskin snorted.

News of the Far East Branch revolting against HQ and taking Eusebius Berith down had already reached the Guild. The Yáo Guāng Xīng's trip toward the 23 Wards had to be related.

"Will the Guild support them?"

"We're mercenaries. We do what's requested of us. As annoying as it may be." Leskin put the documents in his hands down on the desk. "Human fear is the trigger to Moujuufication. All mercenaries under the Guild know this already, so the mess from the other day was not for nothing after all."

"So that is why we haven't been affected."

“The effects of the Ploutonion should increase as we approach the 23 Wards. Army soldiers won’t be able to stand it, which means only we can support Galerie Berith on their assault.”

Akulina nodded. Galerie Berith’s destination was the biggest Ploutonion, located next to the former Tokyo Station. For their armored car to reach it, they had to cross the Rokugogawa Iron Bridge over the Tama River, with safety also guaranteed beyond the other side. Someone had to enter the quarantined zone and get rid of the Moujuu along the railroad.

“Notify all members of the Guild. We will enter the 23 Wards to support the Galerie. Our first objective will be securing the railroad and surrounding facilities. Our second objective will be to eliminate the Moujuu around the Ploutonion.”

“Are you sure? We can’t order a forced mission on this scale…,” Akulina objected timidly.

The Guild head parted his thick lips in a smirk. “Don’t worry about the payment. Ganzheit’s the sponsor, and we can’t be stingy when the world’s about to end.”

Leskin looked out at the sky, dark before daybreak, from the window of the HQ tower built atop the Yokohama Station. He spoke to himself in amusement.

“Kill all dragons… I didn’t expect those girls to make good on their word.”

3

“Wow, Iroha… There are over forty million viewers. It could be a hundred million when combining the mirror streams on other sites.”

Ayaho’s hands shook as she looked at the PC screen. The idea of over forty million people watching their stream all over the world had her trembling in fear.

“That’s pretty amazing. She rarely got over a hundred views up until recently.”

“And look at all the donations! I’d never seen numbers like this…!”

Ren and Rinka, too, winced in amazement. Yahiro understood why they were shaken. In fact, Iroha was the weird one for not feeling any pressure at being the target of all those

eyeballs.

That, and her unyielding mentality that kept her posting videos every day that got no views showed how streaming was her life's calling. In that sense, she really had talent. Yahiro felt proud of her as Iroha Waon's oldest fan.

"Well, it isn't *her* channel, though," remarked the realistic nine-year-old Honoka.

No matter how many views she got, as the stream happened on Douji Yamase's channel, she would not see a penny from ad revenue or otherwise. Only its co-owner, Miyabi, would. Surely, she hadn't been thinking about that when she suggested it…but it would not be surprising if she had.

"Honoka, the sun's moving. Light them up and block the backlight. Kyouta, change the handheld camera's batteries."

"Got it."

"Are these the batteries?"

Kiri and the rest took care of the production, keeping their voices low so the mic wouldn't catch them.

Yahiro was genuinely impressed. He couldn't do anything himself. "They're smart kids."

"Everyone's used to helping her." Ayaho smiled at Yahiro's praise.

One could tell from the look of their coordination that, even though they had no blood relation, they were a real family. Four years back, right before the J-nocide, Iroha was a girl with little emotion and a faltering voice. Now he understood. Back then, she was mentally a child.

Normally, dragon mediums reincarnated with memories of their past lives, but Iroha was only a baby. Even though her body, which was meant to be Runa's, knew how to survive, she was not emotionally developed. There was a gap between her inside and outside.

Yet, by the time he met her again four years later, she had become a girl full of emotions. That had to be her siblings' influence. Iroha grew up by living with them. She thought she had been raising them, but it was the opposite.

The thought gave Yahiro some bitter feelings. Had fate been different, the other dragon medium without memories of the past world—the artificial medium, Sui—could have had a bright and happy future like Iroha did now.

"Giuli, Rosé, notice from the second unit. They got the survey

report on the 23 Wards."

Wei entered the command room with a tablet in hand. The Galerie's Far East Branch second unit that stayed in the Yokohama base went on to survey the 23 Wards under the twins' orders to check on the current state of the Ploutonion.

"The Moujuu are active, as we imagined. The density on the surface is twice the usual."

"There are twice as many Moujuu?"

"Yes, and it seems like the new ones emerging from the Ploutonion are fighting with the others that were already in the 23 Wards."

"Sometimes I wish our expectations missed the mark." Giuli stuck out her tongue.

"Are the railroads and bridge okay?" Yahiro asked with a stern look on his face.

The armored train could not run without tracks, and the bridge crossing the Tama River that separated the 23 Wards was an important point to reach the Ploutonion.

"We worried about that, too, but it seems like Leskin is doing a good job."

"Leskin? The old guy from the Guild?" Yahiro was surprised about the name that came out of Rosé's mouth.

"It appears they mobilized all forces under the Guild to enter the 23 Wards. After what happened in Yokohama, they should have some tolerance against Moujuufication, if only a little."

"But it sounds like they have their hands full with securing the bridge. The Moujuu are overflowing out of the 23 Wards," Giuli added.

The Yáo Guāng Xīng had already passed through Yokohama Station and was about to reach Kawasaki. They would cross the bridge over the Tama River in five minutes. After that, they would be in the 23 Wards—the quarantine zone, and Moujuu territory.

Then Josh slowed down the train. The Moujuu had already reached all the way to a low-emergence zone.

"They're here…?!" Yahiro scowled as he grabbed the Kuyou Masakane.

Thanks to Noah Transtech and the international armies, they got that far without encountering any Moujuu, but they could not escape a fight any longer.

"We have no time to lose fighting *strays*. Charge ahead,

Captain.”

“As you wish, Lady Rosetta,” Aldiss responded with determination through the comms.

There were Moujuu capable of withstanding a direct hit from cannon fire among the flock. The armored train would not get by unscathed charging head-on. Rosé was aware of the risk and still commanded they force their way through. It didn’t matter how much damage the Yáo Guāng Xīng endured if the world ended.

“Wei, protect the power car.”

Paola stood up with her trusty lightweight machine gun in hand. She wore her anti-Moujuu protector, held a big military knife on her shoulder, and hung spare magazines and a handgun from her waist.

“Got it. I’ll handle the remote weapons station.”

“My squad will deal with the Moujuu that cling to the Yáo Guāng Xīng.”

Paola and Wei split up duties and left.

Then Zen stood up. “Let’s go, Narusawa. We have to get rid of the Moujuu on the tracks.”

“Wait, Zen. Are you saying we’re gonna stand on the roof of the front car?”

“It has a railing. If you’re scared, then don’t come.”

“I didn’t say I was scared!” Yahiro ground his teeth and followed Zen.

The Lazaruses wouldn’t die if they fell off the train in motion, but it would delay their arrival to the Ploutonion. That was what Yahiro feared. Before they could leave the command car, noise entered Galerie Berith’s comms.

“This is the Guild’s leadership. Can you hear me, Galerie Berith?”

“This voice… Akulina?” Rosé responded with a look of suspicion.

Neither of them had time to lose on small talk. It had to be an emergency for the Guild to call just as the Yáo Guāng Xīng was about to enter the 23 Wards.

“Rosetta Berith? There’s no time, listen. Our ground forces will fire our multiple-rocket system in sync with your crossing. The shells will be nonlethal tear gas.”

“I see. You’ll paralyze the Moujuu so we can cut through them. Great plan, for it to come from you. Was it Leskin’s idea?”

“Sh-shut it! Anyway, we only get one chance, so don’t miss it!”

“Got it. We’ll play along.”

The call ended once they settled on an execution time.

“You heard it, everyone. Operators, put on your gas masks. Noncombatants move to the command car. The Yáo Guāng Xīng is airtight, but it’s gonna be a strong gas to affect Moujuu, so we gotta take care,” Giuli warned through the train’s PA system.

