

06

FINAL

GAKUTO MIKUMO
Illustration by
MIYUU

HOLLOW REGALIA

06

The End of Eden

GAKUTO MIKUMO

Illustration by MIYUU



HOLLOW REGALIA

Ellie


"Mr. Yahiro... What is this?"
Avaritia's Medium
Iroha Mamana
"Wanna try one?"
Mysterious Girl
Ellie
Avaritia's Lazarus
Yahiro Narusawa


Rosetta Berith
PMC Combat Consultant
Suria Almiron
Giulietta Berith
The Seventh Lazarus
Shigure Shindou

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 as a salvager, retrieving antiques and artwork from the quarantined 23 Wards. After the events at the Ploutonion, he went missing alongside Iroha.



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.



Giulietta Berith

An 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

An 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.



Josh Keegan

A Galerie Berith operator. American of Irish descent. Former cop targeted by a criminal organization. Jokey personality, but an excellent soldier.



Paola Resente

A Galerie Berith operator. Mexican. Former actress with a loyal fanbase. She works hard to send money back to her family in her homeland.



Yang Wei

A Galerie Berith operator. Chinese. His father, a high-ranking government official, was murdered, and while investigating the case, he came across Ganzheit and subsequently joined Galerie Berith. He is handsome, and usually a gentle man, but becomes scary when mad.

Dragon Medium & Lazarus



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.

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 Narusawa

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 and was in Ganzheit's custody.



Auguste Nathan

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.

The Children

These children lived under Iroha's protection in the Koishikawa Korakuen Garden in the Moujuu-infested 23 Wards. Currently under Galerie Berith's protection.



Kyouta



Rinka



Kiri



Honoka



Ren



Ayaho



Runa

Myoujiin Clan



Kaname Kashima



Tooru Natazuka



Karura Myoujiin

Opening Act: **Prologue**
Act 1: **Island in the Sun**
Act 2: **Angel with No Name**
Act 3: **Alternative Lazarus**
Act 4: **Apocalypse**
Final Act: **Epilogue**
Side Story: **Ayaho & Iroha**
Afterword

06

The End of Eden

HOLLOW REGALIA

[redacted]

HOLLOW REGALIA

The End of Eden

06

Gakuto Mikumo

Illustration by **MIYUU**

YEN ON
NEW YORK

Copyright

HOLLOW REGALIA—The End of Eden Vol. 6

UTSURONARU REGALIA Vol. 6 The End of Eden

Gakuto Mikumo

Translation by Sergio Avila

Cover art by Miyuu

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

UTSURONARU REGALIA Vol. 6 RAKUEN NO HATE
©Gakuto Mikumo 2024
Edited by Dengeki Bunko First published in Japan in 2024 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo. English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

English translation © 2025 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for

review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On 150 West 30th Street, 6th Floor New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com
facebook.com/yenpress
twitter.com/yenpress
yenpress.tumblr.com
instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: September 2025
Edited by Yen On Editorial: Leilah Labossiere Designed by Yen Press Design: Madelaine Norman Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.
The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Mikumo, Gakuto, author. | Miyuu, illustrator. | Avila, Sergio, translator.
Title: Hollow regalia / Gakuto Mikumo ; illustration by Miyuu ; translated by Sergio Avila.
Other titles: Utsuronaru regalia. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2023- | Contents: v. 1. Corpse reviver – Identifiers: LCCN 2022048784 | ISBN 9781975352790 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) Subjects: LCGFT: Apocalyptic fiction. | Monster fiction. | Light novels.
Classification: LCC PZ7.1.M555 Ho 2023 | DDC [Fic]–dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022048784

ISBNs: 979-8-8554-0992-5 (paperback) 979-8-8554-0993-2 (ebook)
E3-20250527-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Opening Act: Prologue

Act 1: Island in the Sun

Act 2: Angel with No Name

Act 3: Alternative Lazarus

Act 4: Apocalypse

Final Act: Epilogue

Side Story: Ayaho & Iroha

Afterword

Yen Newsletter



Stay up to date On Light Novels by Downloading our mobile App

Zerobooks Universal

Zerobooks USA ONLY

Zerobooks IOS

Download all your Favorite Light Novels

Jnovels.com

Join our Discord and meet Thousands of LN readers to chat with

Till death do us part...

Prologue

The place was like paradise.

It was a remote island in the middle of the deep blue—a small piece of land far from the mainland. Clouds near the horizon glowed silver in the light of the gentle afternoon sun.

The expansive beach was white as snow, the sea dyed a faint emerald green. Flowers of vivid colors bloomed among trees that were wrapped in the songs of the birds carried by the breeze.

A cozy-looking structure stood near the entrance of the forest on the cove. It was a log cabin of crude, clearly amateurish fabrication. On the wooden deck at the door stood a young man around twenty years old, with black hair and eyes. In his right hand he held a well-maintained cooking knife. He deftly sliced and salted fish on a tray. The young man suddenly halted his work as he heard a voice come from the cabin.

A young woman screamed. It was a scream of joy.

"LET'S GO! I BEAT IT!"

Her excited shout penetrated the soundproofed walls with ease. Then he heard a loud thud. The young woman must have kicked over some equipment in her excitement.

The young man set the knife down and shook his head as if he was thinking *good grief*. He washed his hands in a bucket of water and went into the cabin.

In contrast with the crude exterior, the cabin's interior was fully furnished. In addition to the handmade furniture, there was a satellite radio receiver and a television, and the kitchen had a large commercial refrigerator. High-efficiency solar panels provided all the energy they needed, and they had a diesel generator on standby for emergencies.

Most prominent of all was the streaming setup. A top-of-the-line

gaming PC was hooked up to a high-speed LEO satellite connection. About half the entire building's space was occupied by a streaming booth, and that was where the scream had just come from. The soundproofing was inexpertly done, so the streamer's voice was booming out.

"Thank you for watching all the way to the end. I finally beat it, thanks to your support!"

The stream, which had begun last night, seemed to finally be coming to an end. One had to commend the girl's ability to remain so cheerful after more than half a day of nonstop game streaming.

"Ahh… That was fun. Oh, don't forget to like and subscribe, guys. See you all next stream! Waooon! Iroha Waon signing off! Bye-bye!"

She waved good-bye while ending the stream. Then she shut down the camera, mic, and PC before crawling out of her gaming chair and opening the booth's door. The streamer, also about twenty years old, was clad in a skimpy outfit and animal-eared wig. Her eyes—colored via contacts—grew wide when she spotted the young man standing in the cabin's living room.

"Yahiro! Did you watch the stream? I beat that hidden boss! And it was so close, too! I had just the tiniest bit of stamina left. I've come so far, huh? I can dodge the seemingly impossible chain blows now!"

The streamer threw herself at him, begging for praise. The man, Yahiro—Yahiro Narusawa—caught her.

"I mean, it'd look pretty bad if you didn't get better after playing for so long. Do you realize how long you were in there? The sun's gonna set soon."

"Hmm, I started last night, so that means it's been around sixteen hours? I'd say that's pretty quick, actually. I was ready to spend two whole nights on that."

She shook her head slightly before taking off her silver wig. She then freed her long chestnut hair from her hairnet. The enigmatic persona was replaced by a regular Asian girl.

Streamer Iroha Waon transformed into Iroha Mamana.

Her cosplayer facade was widely known for a variety of reasons.

"Sixteen hours… Yeah, no wonder you stink," Yahiro remarked

bluntly while patting her sweaty head.

Iroha's happy expression was replaced with a blush and a frown.

"Hey! I can't believe this! You're telling your favorite, adored, darling streamer that she stinks?! What am I supposed to do about it?! It's hot in there! And it's not like you smell good, either! Can you really talk when you smell like fish?!"

"Keep your ego in check. I was just cutting fish. But if you don't like the smell, then don't eat it."

"Wait, hold on. I'm hungry. I haven't eaten anything since this morning."

"Then go take a bath. I'll get the food ready."

"Yay!"

Iroha's good mood returned immediately, and she skipped to the back of the cabin. There were natural hot springs all over the tiny volcanic island. By installing a waterline, they were able to have hot baths in the cabin any time they wanted.

"Hey! Don't take your clothes off here!"

Yahiro frowned at the sight of Iroha, already scantily clad to begin with, undressing before reaching the bathroom.

"I'm wearing a swimsuit underneath, don't worry!"

Iroha turned around—half undressed—and leaned forward, accentuating her cleavage. She was indeed wearing a white bikini under her costume.

"Why were you wearing that under the costume?"

"I'm skipping the changing-out-of-my-underwear part so I can jump into the ocean or the bath at a moment's notice."

"What are you, a grade-schooler going to the pool on summer vacation?"

Iroha grinned, and Yahiro flicked her forehead. "Ow!" She clutched her head in pain while glaring at him through tears.

"Why?! Don't worry, I'm not streaming in a bikini. You're the only one who gets to see cute li'l me like this, you lucky dog."

"Just go take a bath already. Save your teasing for after you get that stench off."

"Hey! I don't smell *that* bad!"

Iroha puffed her cheeks out in a pout and walked into the

bathroom. Yahiro watched her leave and then sighed.

The sunlight flowing through the window did a good job disguising the red in his cheeks.

†

The sky faded from orange to purple as the sun reached the horizon. It was a calm evening, with the relaxing sound of waves crashing on the seashore.

Yahiro reveled in the rhythmic lapping as he sat on the deck's bench. Meanwhile, Iroha sat by the grill at the center of the deck, watching the food cook. The scent of the sauce on the charcoal-grilled fish and vegetables began to waft through the air.

"Is it done yet? Can I eat it now?"

"You can if you want, but it'll be tastier if you let them cook a bit longer."

"Aww… I'll wait a little more, then."

Yahiro used a pair of tongs and cooking chopsticks to flip the food.

The day's main dish was longtail snapper. While the island's waters were abundant with seafood, this fish dwelled in deeper places, and he rarely caught them. Yahiro had taken a boat out early in the morning to get the high-grade feast.

Complementing the meal were smoked meat and veggie skewers, as well as earthenware-cooked rice. For dessert there was a banana pie, courtesy of the island's produce. It had become Yahiro's staple dish lately.

"This is amazing! You're getting even better at this, Yahiro."

Iroha was adoring her mouthful of fish.

"Anybody would get this good after three years of cooking. Especially when there's not much else to do."

"No, don't downplay your skills. I am blessed to get to eat your feasts. Gimme seconds."

"All right."

Yahiro grabbed the bowl she held out and filled it with another serving of rice.

The afterglow lit their profiles as the stars began shining in the sky. Yahiro wore a simple T-shirt and shorts. Iroha was dressed in a casual summer dress. They looked like a young couple on their honeymoon, but this was just a regular day for them.

"That reminds me… Nuemaru used to get us fish sometimes back when we were in the 23 Wards. Ren couldn't handle the bones, and Ayaho always deboned them for him. And then Rinka got jealous when she found out…"

"Wow," Yahiro responded softly as Iroha reminisced about her siblings.

A drop of fat fell from the fish onto the charcoal and sparked a burst of flame. The light illuminated Iroha's smiling profile, and Yahiro's breath caught.

"Iroha, do you want to see them?"

"Of course I do. I'd be overjoyed to see them. But it's fine. I'm happy just to know they're okay. We can't go meet them."

"Yeah…," Yahiro whispered, and his shoulders slumped.

The spice of the kebab tickled his nose as he bit into it.

Three years earlier— Yahiro and Iroha had saved the world from doom, and their world turned out to be the underworld. The world of the dead, protected by a dragon. They lived in the illusion of the Ouroboros as part of the mechanism of reincarnation. A place to wait for people to purge their souls of their past lives' regrets.

However, the underworld was on the brink of collapse. The world dragon was nearing the limit of its life.

Iroha was chosen as the dragon medium to give birth to the Dragon Slayer. Yahiro claimed the title and granted her wish. The heroic Dragon Slayer—the one to become the new Ouroboros. Just as the snake ate its own tail, the one to slay Ouroboros became the new world dragon. Thus, the dragon medium's wish became reality. Iroha became able to create a new world to her liking.

Yet she did not wish for that.

Her wish was for their world to continue. And it was not the wish of a single dragon medium; all the people in the world wished for a continuation, a world with gradual transformation. Iroha refused to become the god of a new world.

As a result, the world escaped collapse and continued to exist.

However, Yahiro and Iroha had no place in that world anymore. Naturally. They were the creators—the foundations of the world. They were meant to be trapped in the Afterlife, a place outside the world.

Yet, because Iroha had wished for the old world to continue, they were spared from banishment. But that did not change the fact that they maintained the power of the Ouroboros.

So Yahiro and Iroha had sealed themselves on an island. They confined themselves to a remote stretch of land so the power of the Ouroboros would not affect the rest of the world. This nameless island was their Eden, and at the same time, their cage.

It was hard to tell if their situation was unfortunate, or if it was a better conclusion than ending in the Afterlife, but Yahiro and Iroha were mostly satisfied. In the end, it was they who had wished for it.

"Well, we just can't talk directly, but I can do my streams. That way, they know I'm doing okay. So I'm fine with it. And my subscriber count keeps rising."

Iroha spoke nonchalantly while reaching for the pie.

"And the Moujuufied Japanese have returned to normal. There are more people to watch your streams now."

"I have more rivals, too, though. Oh, hey, you should do some streams yourself. I'm pretty sure there's demand for fishing and cooking livestreams."

"No, thanks. Sounds like a bother."

"You say but still upload pictures on social media."

"Only when I get a big catch."

Yahiro averted his gaze when he realized Iroha knew about the social media account he ran anonymously. Iroha grinned.

"I think it's great. Giuli and Rosé said we gotta enjoy life."

“That whole thing about who knows what effect there will be on our mental stability after losing our human emotions?”

“Yeah, that. It’s why I’m doing my streams.”

“They didn’t ask you to stream until you sweat-stink, though.”

“Hey, I already took a bath! And I was streaming a marathon!”

Iroha whacked Yahiro’s shoulder as he let out a sarcastic chuckle. It was their usual lighthearted banter. But this time, just as Iroha’s fist hit Yahiro, a flash lit up the night sky. Thunder followed after a moment’s delay, and the earth shook as well.

“…Wh-what was that?” asked Iroha fearfully after she tensed with shock.

Yahiro stood and scanned their surroundings.

“I don’t know. I thought lightning at first, but…”

“…the sky’s clear,” Iroha finished for him.

Yahiro nodded.

Indeed, there wasn’t a single rain cloud among the stars. There was no sign of the passing showers that were common there in the south, either.

Yet there was something odd about the air on the island. They hadn’t felt anything like it before in their time there. Then Yahiro noticed the source of the feeling and froze.

At the water’s edge, there was an unfamiliar silhouette on the ground.

“Someone’s there.”

“Huh?” Iroha blinked, taken aback by Yahiro’s remark.

Yahiro put the tongs down and grabbed the shovel for the charcoal. It was an unreliable weapon compared to the katana he had once wielded, but it would work for intimidation.

“An intruder.”

“Intruder? On this island? How did they even get here?”

“Who knows?”

Yahiro jumped off the deck after his curt response, then approached the person on the beach.

Iroha followed right behind, and he didn’t bother trying to stop her. She was a dragon medium and the creator of the world. Basically a goddess. Nobody could hurt her, at least while she was

by his side. She was safer following him.

As he drew closer to the outsider, he became less guarded. Confusion replaced the wariness in his expression. The intruder was a young woman. She had dazzling golden hair and wore a dress like a nun's habit, which was torn all over, exposing most of her skin.

She looked like a castaway who had spent days at sea.

"Uh… Wha…?" The blond girl noticed them approaching and raised her head.

Her facial features appeared Japanese, but her eyes were a clear, piercing blue. She was terribly beautiful.

"Who are you?" Yahiro asked, crouching before her.

She looked at him and smiled weakly in relief. She reached out to him with trembling hands and threw herself against his chest.

"…Yahiro… Narusawa…"

"Wha—?" The sudden embrace had Yahiro frozen in place.

"…Yahiro… Yahiro…" She called his name again and again as she buried her face in his chest.

Iroha's shriek reverberated across the shore.

"WHAAAAAAAAAAAT?!"

HOLLOW
REGALIA



06
The End of Eden

Presented by
GAKUTO MIKUMO

Illustration
MIYUU

Act 1 Island in the Sun

1

When the young man woke up, he found himself in a dimly lit room.

He was wrapped in bandages. He lay on a hard, cramped bed that felt like an operating table, surrounded by foreboding machinery.

It had to be a hospital room. It wasn't compact, but it wasn't spacious, either. The claustrophobic feeling came from the window, which was small and barred.

It didn't feel like a space meant to allow someone to enjoy the view outside. Instead, it felt like a peeping hole to watch a guinea pig. It was a cage.

"Guh…"

The man groaned when a burning sensation flared seemingly in each and every one of his cells. His body was not hot; in fact, it was cold as ice. Yet something in his core burned. He felt like someone was forcing gasoline into a corroded, abandoned machine.

A violent headache hit him the moment he tried to remember why he was suffering like this. His thoughts broke into pieces, and any surfacing memories sank back into the pits of darkness. He fumed at the absurdity of it all.

Anger. Hatred. Vengeance.

The headache vanished as soon as he recalled those emotions. The heat burning in his cells retreated, and he fully regained consciousness.

The airtight door to the room opened, and someone crossed the threshold.

A woman wearing a lab coat stood there. She was white and had lustrous brunette hair. Her face was breathtaking, but her expression

was so neutral that it appeared unnatural. From the way she walked to the way she blinked, it all seemed artificial.

"Shigure. You're awake," the woman said in fluent and polite Japanese while looking down at him on the bed.

"…Shi…gure?" he asked hoarsely, so faintly that he couldn't believe the question had come out of his mouth.

"Yes. Shigure Shindou. That is your name, correct?"

"I…don't remember…"

"Not surprising. You just came back to life." She nodded, unfazed.

Shigure was unable to comprehend what she had just said. "Back to life?" he repeated.

"Yes. You died. Torn to shreds. I hear it was an ordeal gathering your pieces and stitching them back together."

"How…?"

"The Moujuu killed you."

"Moujuu?"

"The general term for dead people who have transformed into monsters. You entered their colony, what used to be called the 23 Wards, and fought them."

"No… I'm asking how I'm alive if I was torn to shreds."

He tried getting up, but then he became aware of the deep wound carved into his arm. And not just that—his legs and chest, too; every body part peeking out of his gown was riddled with injuries. It was apparent that he had been sewn back together.

"Because you are a Lazarus," the woman informed him.

Shigure frowned in confusion. "Lazarus?"

"Put simply, you are immortal. No matter how lethal the wound, given enough time, you'll come back to life. As you did just moments ago."

"That's ridiculous…," he refuted instinctively.

The dead were dead. They could not come back to life, no matter what. A ludicrous immortal creature could not be considered a human, but a monster.

She shook her head and smiled.

"You don't need to believe me right now. You'll remember once your body heals completely. You can't forget yourself."

"What…am I…?" Shigure groaned.

He hadn't forgotten only his name. He didn't know *what* he was. All memories of his life were completely gone. She said he would remember it all in time, but there was no guarantee. He felt a terrible sense of dread, like he was standing atop a feeble sand tower.

"You shouldn't need the life-support system anymore."

The woman turned off the machines around his bed one by one. If it truly was a life-support system as she said, then that lent some credibility to the implication that he had revived.

"I'll get you food in the morning. You should be able to move more freely by then," the woman in the lab coat said before walking back to the door.

Shigure stopped her. "Wait. Who are you? You don't seem like a doctor."

"Suria Almiron. You may call me Suria. Combat consultant for private military company Kyuos."

"And why's a consultant taking care of me?" Shigure asked in confusion.

Her expression became gleeful. "Because I am your employer, Lazarus."

"Huh…?"

Suria left the hospital room and the shocked Shigure inside it behind. All he could do was stare at his arm as her words echoed in his head.

2

Land Hessen, the Federal Republic of Germany. Three people in matching coats ran across the crowded lobby of the Frankfurt International Airport.

One girl and two boys. Asian—a race rarely seen in this city. The small tomboy ran at the front. She wore a beret on top of her short bob and carried a backpack too big for her small frame. She turned back to the two behind her.

“Hurry up, Kyouta. We still gotta go through immigration after the security check.”

“I know! But the luggage is too heavy! All because you buy souvenir after souvenir without thinking! And it’s your fault we’re late to the airport to begin with, Honoka!” retorted the impish boy.

Their coats had a shield-shaped badge on the chest decorated with a book, a sun, and a dragon. It was the emblem of a famous boarding school in Switzerland. They were on a layover in Germany during their return trip to Japan.

“C’mon, I couldn’t abandon that old lady in peril,” the girl, Honoka Togawa, defended herself.

“What peril? She was just lost.”

“Details, details. She was thankful for it, and that’s what matters.”

“Honoka, Kyouta. You’re going the wrong way,” the other boy said calmly to the arguing pair. The boy, Kiri Hirohashi, was pretty and androgynous and had a bob cut.

Honoka and Kyouta Kase became flustered and followed him. They were in sync at times like this, and not just because they had known each other for a long time. Although they didn’t share blood, they were siblings. In a sense, the intensity of their experiences had made them even closer than real siblings; they were a special family.

“Looks like we’re just barely gonna make it,” said Honoka, short of breath as they reached the security checkpoint.

It had been nearly three years since the Japanese people had been restored after the unprecedented J-nocide. Japan had recovered from its state of desolate ruin, but even now, there were few flights into the country. They would have to wait another week if they missed this plane. Even the strong-willed Honoka couldn’t help but feel uneasy at the possibility.

“I’m pooped… This airport is way too big. You got any food on you, Kiri?” Kyouta asked.

“Nope. That chocolate I gave you was the last of it.”

“Dang. Then we gotta buy something after we’re through security.”

“Don’t mind me. I’m not hungry,” Kiri replied indifferently.

“Oh, what am I gonna do with you?” Kyouta sighed. “C’mon,

man. Cheer up. You don't have to be so sad just because we couldn't go back with Rinka."

"I-I'm not sad…"

"Yeah! Don't be stupid, Kyouta!" Honoka yelled.

"Why're you getting mad?!" Kyouta took half a step back.

They had been only nine years old when they left Japan; now they were twelve. They had graduated into middle school last year. They were taller and had lost some of their babyish features.

They had reached an age where they were more conscious of age gaps. Kiri had a thing for Rinka Takio, who was three years older and like a sister to him. The two of them were close, thanks to their shared interest in fashion and beauty. But now, Rinka wasn't accompanying them back to Japan. She had urgent business in North America.

Kiri was down in the dumps because of that, and Honoka didn't like it. Kyouta, who was fairly *immature*, didn't realize it, and had stepped on a land mine. The trio stopped arguing at the security checkpoint as someone called out to them.

"Whoa, wait, are those…? Hey, kids!"

A Japanese woman with bleached hair waved from the next line. She seemed to be about twenty years old; she looked younger than her age, as Asian people tended to. A man, likely her boyfriend and also Japanese, was beside her. He had a serious look on his face.

"It is you! Iroha's kids, right? You remember us?" The woman pointed at herself with a grin on her face.

Honoka was the first to react. There were few Japanese women who knew Iroha's name. Even fewer knew the kids, too.

"Ah…! Sumika?!"

"Yup. Honoka, right? It's been so long! How're you? Other than taller!"

"I see you changed your hairstyle."

"Yeah. I did some cutting." Sumika Kiyotaka smiled bashfully as she touched the ends of her hair, which had been trimmed to her shoulders.

It had been almost three years since they'd last met. Sumika was as pretty as always, but she had turned from a gaudy high schooler

into a collected, refined woman.

"Hello to you, too, Zen." Kiri bowed to the man beside Sumika.

"Hey." Zen Sagara nodded curtly in response.

Kyouta looked up at him and cocked his head before whispering to Kiri, "Who's that?"

"Zen and Sumika, the medium of the water dragon and her Lazarus…"

"Ahh…! The jerks who kidnapped Ayaho!"

"Don't say that, Kyouta!"

"A-ha-ha, it's fine. It's true. Sorry about that."

Sumika laughed his insult off, while Zen grimaced. Zen and Sumika had taken their sister, Ayaho Sashou, hostage, back when they were enemies, in order to lure Yahiro into a trap. That said, they hadn't harmed Ayaho, and Yahiro had reconciled with them. Still, Kyouta remembered them as kidnappers.

"You're taking the flight to Tokyo, too?" Honoka smiled stiffly and tried to change the subject.

"Yeah. You're going back for summer break? Just you three?"

"Our big bro and sis were supposed to come, but Giuli called them."

"Oh… Is it about Teotihuacan?" Sumika blurted out in response.

"You know about it?"

"The request reached us first, but I'm not in shape for it," Sumika said.

Honoka raised her eyebrows. "Why? Are you sick?"

"Mmm, no, not sick." She averted her gaze.

Honoka observed the woman closely. She had felt something was off from the moment she first spotted Sumika. She was wearing flat shoes and a loose dress. And her cheeks were a bit puffy…

"Sumika… Should I be saying congratulations?"

Sumika's eyes grew wide as Honoka's question hit the bull's-eye.

"You're sharp as ever, Honoka. I don't think my belly's showing that much yet, is it?"

"Congratulations, Zen," Kiri said.

"Thanks," Zen replied bluntly again, but with a hint of bashfulness.

“So you’re traveling to give birth in Japan?”

“Yeah. There’s no precedent for a dragon medium giving birth, after all. Who knows what will happen? We thought we better do everything we can and be prepared for the worst,” Zen said gravely.

Sumika and Zen’s child—the child of a dragon medium and a Lazarus.

The nature of Iroha’s birth was similar, but her body came from reincarnation, not the womb of a dragon medium. No one knew what sort of power Sumika’s child would inherit.

The best place to prepare for anything that could rival a dragon’s power was, undoubtedly, Japan. Galerie Berith and Noah Transtech had left plenty of their troops there and continued research on the Relict Regalia. And there was no other country with mercenaries who had experience with dragons.

“You’re so dramatic, Zen. Take it easy.” Sumika sighed, but one could tell she was happy to hear his concern for her.

Meanwhile, one person had been left out of the conversation. Kyouta tilted his head.

“What’s going on?”

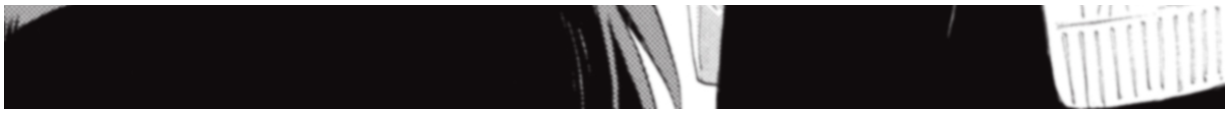
“Sumika’s having a baby,” Kiri whispered into his ear after a sigh.

“What?! So that means they had sex?!” Kyouta shouted.

“Keep it down, Kyouta!”

“You moron!”





Kiri and Honoka smacked him, and he yelped in pain. Zen just sighed, and Sumika laughed out loud.

3

San Juan Teotihuacan de Arista. On a plateau at the heart of Mexico lay the ruins of the civilization of Teotihuacan. The remains of a gigantic holy city.

The historic ruins were about fifty kilometers from the capital, Mexico City. Transport there was easy to find, as it was a popular tourist site. It took less than two hours to get there from the airport.

Yet Ren Sumita's facial expression was sour as he left the Mexico City airport and waited for his ride.

The boy wore a baseball cap and a PMC-provided bulletproof jacket. He would be fourteen years old that year. Though he was over 170 centimeters tall, his face still looked quite juvenile. His sour expression was not just due to fatigue from the long trip.

"Cheer up already." A girl wearing a similar bulletproof jacket of a different color smacked his back.

Rinka was Ren's and Iroha Mamana's non-blood-related sister. She was one year older than him. Ren was much taller, but she had a more mature air to her, thanks to her delicate features and bleach-blond hair.

"You're still grumpy about not going to Japan? I know you wanted to see Ayaho, but c'mon, there's no need to be that bummed out."

"I'm not bummed out because I can't see Aya. I told you it's because of the thin air here."

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever you say." Rinka smirked at his excuse.

Ayaho Sashou was their elder sister, a seventeen-year-old high schooler. All the siblings loved their gentle and attentive sister. Ren in particular looked up to her, or so Rinka thought.

Ayaho had remained in Japan when the younger siblings went to a boarding school in Switzerland. Special circumstances required her to stay.

This summer break was their once-a-year opportunity to visit her, but their plans had been ruined out of the blue.

Arms dealer Galerie Berith's General Manager Giulietta Berith had given them an assignment: to head to the ruins of Teotihuacan.

They were not official members of the Galerie, but Giuli was their guarantor in Europe and the sponsor of their tuition and living expenses. They couldn't possibly tell *her* no.

At the Geneva airport, Ren and Rinka parted ways with their younger siblings, who were heading back to Japan as planned while they traveled to the unfamiliar land of Mexico.

"The air really is thin here, though. It's over two thousand meters above sea level, isn't it?" Rinka breathed in and out, feeling slightly suffocated by the completely foreign air.

The Mexico City airport was the largest in Latin America, but the density of oxygen was low due to its high elevation. They even kept oxygen tanks on hand for travelers who suffered from altitude sickness.

"They say Olympic athletes come here for highland training."

"And why did they have to bring us here?" Rinka glared at him.

"I don't know. They just said someone would come for us once we got to Mexico." Ren scratched his head.

A horn blared from a car on the street. It was a four-wheel-drive pickup truck. A familiar blond white man waved at them from the driver's seat.

"Josh? He's the guide Giuli mentioned?"

Ren walked up to the car while dragging the suitcase that contained all of their clothes.

Josh Keegan, operator of Galerie Berith's PMC division, got out of the truck to greet them.

"Hey, kids. You've grown a lot since I last saw you in Japan."

"And you look a bit older."

"I haven't aged that much in one year, twerp. I'm still in my twenties."

Josh frowned at Rinka's quip while throwing the luggage into the truck bed.

They'd heard that Josh had retired from his post as lieutenant in

Galerie's PMC division and left combat after things in Japan wrapped up. He was supposed to be working at the Japanese branch. The kids couldn't hide their surprise at finding him here in Mexico.

"Did the princess tell you why you're here?"

"Not at all. She just told us to go to Teotihuacan," Rinka replied.

"I thought that'd be the case. A verbal explanation probably wouldn't suffice." Josh didn't pay any mind to the displeasure in Rinka's voice.

"What do you mean? Is it that complicated?"

"The opposite, actually. We know practically nothing. It's basically rumors. But we can't just ignore them, so here we are."

"Rumors?"

"Moujuu," Josh said bluntly.

Ren and Rinka looked at each other.

"Moujuu? You mean the Ploutonion beasts?"

"What?! Didn't they disappear?! Isn't that why Iroha and Yahiro…?"

"Calm down. We still don't know for sure. We're here to check."

Josh ruffled the worried kids' heads.

Ren raised his head. "Hold on, so we're here because we can resist Moujuufication?"

Josh nodded. "Partly. We can't send just anyone in if there really are Moujuu there."

The Moujuu were humans transformed by the miasma coming from the Ploutonion, and this phenomenon was related to this world's true nature as the underworld. Everyone in this world had already died and been thrown to the underworld, and the Moujuu form was their true appearance. They turned into the spectral beasts immediately without the protection of the power of Ouroboros.

However, a few individuals resisted Moujuufication: dragon mediums and their Lazaruses, as well as those who were immunized with the dragon factor through their partnership with the dragon mediums. The last of which included the operators of Galerie Berith's Japanese branch and Iroha Mamana's siblings.

Now it made sense why Giuli had sent them to Mexico. Moujuu appearances meant there had to be a Ploutonion nearby, and only

they could be sent to investigate without worrying about Moujuufication.

"But there's nothing we can do if we find Moujuu," Ren said anxiously.

Though they had once traveled with Galerie Berith, they had been grade schoolers at the time and had no real combat experience. They had participated in some of the Galerie's training exercises since moving to Europe, but only for self-defense. They had no chances of survival if they had to fight Moujuu.

Yet Josh was confident. "Don't worry. There's no way they'll attack us."

"How can you be so sure?" Rinka asked with suspicion.

Josh smiled boldly. "We've got an ace up our sleeve."

"What?"

"You don't remember? Forget fighting them—we can talk to them, thanks to her. We're just here as bodyguards."

"Wait… You mean…?"

Josh looked at the truck before giving an answer. He opened the backseat door and pointed inside.

There, they found the seats already occupied by a white dog-sized Moujuu that resembled a wolf as much as a fox. And holding it like it was a plush doll was a girl who appeared to be about ten years old.

""Runa…?!"" Ren and Rinka shouted in unison.

The youngest of their siblings, who was supposed to be in Japan, looked up at them with a blank expression and nodded.

4

The blond girl lay on Iroha's bed.

She looked terribly weakened and continued sleeping even after the sun rose. Iroha had carried her to the cabin, washed her sea-drenched hair, and changed her clothes all by herself. Yahiro offered to help a few times, but Iroha insisted that he not touch her.

"So who in the world is this, Yahiro?" Iroha raised her gaze up

from the girl to glare at Yahiro.

"I have absolutely no idea," Yahiro responded before he yawned.

Both of them were sleepy after looking after the girl all night.

"Don't lie to me! She knew your name!" Iroha pouted.

Yahiro shrugged. "I'm telling you the truth. I don't know."

"Be honest. I won't get mad."

"You're already mad. And why would you be mad about this girl knowing me to begin with?"

"Whoa! Are you hearing yourself?! Weren't you my fan?! You've got another idol now?! Changing *bias* now?!" Iroha raised her arms in anger.

"You're not accusing me of cheating, are you…?" Yahiro looked at her with surprise.

Iroha was always brimming with confidence and assurance that Yahiro was her biggest fan, yet this mystery girl's appearance had revealed her jealous side. He found that interesting.

"Forget about the *bias* stuff and just think: how could I even meet this girl without you knowing? We've been here for three years."

"Umm… Maybe you got in touch with her while I was in my streaming booth?"

"No." Yahiro shot down her flawed inference. "Also, just because she knows my name doesn't mean that I know her. Maybe she found out about me from some stream. I was on-screen when we crushed the Tokyo Station Ploutonion, remember?"

"Hmm… That does make some sense…" Iroha crossed her arms and considered it.

They had livestreamed their journey to the 23 Wards' Ploutonion from the Galerie Berith train. They had needed to broadcast hope to the people to prevent the world's collapse.

Naturally, Yahiro featured in it fighting Moujuu. It wouldn't be that difficult to find his name with some research.

"I'll say I have my suspicions about her identity, though." Yahiro looked at the girl in the bed again after Iroha's doubts were soothed.

She was small and thin. Her hair was a light blond, lacking in pigment. And her face was intricately, symmetrically, artificially

beautiful. Yahiro knew one other girl with similar features.

"Do you mean Sui?"

"She looks like her, don't you think?"

"…Yeah." Iroha nodded.

Sui Narusawa, the earth dragon's medium, and raised as Yahiro's sister. The girl had an artificially beautiful visage, too. And indeed, Sui Narusawa had been created artificially.

"They said Ganzheit used genetic engineering to create an artificial dragon medium, and that's how Sui came to be. It wouldn't be surprising if they made more."

"So you think she might be a dragon medium, too?"

"That's the first thing I thought… But I'm not sure. What do you think?"

"Mmm… How can you tell whether someone is a dragon medium?" Iroha looked at the girl on the bed.

She poked the sleeping girl's cheek and head, then tilted her own in confusion.

"I don't know… But she doesn't feel like one."

"Yeah, I think she's different from Sui," Yahiro agreed.

It was hard to put into words, but the girl didn't feel the same as the other dragon mediums they knew. Yahiro couldn't feel the magnetic aura that Iroha was always emitting. That likely meant that this girl did not have the dragon factor.

That did nothing to solve the mystery of her identity, though.

"Ngh…" The girl frowned in her sleep after all of Iroha's prodding.

She slowly opened her eyes, and Iroha leaned in close to her face as soon as she noticed. She saw her own face reflected in the girl's unfocused blue eyes.

"You're awake? Thank goodness! How are you? Does anything hurt? You hungry?"

"…No," the girl muttered in confusion, with a voice so faint one could hardly hear it.

She was clearly overwhelmed by Iroha's pushiness so soon after she had recovered consciousness. Yahiro reached for Iroha to peel her away from the poor girl, when their visitor suddenly jumped off the bed.

“Avaritia…!”

The girl’s eyes grew wide as she dragged herself to a corner of the room, staring at Iroha with great caution.

“Huh? Whaaat?!”

“Iroha… What did you do to this girl?”

“Nothing! I didn’t do anything! You know that!” Iroha shook her head, tears in her eyes.

The mystery girl remained guarded—though more from fear than enmity.

Iroha, unable to accept the reality, inched closer to her, only spooking her further.

“Relax. We won’t hurt you. So long as you don’t try to hurt us, that is. Got it?” Yahiro told the girl while grabbing Iroha by the collar and pulling her back.

“Ah…”

She seemed to calm down when she looked at Yahiro. The shock hit Iroha harder, but no time to waste comforting her now.

“Do you understand our language? Does anything hurt?”

The girl nodded in response to Yahiro’s question. Iroha protested, “I literally just asked her that!” but he ignored her.

“Do you want some water?”

“…Water.”

The girl cautiously accepted the bottle of mineral water he handed her. She struggled with the cap, and he ended up opening it for her.

Yahiro waited for her to finish drinking before asking more.

“So who are you? How do you know us?”

“…Who?” she said after a pensive silence.

“You can’t tell us?”

The girl shook her head weakly. Yahiro got the feeling that she wasn’t refusing to answer.





“You don’t remember?” Iroha asked, her head popping out from behind Yahiro. She understood the girl was afraid of her and tried not to startle her.

“Amnesia…? No, maybe she’s confused, having just woken up. Do you remember your name?” Yahiro asked.

The girl closed her eyes and battled to follow her hazy memories before coming up with just one thing: “Ellie.”

“…Ellie? No last name?” Iroha asked.

Ellie shook her head, still somewhat afraid of Iroha. It didn’t seem like she was lying.

“Okay, Ellie. Do you remember anything else?”

“……” Ellie tilted her head inquisitively in response to Yahiro’s question.

He realized he was being too vague and focused first on what most interested him.

“How did you reach this island? Surely not by swimming, right?”

Ellie just blinked. Then she raised her hand above her head. She pointed at the blue sky visible from the cabin’s skylight.

“From the sky?!” Yahiro exclaimed.

Clearly she couldn’t have gotten to this island in the middle of nowhere by normal methods, but dropping out of the sky sure was out of left field.

“Like, a plane crash?”

“Oh… That would explain why only she arrived here…,” Yahiro muttered to himself after considering Iroha’s uncharacteristically realistic remark.

If the plane she was on had to make an emergency landing, perhaps she miraculously ended up unharmed in the sea. Then she happened to wash up on this island.

It seemed contrived, but not impossible.

“Maybe the plane was looking for the island to begin with.”

“That would also explain why she knows our names.” Iroha nodded with satisfaction once she realized that Yahiro had accepted her theory.

“But why would she be looking for us…?”

“Hey, she wanted to meet you, didn’t she?”

"Listen. No more *bias* stuff, got it?"

"Hmm…" Iroha narrowed her eyes as she looked back and forth between the two.

It was impossible to get any more information from Ellie's jumbled memory, though. Thankfully, she only seemed scared, with no intention of causing harm. No need to confine her or tie her up.

"All right. How about we have breakfast? You must be hungry, right?" Yahiro smiled at her.

Ellie touched her belly on reflex and nodded slightly.

Then Iroha's stomach growled.

Of course. Iroha's stomach is right on cue, Yahiro thought, chuckling.

5

Gunshots reverberated as a burning pain ran across Shigure's right arm.

The bullet had gouged the flesh of his shoulder, dyeing his sleeve red. Yet the pain did not last long. The flesh surrounding the wound grew and healed the wound in the blink of an eye. It felt like watching a video rewind.

"…The shooter is hidden in that building."

Shigure glared through the broken window to a building two blocks away and gripped his machete tight.

He was in an artificial ruined city in a desert in North America: a training facility for PMC Kyuos.

Shigure had been toiling away at combat simulation training for the two months since he reawakened. Almost none of his memories had returned, but his fighting skills had improved. As well as a certain other skill: "Open, Talaria!" Shigure whispered.

He felt a revolting floaty sensation in his gut before his field of view instantaneously changed.

Two operators armed with assault rifles stood with their backs to him.

"…?!"

They spun around and cursed the moment they noticed him, but it was too late to counterattack. Shigure hit them with the back of his machete, knocking them into the wall.

The enemies' comrades heard the noise and entered the room. They were about twenty meters from him, and they were armed with guns. He could not possibly reach them.

He swung his machete anyway.

The blade went beyond the limits of space and swept the reinforcements down. Talaria—his Regalia—had the power to control space. He did not teleport himself; he opened a portal in front of his enemy and launched the attack through it.

The exercise continued for a while, with unchanging results. Alone, Shigure defeated a dozen helpless operators in under fifteen minutes. The enemy used real bullets, while he struck only with the dull edge of the machete, or not at all. It was the only way to keep a battle against the Lazarus fair while giving him real training.

"Training is over, Shigure."

A beautiful woman in a suit welcomed him back to the waiting room: Shigure's self-appointed employer, consultant Suria Almiron.

"Battle time of thirteen minutes and forty seconds. Two minutes and nine seconds less than the same conditions two days ago. You've grown accustomed to the Regalia, I see."

Shigure grimaced at the review. "Uh-huh. I still feel weird, to be honest."

He knew he was getting stronger, but he still couldn't feel the power as his own. He had no idea who he was or what he was fighting for.

"Also, my healing was slower this time, wasn't it? I don't know what to do about the weapons' corrosion, either… It's inconvenient that it becomes unusable after only one battle."

"I understand. I've already taken action to solve the issue."

"How?"

"First, take this." Suria glanced at the subordinates behind her.

Two women lab workers were carrying a metal box secured with multiple locks. It wasn't very tall or wide, but it was nearly three meters long.

The researchers unlocked the case and opened it, revealing a terribly long iron sword with nearly no curvature. An ancient straight sword.

"A…sword? It reminds me of a katana, but is it one?"

"People prefer calling it a sword, but to be precise, it is a type of katana. It is the Kotofutsu-no-Mitama. A divine sword passed down in the Heavenly Imperial House. A Relict Regalia."

"Relict… Regalia…"

Suria silently urged him to take it. Naturally, it was heavy, as the iron blade by itself was over two meters long. But a stronger, odd aura came from its hilt.

"Guh…" Shigure groaned at the feeling flowing into the palms of his hands.

It didn't feel good, but he could tell his body was powering up. Like famished beasts, every one of his cells absorbed the dragon aura that remained in the sword.

"Your bodily regeneration was withering due to the lack of dragon factor. This Relict Regalia, a crystallization of it, should help. And the divine sword will not corrode at the touch of your power."

Suria smiled at the look of surprise on Shigure's face.

"So this is the Relict Regalia… Yes, I feel that with this, I'll be able to use Talaria without inhibition."

Shigure gave the sword a swing. The heavy Kotofutsu-no-Mitama couldn't possibly be easy for most people to handle, yet it felt at home in Shigure's hand. Its size was too long for close combat, and should be a good match for his space-manipulation ability.

"But should I be taking the Heavenly Imperial House's Relict Regalia? Isn't this a national treasure? What do you plan on having me do with all this training?"

"Kyuos is preparing to put into action a small-scale plan in Japan soon," Suria replied.

"Japan…?" Shigure was confused by the location; he had heard it was his homeland, but without his memories, it felt as foreign as any other place.

"You will take part in the plan. Your Regalia will be indispensable."

Shigure nodded. Kyuos was investing its precious human

resources into training him because they expected results out of his Lazarus powers. He could not refuse to cooperate.

"But can we do combat in Japan when it's still under reconstruction?"

"Don't worry. We will be up against a fellow private military company. Although nowadays they act as art dealers—a gallery—on the surface."

"A gallery…?" Shigure's brow furrowed.

Art dealership sure was a bizarre facade for a private military company.

Suria nodded with a serious look on her face. For a moment, something flashed behind her emotionless eyes. The gleam of enmity—of resentment.

"Yes. Our enemy is arms dealer Galerie Berith's Japanese branch. Our ultimate goal is to take the power of the Ouroboros they monopolize."

6

Sumika and the rest arrived safely in Japan after a thirteen-hour flight.

The New Haneda Airport they arrived at had opened only a few weeks before. It was a symbol of Japan's revival, a re-creation of the old Haneda Airport that had been devastated during the J-nocide. It was built at top speed as part of international relations strategy.

Naturally, though, the bustle surrounding the building was far from what it had been during the original airport's heyday. Many parts of the terminal were still under construction, too. Yet this incompleteness conveyed the enthusiasm in trying to rebuild Japan. There was a sincerity to it that expressed they had nothing to lose anymore.

"It's more proper than I thought. It looked more like a burned field when I came here six months ago." Sumika sighed with admiration as she saw the view from the windows in the lobby.

Beautiful, wide roads. A cluster of new buildings. The New

Haneda Airport truly was a modern marvel worthy of being the entrance to the new Japan.

"Foreign capital invested a lot of funds into it. Those investors abroad sure have a good nose. I heard our Noah's raking it in with construction and material transport, too," Zen explained.

Sumika shot him a glare. "Could you please not bring up capital talk when I'm feeling inspired?"

"I simply stated the facts." Zen remained serious. "And no matter how it looks here, it doesn't mean the problem of public security has been solved. Keep your luggage close and watch out for pickpockets. Don't let your valuables out of your sight."

"Chill out, please. Don't you get tired of being so on edge?" Sumika sighed and looked at Honoka beside her. "Right?"

Honoka looked up at her with a bold smile. "Public insecurity means a plethora of cases. Which means it's our time to shine."

"What?"

"Honoka's dream is to be a detective." Kiri smiled.

Honoka pouted. "It's not a dream—it's fate. And I won't be any regular ol' detective. I'm gonna be a Master Detective. It is my duty and destiny to help people trapped in hard-to-crack cases."

"A detective, huh… It's really fitting, y'know? You really are Iroha's sister." Sumika smiled brightly at her.

The way she asserted she would be a Master Detective reminded her of how Iroha proclaimed she was a famous streamer. Sumika expected Honoka to get mad thinking Sumika was making fun of her, but Honoka's reaction surprised her. While her expression showed worry, her eyes lit up.

"Really? You really think so?"

"Yeah. You talk just like her. I'm sure she would be glad to see you now. Don't you think, Zen?"

"Indeed. After all, she and Yahiro Narusawa gave their lives to protect this world. We have a duty to make it a better place, and trying to help people in need is a good mindset."

"No, I'm not talking about anything that grandiose… I just mean she reminds me of Iroha." Sumika shook her head and sighed.

Honoka giggled before looking out into the horizon with a terribly

mature expression unbefitting of a girl who had just entered middle school.

"Iroha… I wanna see her…"

"Huh? Wait, you haven't? Not once?" Sumika asked with surprise.

Iroha Mamana, the seven kids' big sister, in reality their adoptive mother, had disappeared three years earlier. She and Yahiro Narusawa headed to the Afterlife to save the world from collapse. She became the sacrificial medium to give birth to the new Ouroboros and vanished from the world—or so they thought.

"But she's always streaming, isn't she?"

"She just streams; we don't meet her. Not even the twins can track where the streams come from."

"S-seriously?"

"Considering what happened, she might as well be streaming from the Afterlife…," Zen muttered to himself with a frown.

"She is this world's goddess, after all. But is that possible…?" Sumika shook her head in confusion.

Even after Iroha disappeared into the Afterlife, somehow, she kept streaming. It was just recently that her account popped back up, but she had been posting almost daily. She did game playthroughs, just chatting with viewers, things so peaceful and ordinary that one wouldn't think she was the dragon medium who had saved the world.

The creator with the power to freely mold the world to her whim was livestreaming from the Afterlife. It was definitely something Iroha would do, but was that all right?

"By the way, I have a question," Kyouta said as the mood turned pensive.

Honoka pursed her lips at the carefree sound of his voice. "What?"