Yahiro and Zen grabbed gas masks. While immortal, tear gas would make them unable to fight temporarily, especially when it was meant for Moujuu.

“Iroha! What’re you doing?!”

Yahiro grabbed enough gas masks for everyone streaming and headed to the lounge car, exasperated that they hadn’t fetched some for themselves. But the moment he entered, he realized why they hadn’t reacted. The lounge was playing dance music so loud that it drowned out the PA announcement.

“Huh, what’s up? We’re in the middle of the singing session… Are you singing with us?”

Iroha, karaoke mic in hand, stared at Yahiro’s wild entrance.

“You’re doing karaoke? Right now?” Yahiro frowned in disbelief.

“One thing just led to another and…” Sumika stopped dancing with maracas in hand and flushed.

Zen covered his eyes and sighed. She had been so against being on camera, but Iroha had corrupted her quickly.

“Gosh, you’re such a good singer, Miyabi!” Iroha ignored the tired looks on the boys’ faces.

Yahiro hung his head. “Et tu, Miyabi…”

“I just thought it wouldn’t be good to stay on edge all the time.” Miyabi shrugged with no sign of repentance.

Yahiro’s head hurt, but they were racing against time. Every second was one closer to the Guild’s plan. “We have no time. Just put these on.”

“What? Gas masks? I’m not into that sort of cosplay…”

“It’s not cosplay!”

Yahiro forced the mask on her face. She yelled and wrestled back, saying it would mess up her makeup. Then, the sound of the train’s race changed. They were on the bridge.

“It’s coming!” Zen yelled after looking at the clock.

A mass of rockets shot from the Tama riverbed and exploded in the sky with a birdlike screech.

4

Pure-white mist engulfed the city in ruins.

It felt like being in the middle of a cloud, which would be fantastical if it weren't strong tear gas. The gray armored train charged into the dense, atrocious haze. It had been five hours since they left Kyoto Station. They finally reached the 23 Wards.

"I never thought I'd be coming back here." Yahiro looked around the city that used to be Tokyo through the gas mask's lenses.

"Yeah. It feels somehow nostalgic and novel at the same time. It's weird," Iroha said while holding her streaming phone.

Come to think of it, they had been on this same train when they left the 23 Wards. The two of them were here together again. The situation had changed a lot in some ways, but not at all in others. It was kind of funny.

"We're breaking through the gas! Eyes wide open!" Giuli warned through the comms on her uniform's collar.

As she said, their vision cleared suddenly as they crossed through the area filled with tear gas. This meant the Moujuu were able to see them, too. The armored train chugged past with boisterous thunder. The Moujuu grew hostile toward the giant stranger intruding on their territory, and their numbers were astounding. Even Yahiro, with his experience in the 23 Wards, had never seen so many.

"How are there so many Moujuu?!" Anxiety took over Iroha's expression as she took off her mask.

Even she couldn't help but feel afraid at the sheer number of them. They covered all the streets and building rooftops as far as the eye could see, and most of them were new-generation Moujuu who would not listen to Iroha.

The Yáo Guāng Xīng opened fire. The armored train charged ahead as the Moujuu on the tracks flinched. It did not stop as it blew them all away with its tackle. The diesel engine roared and the race continued, but the train had dropped its speed. At under 50 kph, the Moujuu would catch up with ease.

The Moujuu launched their special attacks toward the Yáo Guāng Xīng. Shock waves hit the train's armor and shook its whole body. There was no more support from the Guild. The Galerie's operators fought back, but there were too many enemies.

“Tsk…”

Nathan noticed they were after the power car and created an invisible barrier around it. The Moujuu reacted to his dragon aura and attacked even more fiercely, which made Nathan’s face twist in pain.

“Nathan…?!” Iroha screamed as he saw him fall to his knees.

Part of his crystallized body under the sleeve of his suit crumbled into dust.

“The adaption limit…?” Yahiro asked him, wiping all expression off his face.

A Relict Deserver’s powers were not unlimited. Their non-immortal bodies could reach a limit to their adaption under the heavy load of the Regalia. Nathan had already gone beyond his limits in the fight against Natazuka. His body would collapse sooner rather than later if he continued creating barriers against the Moujuu.

“Don’t worry. I knew this would happen eventually.” Nathan looked up at Yahiro with a composed look on his face.

Meanwhile, the effects of his barrier allowed the train to accelerate again. The fierce Moujuu attack continued, but at the very least they would not reach the power car.

“My job was done the moment you met Lady Karura, although it’s a shame that I won’t get to see the fate of this world.” Nathan stood up with a self-deprecating smile.

“Nathan…!”

“I’m sorry…I couldn’t stop Sui Narusawa…” Nathan said as he turned his back to them.

Yahiro gasped. Nathan was with Sui during the four years Yahiro lived in the 23 Wards, and apparently, he had his own feelings toward her while watching over her as Ganzheit’s agent.

“Continue the stream, Iroha.”

“Miyabi…?”

After her gentle request, Miyabi opened the lounge car’s hatch and leaned out of the train. She grabbed onto the handrails and headed in the direction opposite to its movement.

The next moment, the Moujuu clinging to the back of the train were blown away, and it accelerated again. The Moujuu slowing down the Yáo Guāng Xīng were swept away like in a tsunami. Ira’s powers lowered the train’s air resistance while kicking off the Moujuu.

“Stop it, Miyabi! Your body won’t stand it if you keep using your Regalia like that!” Yahiro shouted at her.

The dragon mediums’ bodies were just like any normal human’s; they were meant to simply grant their blessings to the Lazaruses. If they used their Regalia too much, they would lose their human form and turn into dragons—incomplete dragons far from reaching the Ouroboros. And just like the Relict Deservers, they would eventually reach their adaption limit and die, just as Chiruka Misaki and Kaname Kashima did. Miyabi knew that.

“Everyone, take a look,” Iroha said to her phone.

The wind lifted Miyabi’s bangs, revealing her draconized right eye. She didn’t try to hide it. She had asked Iroha to show it on the stream.

“This is what Japan looks like now, and this is our power as dragon mediums and Dragon Slayers.”

Iroha chose her words carefully while speaking beyond the screen. Nathan’s barrier blocked the Moujuu’s attacks. Miyabi’s power blew away the Moujuu. And the Moujuu charged against the armored train without rest. Iroha showed the fierce situation to the whole world without hiding anything.

“The dragons and the dragon mediums are not enemies to humankind. We came back here to save the world from collapse.”

Iroha opened the hatch all the way and leaned out. The city ruins were crawling with Moujuu, a terrifying, despairing panorama the armored train ran through—a giant machine of hope carrying the dragon mediums and the Lazarus. Miyabi urged her to show this to the people.

“We could not have reached this place alone. Karura, the captain and his friends, the Guild, everyone in the Galerie, all of you watching right now—the world is not over yet. So please…”

Iroha’s words were cut off. The Moujuu broke through Nathan’s barrier and attacked the exposed girl outside the train.

But before they could reach her, they froze and shattered into pieces.

Sumika and Zen protected her.

“You can see the Ploutonion now!”

Josh’s voice echoed through the PA system. Cheers began throughout the train, but were cut short by Aldiss’s following words.

“But…there are no more tracks…”

“Everyone brace for impact!” Giuli screamed.

It was the first time Yahiro had heard her this panicked. Tokyo Station was almost in sight. They could already see the blank in the sea of buildings created by the Ploutonion, but there was no more railroad to reach it. It was hard to tell whether the Moujuu had wrecked it, or if it had deteriorated with time, but the viaduct holding the tracks had collapsed.

“Crap… It won’t stop in time…!”

Josh’s cries of despair echoed along with the ear-piercing noise of the brakes that could not stop the giant train running at great speeds. Nathan tried to create a barrier, but this time he fell, completely depleted. Yahiro’s and Zen’s Regalia had no way to stop the train. Yahiro ground his teeth cursing his powerlessness. Even Iroha was frozen in silence.

“It’s okay. Keep the stream going,” Miyabi said calmly.

The dragon aura enveloping her body grew in momentum, creating a whirlpool around her.

“Miyabi?!” Iroha screamed without regard for the ongoing stream.

“Wait, your body’s already…” Yahiro gulped his last words. He realized that only she could save the Yáo Guāng Xīng.

“When we’d just met, Douji said that the truth isn’t something you can see; it’s something you realize after it’s passed away, like the wind.”

Miyabi exuded more and more dragon aura as her form drew closer to a dragon’s. Transparent scales covered her entire body and her skeleton transformed. A long tail ripped through her clothes.

Even draconized, she was beautiful.

“You’re blowing that wind of your own will. I pray that it leads to a happy end.”

Her voice no longer sounded like a human’s as she wished them good luck.

“Miyabi…!”

Iroha let the tears roll down as she filmed the woman’s transformation. Miyabi, now a translucent dragon, took to the skies. A powerful wind wrapped the armored train. The Yáo Guāng Xīng floated with the wind as it plunged off the severed tracks. It veered off the railroad and landed on the parallel street. The wind tried to kill the impact of the fall, but in that

moment, the dragon in the air shattered. Miyabi's body was already past its limits.

The Yáo Guāng Xīng sparked as it slid across the ground with a heavy thud. The people inside would be in peril if it crashed into a building. Even Nathan's barrier could not completely absorb the shock, but the train stayed on the road.

The ground on either side rose up like a slide's railing to keep the train from overturning, all through the power of the ground-control Regalia.

"Vanagloria's power! Ayaho…!"

Yahiro clung to a chair in the lounge to keep himself on the floor while looking at Ayaho, her eyes closed in desperate prayer.

Ayaho's timid, introverted personality resembled Chiruka Misaki's. Perhaps it had something to do with how she became so skilled with Vanagloria's powers in such a short time. They were more suited to protect the many than harm others, and it fit her personality.

The Yáo Guāng Xīng ran over the road for over ninety meters but finally came to a halt without crashing into any buildings.

"Ayaho…!"

Once the tension was over, Yahiro ran up to Ayaho as she was about to collapse. But somebody else propped her up first: her siblings.

"Let's goooo!"

"Ayaho!"

"You did it!"

Ayaho forced a smile as they jostled her with cheers. Then a girl in flashy clothing and furry ears held her tight while in tears.

"Ayaho, thank you…! Miyabi's sacrifice…wasn't in vain… Ayahooo!"

"I-Iroha… I…I can't breathe…and we're on stream…!"

Iroha did not let her go despite Ayaho's protests. Her emotions rocked violently between Miyabi's death and the Yáo Guāng Xīng's safety, wetting her cheeks.

"There's still even more…" Yahiro clicked his tongue after jumping off the train.

Ahead was the former Tokyo Station. Their destination was right in front of them, but hundreds of Moujuu gathered around the Ploutonion. It was their last obstacle. Yahiro did not

despair at the sight—Moujuu were no threat at this point. Yahiro and Iroha weren't the only Lazarus and dragon medium here.

"Stay back, Yahiro Narusawa. We'll take care of them," said the boy with a straitlaced vibe.

In his right hand was a crude Western sword. In his left hand was the hand of a girl in a gaudy school uniform, their fingers interlocked.

"I'm counting on you, Sumika."

"Let's do this, Zen."

Massive dragon aura flowed from Sumika's fingertips into Zen and surrounded them in an infinity of ice crystals. The ice reflected the light of dawn and took on the form of a giant dragon, a beautiful and translucent dragon the color of water.

"Confine them to ice, Acedia!"

Zen swept his sword.

The water dragon roared and shot a stream of pure white, freezing air. The mass of liquefied air turned into a literal tsunami and engulfed the Moujuu surrounding the armored train.

Even with their tough vitality, the Moujuu could not survive being frozen on a cellular level. Everything within Yahiro's field of view, including the streets and buildings, was encased in thick ice, and shattered.

"That's overboard," Yahiro whispered as he shivered in the cold gust.

But that would stop the Moujuu from approaching the Yáo Guāng Xīng for a while. He had Zen and Sumika to thank for that.

"Yahiro, Iroha, go." Wei got out of the train with a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry about the rest. We'll keep the kids safe." Josh slapped Yahiro's back.

"…We got this." Paola gave them a thumbs-up.

The rest of the operators, too, encouraged them, their faces brimming with a sense of accomplishment. Even if the world ended today, they could go without regrets.

"Yahiro…" Ayaho walked up to him timidly but filled with determination.

Yahiro remembered the day they first met in the 23 Wards. "Now you saved me. Thanks, Ayaho."

“…Yes!” Ayaho nodded with glee, understanding what he meant.

He was worried about her use of the Regalia, but looking at her, there was no need to fear the adaption limit, and she had no further reason to use it anymore.

Whatever shape it might take, all this mess surrounding the dragons’ powers would end once Yahiro and Iroha reached the Ploutonion.

“Nuemaru, Runa… Take care of everyone,” Iroha told the white Moujuu and her youngest sister.

Runa nodded with her usual flat expression. There was nothing for Gula’s medium to do now, and she knew it.

The fight was now on the shoulders of the new generation of dragon mediums.

“Giuli, Rosé, thank you for everything,” Yahiro said with a serious expression.

“We only fulfilled our contract. There’s nothing for you to feel in debt about,” Rosé said matter-of-factly, as always.

“Yeah. But hey, since it’s the end, how about I give you a little bonus?” Giuli said.

She stood on her toes and gave Yahiro a peck on the cheek.

Iroha staggered at the sight of that. “G-Giuli?!”

“Just a little good luck charm. C’mon, Rosy, you too.”

Giuli pushed her little sister to the front. However, by then, she was holding a handgun in either hand.

“Would you rather have a 9mm or a .40 caliber?” Rosé thrust both guns against either of his face. She was furious about her beloved sister giving him a kiss.



“Hold on! You’re gonna ruin everything!” Yahiro yelled, seriously afraid.

A Lazarus would take a lot of time to heal from his head being blown off. Losing such precious time over this nonsense was not funny. Yet the look on Rosé’s face was plenty serious, and she didn’t seem to intend to stand back. Yahiro closed his eyes out of fear.

And then, he felt something soft touch his lips.

“R-Rosé…?”

“That’s going to cost you a lot, so you better come back in one piece.”

Rosé looked away, her cheeks turning the color of roses. Giuli looked smugly at him while the operators whistled jokingly. Meanwhile, Iroha puffed out her cheeks and glared at him with resentment.

5

The Tokyo Ploutonion seen from up close was far bigger and more beautiful than any other Yahiro had seen before.

A giant hole in the ground, its surface glistened like still water, like polished obsidian or a mirror reflecting the dark of the night. The original Ploutonion hadn’t changed. If anything had, it was them. The magatama Karura Myoujiin entrusted to Iroha had transformed the Ploutonion.

They did not hesitate to jump into the black water. Runa had already told them the Ploutonion would look like this. Yahiro and Iroha held hands and stepped into the underworld’s gate.

In that moment, their field of vision turned around. It felt like the back and front of the world had switched places. Yahiro and Iroha had entered the literal back side of the world by going through the Ploutonion. Into the real Afterlife, the one yet to dry up, into the womb to birth the next Ouroboros.

“Mmm…”

They walked over the ground, black like the night sky in the middle of a void. Iroha’s cheeks remained puffed in a pout the whole time. She hadn’t said anything since Rosé kissed Yahiro, but she never let go of his hand. He had no idea what was going through her mind.

“C’mon, cheer up already. They were just horsing around.”

“I’m not mad at them. I’m mad at you for being so happy about it.”

“What?” Yahiro sighed at her baseless accusation.

Then he noticed that she still had her phone in her left hand.

“You’re still streaming.”

“No. There’s no signal here, but I’ll make a video later. It’ll be like those videos where they visit scary ruins and all that.”

“Where they get cursed and die?” Yahiro twisted his lip.