"So you were just talking about how Japan isn't very safe, yeah?"

The rest looked at the baggage claim area they were headed toward. The conveyor belt had just begun moving and releasing the flight's luggage. The other travelers gathered around, ready to claim their bags.

Among them was a strange group. A party of big men who looked

like soldiers. They wore aircraft engineer uniforms, but the real workers wouldn't normally be in this part of the airport.

"Isn't that Zen's suitcase those guys over there are taking?"

"What…?" Zen frowned and looked more carefully at them.

The men were holding and checking the sturdy metal case he had brought to transport the art piece he handed to airport staff in Germany.

"Zen! Those aren't airport workers!" Sumika yelled as she pointed at them.

That was not a good choice. The men heard her and noticed Zen approaching.

"Wait, Zen! They aren't regular thieves!" Honoka warned, her voice shrill.

The men moved into formation to intercept Zen. Two of them remained to stop him while the other two ran off with the case. They were well trained and in sync, like army special forces.

"Kyouta! Kiri!" Honoka shouted.

The trio's eyes met, and the boys dashed forward. They knew what Honoka meant with just a look. The siblings were in sync, too.

The baggage claim was crowded with travelers. The fugitives struggled to weave their way through the crowd due to the length of Zen's case.

Meanwhile, Kyouta and Kiri rushed toward the luggage trolleys. They pushed the row of carts and crashed it into the exit, barricading the men's escape route.

The men yelled upon noticing the obstruction, but by then, the boys had already distanced themselves. They had spent their childhood among the dangers of the 23 Wards; they were alert.

Airport security took notice of the commotion and ran to baggage claim. Kyouta and Kiri only needed to buy time. They didn't have to fight.

However, fiery Sumika did not agree with the passive plan.

"Catch them now, Zen!"

She spun her handbag as she ran to his aid, and he scowled at the sight of it.

"Don't! You stay back!"

“Sumika, no!” Honoka screamed from behind.

The men blocking Zen’s way drew weapons. Black bundles of crude metal glowed in their hands—large automatic pistols.

“Guns?! No way!” Startled, Sumika came to a halt.

The men set their sights, not on Zen, but on Sumika behind him.

In that moment, Sumika understood. They knew Zen was a Lazarus. They knew how to stop him.

They took aim and pulled the trigger.

Sumika instinctively covered her belly.

“No!”

Honoka jumped in front of her. She extended her small arms, trying to cover the young woman as much as possible.

The men fired without a moment’s hesitation.

Dazzling lights burst from the barrels as a barrage of bullets rained down on them.

Yet the bullets did not reach their target.

A translucent wall of ice blocked the bullets before their eyes. A wall instantaneously created from the humidity in the air.

Acedia’s power. Zen’s Regalia.

Zen glared at the men in the same moment their screams echoed. Their faces drained of color as their skin frosted over. Zen’s burst of emotion instantly froze the men’s blood.

However, that was the only thing he could do.

Kyouta and Kiri’s blockade hadn’t worked, as the pair who stole the luggage escaped while the guns distracted everyone. Zen couldn’t get the case back.

He let out a soft sigh and released the ice walls. He walked up to Sumika and held her tight without a shred of embarrassment.

“Thank goodness you’re okay… Sumika…”

“Whoa… Zen, wait. Everyone’s looking…!” Sumika struggled, red in the face.

Everyone’s attention was already on them due to the gunfight. She couldn’t help but feel embarrassed.

“I owe you my thanks for covering Sumika.” Zen turned to Honoka and bowed.

“No, you saved me.” Honoka chuckled and shrugged while looking

at the ice shards by their feet.

Zen nodded before looking at the frozen men.

"It's been three years since I used the Regalia."

"Yeah…," Sumika said.

Zen had no need to use his powers after the Moujuu disappeared from the world when Yahiro and Iroha closed the Ploutonion.

This event proved that he could still use it. Or perhaps the Regalia returned to him when he saw Sumika in danger. Still, neither of them intended to change the world with the dragon's power.

The problem at hand was the men before them. They knew Zen was a Lazarus, and they were here to steal his luggage.

"What was in that case again?" Sumika asked.

"My sword. I couldn't take it on the plane, after all. I had to check it," Zen answered.

Zen's Western sword was legally considered an art piece. He could take it on a flight without issue if he properly wrapped it and went through the necessary procedures.

"Why were they after that trinket…?" Sumika cocked her head.

"It's not a trinket. Although…it's not valuable, either," Zen said with a grunt.

His sword was only a tool to control his Regalia; it had nearly no power as a weapon or value as an art piece. And even without it, he could still use his powers.

He only brought it to Japan for peace of mind. He probably wouldn't have even remembered it if it weren't for Galerie Berith's intel about Moujuu sightings in Mexico.

Yet his sword had been stolen. And not by petty thieves—by an armed group of soldiers.

"So they took the favorite sword of the water dragon's Lazarus. Interesting," Master Detective Honoka muttered with a fire in her eyes.

Sumika chuckled at how similar to Iroha the young girl really was; she had almost been killed just now, and she didn't care at all.

Act 2 Angel with No Name

1

Rinka played gleefully with her little sister's hair in the backseat of Josh's truck.

Runa kept looking ahead expressionlessly, letting her big sister do as she pleased. At their feet there was a pure-white dog-sized Moujuu. The scene was typical of a couple of sisters out on a family drive.

If only the truck bed weren't loaded with firearms.

"Ahh… It's been so long since I enjoyed this sensation. You've grown so much, Runa. Has Nuemaru been good?" Rinka sighed with satisfaction while pinching her little sister's cheeks.

Runa gave her a sidelong glance and flatly responded, "You've grown pretty, too, Rinka."

"Y-yeah? Hee-hee." Rinka scratched her head, bashful about her taciturn sister's surprising praise. "How's Ayaho? Did she find a boyfriend yet?"

"B-boyfriend?!" Ren jumped a bit in the passenger seat and listened, thinking they hadn't noticed his reaction.

Runa, the youngest of Iroha's siblings, had stayed in Japan with Ayaho. Which meant she was the only one present who knew how she was doing.

"She doesn't have a boyfriend," she said flatly.

"Oh." Rinka pursed her lips with disappointment.

Runa then shook her head softly. "But she gets a lot of attention from the shop's clients."

"What…?" Ren sucked back in the sigh of relief he'd just let out and stared anxiously at Runa.

Ayaho worked at the gallery Giulietta and Rosé ran in Ginza. Most

of the place's clientele were rich old men with nothing better to do. The attention she got was like that of a grandfather talking to his granddaughter.

Ren realized this, but even so, as her brother living abroad, he was worried. Rinka shot a cold look at the pathetic little guy. The wrinkles on her brow showed how much she didn't like how he only cared for Ayaho.

"We should be seeing it soon… Oh, there it is," Josh said while looking at the scenery around them, unaware of the unrest within the truck.

Strange rock mountains sat at the center of a flat basin surrounded by more mountains.

The kids gasped at the realization that the rock mountains were human-made. There were pyramids built out of giant boulders, and multiple temples. Everything before their eyes was part of the ruins of a vast holy city.

"Wow…"

"That's Teo…whatsitsname?"

"Teotihuacan. The one at the front is the famous Pyramid of the Moon. About two hundred thousand people lived here from the sixth to second century BC. There's no writing left, though, so we don't know a lot about the civilization," Josh answered.

Rinka sighed with admiration. "It's full of tourists, though."

"Well, it is a World Heritage Site." Josh chuckled.

He parked at the ruins' parking lot. It was already nearly evening, but the place was still bustling with tourists. Josh carried the bag full of weapons to the entrance and paid their admission fee.

He thought the staff would say something about Nuemaru, but they didn't even mention it. They probably thought it was a plush doll.

The most eye-catching part of the ruins were the tourists taking selfies like there was no tomorrow. The place was lined up with stalls selling colorful souvenirs, too. It was a peaceful sight.

"Are there really Moujuu here?" Rinka gave him an incredulous look.

Josh nodded awkwardly. "It was at midnight. A group doing a

ritual on top of the pyramid got attacked and people died. That's the survivor's statement."

"What ritual?"

"They were calling UFOs or something."

"…UFOs?" Rinka narrowed her eyes.

"Apparently, Teotihuacan is a famous spot in Mexico for that. There's a lot of UFO sightings. Psychics come here to train because they feel a special power here, they say."

"For real?"

"Hey, don't ask me. But apparently, the ruins here were built for precise astronomical observation. One theory says aliens gave the original inhabitants knowledge of astronomy."

"Uh-huh…"

"So anyway, that's why weirdos sneak in here at midnight and try to contact aliens," Josh explained while looking away from Rinka's cold stare.

Rinka sighed. She could not believe that she'd been brought to Mexico based on delusional people's testimony.

"So they ended up summoning Moujuu instead."

"If we're to believe their story, yeah. The local police closed the case, though, saying it was a stray dog."

"And you don't think it was a dog?"

"I don't know. But I'm sure the princess sent us here because she thought something was up. Maybe *our* dog might pick up on something," Josh said while looking at Nuemaru in Runa's arms.

Nuemaru might be able to notice a trace of a fellow Moujuu. And it would be impossible to track them otherwise, so Galerie Berith had sent Runa and Nuemaru. Ren and Rinka were there to take care of them. A sensible decision, in a way. Josh might be suspected of kidnapping if he traveled with Runa alone.

"So, you feel anything?" poor Josh asked Runa.

She simply shook her head in silence.

"Of course." Josh shrugged with no hint of disappointment. He couldn't believe the extinct Moujuu had appeared there. "Well, all's well if there's nothing. Let's take this as a sight-seeing trip, eh?"

"Doesn't sound bad. I can get some nice pictures here," Rinka

agreed. She took out her phone and opened the camera app.

It wasn't a famous tourist spot for nothing; the place was full of good photo spots. And with Runa and Nuemaru as the perfect subjects, Rinka got lost in photography.

Meanwhile, a bored Ren pointed at the ruins at the front and asked, "What's that building?"

"That is Quetzalcoatl's temple," Josh answered while looking at the tourist guidebook.

"Quetzalcoatl?"

"The main god of the Teotihuacan civilization. A feathered serpent who ruled the wind—a dragon."

"A dragon… This is a dragon's temple?" Ren looked at Josh with wide eyes.

"Yeah." Josh nodded. "You heard about this world collapsing a few times before, right?"

"Yes. The dragon who created the world reached the end of its life, and every time, a dragon medium created a new world like Iroha did…"

"Our princess and lady think these ruins might be a remnant of a past world. An entrance to the Afterlife like the one in the Myoujiin mansion."

"So that's why…they believed the rumors…"

"I don't know if they believe them, but yeah, that's why they wanted us to investigate. But well, if the kid and the dog say there's nothing, I guess we came here for nothing…"

Josh tried to laugh Ren's worries off, but then Runa interjected.

"Wait."

"…Huh?"

"Something's coming."

"Runa?"

Runa put Nuemaru down on the ground and looked up at the sky with her usual blank expression.

Then something emerged out of the blue.

A shadow about five meters long fell across the half-broken stone temple's roof. It was the dark silhouette of a beast covered in rainbow luster like an oil slick.

The kids froze at the ominous sight oozing from the gaps between the rocks.

"Wh-what is that?!" Rinka was paralyzed by the appearance of the monster.

The vibrant monster held her gaze as if drawn to her. Its dark claws broke through the stone as it shot toward her.

"Rinka!"

"…Ren?!"

She was saved from the monster's attack by a hair's breadth thanks to Ren's powerful tackle. They rolled on the ground.

His baseball cap's bill was slashed down the middle.

"I'm fine. Let's run."

Thankfully, Ren himself was unharmed. He stood and pulled her up, too. They booked it.

"What's that thing? A Moujuu?" Josh glared at the monster while pulling a gun out of his backpack.

It was a colorful bird of prey with giant wings. The monster roaring atop the temple did in fact resemble a Moujuu, but the aura it gave off was different. While the Moujuu burned with their hatred for humanity, this monster was as lifeless as a ghost.

"No."

"Huh?"

"That is not our world's Moujuu," Runa asserted.

Josh loaded the first shot into his shotgun and grinned.

"Either way, it's our enemy, right?" He shot at the monster as he spoke.

He used slug shots meant for hunting. These could kill even a brown bear if he aimed well.

Yet against the shadow monster, they did no damage. The rainbow luster across its surface wavered, but there was no other effect.

"Seriously…?!" Josh ground his teeth and retreated while firing rapidly.

Although it took no damage, it was annoyed by Josh's attack. The monster let out a bellow like scraping metal as it leaped toward him. Out of ammo, Josh pursed his lips and glared at the monster as it

descended.

Then Runa called her Moujuu's name softly.

"Nuemaru."

The white dog-sized beast immediately swelled up to eight meters in height and shot powerful bolts from its whole body.

The oddly colorful shadow staggered under the lightning strike.

Josh yelped and ran, nearly struck by lightning himself. He didn't yell at Runa because he knew he would be dead without Nuemaru's assistance.

"Josh!"

"Don't worry about me! Use this, kids!" He pulled a gun out of his bag and threw it at Ren.

"W-wait… Is this the CFA's Relict…?!" The young man's jaw dropped in confusion as he caught the firearm.

The gun was big and had a strange shape. It had no cartridge holder or firing hammer. Instead, it was encrusted with a crimson crystal. It was an artificial Relict amplifier meant for non-Lazaruses to use Regalia.

"I can't use it, but you just might," Josh said casually.

Although the artificial Relicts' firepower greatly exceeded that of normal weapons, not everyone could use them. Even with an amplifier, only Deservers could use Regalia. Not to mention, too much use could put one's life in danger. But this was the only hope to fight against Moujuu, which were unaffected by bullets.

"What do you mean, we just *might*?!" Rinka yelled back at Josh.

"I mean we won't know until you try it!"

"You didn't think anything through, did you?!"

"Just do it! I'm counting on you!"

"I can't do this outta nowhere! Nobody taught us how to use Relicts!" Ren objected with a pitiful look on his face.

Ren and Rinka had lived with the dragon mediums Iroha and Runa for over four years. One could infer that they had been affected by the high-density dragon factor, and so perhaps they could be Deservers, just as Ayaho Sashou was of Vanagloria's Relict Regalia. The twins had sent them to Teotihuacan based on that theory.

“Don’t worry,” Runa said to teary-eyed Ren before softly placing her hand on his back.

Ren held the giant gun up, encouraged by the girl’s gesture.

He didn’t need to take aim. The colorful monster was already right before his eyes.

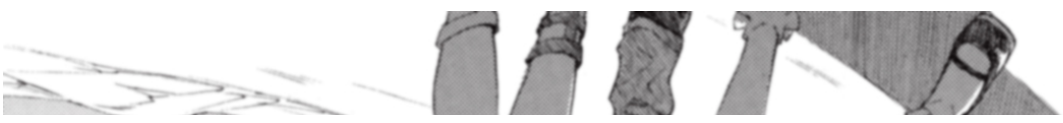
“U-uwaaaaah!”

Ren pulled the trigger, praying that he would protect Runa and Rinka behind him.

The artificial Relict embedded in the pistol glowed as it shot flames. It carried the same power as Avaritia, the fire dragon. The purifying flames whirled into a tornado that engulfed the colorful monster.

The effect was dramatic. The psychedelic beast shattered like glass.





Ren kept holding the gun with both hands as he watched the phenomenon in stupefaction.

"Phew… Looks like we pulled through." Josh sighed while putting the empty shotgun down.

The commotion had made them forget that they were in a famous tourist spot full of visitors. Everyone had witnessed their fight against the monster.

The looks on the tourists' faces was not that of fear. The occurrence was so fantastical that it had seemed more like a show or performance than a real battle.

Still, Josh had fired a very real gun. He and the kids decided it was better to leave before the local police showed up for him.

Josh glanced at Rinka, and she led Ren, who was in a daze, to run away.

"…What in the world was that?" Josh asked Runa, who still had her typical flat expression on her face.

She shook her head and shrugged in silence, holding Nuemaru in her arms again.

2

Tomatoes flourished along the rows of the crude handmade vinyl greenhouse. The fruit was ripe for picking.

Yahiro stood in the middle of a tomato field, fervently maintaining it. He picked the ripe fruit and pruned the damaged leaves and side buds.

A small blond individual wearing clothes that looked like a nun's habit stared at him point-blank.

"Mr. Yahiro… What is this?" Ellie broke her silence and pointed at the tomatoes.

"Is this the first time you've seen tomato plants bearing fruit?"

"I see… So these are tomatoes…"

"Yeah. They originally come from arid plateaus, so they're hard to cultivate here in the subtropics, but this variety is strong against the heat, and with enough humidity control…"

Yahiro cut himself off in the middle of his explanation and turned to look at Ellie.

"Wait… You can speak now?"

"Yes. I finally learned," she responded flatly.

Although she was lacking emotion, her Japanese was natural and fluent.

"How?"

"…Through the videos."

"What? The ones Iroha showed you? That's still way too fast, though…"

"Is it…?" Ellie tilted her head curiously.

It hadn't even been two days since they'd found her on the beach. During that time, she had said almost nothing besides her own and Yahiro's names. But if she was telling the truth, now she had mastered Japanese in just two days.

"Okay, then. Being able to talk can only be a good thing." Yahiro shook his head, choosing not to question it further.

He supposed she might have just *remembered* Japanese, not learned it from scratch.

"By the way, what are you doing right now, Mr. Yahiro?" Ellie asked in wonder at the unripe tomato in Yahiro's hand.

"Thinning fruit. When there's too many of them, they don't get enough nutrients and the quality drops. We thin them out so there's no negative effects to their development."

"Thinning…," Ellie whispered with her brow furrowed. Yahiro realized what he was doing must seem cruel to her; he understood how she felt. "And how do you choose which tomatoes to thin?"

"There's a lot of criteria. Like how they've grown so far…but in the end, just gut instinct. Luck." Yahiro shrugged and reached into the basket to grab a tomato he'd just picked. "Wanna try one?"

Ellie blinked with surprise before accepting the tomato. She closed her eyes as though praying and then bit into it. She looked a little shocked at the overflowing juice but ended up nibbing on the fruit like a hamster. She stared at the cute little teeth marks on it before looking at Yahiro like she had just made a great discovery.

"…It tastes like tomato!"

“Sweet, right? This variety has a lot of sugar. And it’s even tastier if you let it ripen for a few more days.”

“Will you have some, too, Mr. Yahiro?” She timidly offered the half-eaten tomato.

Yahiro was taken aback, but bit into it without hesitation. He found it a tad embarrassing, but he knew she was being nice.

“About what I expected. It’s good.”

“Yes. You do a great job, Mr. Yahiro.” Ellie smiled and took another bite of the tomato.

“Please stop calling me that. You can just say Yahiro.”

“Huh…? Um… But…”

“Please.” Yahiro chuckled at how she averted her gaze.

There couldn’t be much of an age gap between them; she only looked younger due to her small frame and reserved attitude. He admitted that it made her cute, like a puppy.

“…Yahiro.”

“Yes?”

“Hee-hee, just trying it out.”

They looked at each other, and Ellie smiled impishly.

Meanwhile, a shadow slithered among the tomato stalks. Iroha, dressed like a farmer in denim overalls, a tank top, and gloves.

“What are you two doing…?” she muttered at the chummy atmosphere between them, looking uncharacteristically grumpy.

“Iroha?”

“…!” Ellie reacted strongly to the young woman’s sudden appearance.

She jumped up and hid behind Yahiro, trembling. It wasn’t only caution this time.

“Hey, why are you hiding?!” Iroha’s eyes grew wide as she tried to go around him to see her.

The friendly smile on her face only frightened the girl more.

“Please stop. She’s scared.” Yahiro exhaled and came to Ellie’s aid.

Iroha puffed her cheeks and crossed her arms in protest.

“Aw! It’s not fair! Only you get to be with her! Why does she only go to you?! I wanna play with her, too! I wanna feed her tomatoes!

And I want her to feed me!”

“If you just wanna eat, then grab however many you like.” Yahiro pointed at the tomato field with a sigh. “And what about the eggs?”

“Just got ’em. And I cleaned the coop, too.”

Iroha opened her waist bag to show him the fresh eggs inside. They had about thirty-four chickens on the island, and animal-loving Iroha was in charge of them.

“Good job. Now we just gotta bake some bread.”

“Leave it to me. I’m doing it this time, for sure.” Iroha clenched her fist.

Just a few days earlier, things had ended tragically after Iroha tried baking by adding her own spice to the bread.

“How about you just take it easy this time, instead…” Yahiro shook his head, uneasy about her brimming confidence.

Then he wondered about Ellie, who’d been keeping quiet the whole time, and turned around.

She was looking at them with wonder. Not just them, to be precise; she was looking at the whole island, including them.

“Ellie… Something wrong?” Yahiro asked.

Ellie met his gaze. Confusion filled her blue eyes.

“…This world is very warm,” she whispered while looking at the half-eaten tomato.

“Well, we are pretty far south,” Yahiro responded simply.

The weather on the nameless island was between tropical and subtropical. The average temperature was about twenty-five or twenty-six degrees Celsius.

But Ellie didn’t mean that; she shook her head.

“…It’s so bright…and tasty…”

“We worked hard to grow ’em. We gave them a wide field and enough water.” Iroha proudly pushed out her chest while looking at the orderly tomato fields.

“I did most of the work, though,” Yahiro mumbled. Iroha did have the motivation, though; she just ended up exhausted after going too hard too fast.

“…This isn’t like the underworld I know,” Ellie said while still hiding from Iroha.

"What?" Yahiro looked at her, confused as to how naturally she had uttered the word *underworld*.

At first, he thought he had misheard, but then Ellie asked: "This is supposed to be the world of the dead… So how?"

"Ellie, what are you? Why do you know that this is the underworld?" Yahiro scowled.

Iroha couldn't hide her bewilderment, either.

The world they believed to be reality was, in fact, the underworld —the world of the dead. Everyone in this world was dead, living in an illusion created by the Ouroboros without realizing it. The only ones aware of that should have been a few people related to Ganzheit. Ellie certainly was in no position to know.

"…I came here to protect you, Yahiro," she replied.

"Protect him from what?" Iroha asked the obvious question.

Ellie hid behind Yahiro. "The enemy."

"Hopefully you don't mean me, do you?"

Ellie kept silent.

Iroha raised her eyebrows. "Why do you even have to think about it?!"

"Ah…"

Yahiro heard a splat behind him. Ellie had backed away from Iroha's glare and had fallen on her butt. Thankfully, the crops were unharmed, but Ellie rolled over in the field, and her behind was now muddy. Yahiro face-palmed at the sight of her disoriented, teary eyes.

"Let's continue our talk in the bathroom!" Iroha said while holding her hand out to Ellie.

Ellie timidly grabbed Iroha's hand while looking at Yahiro, seeking help.

"…You too."

"No way."

He knew she would feel awkward all alone with Iroha, but he couldn't watch over her in the bathroom. Ellie's eyes grew wide in despair.

"Then I'm taking a bath on my own…"

"Nope. You're not getting out of this. You're taking a bath with

me!”

“…Urgh… Aww…”

Iroha dragged her in the direction of the hot springs. Yahiro let out yet another heavy sigh as he watched them go.

3

“Ow…!”

Ayaho Sashou clutched her right hand after feeling a sudden, sharp pain like a burn.

A scarlet mark resembling a tribal tattoo surfaced on the back of her hand. The scratch of a dragon, in the shape of the creature itself, ran vividly up her wrist with a faint glow.

“The Relict Regalia… Why…all of a sudden…?” She was very confused.

Vanagloria’s Relict Regalia—the scarlet crystal gouged from Lazarus Amaha Kamikita had fortuitously fused with Ayaho’s right hand. Ayaho had become a Deserver and earned the power of the Regalia. A double-edged sword, as excessive use of it could destroy her own body.

After the Moujuu vanished from the world, Ayaho had no reason to use the Regalia. Three years had gone by, and she had begun to forget it was even there. The scarlet mark, once so vivid, had faded away, going unnoticed if one wasn’t looking for it. Until recently. The Relict’s mark was clear once again, as though it had woken from a deep slumber, much to her bewilderment.