They continued walking without saying anymore. Oddly, they had no doubts about what direction to follow. They somehow knew where they had to go, where Sui and Nina were.

“This reminds me of the day we first met,” Yahiro said without much thinking.

“Huh?” Iroha raised an eyebrow.

Yahiro narrowed his eyes with nostalgia.

“We were all alone, remember? Not even Nuemaru.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“At least you’re not wearing that lame tracksuit now.” Yahiro laughed, looking at the Galerie uniform she had put on top of Waon’s costume.

Iroha pouted more. “Well, I didn’t have the time to change back then!”

“Should we have left Nuemaru behind?”

“Yeah, she’s Runa’s. They protected me together this whole time.”

“I see. The pooch was like an overprotective mother, huh?”

“Yeah. Maybe more motherly than me or Runa.” Iroha giggled. She was in good spirits again now.

Iroha kept holding Yahiro’s hand as he asked with worry. “You think I can do it? Break the Ouroboros’s loop?”

“Who knows?” Yahiro shrugged.

Iroha side-eyed him. “What the heck? You gotta say I can even if it’s a lie.”

“But I really don’t know. But it’s okay. Even if it’s all for nothing, it won’t be all your fault. And…”

“…And?”

“I promised. That I’d be with you until the end.”

“Should I take that as a declaration of love?” Iroha asked with her eyes filled with her usual, mysterious excess of self-confidence.

Yahiro nodded. “I guess.”

“Huh… Huuuh??!” Iroha was shocked. “H-hold on. One more time! I wasn’t recording! Do it again!”

“Why? I’m not gonna say it knowing you’re gonna record it.”

“Aww… Please…” She threw a childish tantrum.

Yahiro snorted. Same as always even when the world was about to end.

Then…

“I didn’t think we’d get to meet agaiiin.”

They stopped as they heard an easygoing voice.

A tree grew from the still-water-like ground of the Afterlife. It was barely ten meters tall. Not that big, yet clearly the same type as the world tree they saw in the Myoujiin.

Someone stood at the foot of the young world tree, a young woman of carefree nature. Beside her stood, naturally, a young man carrying a large sword on his back.

“Nina…”

“I actually didn’t expect you to catch up. Kudooos! But honestlyyy, you’re not welcome.” Nina showed them a crooked smile.

There was a violent air about her unbefitting of her usual self, but expected, as they were an obstruction that had showed up right before her wish was granted.

“Where’s Sui?” Yahiro asked, ignoring Nina’s hostile attitude.

Nina pointed at the foot of the world tree in silence.

There slept Sui, curled up in the fetal position. Her skinny body wore the same lavish dress Yahiro remembered, but her silhouette was abnormal.

Her hands had claws. Her neck was thin and long. She was draconizing.

“You remember our promise?” Nina asked Yahiro.

“That I’d help you kill Sui?”

“Yes. Time to fulfill it.”

“By draconizing her?”

“I’m grateful to her. She put so much effort into opening a new path to the Afterlife, so much that she ended up draconizing even with the power of the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi.”

Nina smiled coldly as she looked at Sui with pity.

“Why…?” Iroha’s voice trembled.

Nina blinked in surprise. “It’s youuur fault, Iroha!”

“Huh?”

“You took Yahiro away from Sui. Without her Lazarus, she had to turn herself into a dragon to use Superbia’s power.”

Iroha was at a loss for words. Yahiro held her hand tightly.

Nina was correct, in a way, but it was off on a fundamental level. It was true that Iroha got Yahiro away from Sui’s control, but that didn’t mean she had to use her power.

“What do you want by using her, Nina?”

“Before answering that, mind if *I* ask a question?” Nina looked at Iroha. “Iroha Mamana, what do you plan to wish for here? You’re just an empty, hollow baby. Even if you could paint your ideal world, how long could you keep it up?”

“Shut your—”

“Wait, Yahiro!” Iroha held back his anger and glared back at Nina. “It’s fine. She’s right. I’m just an empty vessel without memory of the previous world, and I don’t know what an ideal one would be. I don’t know what’s right or what’s wrong.”

“Theeen would you mind not getting in my waaay?”

“No. I have to. I can’t create an ideal world. Actually, I’m sure no one can. Not even you, Nina.”

“But someone has to.”

“No. Not someone. Everyone,” Iroha said unfalteringly. “My wish is simply to unlock access to the world dragon to everyone in the world. Everyone, little by little, will have their wish granted by Ouroboros. We will create the world that we all really want.”

“You’re going to create a world based on the average of the wishes of all humanityyy? And you think that would go down well?” Nina sighed.

Iroha shrugged.

To end the Ouroboros loop, Iroha came up with the solution of liberating it—to use the world dragon to grant the wishes of all humanity, not just one sacrificial medium.

“If it doesn’t, then that’s just the limit of humanity, because every one of us bears responsibility for the shape of the world.”

“So that’s why everyone in the world should cooperate to create the ideal world, ehhh? I didn’t think of it. Sure enough, that might get rid of the necessity of one sacrificial medium to wear down her soul, and it could get rid of the need to reset the

world.”

“Nina! Then you…!”

“Buuut, that’s not the world *I* want. I mean, I wouldn’t know aaanything like that.” Nina cut down Iroha’s expectations.

“Know…?”

“Yes, like what the outside of the underworld is like. Like who made the Ouroboros system. Like what would happen if one destroyed that system. I want to know aaall that.”

“Is that…your wish, Nina?” Yahiro glared at her, baffled by the inanity of it.

She only wanted to know, in a most pure thirst for knowledge. That was the only thing that drove her. She’d talked about it before. Said that she was the dragon medium with the greatest sins, that her thirst for knowledge knew no bounds and that she would sacrifice as many people as she needed to satisfy her curiosity, even if she knew that only doom awaited on the other side.

“Yes. I will obtain the Ouroboros and go outside the world.”

“Outside the world…?!” Iroha was flabbergasted.

Nina wanted to use the world dragon as a vehicle to go to an “outside” that she didn’t even know for sure existed.

“And what about the world you leave behind?”

“Without its land to stand on, I guess it would end,” she said nonchalantly, as though she had no interest in that. “In that sense, Sui Narusawa’s goals align with mine—to destroy the world.”

6

Hisaki Minato unsheathed the sword from his back, communicating that there was no point in continuing the conversation.

“I see. So this is what Ed mentioned…” Yahiro sighed deeply before standing before Iroha.

Ed said that Nina’s wish could not be granted without Ouroboros, and that if they tried to destroy the world dragon, they would have to kill Nina.

“Minato, you’re okay with this?” Yahiro asked the boy in the hood.

To go “outside” in exchange for the present world made

sense for curious Nina, but he couldn't believe Hisaki would want that.

"There's a place I have to go back to." Hisaki broke his silence while still holding the sword up.

Iroha's eyes grew wide. "Hisaki, you mean you have memories of the past world?"

"…Yes. If there's a chance to go back there by escaping this artificial world, then I will dirty my hands. I won't let you get in the way," he stated.

Yahiro's hand holding his katana shook. Hisaki wanted to go back to the world in his memories, the place Miyabi called the living world. Ouroboros summoned the dragon mediums from outside the world, meaning it had the power to access the outside from here. It would make sense for it to be able to cross over to that world. Hisaki could return to his former world by becoming the Ouroboros, and he was betting on this, no matter how slim the chances.

"I'm just using Hisakiii, but that goes both ways. I have his consent."

Nina poured her dragon aura into Hisaki as she spoke. Fresh blood spurted from his body, creating a beautiful, light purple armor. The Goreclad. Hisaki took off his hood, revealing dragon eyes.

"Yahiro! Hisaki's…!"

"Yeah. Looks like we don't have the time to persuade them." Yahiro gritted his teeth.

Hisaki was already turning into a dragon. He was ready to transform his body into the world dragon.

"You're gonna get in Hisaki's way and turn yourself into Ouroborooos? How selfish, after you refused to become a dragon for Sui and abandoned herrr."