Ayaho was inside a train running through the heart of Tokyo, on her way back from school. The trains were relatively empty in the afternoon, but the newly restored Yamanote Line was still considerably busy. Thankfully, no one noticed the abnormality happening to her.

Ayaho grabbed a scrunchie out of her school bag to cover her wrist and put a big bandage on the back of her hand. That should stop the Relict’s mark from drawing attention. Taking transit to school would be awkward in the future, but she had no choice but to

cover it in bandages for a while. Galerie Berith did have membranes meant to conceal injuries, so perhaps speaking to Rosé would be a good idea. She was pretty accommodating, despite her seemingly curt attitude.

The real problem wasn't the mark itself, however, but the reason behind its revival. It had reactivated after a long hibernation. She had no idea why that could be, but it couldn't possibly be good news. For the crystallization of dragon factor to show reaction, there had to be a catalyst nearby.

The train slowed as it approached the station. Ayaho got off, though this wasn't her destination. Her gut told her that staying on was dangerous. Ayaho stepped out onto the platform as soon as the doors opened.

A few men looked surprised by her actions and hurried outside, too. They were foreigners, dressed in long-sleeved jackets despite the summer heat. She did not know them.

Ayaho suddenly realized she was being monitored. Or trailed, more precisely. She ran to the exit on reflex, and the men followed her.

"Why…?!" A whine escaped her throat as she dashed through the ticket gate.

She ran toward the small gallery in a back alley in Ginza. The gallery furnished with a café was her workplace and the point of contact with arms dealer Galerie Berith's Japanese branch. Most of the gallery's employees were the PMC's operators. No low-level criminal would stand a chance against them. She should be safe there. It was this same thought that had got her out of the train to begin with.

Unfortunately, she couldn't outrun the men pursuing her.

There were five of them. One of them, a young man in a hoodie, stood out. He carried a case over two meters long, like those that archers used to carry their bows, and ran at the head of the team.

The men closed the two hundred meters between her and them in the blink of an eye. She would not be able to reach the Galerie before they caught her.

"Stop, Ayaho Sashou," the young man yelled in stilted Japanese.

Her heart skipped a beat at the sound of her name. Any suspicion that they could be chasing the wrong person was gone. They really were after *her*.

The street was bustling, but no passersby tried to help her. The violent aura of her pursuers intimidated any possible benefactors.

"If you don't resist, we won't hurt you! Stop!" the young man warned her.

Spin that around and he was threatening violence if she *did* resist. Ayaho came to a halt at the realization. Fear prevented her from running any further.

The young man looked relieved to see her stop. He walked around her to block her way and held his hand out to the frightened girl.

A graceful figure appeared without a sound next to him. A tall woman with radiant brown skin and the looks of a fashion model.

The heel of her palm hit the young man's chin before he could even turn around in surprise. She kicked the back of his knees as he lost balance, then dug her toes into the side of his head as he fell. It happened quicker than Ayaho could take a breath.

The man was helplessly paralyzed on the ground, unable to stand back up even if he regained consciousness.

"Paola!"

"Ayaho, get down."

Galerie Berith's operator Paola Resente spoke softly as she pulled out a handgun. A big .45 caliber gun that could do serious damage even to someone in body armor.

"Why are you here?!" Ayaho exclaimed.

"We have a tracker monitoring your location and heart rate, so we can help you any time."

"Uh… I… Thank you?"

Ayaho felt conflicted. She considered that an infringement on her privacy, but it had also saved her life, so could she really complain?

The pursuers stopped at the sight of Paola's gun. They hurriedly looked for cover while reaching for their own guns. This reaction told Paola that they were trained combatants, so she showed no mercy.

Ruthless shots took them down with ease. There was little blood

in contrast to the loud gunshots, for Paola had used nonlethal ammo. Still, passersby screamed and scrambled at the sudden gunfire. It was obvious that the police would be there at any moment.

Ayaho thought Paola would take her away immediately to avoid the commotion, but still the girl refused to let her guard down. The woman unloaded her magazine and quickly swapped a new one in. She switched from rubber stun bullets to hollow-point bullets meant for hunting.

It took little time for Ayaho to understand why she did this. Strange shadows appeared all around them. Impossibly huge monsters stepped out of the narrow alleys between the buildings.

There were seven of them. They looked like dogs or wolves, but they had giant dragon wings on their backs. Not to mention the unworldly aura they emitted.

Ayaho knew these dreadful monsters.

"Moujuu…? How…? Weren't they gone…?!" Ayaho's voice shook in fear.

Then in unison, the monsters let out a shrill war cry.

4

Paola moved first.

She fired rapidly at the monster not far ahead of her, but the bullets didn't penetrate. They bounced silently off the lustrous rainbow film that covered the creature's body.

It was otherworldly. The bullets didn't so much bounce back as not even connect to begin with. The bullets had no effect on the monster at all. The two repelled each other like water and oil.

"It's not…a Moujuu?"

Paola rolled on the ground to dodge the monster's counterattack, then shot at it again from point-blank range, again to no avail. The bullets slid off and away from its body.

Paola ran helplessly as another monster attacked. Her attacks weren't affecting them, but that didn't necessarily mean that *theirs*

wouldn’t work on *her*. And indeed, the pursuing monster’s claws gouged the asphalt behind her.

Paola gritted her teeth as she found herself surrounded by two of the beasts. She had lost her balance, and she realized she wouldn’t be able to dodge the next attack.

“Paola, run!” Ayaho shouted, clasping her hands in prayer.

Then the asphalt at Paola’s feet transformed. The sidewalk cracked as myriad silver crystal blades shot upward. Saber Hills and Blade Groves—the mountain dragon’s power to control the earth’s metals.

Ayaho’s blades pierced the colorful monsters. They screamed as the spikes tore their bodies apart, inflicting pain on the unbeatable creatures for the first time.

“Thank goodness…”

All strength left Ayaho’s body as she used the Regalia for the first time in three years, robbing her of alertness toward the other monsters.

“Ayaho!” Paola yelled at her.

A beast was already flying toward her. Ayaho’s mind went blank at the sight of its giant colorful body right before her eyes. She didn’t have the reflexes to activate her Regalia. She stood in stupefaction, staring at the fangs closing in on her.

Silver flashed across her sight. A katana two meters long.

Holding it was the young man in the hoodie. He stood unfazed even though the earlier attack must have impaired him.

The monster’s body fell to the ground in two pieces before evaporating. The man’s katana had sliced diagonally through it with ease, even though bullets had done nothing.

“Y-you…” Ayaho looked up in awe from the ground.

“Don’t move,” the hooded man told her, softly and calmly.

His voice was familiar to her.

Seven monsters surrounded them, including the three that were already defeated. Over half remained standing, yet the young man showed no fear or concern.

“Talaria.”

Ayaho compared him to the mental image she had of Yahiro

Narusawa.

He swung his sword when the monsters were still out of his reach, and yet, when he had completed the arc, each of the four beasts was sliced in two. His slash had broken the laws of physics.

"A Regalia…" Ayaho's eyes widened.

She should have realized from the moment he stood up after Paola's attack. He used the long sword to channel his Regalia. All this showed what he was: a Lazarus. Someone under the dragon medium's blessing, just like Yahiro.

"Why…?" was the only thing Ayaho could manage to say.

Why had a new Lazarus shown up here, now?

Why had he appeared before her?

Why had he saved her from these pseudo-Moujuu?

The tsunami of questions overwhelmed her.

Meanwhile, the young man sheathed his sword and approached her.

"Stay away from her," Paola commanded while pointing her gun at him.

But he ignored the warning and held his hand out to Ayaho where she sat on the ground. Bullets wouldn't work on a Lazarus. Paola couldn't kill him.

"Open, Talaria."

He grabbed Ayaho's arm and activated his Regalia. Then Ayaho's vision blurred. She felt she was floating as her consciousness faded. The last thing she saw was Paola moving away from her at tremendous speed.

On that day, Relict Deserver Ayaho Sashou was kidnapped by an unidentified Lazarus.

5

"Ahh… The water feels amazing…"

Iroha exhaled as she sank into the warm water, her long hair bundled up in a towel. The bathtub Yahiro had made of fieldstone was spacious even with the two girls in it. Iroha leaned back with a

heedless grin on her face and stretched her legs.

Ellie stared at Iroha's unobscured form. Iroha's relish came from having washed Ellie's body from head to toe, to the end of her every hair. She was feeling the accomplishment of someone who'd successfully washed a large unwilling dog.

Ellie had resisted fearfully at first, but in the end, she gave up and let Iroha do as she pleased. She now found herself feeling a weariness that contrasted Iroha's glee.

Iroha's efforts had not been in vain, though, as Ellie's attitude toward her had changed a bit. At the very least, she no longer feared Iroha unconditionally as she had when they first met. Not that she trusted her, though.

"Ummm… Miss Dragon Medium… May I ask a question…?"

"Stop calling me that. Just call me Iroha, yeah?" she said, still leaning back in relaxation.

Ellie kept a straight face, but she lowered her guard a little. She felt it was pointless to stay scared when Iroha was just chilling out.

"…Iroha… What is your wish?"

"My wish right now is to be your friend. Will you make it come true?" She sat up and leaned toward her.

Ellie leaned away in return. "Wh-what's the point of that…?"

"Because it'd be fun. You see, I have a lot of siblings. We're apart now, but they're all good kids. We used to take baths together like this when they were little… This reminds me of those good times. Oh, but Rinka always got so mad. She's very picky about her skin care. That's how I ended up with pretty skin myself. I'll teach you later about skin care, and massaging."

"…I-I'm okay." Ellie barely managed to say two words in response to Iroha's torrent.

Iroha misunderstood and got touchy-feely with her.

"Hmm, your skin is already pretty good, though. You've got a nice body, if a bit too thin. Your hair is so soft. You're like a baby. Also, I've been wondering this whole time—are those birthmarks on your back? They're not scars, surely. And they don't look like tattoos," she asked while stroking the girl's back.

Fine lines ran down by her shoulder blades, highlighting her

translucently pale skin in a silver color reminiscent of the inside of a pearl oyster. They looked like scars of torn-off wings.

"…A-answer my question…" Ellie anxiously veered the conversation back away.

"What question?"

"Why did you create this world…?"

"Huh…? What do you mean?"

"You became the Ouroboros's medium. You could have made any wish come true, and yet you wished for the old world to continue… I'm asking your reason for doing that." Ellie looked at her straight on.

Iroha tilted her head. "I'm not sure what I'm supposed to say about a *reason*, but my wish is this world right here."

"That cannot be… Someone without a wish can't possibly become the world dragon's medium…"

"Ah… Nina said the same thing. That I'm hollow." Iroha smiled with nostalgia. A strong emotion filled with mysterious confidence, not self-derision. "But that's okay. Yahiro's not making just *my* wish come true. He's making everyone in the world's wish come true. Because that would be most fun."

"…Fun?" Ellie blinked, taken aback.

"The power maintaining the world comes from the dragon medium's wish, right? But I'm a hollow medium. My wish couldn't keep the world going for long." Iroha puffed her chest. "So, better to share the wish with everyone. That way, the world will keep going forever. And if it breaks down in the end, it won't be just my responsibility."

"I don't think your wish will be granted that way."

"Yes, it will. A wish is something you make come true with your own power," Iroha assured her nonchalantly.

Ellie looked at her with surprise. She tried to say something but swallowed the words.

Then her shoulders trembled in fear.

"…It's here."

Ellie stood up in the bath and looked at the coast with a scowl. Toward where she'd washed up on the beach.

“Ellie? What’s here?” Iroha looked up at her in shock.

She did not answer her question. “Yahiro is in trouble.”

“What? Hey! Where are you going?!”

Iroha’s eyes widened as Ellie ran out of the bathroom, toward the shore. Naked.

“Wait! Put on some clothes! Ellie!”

Iroha, too, got out of the bathtub in a hurry. She undid the towel on her head and chased Ellie.

6

“Yahiro!”

Yahiro lifted his head. He’d been feeding firewood into the stone oven to bake bread.

It was Ellie. He scowled like a migraine had hit him at the sight of her.

She wore only a T-shirt she’d borrowed from Iroha. It covered up to her thighs thanks to the girls’ size difference, but it was obvious she had no underwear on. Not to mention it was damp and clinging to her body. It looked like she’d just put it on, without drying herself after the bath.

“Ellie, stop! What happened?!”

Iroha followed behind her. She only wore a tank top and panties. She was more dressed than Ellie, but one could say she looked more provocative due to the shortness of the tank top.

“Why in the world…are you dressed like that?”

“Hey, at least I tried! Ellie was running outside without even thinking about putting on that shirt!” Iroha argued with a pout.

She didn’t seem to mind her own appearance. She probably found it no different from wearing a swimsuit.

While they talked, Ellie glared at the beach.

Dusk was coming. The sun near the horizon dyed the sky red with golden rays between the clouds. The view reminded them of the day Ellie showed up. The evening calm came along, and the wind mellowed out.

Then Yahiro and Iroha noticed the abnormality. The sky was glowing.

A ray of light like a lightning bolt fell straight into the sea, and a roar shook the air. It was the sound of the sky splitting apart.

The barrier surrounding the island broke, and shadows crept through the cracks one after the other.

Oddly flat monsters appeared. Shadows with ambiguous shapes that were enveloped in a rainbow luster. At most one could discern the legs and wings of birds of prey, and human torsos. Their wings were four or five meters long. They resembled mythological birds. And Yahiro and Iroha knew them.

"Moujuu…? Why…?" Yahiro muttered.

"No. Those are not monsters transformed from people," Ellie said.

Yahiro and Iroha looked at her, shocked by the fact she was sure of the colorful monsters' identity.

"Those are angels. Birthed by our world's creator…"

"*Our* world's…? Are you saying that you—?"

"Move!"

Ellie cut him off before he could finish saying, "…that you're from a different world?"

A monster charged him, but Ellie blocked the attack. She jumped in front of the swift monster and punched it bare-fisted in the face. Black miasma spurted from the wound instead of blood.

Sharp claws grew from Ellie's right hand from her wrist to her fingertips in the fiery talons of a bird of prey.

Ellie's back radiated as giant wings emerged from it. Silver feathered wings that glowed like mother-of-pearl.

She flapped her wings and took off into the sky. She launched an aerial strike on the colorful creatures.

"What…is going on…?" Iroha mumbled.

Yahiro couldn't process it, either.

Ellie looked like a siren. Or, as she'd said, an angel.

She transformed into an angel like those found in religious paintings and fought the non-Moujuu beasts. Yahiro couldn't keep up.

Ellie continued fighting while the pair remained taken aback—

although one could hardly call it a fight due to Ellie's overwhelming power. It was more like a massacre. She vanquished a dozen birds, one after the other.

It was over within a minute.

The silver-winged girl landed back down on the beach after wiping out the monsters. Yahiro and Iroha ran toward her.

"No! Don't come! It's not over yet…," Ellie warned them, wings still spread.

Another thunderous roar shook the world before she could finish talking. New shadows emerged from the cracks in the air's barrier.

"C'mon…" A groan escaped Yahiro's throat.





Three more angels appeared. Not that he took Ellie's word as gospel, but there was no better word to describe them.

"No way… They're really angels…?"

Half human, half bird, with silver wings. They looked like Ellie now, but they were different in two ways.

First, they were male. Second, they wore full body armor and carried shiny lances.

"…Ellieee…!" an armored angel howled from above.

It sounded like the shrill noise of metal scraping on metal, but there was no doubt that it was his voice.

Iroha and Yahiro didn't know the language he spoke, but they understood the meaning in the tone. The angels were insulting Ellie. They attacked her like she was a traitor.

"Yahiro!"

"What…?!"

One of the armored angels dove down the moment Ellie warned him. Yahiro groaned at the realization that he was after him.

He was armed. And could fly. Yahiro was defenseless. And despite the great advantage, the angels looked grievous, like they were desperate.

"Tsk!" Yahiro clicked his tongue as he looked up at the attacker in the air.

Battling a flying angel was out of his wheelhouse, obviously. He had no idea why the angels were after his life to begin with. But the inner conflict didn't last long. Ellie spread her silver wings and flew from the side to knock the angel off course.

Apparently, she was strong enough to take on fully armored angels. Her talons dug deep into his side, and the angel burst into light particles.

"ELIMIEEEL…!" one of the remaining angels bellowed as he attacked her. Blue lightning shot from the end of his lance.

The flashes rained on the ground, causing huge explosions all over their island.

Ellie was faster than the armored angel, but dodging the relentless lightning took all her attention, leaving her unable to counterattack.

Meanwhile, the other angel dove toward Yahiro, distracting Ellie. She reflexively turned around to protect Yahiro, but the move left her wide open, and her enemy did not let the opportunity slip by.

Ellie's turn slowed her down, and lightning struck her. She managed to block by crossing her wings, but the damage was still high. The armored angel charged toward her, intending to deal the finishing blow while she was off-balance.

"Yahiro…"

He heard a soft voice in his ear. Iroha was standing next to him, looking up at the angels with an aloof look on her face.

"It's okay, Yahiro." She touched his shoulder, a sad smile on her face. "Sorry I held you back. Go help her."

"…If that is your wish."

Yahiro looked her in the eye, asking for confirmation.

She nodded. He grinned. An armored angel rushed toward them with lance at the ready.

Yet Yahiro gave him a cold look and whispered: "Burn to ash…"

In that moment, the world changed colors. The sky and the land were tinted with scorching crimson, and the sea swirled in burning flames.

Tall, viscous flames like lava engulfed the assaulting angel. The angel vanished without a trace, turned to ashes—armor and all. He never knew what hit him.

The other angel fighting Ellie suffered the same fate as he got caught up in the flames. Scorching rays pierced him like lances from every direction.

Were they aware that everything in the world had turned into their enemy?

"Avaritiaaa!" the angel roared with hatred, but nothing more. The blast swallowed his ending cries and only silence was left behind. It happened in the blink of an eye.

Yahiro exhaled. The flames covering the world disappeared then. The white beach, calm sea, and dusk sky returned to how they'd been before.

"As ridiculous a power as I remember…" Yahiro sighed with listless self-derision.

He was now the Lazarus with the power of Ouroboros. He had inherited the power of the previous world dragon and, in a sense, had the power of a god.

He knew he could easily defeat the beings Ellie called angels, but there was a cost to his power. He who used the power of a god could not remain human.

"Yahiro…" Ellie landed and approached him with low spirits.

Whether she was dejected about hiding her identity or about being unable to protect Yahiro, he did not care.

"You okay, Ellie?" he asked.

Ellie was clearly wounded from the battle, but she nodded. The injuries weren't a big deal, though the T-shirt was tattered. Her pearl-oyster-silver wings on her back remained spread.

"Yahiro… Is that you…?"

"Oh. Yeah. Looks like I'm back, after all the growing up I did…" Yahiro shook his head in gloom after looking down at himself.

His body had returned to how it was at seventeen.

"Iroha and I don't age since we inherited the Ouroboros's power. I guess it's because we're outside the realm of biology now. We can grow up while the dragon's power is sealed, but the moment we release it, well. You can see."

"Just when I thought I'd matured into a good woman…" Iroha dropped her shoulders with a weak smile. Her age had reset, too.

They weren't at an age for their height to change dramatically, but the changes they experienced from their late teens to their twenties were not insignificant. Iroha didn't so much rejuvenate as become childlike.

They had been holding back from using the Lazarus's power because they hadn't wanted this to happen. It reminded them of the fact that they couldn't live like normal humans.

"I…couldn't protect you…" Ellie bit her lip with regret.

The island was wrecked by the armored angels' attack. A considerable amount of their crops had to have been ruined.

"Don't mind it. It's not your fault," Iroha said.

"Yeah. And after all that ruckus, they'll be here any minute," Yahiro said.

"…*They*?" Ellie frowned.

"Yep." Yahiro smiled weakly.

He was getting a headache just thinking how to explain Ellie and the angels to them.

Right then, they heard footsteps on the bright white sand, carried on the wind. Two small silhouettes approached from the far side of the cove. Silhouettes so similar it was hard to tell them apart from a distance.

Iroha beamed upon noticing the surprise visitors. "Speak of the devil."

"That was way too fast. Chill out a little, guys," Yahiro said to them.

They were beautiful women of Asian descent with identical faces. Twins. They wore suits with tight skirts, unfit for a remote island like this. Despite being only in their late teens, they had the poise of big-time CEOs. And that's because they were. They were the principal shareholders and chief executive officers of one of the biggest arms dealers in the world: Galerie Berith.

"Hopefully you don't think we're here because we wanted to see you." The younger twin, Rosetta Berith, spoke plainly and coldly.

"We were on a different case, but this happened at just the right time." The older twin, Giulietta Berith, smiled boldly while looking around the wrecked island.

They hadn't changed much physically in three years. They even wore the same blue-and-orange highlights in their hair.

Their hair was longer, though. That changed their aura significantly. They looked mature in Yahiro's and Iroha's age-reset eyes, which only made them jealous.





The twins stared at Ellie intently.

"It's not every day we get to talk to an angel, after all."

The girl with the silver wings looked back at them with a flat, if slightly troubled, expression.

Act 3 Alternative Lazarus

1

A ship was moored in the deep cove of the nameless island.

It was black and cylindrical, reminiscent of a giant whale, over one hundred meters long. Its name was *Alioth*, Galerie Berith's only commercial submarine. The Galerie had taken advantage of the J-nocide to confiscate the conventionally powered submarine the Japanese government had been building for the Maritime Self-Defense Forces.

"You might not get to come back to this island for a while. Make sure you don't forget anything important," Giuli warned them as she stepped onto the gangway hidden in the trees.

The island Iroha and Yahiro lived on was less than three kilometers across. Big enough for the two of them, but too small to secure all the food and daily necessities they needed.

Every two months, Galerie Berith used this submarine to deliver other commodities. This was also how Iroha got everything she ordered online.

"I'd rather not be gone for too long, or the cabin will deteriorate," Yahiro said.

"Can't say for sure how long it'll be until we get the angel to tell us everything. We can't let you stay here when they know where you are," Giuli replied, looking at the girl hidden behind him.

Ellie had changed into her habit-like outfit and was shaking in her boots. The wings on her back were gone, and now she merely looked like a frightened nun.

"Umm… Yahiro… Where are you taking me?" she asked with a gloomy tone.

The unfamiliar twins who had showed up out of nowhere were

taking her into a submarine; how could she not be scared? Even with her superhuman fighting prowess, it was only natural she would feel anxious.

"Don't worry, Ellie. They're our friends," Iroha said while pulling her away.

"F-friends?"

"Yes. The cute one here is Giuli, and the pretty one there is Rosé. They're the owners of a company called Galerie Berith."

"Uh…huh…" Ellie gazed around, disoriented by Iroha's explanation, before looking at Yahiro for help.

It was impossible to tell the twins apart when described as "the cute one" and "the pretty one."

"*Friends* isn't quite exactly right. We think of ourselves as your guardians," Rosé said flatly, bringing even more confusion to Ellie's face.

Yahiro sighed. "Rosé, don't make things more complicated. Iroha's mostly right. We are hiding on this island with the Galerie's help. The Ouroboros and his dragon medium can't exactly be walking around in public, you get me?"

"Hee-hee… It's not easy being famous." Iroha scratched her head bashfully.

Yahiro and Iroha had isolated themselves to this remote island not just because their faces and names were known. They had the Ouroboros's epic power to change the world and were afraid that people wanting to use it for evil would go after them. Those in the realm of godhood should not be in human society—that was their decision.

Surprisingly, Giuli and Rosé had agreed. They thought it would be better to be safe and get them out of anyone's reach, rather than risk it and try to use the uncontrollable power of the Ouroboros. So they got them a small, nameless island.

The island's existence was concealed by a barrier set by the Ouroboros's power. Not even recon satellites could find the island. Galerie Berith used a submarine to deliver their necessities so the island's location would remain a secret from shipping surveillance, too.

Galerie Berith had hidden Yahiro and Iroha from the world for three years. They were thorough to the point that even Iroha's siblings were not told about the island.

"So we couldn't look the other way when angels showed up on this island. We'd love to hear how they found the location." Giuli glared at Ellie with a grin.

Ellie gulped, the reaction of a feeble critter. It was hard to believe she was the same being who had fought so fiercely against the armored angels.

"Fortunately, we have more than enough time to hear all the details," Rosé said flatly while urging her to get in the submarine.

Frightened, Ellie did as she was told and went through the hatch.

Yahiro and Iroha felt bad for her, but they wanted to know about her, too. They showed no objection to the twins' approach and got into the submarine as well.

The *Alioth* was to spend a night underwater to escape satellite monitoring before moving to the Galerie base in the South China Sea. They were to take a plane to Japan from there. Just like Rosé said, they had plenty of time to listen to Ellie's story.

"So, what are you, little angel? How did you find this island? Who were those guys with the wings?" Giuli shot a barrage of questions the moment they reached the submarine's dining hall. Ellie hunched under the pressure.

"They're after Yahiro."

"Sure looks like it." Giuli giggled while glancing at him.

Yahiro grimaced in silence. Having faced them firsthand, he knew that the so-called angels were after his life. They were not trying to capture him. Whether it was possible or not, they wanted to kill the Lazarus.

"Why were they trying to kill me?"

"Because you're defec…a special Ouroboros, I think." Ellie hastily corrected herself before calling him defective.

Whatever they wanted to call it, it was true that Yahiro was an irregular world dragon. Because the wish of Iroha, who gave him the power of the Ouroboros, was irregular.

The Ouroboros's medium was able to change the world to her

whim, but Iroha had thrown away the right. She only wished for this world to continue, and in order to get the necessary energy, she made every person in the world bear the load equally. Few people truly wished, from the bottom of their heart, for the world they lived in to perish. And so the anomalous wish was granted.

The world brought about by the dragon medium's wish would ultimately end as the wish wore out over the years. And the moment the medium's wish vanished would mark the end of the world dragon's life. Every time the old Ouroboros reached the end of its life, a new dragon medium was summoned to create a new Ouroboros. The world had cycled through death and rebirth in such a way time and time again. Like Ouroboros—which ate its own tail.

Iroha's irregular wish broke the system. So long as the people wished for this world to continue, it would not perish. Thus, Yahiro became an irregularly powerless Ouroboros. He simply had near-infinite life. His role was only to maintain this world.

However, being powerless was not all bad. It meant Yahiro and Iroha were not locked up in the Afterlife and could travel the world freely.

"I have no objection to being called a failure of an Ouroboros, but why is that a reason to attack me?"

"Erratic worlds produce erratic evolution and eventually erratic beings. They feared this. The possibility of the birth of a being that could endanger their standing," Ellie responded.

Yahiro's brow furrowed. "And who are *they*?"

"Umm… How should I put it… The residents of Heaven? What we call gods."

"Gods?!" Iroha squealed. "So…that's why you said you're an angel. So you came from Heaven, too?"

"No, the underworld sentries' bodies are made in this world."

"Underworld sentries?"

"Yes. We watch over this world and swiftly seal anomalous Ouroboroses. We are artificial life—tools meant for this purpose." Ellie closed her eyes.

Yahiro and Iroha looked at each other.

The premise was unbelievable. The small girl before their eyes

was a tool sent by the gods in Heaven to monitor this world—it was unthinkable. It was too outrageous to be even a delusion.

Yet those supposed underworld sentries had attacked them. They couldn't laugh off Ellie's explanation.

"So you sentries have been observing the world for centuries. Do I have that right?" Rosé asked flatly.

"Y-yes." Ellie nodded anxiously.

"And you've watched in silence as the world perished time and again?"

"Y-yes… Well, I mean, we're usually in a sort of suspended animation state, so we don't have memory of what happened in the meantime…"

"But you woke up once you marked Yahiro down as a dangerous Ouroboros."

"Um… Ah… Sorry."

Ellie hung her head, overwhelmed by Rosé. Rosé, who stared closely at her the whole time, kept her expression unchanged as she murmured.

"Do you know of a place called Teotihuacan?"

"What?!" Ellie's eyes grew wide. "That is the city of the gods, and one of the bases where underworld sentries lie in hibernation. There is also a device meant to observe the Ouroboros there."

"I see… That explains it."

"What do you mean, Rosé?" Yahiro cocked his head, impatient for an explanation.

He knew about the famous ruins and tourist spot, but he had no idea how that connected to the underworld sentries.

"Simply put, this is not the first time Galerie Berith has made contact with the angels. We sent Ren and Rinka to the ruins of Teotihuacan to investigate last week, and they reported a fight against them."

"WHAAAT?!" Iroha jumped up from her seat and closed in on Rosé. "Ren and Rinka fought them?! What are you making my siblings do?!"

"Don't worry. Runa and Nuemaru were with them as guards. And Josh, too."

"That's not the problem here…!"

"The angels were a surprise to us, too. We sent the kids there to investigate Moujuu sightings in Teotihuacan."

"Moujuu…" Iroha's voice grew weak.

The Moujuu were supposed to have perished. As a member of Ganzheit, Galerie Berith could not ignore information about a sighting. And it wasn't that outrageous of a decision to send the kids there. Ren and Rinka were resistant to Moujuufication, and even if a Moujuu attacked, they would be in no danger with Runa and Nuemaru there.

"So they mistook the angels for Moujuu," Yahiro asked.

"Yup. And to be clear, *that's* the first time the Galerie came across angels," Giuli responded.

"And what happened to the angel?"

"Renren and the others beat it with an artificial Relict."

"You're making my little brother use that thing…?" Iroha frowned.

The overprotective eldest sister could not forgive the Galerie for putting her siblings in danger.

"Wait, so that's why you're trying to get us back to Japan?" Yahiro looked straight at the twins.

The Galerie's submarine had arrived at just the perfect time, hurrying them off the island. He'd thought there had to be something up, and this explained it. Naturally, they would want to hold their aces close to the chest now that unheard-of creatures had appeared.

"Ooh, close." Giuli shook her head. "But that's not all. Angels showed up in Japan, too. And they attacked Ayaho."

"…What?" Yahiro looked at her in disbelief.

Iroha's mouth opened and closed wordlessly in shock.

"Ayaho… Is she all right?!"

"A new, unidentified Lazarus showed up and beat the angel, according to Paola's report. But that's all we know. We don't know whether Ayaho's safe," Giuli said without much concern.

"But why?! Didn't they beat the angel?!"

"Ayaho was kidnapped by the unidentified Lazarus."

"WHAAAT?!" Iroha's jaw dropped.

Yahiro was at a loss for words.

A Lazarus who hadn't shown up until now had not only defeated an angel but also made off with Ayaho.

Ellie didn't know anything about all this, naturally. She looked equally lost.

"All right, losing our minds before we reach Japan will do nothing, so let's just enjoy the underwater trip today, yeah? Make yourselves at home, as much as this tiny place will let ya." Giuli gave them a smile.

"You want us to chill after hearing all that?!" Yahiro grumbled.

The *Alioth*, now shrouded in an oppressive atmosphere, swam across the dark sea.

2

A colorful variety of dishes was set on a glass table across from a leather sofa in a luxury room of a high-rise hotel.

Salad, soup, terrine, tartare, fish pie, steak with foie gras, and all sorts of bread and desserts lined the table. Next to it was a cart full of expensive wine.

"You won't have anything, Ayaho Sashou?" the white woman sitting opposite to her asked.

The woman was in her late twenties and wore a suit. She was kind and polite, but her voice felt artificial, lacking human warmth.

The young man in a hoodie stood behind her like a loyal guard. He was the Lazarus who had kidnapped Ayaho on her way back from school.

Ayaho stared intently at the young man's face. She was afraid about being taken somewhere she didn't know, and mad about being kidnapped, yet much to her surprise, she was calm. An emotion stronger than fear or anger budded within her. The sense of duty to figure out this young man's identity.

"The hotel provided this food. You don't have to worry about anything dangerous being in it. The dishes were supposed to come in courses, but it's room service."

"I don't mind any of that," Ayaho said curtly. Coldly, to her own surprise. "I want an explanation. This is a luxury hotel for foreigners, isn't it? Why did you bring me here?"

"Please consider this room a show of our good faith."

"Good faith?"

"After all, we took you by force, although it was necessary. It's an apology. A way to make you feel comfortable while you're in our protection." The woman wore an unapologetically charming smile.

The audacity aggravated Ayaho.

"What do you mean by *protection*?"

"Did you not see the angel?"

"A-angel?"

"The colorful winged monster. They're after you. So we brought you under our protection. Guns and swords don't work on angels. Only Shigure here can protect you."

Ayaho was at a loss for words. It probably was no lie that the colorful monsters were after her. And it was also a fact that this Shigure boy had defeated them. But that was not enough to trust this woman. She hadn't given a real reason why they'd kidnapped her.

"Are they after me because of the Relict Regalia?"

The woman raised her eyebrows at Ayaho's question. Did she find it surprising that Ayaho had accepted the explanation so calmly?

"Yes. The angels attack those with the dragon factor indiscriminately. Your Relict Regalia is practically bait for them."

"That doesn't explain why you would protect me, though, does it?" Ayaho coolly pointed out. "Who are you? Why did you capture me?"

"Ahh, apologies. I haven't introduced myself." The woman smiled.

She raised the ID hanging on her chest. It showed an eerie logo of a four-headed panther.

"I am Suria Almiron. Consultant for private military company Kyuos."

"A PMC…"

"Yes. Galerie Berith's business rival, you could say." She narrowed her eyes as she saw Ayaho stiffen. "Ayaho Sashou… Don't you want

to know where the Ouroboros and his medium—Yahiro Narusawa and Iroha Mamana—are?"

"You know where they are?!" Ayaho leaned forward on reflex.

Iroha and Yahiro had vanished after they went into the Afterlife three years prior. Even with Iroha's streams back online, no one had any idea where the pair were.

"They're on an island belonging to the Galerie in the western Pacific. Call it a slow life down south. It sounds nice, but the reality is, they're being confined and isolated from society."

"Confined…? Then…"

"Yes. The Galerie knew where they were and kept quiet. They didn't even tell you, Iroha Mamana's sister."

"But why…?" Ayaho shook her head in denial.

There was no proof Suria was telling the truth, but it didn't feel like she was lying. Telling an obvious lie and losing Ayaho's trust wouldn't be in her best interest.

"So the Galerie can monopolize the Ouroboros's power, right?" Suria wore a daring smile. "Yahiro Narusawa now has the power to change the world to his whim. We fear Galerie Berith is using the world dragon's power for their benefit. We need the power to stop them."

"…And that's why you kidnapped me?"

"We have no way to resist the Ouroboros's great power. But the dragon medium behind him has a weakness—her family." Suria closed her eyes with melancholy. "The Galerie has all her family in its clutches. Like hostages. Would Iroha Mamana be able to refuse if they asked something in exchange for your safety?"

"They…" Ayaho bit her lip indecisively.

She could not deny Suria's fear. She knew Iroha well; she would do anything to protect her siblings. The siblings were proud of how much she loved them, but at the same time, they were restless about that love as well. Doubly so now that she had the power to change the world.

"Don't worry. Kyuos does not intend to make an enemy of the Galerie. We simply want to guarantee that they won't hog the Ouroboros's power." Suria observed Ayaho's scowl with a soft smile.

“And assisting us should be beneficial to you as well. We have a common enemy, after all.”

“The angels…”

“Yes. They attack those with the dragon factor indiscriminately—not only do they pursue you for having the Relict Regalia, but Shigure here is in danger, too. What better than to join hands, don’t you think?”

Suria had craftily driven her into a corner, but Ayaho did not respond. The proposition wasn’t bad—if she was telling the truth. Ayaho couldn’t feel any animosity from her, either. But she couldn’t bring herself to trust this woman. Even if she wasn’t lying, she had to be hiding something—Ayaho’s gut told her so.

“You don’t need to answer right now. Think about it carefully. I’ll leave Shigure as your bodyguard, so please ask him for anything you need.” Suria stood up, noticing Ayaho’s distrust.

The woman was not going to let her out of this room. Shigure wasn’t so much her guard as he was her warden.





“And by the way, Shigure. Take off the hood during a meal. It’s impolite,” Suria ordered just before leaving.

The young man who had stood in silence the whole time obediently pulled back his hood.

In that same moment, Ayaho was paralyzed in shock. She knew that face. His hair had lost all pigment and was now white, and deep scars like seams ran across his forehead.

But beyond that, he was the spitting image of Yahiro Narusawa.

3

“Yahi…ro?” Ayaho mumbled, staring at the young man by the wall.

It took a while for the word to leave her lips, and by then Suria was gone. Shigure’s face had thrown her off guard.

“Do you know me?” The man with Yahiro’s face looked at her with interest.

Ayaho came to her senses and shook her head in panic. It occurred to her that calling a person by someone else’s name was rude.

“I-I’m sorry… I was thinking of somebody else.”

“Somebody else…huh?” Shigure sighed, disappointment obvious in his tone.

Ayaho felt like she had to explain herself when she heard that.

“But you look just like him. Your hair is a different color, but your frame, and the air about you…and your face.”

“I see,” Shigure said softly; he didn’t seem particularly hurt. “Would you tell me more about him? I might find a hint there.”

“A hint?” Ayaho furrowed her brow.

“Ah, sorry. You see, I’ve lost my memories. The name Shigure, she—Suria gave it to me. I don’t know if it’s my real name.”

“Is that…so?”

“Yes. Honestly, I don’t even know why I have the power of the Lazarus.” Shigure looked at his right hand.

His wrist, peeking from his sleeve, had terrible stitches on it, too. As though they had sewn him back together after he was torn to

pieces.

"Oh, sorry. Please don't mind me. Enjoy your meal before it gets cold." Shigure glanced at the dishes on the table and smiled.

Ayaho looked at the dishes, then back at Shigure in confusion.

"Would you like to have some, too? I don't think I can finish it all by myself." Ayaho pointed at the seat opposite her.

Eating all by herself while Shigure watched would be awkward. Better to get him in on the meal, she thought.

She wouldn't have been able to eat in front of that Suria woman, but Shigure's presence wasn't as suffocating. She decided to try and trust him after their short conversation.

"If you say so. Allow me to serve the food." Shigure accepted and picked up cutlery to cut the main dish.

He was quite dexterous for somebody without memories. His profile as he looked seriously at the food reminded her of Yahiro's.

"You're a Lazarus," Ayaho said absentmindedly.

"Huh?" Shigure raised his head with confusion.

"They called Yahiro that, too, because he bathed in dragon medium blood and became immortal."

"I've heard about him. Supposedly, this world exists thanks to him."

"He's with my sister. We knew they were alive, but we had no idea where they were."

"Because Galerie Berith had them confined?"

Ayaho nodded. Up until now, she had trusted the Galerie unconditionally. She and her siblings owed their lives to the Galerie; they had taken them in and provided for them, like real family.

Suspicion was now rising in her heart after hearing they had hidden Yahiro and Iroha's location. She couldn't entirely deny Suria's suggestion that they were simply bait for Iroha.

"What was he like? Yahiro Narusawa," Shigure asked, considerate of the gloomy look on her face.

Ayaho smiled with her eyes closed.

"He was kind. He thought it was his fault that Japan was destroyed. He was always suffocating, blaming himself. Maybe that's why Iroha couldn't look away from him…"

“Did you love him?”

Ayaho raised her head at Shigure’s question. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

Shigure looked taken aback, and Ayaho was just as surprised. She couldn’t believe she could cry so easily.

Yes. She loved him, most likely. She was sad she couldn’t see him.

But she had given up. Not just because Iroha and Yahiro made a good couple, but because, deep within her heart, she knew that only Iroha could’ve saved him from suffocation.

“I’m sorry. I think that was inconsiderate of me.” Shigure bowed his head.

Ayaho shook her head with a smile.

“When I first met him, he saved me. He came running to me just when I thought a Moujuu was going to kill me.”

“That’s…”

“That’s just like what you did. You resemble him even in that way.”

Ayaho lifted a forkful of food while looking at the surprise in Shigure’s face. The fatty meat was delicious. The soup wasn’t so bad, either, even though it was cold now.

“I would love to meet and talk with him.”

“With Yahiro?”

“Yes. If we really look the same, then I might find a clue about my past. Regardless of whether he knows me or not.” Shigure took a bite of bread.

Ayaho looked at him and exclaimed, “Ah…!”

“What is it?”

“Yahiro had a little sister. Although they weren’t real siblings.”

“I see…” Shigure was puzzled by Ayaho’s enthusiastic remark.

Ayaho paused before continuing.

“Her hair was white, just like yours.”

Shigure’s eyes went wide.

The earth dragon Superbia’s medium, Sui Narusawa, was artificially created by Ganzheit. Her hair was pure white, like Shigure’s. But Ayaho hesitated to tell him the whole story.

"Yahiro Narusawa's sister… Sui Narusawa…" Shigure's brow furrowed and held his head like someone suffering from a migraine.

Ayaho was disconcerted by his sudden expression of pain.

"Shigure…?"

"I'm fine… Don't worry… My head just hurts a little…" Shigure shook his head furiously, his hands still on his temples.

Ayaho kept staring with concern, so he looked back at her and forced a smile.

"What were the people of Galerie Berith like?"

"Umm… It's hard to explain, but put simply… We siblings owe them our lives. We can live the way we do now thanks to our meeting them."

"I see… That's not what Suria said…" Shigure narrowed his eyes in deep thought.

Suria said that they had kidnapped her to keep her safe. Shigure must have fully believed this, and so he abducted her without a second thought. But if Ayaho and Galerie Berith had a relationship of trust, then it wasn't so simple. That would mean Suria had used him to take her away from the Galerie.

"Do you want to go home?" Shigure asked seriously.

Ayaho nodded without hesitation. "Yes."

"I see. Let's go together, then. I'll take you somewhere safe."

"…Are you sure?" Ayaho appeared surprised.

He was suggesting betraying the private military company Kyuos. That couldn't be an easy decision, and yet he stood up with a calm smile on his face.

"I think that might be the quickest way to get my memories back."

He walked to a corner of the room and grabbed two weapons: a straight sword over two meters long and an old Western-style sword.

"I'm sure this Yahiro Narusawa would've done the same, right?" Shigure looked at her bewildered expression and smiled.

Ayaho felt a twinge in her chest before nodding.

A cluster of high-rise buildings under construction were lined up along the brand-new freeway. It was such a beautiful and futuristic cityscape that one could hardly believe it had all been ruins until recently.

"Whoa…!" Iroha exclaimed like a kid, pressing her face against the car's window. "It's Japan…! Look, Yahiro! That's Japan! Tokyo, Japan!"

"I know. I know, please calm down."

Iroha's voice, trained by years of livestreaming, was clear and loud. Her shrill shouting inside the airtight armored car was painful even to the Lazarus.

"It isn't like the Tokyo we knew, huh? Amazing what three years can do."

"Since all other industries were devastated, they had no choice but to put all the workforce into infrastructure."

"And all the PMCs who could no longer profit from dealing with Moujuu invested everything in it, too."

"…Wish there was a more inspiring explanation than capitalism…" Yahiro hung his head at driver Rosé's and passenger seat Giuli's dry remarks.

The city development was delightful on the surface, but they said there was a fierce fight over the rights behind the scenes. Naturally, Galerie Berith must have participated, too. They knew the state of the ruined Japan better than anyone, so they couldn't possibly stand back and watch as gigantic restoration funds moved to Japan.

The armored car left the freeway and passed into reclaimed land along the coast. On the horizon stood a familiar old brick building. The base of operations of Galerie Berith's Japanese branch.

"Mama!" A boy who appeared to be in middle school came running toward the car as soon as Iroha got out. He had a lively, if a bit cheeky, look on his face.

"Kyouta?!" Iroha's eyes became wide as saucers when she noticed how grown-up he looked.

After Kyouta Kase showed up, a pretty androgynous boy appeared. And behind him, a tomboy wearing a beret.

"Welcome back, Mama."

“Kiri! You’ve grown so much, too.”

“You shrunk.”

“Don’t be silly.”

Iroha hugged her two brothers with an ear-to-ear smile. They looked shy, but didn’t resist.

“Iroha…” The girl with the beret spoke at last.

She usually stood at the head of the trio, yet she was quiet today.

“Honoka, it’s been so long,” Iroha said gently.

Honoka nodded slightly, her face a teary mess. She sobbed before clutching Iroha and wailing.

“I wanded do see you… Why didn’d you see us befowe…”

“I’m sorry… I’m so sorry…” Iroha cried with her.

The boys cried, too, seeing their sisters hug while in tears. Yahiro watched from afar, unwilling to break the family’s moving reunion.

“Hey, Yahiro! How’ve you been?”

A woman around twenty years old greeted him in the lobby. Her hair was bright, and her beautiful face had a mature charm about it.

Yahiro did not immediately recognize her, despite the friendly welcome. She had changed a lot from when he last saw her.

“Sumika Kiyotaka…? I didn’t recognize you…”

“Hee-hee… Actually, I go by Sagara these days.”

She raised her left hand up to her cheek. A platinum-colored ring shone on her ring finger.

“You got married? Wow… Congratulations.”

Yahiro gasped after noticing the loose maternity dress she wore.

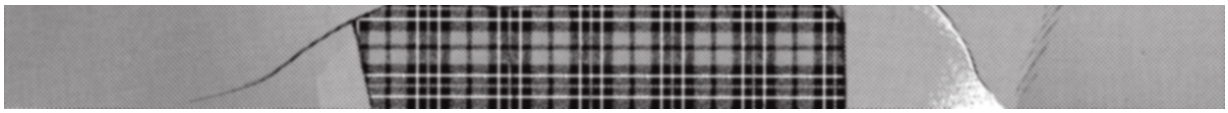
“Hee-hee. Thanks.” Zen stood next to her, and she hugged his arm.

“Yeah,” he replied bashfully.

“And what about you? You’ve been all alone with Iroha this whole time, right? But who’s that girl? Your lover? You’re cheating on her?!” Sumika put on a smug grin at the sight of Ellie hiding behind him.

Ellie’s shoulders trembled as Sumika boldly walked up to her. Her reaction wasn’t as big as when she met Iroha, but her fear of dragon mediums was deeply ingrained.





“I take it you being here means the angels attacked you, too?” Yahiro became serious and looked at Zen.

The Galerie had already sent an encrypted message reporting the angels and the underworld sentries, although they hid Ellie’s identity. Zen should have been aware of it.

“No, not us. But we can’t plainly say it’s not our business,” Zen replied as solemnly as always.

Meanwhile, Sumika was pouting about being ignored.

“Hey! Answer my question.”

“What do you mean by that, Zen?” Yahiro pretended not to hear her.

“You heard they kidnapped Ayaho Sashou?”

“Yes. That’s why we’re here.”

“Don’t ignore me…,” Sumika said pitifully.

Ellie simply watched nervously.

“We were attacked in Japan, by a PMC’s operators,” Zen said calmly.

Yahiro was taken aback. “Operators? Humans attacked you, not angels?”

“They were after my sword.”

“Why would they want that crummy thing…?”

“It’s not crummy. It has a lot of history,” Zen retorted before clearing his throat and continuing like nothing had been said. “I heard a Lazarus kidnapped Ayaho Sashou, and it seems it’s the same PMC backing him.”

“So you know which company it is?”

“We captured and interrogated an operator. It’s a small company that doesn’t even belong to the Guild. The name is Kyuos.”

“Why would they kidnap Ayaho…?” Yahiro cocked his head.

Ayaho was not an official member of Galerie Berith. She was just a high school girl working part-time at their café. That couldn’t be reason enough for professional operators to be sent to abduct her.

“Her kidnapping alone would be baffling if it weren’t for the fact that they also stole my sword.”

“…The Relict Regalia… The dragon factor…!” Yahiro gasped.

Zen’s sword, used as the catalyst for his Regalia, had approached

becoming a Relict Regalia due to being exposed to high-density dragon aura for so long. And Ayaho was a Deserver fused with Vanagloria's Relict Regalia.

The commonality was the huge volume of dragon factor within both of them.

"The Lazarus needs the dragon factor to maintain their immortal powers. It's not something to be worried about when you have a dragon medium by your side, but…"

"Without one, you need another source…"

Zen nodded.

Ellie listened to their conversation with a blank expression.

"But isn't that weird? How can there be a Lazarus without a dragon medium?" Sumika asked.