Yahiro wore his own deep crimson Goreclad while Nina criticized him.

"Selfish, huh? That's pretty high praise coming from you!" Yahiro unsheathed his sword. He had to beat Nina, not Hisaki. A battle between Lazaruses was never-ending. He had to kill the dragon medium to stop Hisaki's draconization.

"Get out of our way, Narusawa!"

"Get out of my way, Minato!"

Hisaki attacked head-on as Yahiro accelerated with bursting flames. Yahiro knew Hisaki was strong. They were equals, even

after unsealing Iroha's power. In fact, Hisaki had the advantage due to his draconization. Hisaki's Regalia, his power of marshification, could cancel out Yahiro's flames of purification. In return, Yahiro's flames also blocked Hisaki's marsh from taking control of the area.

The only thing that remained was a clash of raw strength.

"Yahiro…!" Iroha screamed.

Yahiro's body was also beginning to change as he continued to unleash a great mass of Regalia. It began to swell and his armor turned into scales. He was draconizing.

"No holding back, Iroha!"

"I know. I trust you!"

Iroha held her hands together in prayer while grimacing. The dragon aura flowing from her increased in power, and Yahiro was able to push Hisaki's sword back.

"You can't decide to end the world on your own! If you really want to know the outside of the world, then persuade everyone else first!"

Yahiro yelled at Nina while locking swords with Hisaki.

"Then all of humanity can decide together whether to end the world or not!"

Nina sighed.

"That's pointleeess. History shows that a bright dictator brings better results than the majority vote of the irresponsible masses. In the end, you're just running away from bearing the weight of the world."

"You're the ones looking away from the world and running from it!"

Yahiro brought his flame-wreathed katana down on Hisaki. His face twisted in pain as his translucent scales broke down.

"Open your eyes, Minato! Even if you destroy the underworld, you can't return to the previous one! Even if this world is full of shit, we have no choice but to live here!"

Hisaki came to a halt with his movements in sync with Yahiro's. Hisaki's sword buried into Yahiro's left shoulder, while Yahiro's katana pierced Hisaki's chest.

"What do you know about anything?!" Hisaki growled as he spat blood.

"What?!"

"You only think that because you have a family and loved ones in this world. How can you understand my wish when

you’re trying to kill your family…?!”

Hisaki’s dragon aura boosted in pressure and filled his body in a flash. The force of his sword disappeared and Yahiro lost his balance. Material permeation: another of Luxuria’s powers.



“Yahiro!”

“Shoot…!”

Hisaki got past him by going through Yahiro’s body. Hisaki’s real target was Iroha. After getting his attack nullified, Yahiro couldn’t reach him right away, and Iroha was defenseless against him.

“Iroha!”

Nearly fully draconized, Hisaki swung his great sword down on Iroha while she glared straight at him. Then, Hisaki suddenly stopped. The scales covering his body shattered like glass. Weakened, he could not bear the weight of his sword and fell to one knee.

Hisaki’s draconization was undone, and he lost his Lazarus powers. Yahiro and Iroha watched in bafflement. What happened? Then, Yahiro heard something falling behind him. Nina was on her knees.

A blade pierced through the center of her chest.

A straight sword with a mystical silver shine.

“Ahh… This I did not expeeect… Color me surpriiised…”

Nina turned around slowly. Looking at her from above was a girl with long white hair and red eyes. Sui. She had woken up and stabbed Nina from behind with the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi.

“Ninaaa!” Hisaki screamed at the sight of her injury. “Don’t touch her!”

Hisaki picked the sword back up and launched himself at Sui, but his movements were hopelessly slow. Nina was no longer supplying him with dragon aura after being stabbed by the divine instrument. He lacked the power of the Lazarus.

Sui brushed him away easily with her draconized right arm. Her giant claws slashed his body deeply and he was blown away like a dirty rag.

Yahiro watched at a loss for words.

“You’re here, my dear brother.” Sui smiled sweetly while licking the blood off her claws.

“Sui…!”

Yahiro shouted his sister’s name as he glared at her lips, dyed red, the crimson trail extending to her cheeks.

Sui narrowed her eyes in glee as she looked back at him.

“Don’t you find it laughable, Brother?”

Sui spoke quietly as she looked around at the hollow land adorned only with one tree.

“An artificial dragon medium created by Ganzheit and an unborn baby… These hollow dolls are going to decide the fate of the world. Perhaps a fitting end for this sham of a world.”

Blue lightning shot from snickering Sui’s fingertips. The thunder shot at Iroha, but Yahiro beat it down with his katana.

“Pity,” Sui muttered. She was only trying to mess with Iroha, rather than Yahiro.

“This power… It’s from the dragon factor you stole from Natazuka…?”

Yahiro pointed his sword at Sui. She had nearly no dragon medium power left, as shown by her being unable to fight without Natazuka’s Regalia or the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi. But that was no big deal for her. She wasn’t there to fight Yahiro. Her wish was to destroy the world, to take revenge on the world that hadn’t accepted her.

“This is your last chance, Brother. Become one with me. Let us watch the twilight of the world together.”

Sui reached her still-human left hand to him as she asked him to accept her power and become her Ouroboros.

“Stop it, Sui.” Yahiro refused her wish. He could not accept her invitation. Not because he hated her, but because he did not wish to destroy the world.

“Ganzheit’s warmongers, the guys who used you, are no longer around. There’s no reason for you to destroy the world.”

“Oh, but there is. You still don’t understand?” Sui sneered. “It would be fun, don’t you think?”

“Fun…?”

“Yes. The happiness people spent their whole lives to obtain, the history and culture built over such long stretches of time…it would all disappear forever, even from memories.”

Sui opened her mouth wide and cackled. Her once beautiful face had already transformed, the inside of her jaw filled with sharp fangs.

“I’ll destroy it all. I was never loved, I never got anything, and I will now rob the world of everything! Could there be anything more fun?! That’s karma!”

Her shrill laughter echoed in the hollow world. The still-water land at her feet cracked. Obsidian fragments scattered as

a pitch-black mirror appeared from below.

“I’m destroying the world because I hate it. I won’t leave an unshattered piece of this world where you aren’t mine!”

“Sui…!”

Yahiro fell to the ground under intense pressure. It felt like a giant rock weighed on him, more powerful than Nathan’s repulsive barrier. A gravity attack. Superbia’s real power.

“That mirror, it can’t be… A Relict Regalia?”

“Yes. Ganzheit brought this divine instrument here four years ago. My true Regalia, from before I was robbed of my power, was engraved in this mirror.”

Sui’s expression contorted in delight at the return of her power. It wasn’t lost only because Iroha’s flames burned her dragon factor.

Sui continued opening this Ploutonion she created four years before. The black mirror was absorbing her dragon aura.

Sui had regained her power by recovering the mirror. Now she could reach Ouroboros on her own. She needed no Lazarus. After all, her wish was to simply destroy the world. She did not need to maintain it.

“What a shame, Brother. If you had accepted my power back then, you would’ve been able to feel it now…!”

Sui’s gravity force increased, making Yahiro’s bones screech.

“Yahiro!” Iroha tried shooting flames to erase Sui’s powers.

“Iroha Mamana! Stay away, hollow doll!”

Sui noticed and controlled gravity to shoot pieces of the land like bullets. The obsidian-like fragments rained toward Iroha, but right before they could reach her, she was shielded by a large sword.

“Minato?!” Yahiro moaned, still pushed to the ground.

The heavily injured Hisaki had defended Iroha.

“Kurao-no…Nuboko!”

Hisaki stabbed his sword into the ground. A marsh area under his control extended to swallow Yahiro’s and Iroha’s footing. As they were disconnected from the black land used as its channel, Sui’s powers lost effect, and Yahiro was freed from the gravity attack.

“Hisaki?! Why…?!” Iroha asked.

Hisaki didn’t reply as he looked at Nina on the ground. It was as though he was saying it was what she wanted.

“Nina… What’s with your body…?” Yahiro twisted his face in

shock.

Nina was not bleeding despite being stabbed by the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi. Instead, scale-like translucent crystals fell from her body.

Unrecoverable draconization, just like Miyabi's right eye. Even graver than Miyabi's. Lethal.

"Ahh… You found out. It's because of my experiments. I did a lot to investigate the dragon medium powers." Nina laughed softly.

Yahiro shook his head. "Minato, were you helping her…to save her life…?"

"…I knew…that the dead…that *I* couldn't return to that world." Hisaki spoke like a scolded child.

Yahiro felt like he saw Hisaki's real face for the first time.

"But I wanted to believe Nina's words…" Hisaki exhaled and fell to his knees. He hadn't fully recovered his Lazarus powers because his dragon medium was near death.

"We'll give you our powers… Destroying the world for no reason is boring. I'm more interested in what sort of world Iroha can make."

Nina grabbed the Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi and pulled it out. Then, she shoved her hand into her wound and pulled out a small clump the size of a heart. It was a red crystal. She gave it to Hisaki, and he gave it to Yahiro.

"I really wanted to see the outside of this wooorld… Too bad," Nina said with the innocence of a child before closing her eyes.

Hisaki held her in his arms as she crumbled to dust, then he suffered the same fate. Only the sword stabbed into the ground remained.

"Satisfied now, Brother?" Sui said coldly as she looked emotionlessly at the crystal they left behind. "Luxuria's Regalia… You think anything will change now that you have that?"

"…Yes," Iroha responded. She glared at Sui, quiet flames in her eyes. "You haven't noticed, Sui? You don't hear the voices?"

"…Voices?" Sui furrowed her brow.

She tried to deny Iroha's claim on reflex, but then she shut her mouth. She noticed it.

"Yes. Millions of voices… Prayers from around the world. The voices of the people watching the video my siblings are

streaming. Runa, Gula's medium, is delivering them to us."

Iroha's gaze lacked hostility. She stood defenseless, yet Sui subconsciously took a step back in fear.

"Everyone is cheering us on. They want us to save the world. Sui, where do you think the dragon power you're using right now comes from?"

"It…can't be…"

"Humans and dragons coexist. Ouroboros protects this box, this world where people's souls live, and the people's emotions give it power. No matter how many divine instruments you collect, no matter how powerful Superbia's power is, you alone cannot defeat us."

"That's a lot of baseless confidence… How stupid!" Sui argued back emotionally.

Iroha shook her head with a smile. "It does have a basis. You should know that better than everyone else. You know that the dragon power flowing into us is getting stronger and stronger."

"Just…shut your mouth…!"

Sui shot fragments of ground again, but none of them reached Iroha. They went right through her as though they were illusions.

"Luxuria's…material permeation…! Then how about this…!"

Sui fired the electric shock she stole from Natazuka, but it was blocked by the metallic crystal blades that shot up silently from the ground.

"Vanagloria's power…?! How…?!"

"I told you. Everyone's cheering on us. The wish of a single dragon medium won't change the world. The world chooses the dragon medium."

"But… That can't be… I won't accept it…!"

Sui shook her head violently, yet the dragon aura surrounding Iroha was becoming colossal. Acedia's, Ira's, even Tristia's and Superbia's powers whirled around her, protecting her. The powers of the eight dragons originally came from the Supreme Absolute—the Taiji. They were all originally one power.

"But Iroha Mamana, as long as I…as long as I can get rid of you…!"

Sui picked up a fragment of the land, sharp like a knife, and ran. She charged to stab Iroha with its pointed end.

Yahiro blocked her way. He received the stab to his stomach

and hugged her.

“Brother?!”

Sui’s eyes grew wide in shock as Yahiro looked at her gently.

“It’s over… Let it go. The time for revenge is over…Sui.”

Yahiro and Sui used to be close siblings, but she suffered under the whims of adults from the moment she was born, and her brother never noticed. Even if they were to go back in time, their fate wouldn’t change, but they could end that fate, and only Yahiro could do it.

“Burn to ash, Avaritia.”

Still holding Sui, Yahiro turned into a dragon—a fire dragon that would burn everything to the ground. The light burned the world tree and the flames extended throughout the vast Afterlife to purify it.

Then the world went back into motion.

Epilogue

“Bye-bye, Ayaho. Good luck at work.”

“Thanks. See you tomorrow.”

Ayaho Sashou got off the train as her friend, wearing a matching uniform, said good-bye.

Yuurakuchou Station from the Yamanote Line was curiously right by where the Ploutonion used to be and the last stop of the armored train Yáo Guāng Xīng.

It had been almost three years since the Ploutonion disappeared.

The Moujuu disappeared, and a percentage of the Japanese who had died returned with a four-year gap in their memories, but that was the only change.

The wrecked roads and buildings weren’t restored, nor did the people who died come back to life. Naturally, conflict among humans didn’t disappear. Terrible wars still happened, and people lost their lives around the world. Rumors that everyone in this world was already dead remained unconfirmed.

But even so, the world did not end.

That much was certain.

Yahiro and Iroha did not return to this world after entering the Ploutonion that day.

Ayaho knew that would be the case. Saving the world meant Yahiro would turn into the new Ouroboros, and Iroha would become his sacrificial medium and stay to offer her prayers. Even if they could stop the world from ending, they would never be able to come back. They headed into the Ploutonion well aware of this.

If their wish was truly granted, no new dragon mediums would appear. Yahiro would become the last Ouroboros, and a world without end would be created. It would take centuries to find out if they succeeded. Ayaho would no longer be there to

confirm it. That was a little regrettable.

"I'm here."

Ayaho unlocked the back door and entered the shop. She worked at a small gallery on a back street in Ginza called Galerie Berith. It was a relatively decent business, selling art pieces, antiques, and some swords. The gallery had a café, and that was really the main source of profit. Ayaho worked at the café.

She was one of the first employees they hired after opening, and lately, she had been looking out after the newer hires. It was a pretty stressful spot for timid Ayaho. She entered the locker room and locked the door before taking off her high school uniform.

She barely attended middle school due to the four years lost to the J-nocide. Enrolling in high school was no problem after the Japanese returned, but she'd struggled with her studies at first. She only got through it thanks to the help of the friendly PMC operators she had spent a short but eventful time with.

Ayaho got the gist of studying thanks to their teachings, and her grades went way up. Now she was one of the top students.

The café uniform was pretty showy for a gallery café. It had a short skirt and lots of frills and ribbons. It also felt like it accentuated her chest a lot. All to the tastes of the twins, the owners.

Iroha would have probably loved it and asked to wear it, too. A smile escaped Ayaho as she pictured Iroha saying that. The mirror showed Ayaho at seventeen years old now—the same age Iroha and Yahiro were when they said good-bye.

Following Iroha's influence, she let her hair grow out, and now she was used to it. Her sister, Rinka, insisted she dye it a lighter color, but the school rules did not allow it, and she didn't feel brave enough to try it yet. Besides, Ayaho didn't want to become Iroha, she only wanted to preserve a bond to her beloved sister, and this much was enough.

Ayaho opened the window and saw the cityscape of Tokyo in recovery.

Things weren't all back to normal just because Japanese people returned. The standards of living and economy were a

mess. Japan had to redo its nation from zero. Most international armies were still stationed in the main cities, and negotiations to get them to leave were not going well. Still, Ayaho felt like things were going in a good direction.

There were plenty of organizations that supported Japan, such as the Salas Foundation, Noah Transtech, and the PMC Guild. Ayaho's school was run through their cooperation, too.

"Sorry I'm late. I'll enter the hall right away." Ayaho finished changing and entered the café.

"Thanks."

Shen and the rest of the kitchen staff smiled at her.

The relatively small place was full of regulars. The chatty madams by the window came here for Wei. A man was over by the gallery to see Paola. Josh was eloquently selling antiques.

After the Ploutonion disappeared, Ganzheit gradually disbanded and most of the armed forces surrounding the warmonger faction dissolved. It was only natural, as they had lost their dragon mediums.