It was an obvious question. A dragon medium's will created a Lazarus. No matter how much dragon factor one poured into someone, without the trust—the love—of a dragon medium capable of overturning the fate of death, a Lazarus couldn't be born.

It was impossible for a new Lazarus to show up without a dragon medium.

"No point wasting time thinking about it. Better just ask the Lazarus himself." Zen calmly put an end to the unanswerable riddle, as though he knew where the Lazarus was.

"Okay, and where is he?"

"We don't know where Kyuos's base is, but Ayaho wasn't taken there. They took her to a high-rise hotel by the coast," Rosé answered.

Yahiro was taken aback. "A hotel?"

"A luxury hotel for foreigners. You can't quite lock up a Relict Deserver, can you? Better make her feel safe and comfortable."

"I'm kinda lost there, but she is safe, yeah?" Sumika sighed in relief; as a fellow woman, she worried about how they would treat Ayaho.

"Doesn't mean we can let them be, though." Yahiro frowned, looking again at Iroha as she enjoyed her reunion with her siblings.

He could only imagine how sad she would be if she couldn't meet Ayaho again. And her sadness could affect the world through the

Ouroboros, himself. Whether the Lazarus who kidnapped her was aware of it or not, the risk went beyond the kidnapping of a single person.

"We intended to send a few operators to sneak into the hotel to take her back, since we would rather avoid combat in an active public facility…," Rosé said.

"But…" Giuli shrugged. "There's been a change of plans."

"Why?"

"Looks like Ayaho escaped from the hotel already. With the Lazarus, to boot." Giuli whistled.

"…What?!" Yahiro's jaw dropped.

5

"Should we really have let them go?" a Black man in a white suit asked while looking down at the scattered night lights.

He had a shapely face, but it was too symmetrical, like an image created by AI.

"Don't worry. Ayaho Sashou is only bait to lure out Avaritia's medium," Suria responded.

They were in a high-rise office building in the heart of the city: the executive office of private military company Kyuos.

"Her work is done now that Avaritia's medium has left her stronghold?" a tall old white man asked.

He was Kyuos's representative, on paper. His title had no real meaning. After all, PMC Kyuos was but one of the many covers the underworld sentries had in this world.

Suria, one of such underworld sentries, had no idea anymore how long these entities had existed in this world. They had been part of the world's supervision system for too long.

A world created by the Ouroboros had died, and the generation's dragon medium had created a new one. It was comparable to the lives of plants. Even if one died, from the seeds it planted would bud a new plant in the same earth. And on and on, over and over again.

The problem was that changes existed in the world.

A different color or form in the new plant was not so harmful, but sometimes, more destructive plants would mutate out of nowhere. And if that destroyer plant spread beyond its parent's boundaries, it could destroy neighboring plants, too.

The creators of the underworld sentries, the residents of Heaven, feared this. That the new Ouroboros in this world could evolve to endanger them.

The residents of Heaven had no intention of indiscriminately destroying worlds. They didn't know all the workings of the universe, either. They didn't know what effect it would have on their world if another disappeared, because the balance between worlds was maintained as if by a miracle.

So they sent these so-called sentries to neighboring worlds. To seal the Ouroboros and end the world only in case a medium's irregular wish warped the world under the dragon's power.

In a way, the underworld sentries were like viruses sent from Heaven to destroy the world.

Suria held no doubts regarding her role. She was only a cog in the system. She questioned nothing.

Not until *she* had rebelled against fate.

"But I don't understand, Suria Almiron. Setting the Deserver aside, is there really any value in using that defective individual? Shouldn't we nameless angels be enough to seal the Ouroboros?" the old man asked accusatorily.

Only three of them were in the room. Four of the seven seats were empty. Suria looked down at the tablet in her arms and shook her head coldly.

"I've lost comms with our brethren, Afu, Shemihaza, and Armeno."

"What…?"

"They were pursuing Elimiel. They must've broken the barrier, encountered the Ouroboros, and been defeated."

"Elimiel… The traitor." The Black man groaned.

The old man scowled, too.

"We've lost over half of the seven archangels overseeing this world. The Ouroboros is not to be made light of."

“Can your toy destroy the Ouroboros?” the old man asked with exasperation.

Suria denied it right away. “Impossible. To destroy the Ouroboros, one needs the power to destroy the world itself. Which is why we sentries are meant to seal the Ouroboros, remember?”

“Yes, but…”

“Its role is the same. The Lazarus Eater is only a tool to seal the Ouroboros. Once the Ouroboros is sealed, the world will lose the dragon medium’s blessing.”

The men nodded gravely in response to Suria’s apathetic explanation.

“And without the blessing, the world will perish, and thus the Ouroboros, too. What a long road it has been.”

“But the Heavenly made the right decision. After a near-eternal loop, this world at last created that defective Ouroboros.”

“Yes. We will seal the Ouroboros and destroy this world that puts Heaven in danger. That is the underworld sentries’ purpose.”

Suria responded to her brethren without hesitation. Then, she murmured silently, with hatred in her eyes: “You will not get in the way, fallen angel—Elimiel.”

6

“Open, Talaria.”

The young man with the white hair and Yahiro Narusawa’s face whispered while carrying Ayaho in his arms.

Then she felt a jolt, as if she’d been thrown off a building.

After opening her tightly closed eyes again, Ayaho found herself inside a building still under construction, steel frames exposed.

Shigure Shindou had jumped over one hundred meters in an instant with his Regalia.

“Kuh!” He fell to his knees, short of breath.

“Shigure?!” Ayaho screamed.

His face suddenly turned pale. He lacked any color, like a corpse.

“Don’t worry… It’s just a lack of dragon factor. But this can heal

me…," he said as he reached for the sword on his back.

Ayaho knew that sword. It was the Relict Regalia of the Lazarus under the thunder dragon Tristitia's blessing—Tooru Natazuka.

The katana held a great volume of dragon factor within it, but was that enough, without the blessing of a dragon medium?

"You just need dragon factor?" Ayaho placed her right hand on his neck.

There was no reason she chose the neck, other than thinking that touching his skin directly would be most effective. And indeed, that was the right choice. Vitality came back to Shigure's eyes as the mark on Ayaho's right wrist glowed.

"Wow. So this is the power of a real Relict Regalia." Shigure looked up at her with a breath of wonder.

"Oh, no, it's not like it's my power…" Ayaho looked away immediately.

The proximity and the warm sensation on her hand made her terribly conscious of him.

"Thanks. I'm okay now." Shigure stood up.

Ayaho then remembered she was in an incomplete building probably fourteen or fifteen stories high. The footing was unstable and the wind was strong.

Shigure noticed she was getting dizzy and reached out to support her. Ayaho clung to his arm without timidity.

"We should move quick. Suria knows my Regalia can't take us too far. Kyuos will come after us as soon as they know you're gone."

"O-okay…!"

Shigure held her hand while they nervously went down the open metal stairs.

She had lost her bag when they kidnapped her and, with it, lost any way to contact Galerie Berith, but she wasn't worried. Paola said the Galerie monitored her at all times. They should know her location already if that was true, and they would send someone over as soon as they noticed she had escaped.

"The train…isn't running at this time, I guess. Hopefully we can get a taxi. Ah… I've got no money… But if we go to Ginza maybe they'll give me an advance on my wage," Ayaho pondered seriously

ten minutes later, once they were on the ground.

They could only go so far walking, but Ayaho couldn't think of any method of transport that didn't require money she didn't have.

"We'll worry about money later."

"Huh?"

"Someone's after us."

"Did Kyuos already find us?"

"No… This isn't Kyuos." Shigure unsheathed the straight sword from his back and stood in front of Ayaho to guard her.

He glared at the alleyway between buildings. A shadow oozed from the cracks—a giant, colorful monster.

"Moujuu?!"

"No. These are angels."

"Angels…?" Ayaho blinked in confusion.

The monster had wings, yes, but that was the only angel-like element. Its appearance roused instinctive disgust. There was no better word for it than *monster*.

"Suria said it's a lowest-tier angel, attracted by dragon factor and only here to devour it. Nameless minions, essentially."

"How does Suria know that?"

"Because she's controlling them."

"What…?!"

"Down!"

Ayaho ducked in a panic at Shigure's call.

The colorful monster's claws tore through the air above her. Shigure intercepted it with the katana. His space-controlling Regalia extended beyond his bodily reach to dig deeply into the monster's torso.

"That's one down!" Shigure grunted, spurring himself onward.

He swung the sword without rest. A second angel screeched overhead. Shigure teleported the blade to strike it.

"There's no end to them… They want to deplete my dragon factor?"

Shigure scowled as he defeated the third and fourth angels in a row. The angels' attacks were not fierce. Suria had no intention of harming them. Her aim was to send waves of angels to wear him

down. Without dragon factor, the Lazarus would fall into a death slumber, and catching Ayaho would be easy.

"Shigure, please, step back."

"Ayaho?!"

He frowned at the sight of her running toward the angel.

Vanagloria's Regalia had the power to control the earth. She could raise the ground at will and manipulate the minerals in it to create an infinite amount of metallic crystal blades. Her reach was wide, but it was not meant for aggressive attack. Its forte was defense, a skill perfect for the mature and reserved girl.

Suria's angels underestimated her because of that. They didn't see her as a threat to airborne enemies. And they weren't entirely wrong. Ayaho would have been helpless if this were a clear, flat land.

This was the city of Tokyo, however. And a district full of skyscrapers in the middle of construction, at that. Exposed steel frames were all around them—the perfect resource for her powers.

The angels began to hurry when they noticed, but by then Ayaho had already used her Regalia. The high-rise building's steel frames transformed into blades of metallic crystal and pierced the flying angels from the side. The blades, enveloped in dragon aura, easily slashed and killed the bullet-immune angels.

"We should have some time now! Let's run!" Ayaho turned to Shigure and shouted.

Ayaho figured that, by vanquishing all the summoned angels at the same time, there would be a pause in Suria's attacks.

Shigure was dumbstruck for a moment before nodding back.

Ayaho was reserved, but not helpless. She had survived the Moujuu-ridden Japan right after the J-nocide. She was no worse than the average mercenary in cleverness and decisiveness. It had taken until just then for Shigure to realize this.

The two of them ran side by side before arriving at a wide intersection. Many of the buildings in this office area were still under construction, and there was little traffic at night.

A roar broke the nocturne silence. The noise of rotating blades and exhaust of a turbo-shaft engine in the air. A military helicopter descended in the middle of the street. Shigure clicked his tongue

loudly. The mere action showed this was no civilian machine. It had to be Kyuos's operators. Ayaho stopped him before he could raise his sword.

"Wait, Shigure! That's not our enemy!"

"…Huh?" He frowned.

There was a striking logo on the side of the chopper. The emblem of a crown, a horse, and a devil. This was not Kyuos's emblem—it belonged to a different private military company.

"Galerie Berith…" Shigure lowered his katana.

The hatch opened as the chopper descended, revealing its passengers. Shigure bit his lip, at a loss for words at the sight of the black-haired man in his late teens holding a Japanese sword.

His face was identical to Shigure's.

Act 4 Apocalypse

1

Galerie Berith's helicopter landed in the middle of the intersection.

Iroha jumped out of the vehicle and ran toward Ayaho without so much as glancing at anything else. She practically tackled her with a hug.

"Ayaho!"

"Iroha…?!"

"Ayaho! Thank goodness you're all right! Thank goodness…! You're not hurt? You're so tall now! And so pretty. You look good in that uniform!"

Iroha rubbed her cheek against Ayaho's, caressed her head, and jostled her all over with all kinds of physical signs of affection. Ayaho would have clawed her already if she were a cat.

"I-Iroha… Please… Calm down."

"Hee-hee-hee…"

Iroha recovered her sanity once satisfied with her contact with Ayaho, then looked at the boy next to her with puzzlement.

"Umm, and who is this? He looks kinda like Yahiro, don't you think? No… More like, he's *just* like him! What?! Are they twins?!" Iroha looked Shigure over.

He looked similar enough to warrant the reaction. Yahiro looked a bit younger, but that had to be because his aging had reset after he became the world dragon. They would look even more similar if they were the same physical age.

"Iroha, stay away from him! You, too, Ayaho!"

"Y-Yahiro?"

Yahiro held a katana in a wooden sheath. Not the Kuyou Masakane he had lost in his fight against Sui Narusawa, but still a

fine sword the Galerie had acquired for him.

Zen had also armed himself with a replacement for his Western sword.

Both of them were on high alert, recognizing the dragon aura that enveloped Shigure.

"You're the Lazarus who kidnapped Ayaho?" Yahiro asked, ready to activate his Regalia at any moment.

Ayaho panicked at Yahiro's hostility. She got between him and Shigure, spreading her arms.

"W-wait! Please wait!"

"Ayaho?"

"Shigure isn't a bad person! He helped me escape!"

"But didn't he abduct you to begin with?" Zen remarked.

Ayaho grunted. "Yes, but there's been a misunderstanding…"

"What misunderstanding?"

"Shigure thought I was a hostage… Right?" She looked at him.

Yahiro and Zen looked at each other in confusion. They suspected he had threatened or fooled her.

"I get it. So they told you you were being kept so we could hog the Ouroboros's power?" Giuli joined the conversation now that Yahiro and Zen's animosity had abated.

Rosé got off the helicopter and agreed with her twin sister. "I suppose we can't deny that."

"Could you please deny it, even if it's a lie?" Yahiro sighed while relaxing his grip on the hilt.

He didn't trust Shigure, but he admitted there was no reason for this strange Lazarus to harm Ayaho.

"It's true that the kids are under the Galerie's guard, but that is mainly so other groups won't use them for wrongdoing," Rosé explained calmly.

Shigure relaxed upon hearing that. "So it's true. Ayaho told me about that."

"Good thing the misunderstanding is cleared up. So who are you? Why do you look just like Yahiro?" Giuli smiled amicably.

Shigure was taken aback by the direct, blunt question.

"Do we really look that similar?" Yahiro asked Iroha in a low

voice, his brow furrowed. He just couldn't see it.

"Yup, you're spitting images of each other. But I think that guy looks a little better. He looks so upright."

Yahiro pursed his lips at her candid response.

Shigure had a conflicted look on his face, too.

Nobody could possibly feel comfortable seeing someone with their own face. Much less so when it was a Lazarus. Even without hostility between them, they had no idea how to address each other.

"Wait." Zen spoke to Shigure instead of Yahiro, who was still awkwardly quiet.

He looked carefully at the sword Shigure carried on his back, in addition to the long straight katana in his hand. The sheathed sword was old and an austere Western-style.

"Is that my Gram?"

"Gram? This sword is yours?"

"Kyuos's operators stole it from me at the airport." Zen scowled.

Even with the misunderstanding of Ayaho's kidnapping cleared up, Shigure was still suspected of aiding in the theft of the sword. It was only natural that Zen would become aggressive after seeing him with it.

Shigure just handed it over.

"I see. Okay, you can have it back."

"Seriously?"

"My employer gave it to me. I have no reason to keep it."

"I see."

Zen gathered he wasn't lying and accepted it. He walked toward Shigure, guard still up. Yahiro followed him.

Then, someone pulled Yahiro back. He turned around and saw a short girl in a nun's vestment. Her eyes were emotionless as she stared at Shigure while holding Yahiro still.

"Ellie?"

"Wait. You mustn't get near him. Not yet."

"…Yet?"

Before he could ask for an explanation, a scream interrupted them.

"Zen?!" It was Sumika.

He followed her gaze and found Zen kneeling. He had fallen the moment he tried to reach for the sword.

"What… What did you do…?" Zen looked up at him with a glare.

Shigure was equally confused. "Wait, I didn't do anythi—" He shook his head hard, still holding out the sword.

His white hair waved furiously like he had been hit by a strong wind, and a strange pattern emerged on his cheeks and neck.

A rainbow sheen like a film on the surface of water. The same peculiar look of the nameless angels.

"Uw…ah…AAAHHH!" He clutched his head.

"Shigure?!" Ayaho reflexively reached out to him.

Then she lost all the strength in her knees. Sudden weariness left her unable to move or even stand. Something flowed from her body through the Relict Regalia on her right hand.

"Zen!" Sumika took a panicked step toward him.

"Stay away, Sumika!" her husband yelled.

A strong wind blew around Shigure like a tornado surrounded by a stagnant glow and heat.

The dragon factor was sucked out of Zen and Ayaho and flowed into the middle of the whirlwind, then into Shigure's body. He screamed in pain, unable to take the flood.

"Shigure… What's happening?!"

"He's draining our dragon factor?!"

Ayaho and Zen growled in distress, looking up at him. Shigure crouched in agony, his body creaking. Giant, colorful wings spread on his back, tearing through his jacket. Not angel wings—twisted dragon wings.

"Ellie, what is that?! What is happening?!" Yahiro turned toward her.

Yahiro had no idea what was happening to this other alleged Lazarus. Only Ellie could explain this phenomenon. Only the underworld sentry knew anything about the angels. Yet she would not talk. She kept her hands clasped together as if in prayer, a detached smile on her face.

"I see how it is…," Rosé whispered.

She held her gun but hesitated to attack Shigure. There was no

guarantee a simple bullet could stop him, and no one could predict how he would react to an attack.

"The reason they stole Zen Sagara's sword was to make sure he would eventually meet this Lazarus," Rosé coldly surmised.

"So the same goes for Ayaho. She was bait to lure Yahiro and Iroha out of the barrier. They played us like a fiddle." Giuli shrugged.

Ayaho's kidnapping had been a surefire way to get Yahiro and Iroha out of their isolated island in the unknown south. Galerie Berith couldn't hide it from them, because if anything happened to Ayaho without her knowledge, Iroha would be furious.

The plan was exceedingly simple, and yet the Galerie had not seen through it. The reason being that Ayaho had a Relict Regalia—she had value on her own. Her being mere bait was not immediately obvious.

"Their goal was to gather the surviving Lazarus? But why?"

"The answer is what we're seeing right now," Giuli remarked.

"To steal their dragon factor…!" Yahiro gritted his teeth.

Shigure absorbed the surrounding dragon factor uncontrollably. It couldn't be his own will. He had to be only a pawn. Someone had plotted this whole situation.

"Ayaho!"

"Don't, Iroha."

Giuli held Iroha back before she could jump recklessly into the dragon factor whirlpool. Giuli resisted Iroha's best efforts with a firm grip on her wrists. Iroha was desperate to help her sister.

Suddenly, Iroha stopped, her eyes wide in shock. Her gaze was set on the cramped expanse of night sky peeking through the buildings.

"Yahiro!"

"…!"

He noticed, too, once he heard Iroha's warning. A shadowy flock flew overhead. Colorful winged monsters.

"Angels?! Worst possible time for them to show up!" Yahiro glared daggers at the monsters.

It was also the most obvious timing for their appearance, if Shigure's rampage was part of the underworld sentries' plan. They

would make it difficult to rescue Ayaho.

"Get out of the way!" Yahiro unsheathed his sword and swung at the angels' claws as they rained down on him.

He unleashed the Ouroboros's power, ready to burn every enemy in sight to ash, but the world saw no change. The angels were unharmed.

"The Regalia's not working?!"

Burning pain ran across Yahiro's right shoulder. An angel's claws dug deep into his flesh, dyeing his clothes red.

"Yahiro!" Iroha ran up to him, pale in the face.

The injury would have killed any normal person, but Yahiro was a Lazarus. Such an injury couldn't take him down—or rather, it shouldn't have. He couldn't stand back up.

The Lazarus's monstrous regenerative ability wasn't kicking in. Not only did the Regalia not work, but he had also lost his immortality.

"Yahiro?! Why?! Why aren't you healing?! Yahiro!" Iroha wailed in a frenzy.

He was immobile. Warmth left his body along with the blood, and his vision went dark. Yahiro lost consciousness under the sneering of the angels in the sky.

2

Zen watched flabbergasted as Yahiro bled out.

He was the Ouroboros and had the power to change the world to his will. As a fellow Lazarus, Zen understood the extent of his power. And yet the young man remained wounded on the ground, like a regular helpless human. It was an unthinkable situation.

"Narusawa… What's wrong?! What in the world is happening…?!" Zen forced himself up, fighting the lethargy corroding his body.

Shigure's rampage stopped as though in response to the angels' entrance. Zen recovered a bit of strength as the suction of his dragon factor let up.

About ten angels swirled in the sky. A few of them descended

toward Sumika and the girls. Zen grabbed his weapon—the antique Western sword—and reclaimed his partner from Shigure.

"Icefall!"

The air liquefied and turned into ice spears that barraged the angels.

"Zen?!"

"Are you okay, Sumika?!"

"I'm fine! But Yahiro…!"

"I got it!"

Zen held her protectively and used his Regalia again. But the dragon factor hadn't recovered enough, and he couldn't control it well. He missed two angels, and they flew toward the injured Yahiro and Iroha, who was guarding him.

"Iroha…!" Sumika yelped.

Zen scowled as he saw he wouldn't be able to use his Regalia again fast enough. But the moment the angels had nearly reached Yahiro and Iroha, they made a hard turn toward the ground.

A silver shadow flew up into the air and struck the angels down as it flew past. Their heads were cut off, their lives ended before they could so much as scream.

"You…"

Iroha's savior was the girl in the nun's habit that Yahiro had called *Ellie*. Giant silver wings grew from her back, and her hands had changed into the claws of a bird of prey. The angels flew away before Ellie's glare. She was so obviously superior to the colorful, nameless creatures.

"Ellie…" Iroha looked up at her with pleading eyes, holding a bloodstained Yahiro.

Ellie did not respond. Her emotionless blue eyes stayed up on the night sky. Newcomers appeared in the air to replace the runaway angels. Three people with beautiful features and pearly wings. Beings much closer to the more common image of an angel than the previous monsters.

"Suria…," Ayaho groaned, looking up at the woman in the sky while Giuli helped her up.

"Whoa." Giuli raised an eyebrow and looked at her. "You know

her? This peculiar character descending from the sky?”

“I heard she was a consultant for PMC Kyuos. And Shigure’s employer.”

“Huh… The mastermind behind your kidnapping, then…and of this whole ordeal.” Giuli licked her lips hawkishly.

“I see. So those are underworld sentries.” Rosé let out a cold breath.

“Wait, why’re you so calm about this?! Aren’t those angels?! We’re looking at freaking angels right now!” Sumika shouted in confusion.

Platinum-winged angels descending from the night sky—how else could this be described but as divine? The sight of them instilled fear in one’s core. Ayaho and Zen were equally uneasy. However, Rosé remained unmoved.

“There are dragons in this world. What’s so odd about a few angels?” she retorted apathetically.

“I…guess!” Sumika sighed; she couldn’t beat Rosé in an argument.

Rosé had a point. This was the underworld—hell. The Bible said that angels fought dragons and exiled them to hell. Indeed, angels and dragons were fated to be enemies.

“Wait! But then that means Ellie is with the angels?!” Sumika yelled, looking back at Ellie, whose wings were still spread.

An unexpected person replied to that. If she could be called a person to begin with, since she was one of the underworld sentries who had descended from the sky. The woman in solemn white robes.

“With us? No, you’ve got that wrong.” Suria glared with contempt and hatred at Ellie. “Elimiel betrayed us underworld sentries. She is an abominable fallen angel.”

“A fallen…angel?” Zen muttered.

Taking the words at face value would mean Ellie had rebelled against the duties given to her from Heaven. She was an enemy to Suria. And thus she was an ally to humanity.

However, they couldn’t celebrate just yet. Ellie was clearly outnumbered, and the underworld sentries had already activated

their trap card with Shigure.

"It's been a long time, Suria." Ellie returned Suria's glare with a sad look on her face.

"You impudent turncoat. We know you abandoned your job and are protecting the Ouroboros. We lost three of our brethren because of you."

"That's because you're trying to bring unnecessary tragedy into this world," Ellie argued back with a calm voice.

"Tragedy? Perhaps from the humans' point of view. But we're only doing our job as sentries." Suria spoke haughtily. "The irregular dragon medium distorted this world from its proper form. An endless underworld must not exist."

"Because who knows how the people of the underworld will evolve? And they might endanger Heaven?"

"Yes."

"I don't understand. What's the problem?" Ellie asked.

Suria's cheek twitched like she had been punched. The question was more hard-hitting than any fist.