Giuli and Rosé returned to the European HQ and inherited the entirety of Galerie Berith. They purged most of the old management and turned it into a regular arms dealer. As war continued incessantly around the world, they had even greater earnings than when they were with Ganzheit.

Meanwhile, the Far East Branch dissolved after having delivered their revenge, and most operators left. They turned a new leaf, away from violence. The small gallery in Ginza became a place to rehire such operators. Rosetta Berith said it was not for charity, but Ayaho wondered. She knew how nice Rosetta was at her core, which only made Ayaho doubt her all the more.

"Ayaho, could you come here, please?"

A short regular sitting at the terrace called her. It was a white-haired old man wearing a gaudy shirt—the owner of a shady store in the neighborhood. A girl around ten years old sat next to him, and a white doglike creature was by her feet. Runa and Nuemaru. The old man, Eduardo Valenzuela, became the siblings' legal guardian.

“Welcome, Mr. Ed. You don’t want the usual?” Ayaho asked with the familiarity one would use with a relative.

“No, I do want the café de olla. With the *tasty, yummy* chant as always.”

“No, we don’t do that kind of service here.”

Ayaho chuckled, then looked at the table, where she found the latest model smartphone. It was the first time she had seen the old man walking around with an electronic device.

“I wanted you to take a look at this.” He grabbed the phone and opened a video app. The playlist showed the thumbnail of a streamer Ayaho recognized: a pretty girl wearing a flashy miko outfit and a wig with furry ears.

“No…way…”

Ayaho covered her mouth. She was frozen in shock, unaware that she had dropped the menu she had been holding to her side. Iroha Waon videos were not unusual. Heaps of them appeared using clips from her videos after that day three years back.

But this video was different. In it, Iroha was wearing an outfit Ayaho hadn’t seen before. Ayaho had made all of Iroha Waon’s outfits, from the first to the last, by hand. There was no fit she hadn’t seen. If there was, it had to be recorded after they said good-bye.

Which meant this video was taken after she returned from the Ploutonion.

“Waooon! Hi everywaon, Iroha Waon here! It’s me! It’s been so long!”

Iroha on the screen spoke with the same energy from three years ago. She looked a little more mature, but Ayaho couldn’t be sure she’d changed much.

“Ayaho! Rinka! Ren! Honoka, Kyouta, Kiri! Runa and Nuemaru! How’s everyone in the Galerie doing?”

The person in charge of the camera and lighting hurried to stop her after she yelled the names of her siblings for the whole world to hear. Ayaho teared up at the sound of his voice yelling, *“Idiot!”*

“It took us a while to come back, but we’re here!”

Where?! Ayaho reacted internally while wiping away the tears.

By then, the Galerie’s staff had gathered around her and were clapping or pumping their fists.

Ayaho had no idea how they had come back from the Afterlife. But she was sure that they would come to see her soon enough.

Even if this world was only a hollow illusion.

Her beloved family was right here.

Ayaho looked up at the sky.

The clear, blue sky; no dragon in sight.



Afterword

So there you have it: *Hollow Regalia* Volume 5.

I'm not sure what to write about here without spoiling the story considering how many mysteries were solved in this volume, but in any case, I'm glad I got this done. Truly.

The meaning behind the Lazaruses and the Moujuu in this world, Sui's secret, the reason why Iroha had no memories… I was so afraid I might die before I could tell all of this to you. I'm glad it's done now. It might sound like I'm exaggerating, but I do remind you that this series was created during a global pandemic. That said, it's not like I want to die now that everything has been revealed, so I'll continue looking out for my health.

What left the biggest impression on me about this volume was Ayaho. During the planning stages, she could have ended up dying down the line, so I'm personally glad that she grew to the point of having a section written from her point of view.

And we can't forget about our heroine, Iroha. She was a kind of heroine that I had never written before, so all her scenes felt fresh and fun. The streaming themes this time around were karaoke and offline collabs. An offline collab with Iroha would definitely be a blast.

Now then, with everything that's happened and all I'm saying, it feels like this is the last volume, but thankfully editorial told me that I could keep it going, so *Hollow Regalia* will continue for a little longer.

Matsuki Ugatsu's manga adaptation is also running in Dengeki Maoh. The first volume is already on sale, so please check it out.

My new book titled *Sword of Stallion* is to be released at the same time as this volume. It's an isekai fantasy story with a knight, an imperial princess, a dragon, and a giant robot. I had a lot of fun writing it, so I would appreciate it if you could give it a look.

Finally, I want to thank illustrator Miyuu for the fantastic job. I'm always so grateful for how the illustrations represent the world so beautifully, in a way the text isn't enough for.

I also give my deepest thanks to everyone involved in the production and sale of this book.

And of course, my biggest thanks to you, for reading.

May we meet in the next volume.

Gakuto Mikumo

06

The End of Eden

HOLLOW REGALIA

A Lazarus we
don't know about?

Who the
hell opened
this Ploutonion?!

W-waooo...
I can't do this...

Iroha...
I want to see you...

You are not getting
away with hurting
my employees.

The Kuyou Masakane?!
Why do you have it?!

Yahiro Narusawa—Lazarus



Kuyo Masakane

DATA

Age:	17	**Birthday**	8/16
Height:	5′9″		
Traits:	Black hair and eyes, 135 lbs.		
Special Skill:	Kendo (first kyu)		
Likes:	Yakitori, watching movies		
Dislikes:	Onions, classical literature		

CONFIDENTIAL

SUMMARY

He became a Lazarus after being bathed in dragon blood. One of the few surviving Japanese. He lived on his own as a salvager, retrieving antiques and artwork from the quarantined 23 Wards. For years, he looked for his younger sister, Sui Narusawa, who went missing after the J-nocide.

Iroha Mamana—Moujuu Tamer



DATA

Age:	17	**Birthday**	7/21 (tentative)
Height:	5′3″		
Traits:	Brown hair and eyes, F-cup or greater		
Special Skill:	Streaming, cosplay		
Likes:	*Dorayaki*, family		
Dislikes:	Coffee, math		

SUMMARY

A Japanese girl who survived near the center of the quarantined 23 Wards. She lived with her seven brothers and sisters in the former site of the Tokyo Dome. Sentimental and quick to cry. She has the power to control Moujuu, and is targeted by private military companies because of it.



Iroha Waon—Streamer

Age:	17,000	**Birthday**	7/21	**Height:**	15 apples

Traits: Silver hair, green eyes, furry ears and tail

Cosplayer who livestreams in Japanese on a foreign streaming site. Despite her cute looks and voice, the actual contents of her videos are not very interesting and she's having trouble increasing her followers. There seems to be a special reason why she continues to stream despite the low viewership…

Giulietta Berith

Age:	16	**Birthday**	6/13
Height:	5′1″		
Traits:	Orange highlights, E-cup		
Special Skill:	All martial arts		
Likes:	Fruit, art appreciation		
Dislikes:	Blobby things, grotesque things		

Executive of arms dealer Galerie Berith. Older twin sister of Rosetta. She's of Chinese descent but a citizen of Belgium, base of the House of Berith. She over-powers Yahiro in hand-to-hand combat with superhuman skill. She is friendly and respected by her underlings.





Rosetta Berith

Age:	16	**Birthday**	6/13
Height:	5′1″		
Traits:	Blue highlights, less than A-cup		
Special Skill:	Sniping		
Likes:	Black tea, reading		
Dislikes:	Alcohol, horror movies		

Executive of arms dealer Galerie Berith. Younger twin sister of Giulietta. She has superhuman physical ability and a natural talent for weaponry, especially firearms. The opposite of her sister, she is always calm and collected and rarely shows any emotions. She usually takes command of the troops. She always dotes on her sister.

CONFIDENTIAL



Eusebius Berith

Age: 46 **Birthday** 2/26

Height: 6′1″

Current head of the House of Berith and CEO of Galerie Berith. His position within Ganzheit is not very high, but thanks to the feats of the Galerie's Far East Branch, he gained influence to the point of leading the hard-liner faction. He has a genetically modified body and above-average intelligence and physical capabilities.