"What did you just say…?"

"Heaven exiled us underworld sentries. No, we don't even know Heaven. Why do we need to destroy this world for their sake?"

"Elimiel… You…" Fear surfaced in Suria's eyes.

The two sentries behind her were restless. Ellie's remark shook the core of their existence.

"If we destroy the underworld, we disappear as well. Why should we sacrifice ourselves for Heaven? We can live in this world. I would rather this world develop, even if it means Heaven perishes instead."

"That is an unforgivable thought for an underworld sentry."

"Elimiel, you are broken."

The two male sentries condemned her.

"Yes, Elimiel. You're broken. That's why we call you a fallen angel." Suria's voice shook with anger.

Zen felt something was off about their aggressive argument.

Ellie's position was only logical, from a human point of view. Yet the loyal underworld sentries could not accept it, and Ellie realized this. Still, she kept trying to convince them. Ellie was not speaking to

Suria. She was trying to say something to the humans there.

"Oh, I see."

"Now I understand the deal with the underworld sentries."

Galerie Berith's twins interjected with grins on their faces—a look of pity for the sentries.

"What can specters expelled to the underworld understand?" Suria looked down at them with indignation.

Rosé coldly responded, "The denizens of Heaven aren't so different from us."

"What?"

"Call it Heaven, but that's just a name they gave it themselves. I imagine there's an equivalent of an Ouroboros there maintaining their world."

"Yup, that's why they're afraid that another world will develop, further from theirs. They're scared that their world will be attacked. So narrow-minded for a so-called Heaven, isn't it? Or are they just that cowardly?" Giuli shook her head dramatically and sighed.

"Silence!" The sentries' voices shook with anger.

Zen understood why they were so restless. Heaven was afraid of an external attack—that naturally meant their world could be invaded. Ellie was trying to explain that to everyone present.

"No, they're right," Ellie said with satisfaction, her hands clasped together in prayer. "Heaven is but one of many worlds in this universe. It is not a special place."

"…Perhaps that could be," Suria said, her voice low. "Maybe completing the underworld sentries' mission is meaningless."

"Suria?!"

"Will you turn your back on Heaven, too?!"

The two male sentries glared at her in disbelief.

"No, no." Suria shook her head with a smirk, the first time she showed a human smile. "Elimiel, even if you're right, it's meaningless. The Ouroboros has already been sealed. Yahiro Narusawa will die, and the underworld will perish. This fate cannot be undone. We've won."

3

Yahiro's body was cold on Iroha's lap.

Only the fresh blood flowing from his injuries had warmth. The Lazarus's supernatural regenerative power did not kick in. Yahiro was just a human on the verge of death. With such heavy bleeding, he wouldn't last five more minutes.

"Wait…" Iroha raised her head, still holding him to her chest.

She had heard something she couldn't ignore during the underworld sentries' conversation.

"What do you mean, you 'sealed the Ouroboros's? I'm the dragon medium and I'm perfectly fine!" She spoke with unconcealed anger.

The loss of the Lazarus's power and the sealing of the Ouroboros had to be linked. Yahiro's dying state was part of Suria's plan.

Suria received the anger calmly.

"An organization of this world called Ganzheit had the technology to artificially create humans. And that came from us underworld sentries," she said with her artificially monotonous voice.

Iroha was perplexed. The image of Sui Narusawa crossed her mind. Shigure's unpigmented hair was like hers.

"Shigure Shindou was created from the same technology. We used a nameless angel's body as resource, as well as the cells of the Lazarus Yahiro Narusawa…"

"Yahiro's cells…?!"

"Yahiro Narusawa was injured countless times in past battles. Obtaining the samples was not so difficult," Suria explained.

If the underworld sentries' goal was to monitor the Ouroboros, it was logical that they would use Ganzheit, who had similar aims. The organization must have been influenced by the sentries for centuries. And they had obtained Yahiro's cells through this connection.

"Even with Lazarus cells, a lack of dragon factor would mean death. But this also means that keeping him alive was simple; he simply needed dragon factor."

"So that's why you went after the Relict Regalia…" Rosé snorted, impressed.

Shigure Shindou's body used Yahiro's cells. It would reach the end of its life without the dragon factor; it was an imperfect immortal body. Shigure needed a constant supply of dragon factor through the Relict Regalia to maintain his imperfect immortality.

"Shigure…is a Lazarus made from Yahiro's cells…" Ayaho frowned in despair.

Beside Suria, Ayaho had the deepest link with Shigure. She'd realized that Shigure and Yahiro had to have some sort of connection, but she hadn't thought he could be a copy. The shock was considerable.

Shigure stayed on the ground after his rampage, groaning weakly. The three underworld sentries had descended and surrounded him. As though he was a sacrifice for the angels. Suria glared coldly at Shigure where he lay at her feet before she looked at Iroha.

"Yes. Shigure Shindou's and Yahiro Narusawa's biological data are one and the same. They both have the right to receive Avaritia's blessing. Which means that Shigure Shindou can become the Ouroboros."

"Wait, that doesn't make any sense! They're different people! That doesn't change just because they came from the same cells!" Iroha argued fervently.

Even with the same cellular makeup, they had individual wills and experiences—they were not the same.

"Indeed, so long as Yahiro Narusawa is the Ouroboros, Shigure Shindou cannot become it." Suria plainly agreed with her argument, but the look on her face was cruel. "The solution is simple: Shigure Shindou must steal the right from Yahiro Narusawa."

"Steal?! How—?!"

"Ah, I get it." Giuli cut Iroha off.

"What do you get?!" Iroha glared at her, still holding Yahiro's cold body close.

"Yahiro has been injured time and time again. He's sometimes lost one or two limbs… Even had half his body blown off," Rosé replied instead.

Iroha grimaced. Yahiro was injured at this very moment, nearly

dying.

"I mean, yeah…"

"But even when ripped apart, Yahiro did not regenerate into two people."

"It'd be scary as hell if he did!"

"But who or what decides which parts of Yahiro's body are restored and which parts decay?"

"Huh…?" Iroha was baffled by Rosé's question.

Now that she pointed it out, Iroha agreed that was strange. The Lazarus could revive from even one remaining cell—but where was their soul then?

"That's it… The dragon factor…," Zen muttered.

Iroha blinked in confusion. "The dragon factor?"

"Yes, that must be it. The cell with the biggest volume of dragon factor becomes the core to regenerate from."

"That's, um, a pretty sloppy call, don't you think?"

Rosé nodded to Iroha's confused remark. "And the underworld sentries took advantage of it."

"What?"

"Shigure Shindou's body is part of Yahiro's body. Which means, if Shigure's dragon factor went above Yahiro's, even for a moment, he becomes the main one. Isn't that right, underworld sentry?" Rosé asked Suria.

Suria's expression barely changed, but her lips twisted up ever so slightly in derision.

"Vanagloria's Relict Regalia in Ayaho Sashou's possession, Lazarus Zen Sagara's Gram, and the Kotofutsu-no-Mitama… With the great volume of dragon factor he absorbed from them, Shigure Shindou's reserves surpassed Yahiro Narusawa's. As a result, Iroha Mamana… Your blessings switched over to Shigure Shindou."

"You changed my *bias* without me realizing?!"

"*Bias*?" Suria furrowed her brow.

Iroha wasn't expecting a retort from her.

"Then Yahiro…"

"He is but a helpless human. And he doesn't seem to have much time left."

“No…” Iroha teared up as she held Yahiro’s unconscious body tight.

He was so close to her, yet her blessing wouldn’t reach him. His dragon medium was powerless to help him escape death. The fact devastated her. Gave her a sense of despair she hadn’t felt since meeting him.

The Ouroboros’s medium had the power to change the world, yet Iroha couldn’t save the person she loved right before her eyes.

“What will happen to Shigure?” Ayaho forced herself to ask while looking at the depressed Iroha.

Suria’s response was short. “Nothing.”

“Huh…?”

“We will do nothing more. There is no need. Shigure Shindou is the Lazarus Eater… He was born only to seal the Ouroboros’s power,” Suria told her with pity. “His body is not only Yahiro Narusawa’s copy but a nameless angel’s as well. As a servant of the underworld sentries, he cannot oppose our orders. We will take him and seal him. And that will be the end.”

“The… end…,” Iroha mumbled in stupefaction while Ayaho was at a loss for words.

Suria smiled with satisfaction. The underworld sentry had no reason to tell them everything, and yet she did. Not out of kindness, but to please herself. She was finally free from the centuries-long, perhaps millennia-long, duty. She was high on that sense of freedom.

“Sealing the Ouroboros means the underworld will lose his blessing. In other words, it will be as though the world dragon’s life has reached its end.”

“And…the world will end…?”

“Correct.”

Suria responded to Iroha’s weak question with a smile of victory. Then she looked at the traitorous fallen angel.

“You lost, Elimiel. Your efforts to protect Yahiro Narusawa ended in vain. We have completed our job.”

“…No, Suria Almiron. It was not in vain.”

The habit-clad fallen angel chuckled lowly. She narrowed her eyes

in euphoria and stared back at Suria, who appeared confused.

"You are a brilliant underworld sentry. You doubted not the Heavenly and kept loyal to your programming. And because of that, your actions were predictable."

"What are you getting at, Elimiel?"

"I knew." Ellie looked at all three sentries. "The moment Yahiro Narusawa became an irregular Ouroboros, I knew you would try to seal him. So I prepared the Lazarus Eater as a tool. Ah, but if I hadn't 'fallen,' you would not have used it. Because you hated me. You didn't trust me."

Iroha stared in bafflement as Ellie giggled.

She looked nothing like the scared and insecure girl Iroha knew. Her voice was as soft as always, but spite seeped through her words.

"But once I fell, you could use the Lazarus Eater without reserve. I knew that would be the surest way." Ellie pointed her sobered gaze at Shigure, between the three underworld sentries. Then she whispered. A strange word Iroha and the rest couldn't understand. Like a spell, a keyword to boot something up. "Yes. I wanted you to use the Lazarus Eater. Thank you, Suria Almiron. Now *my* wish will come true!"

Ellie's grin was broad, showing her white teeth. Immediately, something changed in Shigure's body. His eyes opened wide, and flames engulfed him.

Scorching fire like lava covered his whole body like armor. A crimson armor reminiscent of dragon scales. Iroha knew this—it was the Goreclad Yahiro used.

"Shigure Shindou?! What's going on?!"

"Suria Almiron. Loyal and foolish sentry. You did not realize that I, the fallen angel, cast a spell on the Lazarus Eater."

"A spell?" Suria looked at Ellie with fear.

Even Suria, a fellow underworld sentry, could not understand what she meant. Ellie covered her grin with both hands, like a child whose prank had succeeded.

"When harvesting the Lazarus's cells, I planted a little trap. What one in this world would call a virus, or a Trojan horse."

Iroha and the rest watched in bewilderment as Shigure's body transformed. His body grew larger and larger, into the shape of a monster. The same thing Yahiro had once gone through—draconization.

The young man created from the body of a nameless angel and the cells of the Lazarus was being sacrificed to summon a crimson dragon.

"The Lazarus Eater is not a tool meant to seal the Ouroboros. In fact, quite the opposite. It's a sacrifice to materialize the world dragon." Ellie's smile widened further.

The moment she discovered Yahiro Narusawa was an irregular Ouroboros, she had put a little spell into the Lazarus Eater created from Yahiro's cells, then became a fallen angel and left the underworld sentries so they would not notice.





The underworld sentries had found the island Yahiro and Iroha lived on because Ellie had gone there first. And Suria, without realizing Ellie's plot, got Shigure to inherit the Ouroboros's power. As a result, Ellie was about to obtain a dreadful weapon: the materialized world dragon.

"The red dragon…of Revelation… You would try to summon such a thing, Elimiel?!"

"With the power of the Ouroboros who created a new world, it should be possible to cross the wall between dimensions and attack Heaven. There is no way for Heaven to escape unscathed from the collision."

Ellie spread her silver wings. She flew up into the sky to the draconized Shigure's side.

"Fallen angel Elimiel!"

"You mean to destroy Heaven?!"

Her brethren flew to stop her, but it was reckless. The crimson dragon stood in the two underworld sentries' way.

"Elimiel… You took control of the Lazarus Eater…?!"

"Yes. To begin with, the nameless angel used for Shigure Shindou's body was my familiar." Ellie's chuckle did not reach them, for the crimson dragon's scorching ray burned them to ash. "It's the underworld sentries' job to destroy the underworld, right? I am only loyally following my duty. It just so happens that Heaven will fall in the process, too."

The silver-winged angel flew right next to the giant dragon. It was the majestic sight of the apocalypse.

"Now then, it is time for revenge. Let's have the Heavenly ones who have forsaken us pay for their sins," Ellie sang, as if in a choir.

Iroha and everyone else could only look up in astonishment.

4

"Hey! You girls, what're we supposed to do now?!" Sumika shouted at the twins.

The crimson dragon under Ellie's control was already over twenty

meters long and still growing. The Ouroboros, who should not exist outside the Afterlife, was taking form in the physical world.

"Iroha, can you stop the dragon factor supply to Shigure Shindou?" Rosé asked with her usual flat tone.

Iroha shook her head weakly. "I've never done so consciously. Besides, it's not just my wish Yahiro's granting…"

"Right, that's how he obtained the world dragon's power irregularly…" Rosé let out a heavy sigh.

A regular Ouroboros granted only the dragon medium's wish. Yet Iroha had let go of this right and asked everyone in the world to maintain it—it was the whole world's will that supported Yahiro as the Ouroboros. Shigure Shindou must have inherited that eccentric dynamic.

Even if Iroha cut off her supply of dragon factor, the Ouroboros would not disappear. Just as the Ouroboros protected this world, this world supported the Ouroboros's existence.

"But we can't stand here and do nothing, can we?"

"No. If Ellie invades Heaven like she wants to, this world will be left behind without its Ouroboros and die. The best way to prevent it would be for Yahiro to get his power back, but…" Rosé cut herself off as she looked down at Yahiro in Iroha's arms.

The situation was worse than it had been when they fought Sui Narusawa. They had so little power and so little time. Not even the Japanese government would be able to do anything in time if they found out about what was happening.

"Listen, Suria Almiron. How about we join forces for a little?"

"Huh?" She blinked in confusion, moving her vacant gaze from the dragon down to Giuli.

"You don't want the Ouroboros to attack Heaven, do you? Won't you help us do something about the Lazarus Eater?" Giuli wore a bold smile.

Suria gave her a look of suspicion. She was the ringleader of the underworld sentries who had tried to destroy this world. It was unbelievable that they would want to join forces with her. Yet, even knowing what she had done, Giuli had suggested it. She had gauged the pros, and they outweighed the cons.

"…What would you have me do?"

"We'll get the Ouroboros's attention while you take Ellie down. I don't feel good about asking you to kill one of yours, either, but we can't really fight an angel in the sky."

"Elimiel is not an angel. She's not one of mine. She's my enemy," Suria corrected her.

Giuli smiled like she had predicted that reaction. "So I take it you agree to my request?"

"Take it how you will. I'll bring Elimiel down," Suria asserted before looking up at Ellie on the dragon's back.

She could not face her head-on now that Ellie had the Ouroboros in her control. She would suffer the same fate as her colleagues. She was to look for a brief opening while Galerie Berith fought the Ouroboros. It was her only chance. And the humans' only choice, as they lacked the means to defeat the world dragon.

"You heard it, Zen Sagara. Sumika. We're counting on you," Giuli said.

"I know. It's the Lazarus's job to fight dragons," Zen responded solemnly.

"Yup. We've got no choice." Sumika nodded while holding her belly.

Killing a dragon was the Lazarus's job, the Dragon Slayer's job. And now that Yahiro was down, Zen was the only Lazarus in the world. He could not run away, and he knew it. It was his burden to bear.

"Ayaho, you protect Iroha and Yahiro. But don't be reckless. You may be a Relict Deserver, but don't think you can actually fight the Ouroboros," Rosé said.

"Y-yes…," Ayaho agreed wryly.

Yahiro was dying and couldn't be moved. Naturally, Iroha had no intention of leaving him. Only Ayaho and her Relict Regalia could protect them. The responsibility weighed on her. Iroha looked up at her, then hung her head dejectedly.

"I'm sorry, Ayaho… It's my fault… I'm sorry…"

"Iroha…" Alarmed, Ayaho kneeled next to her.

Iroha looked as if she were Ayaho's age. The sight of her once-

reliable sister, now so weak, shocked her.

It wasn't Iroha's fault that Shigure had stolen Yahiro's blessing and become the Ouroboros, and yet she felt responsible for it. Her decisions, as the world dragon's medium, affected the fate of the world. She had fulfilled this duty with Yahiro this whole time.

Ayaho hugged her tight.

"You did nothing wrong. If you're to blame yourself, even I… I helped Shigure and got him here…"

Iroha had come to Japan to rescue Ayaho. And Ayaho's supply of the dragon factor helped Shigure become the Ouroboros. Ayaho was unable to handle the guilt, and tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Ayaho…" Iroha began crying, too.

The sisters wailed in each other's embrace while Yahiro remained unconscious, as though he were dead.

5

Scorching flames dyed the sky over the ruins in red.

The city was deserted. The high-rise buildings collapsed. The streets cracked and caved. The rain was red with rust. It was the image of the summer when the country of Japan had perished.

A terribly familiar sight.

"You're…still alive, my dear brother. Although it doesn't seem like you'll survive this time."

A girl with pure-white hair stared at Yahiro amid the fog and red rain.

A strange sensation struck him at the sight of her red eyes. He felt as sad and calm as when looking at a faded photograph. He couldn't believe that the day would come when he would feel that way while looking at her.

"Sui." He called her name with a wry smile.

Her beautiful face twisted into a frown. An expression most characteristic of her.

“Why are you smiling? You’re creeping me out.”

“I didn’t think I would see you again.”

“Not like you wanted to see me.”

“That’s not true. You’re my sister.”

The girl shrugged in reaction to his sincerity. The frown on her face was gone.

“A silly thing to say while the world is ending.”

“Yeah.” Yahiro nodded in response to her dismissive comment.

He knew he was dying.

He’d lost the power of the Lazarus and was gravely injured. Even if he recovered consciousness, he would be unable to move and could only wait for death.

Still, he thought, *I have to go back. Because she’s crying.*

Yahiro hadn’t changed a bit. He was helpless without the power of the Lazarus. He was the same powerless boy who had watched Japan collapse that summer.

And yet he had vowed to protect Sui. Because the only thing that could save him from the despair of that city in ruins without exit was her smile.

“Where are you going?” Sui asked as he turned his back on her.

“I can’t let him go on like this,” he said without hesitation.

Even if he was a powerless boy, he had to go back. Her smile wouldn’t return unless he defeated that red dragon.

“I don’t think you can do anything now.”

“Even so, I have to try. I sacrificed you to protect that world.”

That world was no Eden. It was a cruel world full of war and conflict. And yet many people had been sacrificed to release it from its doom. Sui among them.

She shook her head in disbelief.

“I don’t believe myself a sacrifice. You saved me.”

“Sui?”

Yahiro watched with confusion as she pouted like a kid.

“Did you realize, Brother? Our feelings remain here even now, because she wished for the world to continue.” She snorted. “Tell her that I hate her, and that if she keeps being this pathetic, I’ll return to take my brother back.”

The small, white-haired girl embraced him.

In that moment, Yahiro felt very clearly the warmth of a girl who should no longer be there.

Then…

"Su…i…!"

"Huh?!"

The first thing Yahiro saw as he opened his eyes were Iroha's breasts filling his whole field of view.

Iroha's and Ayaho's eyes were red and swollen. They looked dumbstruck by his sudden awakening. Iroha stared at him with her jaw dropped for a while before frowning. She violently pinched his cheek and raised him up on her lap.

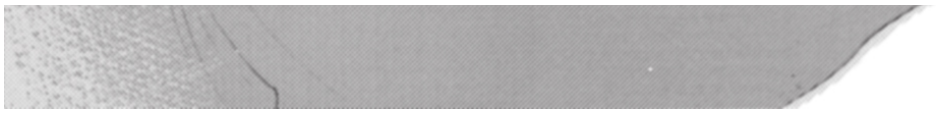
"What does that mean?! You're calling Sui's name in your sleep?! You're cheating on me?!"

"Iroha, don't do that right now…!" Ayaho shook her hands, asking her to stop.

Yahiro had been dying until just now. She shouldn't be picking on him for talking in his sleep. But then her jaw dropped again as he stood up like nothing had happened.

"Yahiro, your wounds…!"





"Yeah, looks like I couldn't die this time, either."

The deep gouge on his red shoulder emitted steam as it quickly closed. He would recover most of his blood in a time.

His Lazarus powers had returned.

"How…?! Your Ouroboros powers aren't back, are they…?" Iroha's eyes were wide.

Avaritia's blessing for him hadn't returned. As his dragon medium, she knew that well. Yet Yahiro smiled boldly in silence. He didn't think they could understand if he explained. And didn't find it necessary. What mattered was that he was able to fight again. He had the power of the Dragon Slayer again.

"We'll talk later. First, we gotta save the world."

He picked the unsheathed sword up from the ground and looked at the giant crimson dragon. Then he whispered to himself: "It's time for revenge."

6

Minus two hundred degrees Celsius—frigid liquid nitrogen rained down on the dragon's scarlet body.

Acedia's power under Zen's control froze the water in its body instantly, and the expansion burst its cells. No creature could endure this, not even a materialized dragon. Yet the scarlet Ouroboros stood unfazed in the liquid nitrogen rain. It was too big for Zen's power to keep up, and its healing power was faster than the destruction of its cells.

Even so, the rain annoyed it. The materialized world dragon turned to Zen intermittently to attack, like swatting a fly. Its scorching rays melted the asphalt and vaporized the buildings. The searing gust seared Zen's flesh, and the fiery smoke robbed him of his sight.

"This is absurd…"

Zen burned with desperation as he dodged the Ouroboros's attacks, bolting back and forth through vapor explosions. He was getting its attention, and the others received less damage in return,

but that was all he could do. He couldn't hope to deal any significant damage, much less take it down. The only one who could be defeated was himself, and that possibility grew more likely by the second.

One thing in particular was more anxiety-inducing than anything: the Ouroboros was still growing. The crimson dragon was already over double the size it had been when it emerged. The number of horns on its head and wings on its back had grown as well. And the fuel for its growth was the environment itself.

The surrounding space was corrupted like blocky artifacts in a video game as the dragon devoured it. The buildings, trees, asphalt roads, and traffic signs turned into vivid, colorful noise as they became part of the Ouroboros. One could say it was the natural conclusion. This world itself was but an illusion created by the Ouroboros—it had been part of the world dragon from the very beginning.

Zen was going up against the world itself. He had no hope of victory.

"That doesn't mean I'm going to give up…!" Zen ground his teeth and jumped off an ice block and up to the sky.

His power could not defeat the Ouroboros—but the same didn't go for the fallen angel controlling it. At the very least, the world dragon's invasion into Heaven could be stopped if Ellie was defeated. They could buy time to deal with the Ouroboros if only he took her down.

Zen hid in the mist of his powers and the smoke of the dragon to approach her. But Ellie saw through his trick.

"—?!"

As he exited the mist, his sight was blocked by the Ouroboros's giant tail. Ellie knew the exact time he would strike and made the dragon swing back.

"Gu…oh…!"

Zen immediately tried to dodge with a vapor blast, but the Ouroboros was too gigantic for him to evade the attack entirely. The countless protrusions on its tail caught him and slammed him into the nearest building's wall.

He broke too many bones and burst too many organs to count. The injuries were too grave even for the Lazarus's power to heal immediately. And while he was defenseless, the dragon opened its giant maw, preparing to vaporize him with a heat ray.

"Tsk…!"

Could the Lazarus revive from being destroyed down to the last cell? There was no precedent for it, and he didn't want to be the first to test it. But he was immobilized and unable to block the Ouroboros's breath.

"Sumi…ka…!" The smile of the woman he loved crossed his mind.

A thunder accompanied the scorching ray as it blocked his sight and engulfed him—but the instant before he was burned, the ray was flicked away, as though it had hit an invisible wall.

The flaming reflux struck the world dragon, the same fire it had shot blowing it away.