Cyrille Ghislain

Age: 52 **Birthday** 9/13

Height: 5′9″

Steward at the service of the House of Berith. He is a former soldier of the special forces and works as Eusebius's bodyguard and commander of Galerie Berith's private military company division. Expert in negotiating and sneak attacks. Rosé knows this and is always on high alert around him.

Karura Myoujiin

Age: 20 **Birthday** 7/5

Height: 5′3″

The eldest daughter of the Myoujiin clan, who are direct descendants of the Heavenly Imperial House's bloodline. Candidate to be the next Heavenly Emperor. Sociable and cheerful, but her true thoughts always remain obscured. She owns the Heavenly Imperial Treasure, the Crimson Magatama.









Kuro

Small Moujuu resembling a canine. Controlled by Karura Myoujiin's pseudo-Regalia, it shares its five senses with her. It has the power to hide itself in shadows and uses that to act as Karura's messenger.



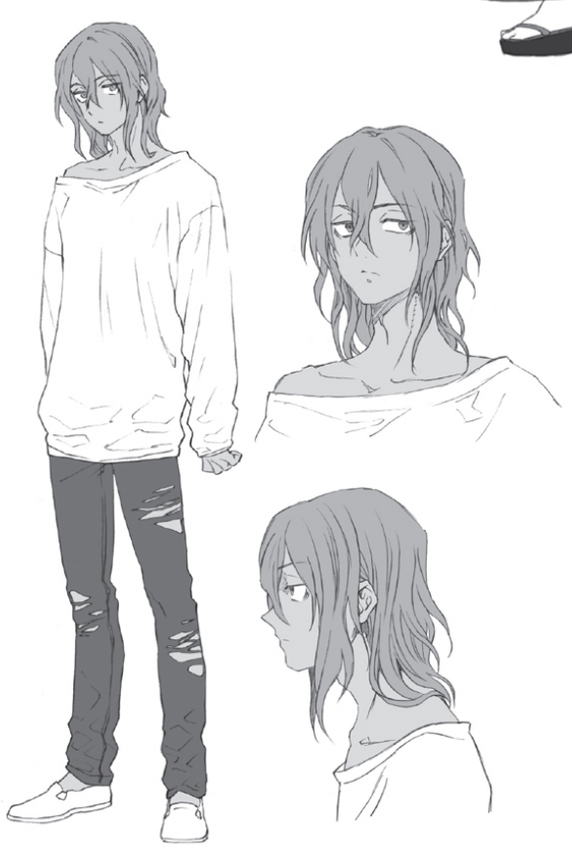
CONFIDENTIAL

Kaname Kashima

Age:	17	Birthday	1/17
Height:	5′1″		

Medium of the thunder dragon, Tristitia. Member of the Kashima clan, which is a branch of the Myoujiin clan. Held captive alongside her contractor, Toru Natazuka. She loves plants and has a calm nature, but hides a ferocious side that is unleashed when facing someone who opposes the Heavenly Imperial House.





Toru Natazuka

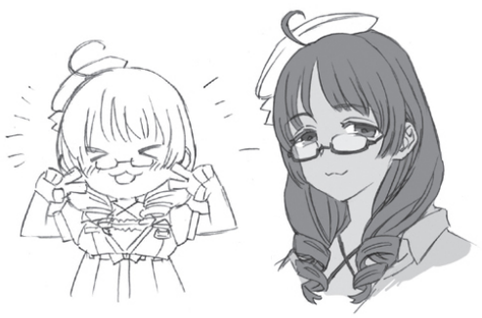
Age:	19	Birthday	9/8
Height:	5′5″		

A Lazarus under contract with Kaname. He once took advantage of his immortality to commit all sorts of violence, and is now imprisoned in a detached palace of the Heavenly Emperor's clan alongside Kaname. He is lazy and hates going out, but the fact remains he's a dangerous individual who wouldn't pass up a death match with another Lazarus.

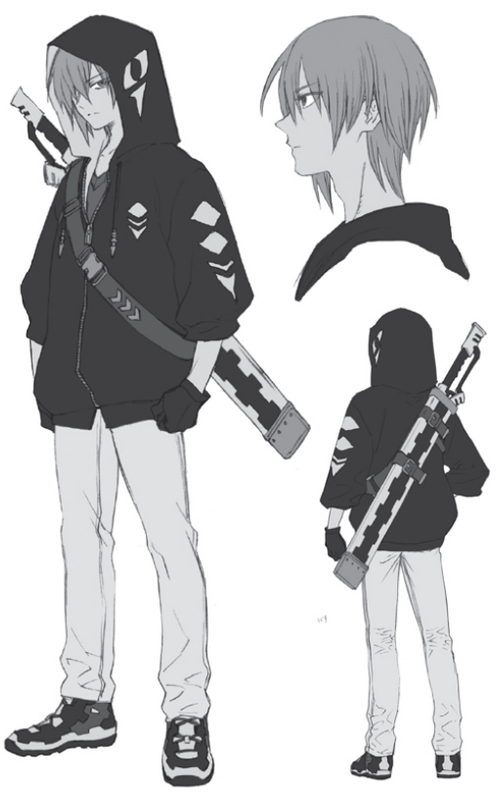
Nina Himekawa

Age:	22	Birthday	2/14
Height:	4′9″		

Researcher at the European Organization for Graviton Research (CERG). A genius who skipped grades and obtained a PhD at a young age. She is the medium of the marsh dragon, Luxuria, and is investigating the dragons' powers through the lens of physics.







Hisaki Minato

Age:	18	Birthday	4/11
Height:	5′8″		

Lazarus under contract with Nina. He obeys her every command like a loyal dog, but his true aim and intentions are unknown. He seems rude and unsociable, but is actually an honest young man.

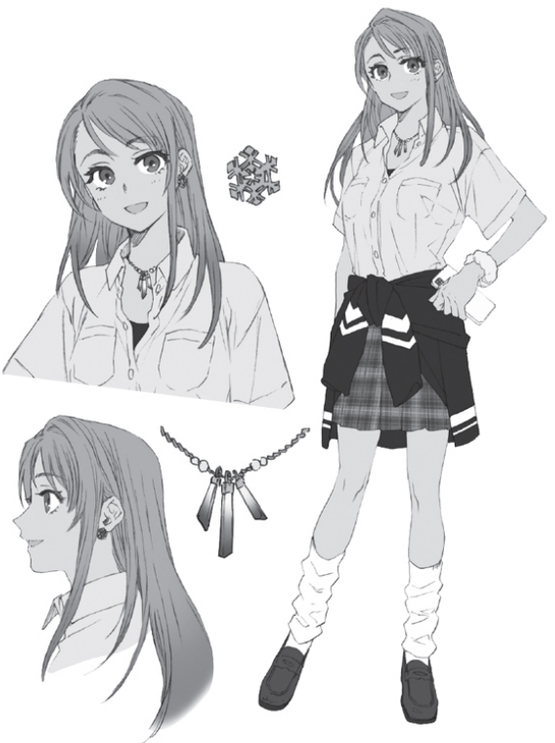


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Sumika Kiyotaki

Age:	18	Birthday	5/9
Height:	5′2″		

Medium of the water dragon, Acedia. She is cheerful and a positive thinker, but also a realist. It took a long time for her powers as a dragon medium to awaken, and she lived in a brothel as a regular survivor for two years after the J-nocide. She witnessed the emergence of the earth dragon four years ago and bears a grudge against the Narusawa siblings.





Zen Sagara

Age:	17	Birthday	11/21
Height:	5′9″		

Sumika's Lazarus. He is straightforward and has a strong sense of justice, but is also stubborn and obstinate. He attended a prestigious international boarding school before the J-nocide, and went through hell when coming back to Japan. He practiced fencing since childhood and was once expected to become a Japanese representative in the field.

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