"What…?" Zen shook his head slightly, unable to comprehend what had happened.

An invisible wall that could reflect even the Ouroboros's flames—he knew about such power. But its user was gone. The contradiction shocked him.

"Superbia's Chibiki-no-Iwa…?!"

Zen's arms finally regenerated, and he pushed the rubble away to stand up.

A silhouette watched him from above the broken wall. A young man holding a Japanese sword. His jacket was torn apart at the shoulder, but the skin peeking from it was unharmed.

"Kept you waiting, huh, Sagara?"

"Narusawa?! You recovered your Lazarus powers? But why do you have Superbia's…?"

"Who knows. I sure don't. I never understood her." The boy who had nearly died upon losing his powers scratched his head with a smile on his face, relaxed as though all the weight on his shoulders had been lifted. "But I don't care why, so long as I can take that thing down."

He glared at the Ouroboros in the middle of the block. The crimson dragon kept devouring its surroundings and growing. Yahiro

reached his right hand toward it and clenched his fist as though clasping something.

"Open, Ploutonion!"

Immediately, the ground at the Ouroboros's feet was enshrouded in pitch black. The still-water-like entrance to the seemingly bottomless pit.

The dragon's giant body sank into the deep, deep nether. On the other side of the hole to the Afterlife lay the battlefield for the decisive match against the world dragon.

7

A giant hole opened without warning at the scarlet dragon's feet.

The Ouroboros fell into the hollow as though pushed by an invisible force. The fallen angel in a nun's vestment observed in astonishment from the air between buildings.

"The Ploutonion… How can Superbia's power be here…?!"

The entrance to the underworld whence the Moujuu emerged and destroyed Japan: this was Sui Narusawa's power, and should not be in use now that she had perished.

"No… I see, Yahiro was a double Lazarus… He had Superbia's blessing as well… Of course. Ha-ha," Ellie muttered to herself, seriously impressed.

Yahiro had Iroha Mamana's blessing, but at the same time, the earth dragon medium, Sui Narusawa, had given him the Lazarus grace. Naturally, he had the right to use Superbia's power.

Put simply: now that Shigure Shindou had stolen Avaritia's blessing, Yahiro had awoken to Superbia's power. This turn of events was unexpected, but he was never a regular Lazarus to begin with. One or two more irregularities were nothing to worry about.

"The result will be the same. My Lazarus Eater *is* yourself—there is no way you can defeat it. You're only making things harder for both of us." Ellie giggled to herself.

The Lazarus's power was too brittle to stand against the Ouroboros devouring the world. Acedia's Zen Sagara had proven so

himself. Yahiro's new power could not prove to be an obstacle to her revenge.

That said, it was inconvenient for her to be separated from the Ouroboros. Should she follow it into the Ploutonion?

A silver glow crossed the edges of her vision as the thought took her attention away for a moment.

"Elimieeel!"

The glow came from an underworld sentry's wings. Suria Almiron's talons slashed toward Ellie's head from a blind spot.

"Hey, Suria." Ellie looked up at her, eyes wide with surprise.

They had equal flying capabilities, both being underworld sentries. Ellie was unable to dodge at this point.

Suria had been counting on that, but something unexpected prevented it.

"What?! A nameless…angel…?"

A monster like a bird of prey, glowing in the colors of the rainbow, blocked the attack.

All of her familiars were supposed to have been lost in the fight against the Lazarus. Suria's claws pierced the nameless angel, and it vanished with a screech.

The jig was up. More nameless angels appeared from the gaps between the buildings and surrounded Suria. Ellie had not fallen for her trick. Suria had fallen for Ellie's.

"Of course. They told you to go after me while they took the Ouroboros away. It's such a foolishly simple plan. Not what I'd expect from you. So they're ordering you around now?" Ellie smiled.

Suria frowned with desperation and ire, but Ellie's smile was strong, overwhelming—victorious.

"Not that the plan itself was bad, though. But like I told you, you're too predictable. The humans can't fly, so it's obvious that you would come after me. You had no choice but to go after me, since you cannot stop the Ouroboros."

"Elimiel…!"

Suria struggled desperately to fly closer. They weren't even ten meters apart. But the six nameless angels Ellie had saved blocked her path.

As much as Suria tried, she was outnumbered. Right as she took down the third angel, another's claws got her wings. There could be no fight, then. The angels ganged up on her as she was immobilized. Suria protected herself fiercely, but her whole body was in tatters soon enough.

Ellie transformed her hand into claws and drew in to deal the killing blow. A show of mercy for her former brethren.

"Good-bye, Suria. May your soul rest in peace in the underworld."

Ellie raised her right hand with shameless words of prayer.

Suddenly, a glow appeared on the rooftop of a faraway building.

"—?!"

A bullet pierced through one of the nameless angels and struck Ellie's shoulder.

Her divinely protected body shed blood. It was a shot from a sniper rifle. With unbelievable accuracy and power.

"What… An artificial Relict bullet?! But who…?!" Ellie looked in the direction of the shot, her face twisted in agony.

Nearly one kilometer away was a small Asian woman. Ellie's supernatural eyesight let her recognize the bangs dyed blue.

"Rosetta Berith…!"

The sniper fired again before Ellie could collect herself. The nameless angels surrounding Suria were shot and evaporated one after the other. Normal weaponry could not harm them, but these were artificial Relict bullets. They could kill even underworld sentries.

"But you can't snipe me if I'm out of your sight…!"

Ellie used the last angel as a shield to fly into the shadows of a building, and then pain shook her whole body.

Thin, almost invisible wires were laid out across the buildings like spiderwebs.

"You thought you'd be safe up here because we can't fly?"

"Giulietta Berith?!"

Giuli stood in midair, on the wires.

Only then did Ellie realize her chest was pierced, by the katana Giuli had stabbed her with as she flew by. It was an old Japanese sword, like an antique taken from a museum. But dazzling dragon aura oozed from its blade.

“This can’t be… Nothing indicated that you were Relict Deservers…” Ellie groaned, looking at the Relict Regalia in Giuli’s hands.

“You lost for one reason, fallen angel: You underestimated humanity’s malice.” Giuli smiled with pity at the sentry caught in the wires.

A wry smile escaped her in response to Giuli’s spite.

“Unbelievable… Suria was the bait all along… Looks like I can’t beat humans in deception, after all.”

A clump of blood came out of her mouth. Her silver wings lost their glow and burned away.

“Do your best… I think that you, with all your war and sin, will be able to take revenge on those pieces of shit up in Heaven one day… That’ll be all… I wanted…”

Ellie clasped her hands to her chest and closed her eyes forever.

“Maybe one day,” Giuli whispered lowly, as if in prayer.

8

Pitch-black darkness like still water covered the ground.

The Ploutonion. The entrance to the pits of the nether realm that Yahiro had opened and sealed the crimson dragon in.

Iroha stood at the edge of the hole, peering into it.

“Hold up! Iroha, are you seriously gonna go in there?!” Sumika grabbed her shoulders and pulled her back, her face twisted in desperation, as she thought Iroha would jump the moment she let go. “That’s the Ploutonion! Remember?! Even if Yahiro opened this one, you…”

“Iroha, I don’t think you should, either,” Ayaho added shyly, her voice sounding like she had given up; she knew no one could change her sister’s mind.

“I know. But I gotta go! I feel like I gotta go!”

“How are you even gonna get all the way down?”

“Uhh… I…” Iroha pursed her lips as she looked down into the bottomless pit.

The walls of the Ploutonion were not perfectly vertical. Rocks protruded from the sides to use as footholds. She could jump from rock to rock to descend, the same way Yahiro and Zen had.

However, she lacked the Lazarus's superhuman physical capabilities. Iroha and Sumika were dragon mediums, but their bodies were identical to normal people's. Iroha bit her lip like a sulky child and groaned.

A diesel engine rumbled and brakes screeched behind her. A dark-green machine stopped right next to the Ploutonion: Galerie Berith's wheeled armored vehicle.

"Geez, we're fighting flashy monsters one moment, then dragons the next. Give a guy a break!"

A blond white man emerged from the rear hatch. Iroha raised her head at the nostalgic sound of his voice.

"Josh!"

"Long time no see, Iroha. Good to see you're doing fine."

"What're you doing here?! Weren't you in Mexico?!"

"The kid just wouldn't stop insisting that she had to take the little guy to you." Josh turned around and lazily pointed his chin ahead. A small girl around ten years old slipped down from the vehicle.

"Runa?!"

Runa Senou stood without expression. She only blinked at the sound of her name. In her arms she carried a white furry Moujuu.

9

The dragon's gigantic body lit the darkness in fiery red.

The Ouroboros grew by eating its surroundings, yet its power was not flowing now. It writhed in pain from hunger.

The Ploutonion was the entrance to the Afterlife—an anomalous space that nulled the dragon's power to eat the world.

"I get it. The Ploutonion can stop its growth," Zen said.

"Exactly. And there's no need to worry about damaging the city here," Yahiro replied while sliding down the wall of the Ploutonion.

The Ouroboros was about thirty meters long now. More than

twice the size it had been when it appeared. Its presence was intimidating even from afar. But at the very least, it wouldn't grow any bigger. The Ouroboros could no longer obtain the power it needed to leave this world and invade Heaven.

Now they only had to disassemble this dragon and pull Shigure Shindou out of it to put an end to this. The question was: How?

"So what now? We could be fighting forever here if it can heal like a Lazarus," Yahiro said.

"Yeah. If anything, we'd be at a disadvantage then," Zen agreed, then gave him a look of suspicion. "But don't tell me you didn't have a plan."

"Oh… No, I do. We can't defeat the Ouroboros—if he's the real Ouroboros."

"What?!" Zen scowled.

Then they jumped away from each other.

A scorching ray seared the place where they had been standing. The Ouroboros had attacked.

"Narusawa!"

Zen managed to escape the fire by accelerating with a vapor blast. Yahiro could do the same with an explosion from Avaritia's power, but he lacked her blessing at the moment. He had no way to escape the attack—so worried Zen, until he spotted Yahiro up high in the sky.

Yahiro stood midair and thrust his right hand toward the Ouroboros, launching a cannonball of high-pressure air. The invisible bullet pushed through the heat and struck the crimson dragon's body. The thirty-meter giant staggered.

"What was that Regalia?! Ira's power?!" Zen asked as he ran up to Yahiro's landing spot.

Douji Yamase used the wind dragon's power in the past, and now Yahiro did something similar. Even though he didn't have the blessing of Ira's medium.

"I told you. We can't defeat him. Not just with our powers." Yahiro's lips curved into a bold grin as a new Regalia kicked in.

The ground at the Ouroboros's feet turned a poisonous purple color—miasma. It immediately tried to run away, but metallic crystal

blades shot up to nail him to the ground.

"Luxuria's marshification and Vanagloria's crystallization…!" Zen gasped.

He finally realized. It was not Yahiro himself who was using the various dragons' Regalia. He merely borrowed their bodies. It was the residual essence of the former mediums in this world attacking the Ouroboros. The wills of the world itself.

"Lazarus Eater… Shigure Shindou, I still can't believe that you are a part of me, but I feel for you…"

Tristitia's power, lightning strike, rained on the crimson dragon and gouged its body.

Yahiro sighed, looking up at the gigantic creature with pity.

"The underworld sentries were wrong. They were close, but no cigar. Iroha's blessing… Avaritia's power is only part of what constitutes the world dragon. Although neither of us truly realized that."

"What do you mean?" Zen furrowed his brow.

"The Ouroboros is only an administrator, temporarily in charge of all the dragons' powers," Yahiro replied nonchalantly.

Once, the Berith twins had said that the dragons were the world itself. The eight dragons symbolized the Eight Trigrams—the eight elements that constituted the world. The Ouroboros, as the creator of the new world, must rule over all eight of them.

"All the dragons' powers…? Even my Acedia's?"

"Hey, aren't you right here, helping us out?"

"…I see. So all eight dragons recognized you and Iroha Mamana," Zen said, trying to make sense of it.

There was no need to steal the entirety of the eight dragons' powers. They only had to be recognized as worthy of borrowing them. As agents of the dragons' wills. That was the Ouroboros.

"Yeah, but Shigure's different. He can't become the Ouroboros just by taking Avaritia's blessing from me."

"Shigure Shindou stole only the fire dragon's power… That's not the world dragon—that's a manifestation of Avaritia." Zen nodded in understanding.

In fact, draconized Shigure Shindou could only use flames—

Avaritia's power. He wasn't refusing to use the Ouroboros's power. He *couldn't* use them.

"Knowing that, how do we defeat him? Even this fake Ouroboros is a formidable enough foe," Zen replied while dodging the crimson dragon's desperate flames.

The dragon had to be worn out from Yahiro's attacks, but it was far from being lethally injured. It kept going strong even as its scales and wings grew tattered.

"Honestly, I hadn't considered that." Yahiro looked away.

"What?!" Zen's jaw dropped.

Behind them, a giant beast landed thunderously. From the walls of the Ploutonion jumped down a ten-meter-long, pure-white Moujuu. Three girls rode on its back. The face of one of them was paralyzed in fear, the other one was expressionless, and the third, at the front, wore a victorious grin.

"Heh-heh-heh. Looks like you're hopeless without me, Yahiro. As I expected."

"Iroha?! Nuemaru…?!"

"You, too, Sumika…?"

Yahiro raised his eyebrows, and Zen clutched his head as Iroha jumped off the Moujuu's back. Sumika held on to Runa for dear life.

"Do not fear anymore! Your hero is here!" Iroha declared as she ran up to Yahiro.

"What're you gonna do, Hero?"

"Heh. Curious, huh? You're just dying to hear what your goddess of victory has cooked up, huh?"

"…Get on with it already…" Yahiro groaned at her usual incomprehensible confidence.

He could not deny that her positivity had saved him multiple times before, though.

"Sumika, what are you doing?!" Zen reproached her.

"I didn't want to be left out… And, like, what if I could never see you again?" Sumika mumbled.

Zen frowned awkwardly before wrapping his arm around her.

"Then don't leave my side for a second!"

"Roger that!"

The crimson dragon's flames rained on them. Zen blocked the attack up front, with Sumika still in his arms. Frigid spears of liquid nitrogen slashed through the fire and barraged onto the dragon. It wailed in pain as the spears pierced all over its body.

Zen's Regalia grew more powerful, thanks to the dragon factor supply he was receiving from Acedia's medium right next to him. He smiled boldly when he realized this. He finally saw a way to take the fake Ouroboros down.

"Yahiro! We gotta shave down his dragon factor!" Iroha urged him.

"I know…!"

Yahiro activated the multiple Regalia.

Lightning strikes burned the dragon's wings, and air tore its scales. With every loss of a piece of its body, the dragon factor inside it melted away into the Afterlife's air. The once-thirty-meter-long dragon shrunk to half that size. Its ribs showed through its skinny body, and dragon-factor-infused blood spurted from his countless injuries.

The pseudo-Ouroboros opened its gigantic maw and roared at the sky. Then a violent gust enveloped its body. The dragon factor scattered in the air whirled on its way back to its body.

"That tornado… That's the Lazarus Eater's power!"

Lethargy hit Yahiro's body as his dragon factor was drained.

No matter how much they depleted their enemy, so long as it had this power, Shigure Shindou would easily recover his dragon factor. This was the true predicament of the power created by the underworld sentry to seal the Ouroboros.

But suddenly, the lethargy eased. Wind kept whirling around the fake Ouroboros, but it did not reach them. It was all absorbed by the pure-white disk on top of its head.

It was a hole in the middle of the air. A hollow fissure opposite to the Ploutonion. They had never seen this power before. And the one controlling it was the small girl on the back of the white Moujuu.

"Runa?!"

""The space-control Regalia… Gula's power!"" Iroha shouted in sync with Yahiro.

Runa looked at them from Nuemaru's back and nodded. Runa had never interfered in a battle before, and now she helped them. Yahiro and Iroha looked at each other. They smiled at the realization. So many different powers supported them. They couldn't possibly lose to this pretend Ouroboros.

"So, got any more tricks up your sleeve?" Yahiro asked Iroha.

Iroha's cheeks turned red, and she looked away.

"Erm… Avaritia's blessing went over to him because he had more dragon factor than you, right?"

"Yeah. That's the Lazarus Eater's power, if I understand correctly."

"But he's pretty depleted now, so if we can get you boosted, maybe you'll get the blessing back."

"…I get the logic, but how? There's no Relict Regalia we can use around here." Yahiro cocked his head.

He didn't have the Kuyou Masakane. And he couldn't believe a different Relict Regalia would fall into their hands so conveniently.

His dragon medium was right next to him, but there was no sign of his dragon factor invigorating. Shigure still had Avaritia's blessing. Iroha nodded firmly, her resolve unwavering.

"It's okay. Just look at me."

"Wha—?!"

Iroha's hands wrapped around Yahiro's head, and she planted her lips on his.

Yahiro's mind went blank, and time around them came to a halt.

It was an awkward kiss, like it was their first one.

"S-so…? I think I sent you a whole lot…of, y'know…love…?" Iroha said, beet red, after a long kiss.

Iroha tried to step back in embarrassment, but Yahiro pulled her close.

"Yes. I can tell. Give me one more."

"Whoa… Yahiro?! Wait, they're watching! Ayaho and Runa are watchi—!"

Yahiro shut her up with a kiss.

Despite what she'd said, she didn't resist. All sound vanished from the world, and light filled Yahiro's vision.

Scorching flames ran through his whole body. He felt as though

he was hugging the entire world. He could tell Avaritia's blessing and the Ouroboros power had come back to him. No—it had always been with him.

"Yahiro!"

"Yeah…!"

Flames manifested in Yahiro's hand in the shape of a sword. His trusty katana that had been lost to the Afterlife. The Kuyou Masakane.

Yahiro held it up high toward the giant crimson dragon.

"The Lazarus Eater?" The dragon shot a blazing ray at him, but it broke into flames that he absorbed into his hand. He devoured the phony world dragon's Regalia. "Ha. You're late to the party, buddy. I'm the Ouroboros… The self-eating dragon."

He took not only the Regalia. The crimson dragon's body itself turned into light particles that were absorbed by the whirl of flames around Yahiro. Its wounded wings, cracked scales, twisted claws and fangs—everything that comprised the Ouroboros disassembled.

The only thing remaining was a misshapen monster with the body of a dragon and the wings of a nameless angel.

Yahiro swung down his sword toward the pitiful Lazarus who looked identical to him.

"Burn to ash… Blaze."

The flames of purification engulfed the pitch-black world. Amid the fire, the young man with Yahiro's face smiled peacefully, as though he had finally found salvation.

Epilogue

The flames bursting from the Ploutonion dyed the night sky of Tokyo red.

Suria Almiron took in the view with a blank expression where she lay collapsed on the hard asphalt. Her body was in shambles from the battle against Ellie. Her pure-white robe was stained with blood and mud, and she lacked the strength to even materialize her wings.

If left to her own devices, she would die from blood loss and hypothermia in only a matter of time. The underworld sentries had tougher bodies than regular people, but they weren't equipped with the supernatural healing power of the Lazarus.

"Looks like Yahiro got the power of the Ouroboros back," a voice came from overhead.

She looked in its direction and met the friendly and smiling gaze of Giulietta Berith.

Giuli had an old katana, a Relict Regalia, in hand. A weapon capable of killing underworld sentries. Yet Suria felt no fear at the sight of it. She was resigned. Giuli should kill her already. Her job was over. She had no more reason or way to defy death.

"Yahiro Narusawa defeated the Lazarus Eater… But how…? No, it doesn't matter to me anymore." Suria sighed self-deprecatingly while watching the glow of the fire in the sky. "I wouldn't have thought the sentries could be wiped out, even with Elimiel's betrayal. And without most of its executive team, Kyuos will disappear, too. Funny how things turn out." Suria sneered internally.

The sentries had overseen the underworld for an unfathomably long time, and they perished in a matter of days. Only because they finally took action to complete their one job.

"Do you regret going after Yahiro?" Giuli asked, looking down at Suria.

There was no malice in her voice. Just pure curiosity.

"I do not. I have no regrets regarding anything."

"How come?"

Suria thought for a moment.

"Because what she said was probably true. Heaven isn't necessarily a special place. It is just another of the innumerable worlds like yours. They sent us simply because they were scared."

"They thought they would be destroyed one day, and so they tried to destroy the other first."

"…Ridiculous, isn't it? It's no different from what the foolish humans do. The Heavenly themselves proved that they are nothing special." Now Suria chuckled.

Yes, the Heavenly were foolish. Which in return meant their creations, the sentries, were foolish, too. Just the same as the people of this world they so looked down upon.

"Won't you kill me, Giulietta Berith?"

"Do you want me to?" Giuli replied.

"The underworld sentries will be gone if I die. There will be no one left to destroy this world."

"Unless humanity wishes for its own destruction."

"Indeed. But it is not our problem," Suria said coldly. The first time she had spoken her own true thoughts.

Suria had no responsibility for this world. But she could sit back and watch its fate. She had become free when she abandoned the job the Heavenly ones gave her.

"Suria Almiron, would you like to help Ganzheit?" Giuli asked.

Suria frowned. "Ganzheit? I thought it'd been dismantled."

"The extremist faction trying to use the power of the dragons to make their own world, yes." Giuli grinned.

The leader of the extremists had been her adoptive father, Eusebius Berith. And it was the Galerie's Japanese branch who had put an end to them.

"Ganzheit is an academic organization now, simply monitoring to prepare in case the Ouroboros goes berserk. Not that there's anything we could really do in that case, though."

"…You want Ganzheit to use the underworld sentries'

technology?”

“Same you’ve been doing since forever, right?”

Suria pursed her lips at Giuli’s remark. The underworld sentries had used Ganzheit multiple times in the past to monitor the dragons. They gave them technology beyond modern capability to try to manipulate them.

“I think it’s a pretty apt role for an underworld sentry, don’t you think?”

“Very well. You’ve made me want to see a bit more of this world,” Suria accepted.

Deep within her, she understood that their deal resembled that of the angel who fell to the snake’s temptation.

“And if this world eventually destroys Heaven like Elimiel predicted, then that in itself would be an interesting sight to behold.”

†

“What was Shigure Shindou like?”

Iroha’s brother, Ren, came up to Yahiro with a worried look on his face, wanting to talk.

He was fourteen now. He was as reserved and polite as always, but his sensibility contrasted interestingly with what one would expect from a teenage boy.

“I’m not sure what to say. We only spoke a little bit in the end.” Yahiro looked up at the cabin’s ceiling.

After firing the purifying flames and burning down the crimson dragon, they found Shigure Shindou back in his human form among the ashes. The Lazarus was fatally injured, yet still alive.

He asked why they didn’t kill him, and Yahiro answered that they had no reason to.

Shigure was born as Yahiro’s clone, but he was his own person with his own will. He was like Yahiro’s twin brother, separated at birth.

It was irritating seeing someone else with his face, but not to the

point he would want to kill him. He thought that Shigure should go find his own happiness somewhere.

Runa gave him her blessing. Normally, Gula's medium did not bless any specific Lazarus, but her job was done the moment Yahiro became the Ouroboros. There was no further need for her to remain neutral. She decided it would be no problem to simply provide Shigure with dragon factor. He would have died without Runa's blessing, and she said that Ayaho would be saddened if that happened.

"Ren's worried that Shigure will steal Ayaho from him."

"Hey, Rinka!" Ren panicked.

"Ayaho?" Yahiro finally understood after seeing the boy's bashful reaction.

Ren was infatuated with his adoptive older sister and was anxious about the guy she'd met. Worried that he would take her away.

"Ahh… Well, apparently Shigure Shindou saved her, so…" Yahiro beat around the bush.

"He saved her…?" Ren's shoulders slumped.

Yahiro was dismayed. He wasn't good at handling this sort of thing. He had no idea what Ayaho thought of Shigure.

"Still, they only knew each other for just a couple days, so surely they're not in love with each other, right? Maybe they'll send each other letters, but who knows."

"I'm not so sure. He looked just like you, right?" Rinka said impishly.

Yahiro asked back in confusion, "Wait, why does that matter?"

"Haaah…" Rinka shook her head dramatically.

Ren sighed, too.

"And this is why Yahiro belongs with Iroha."

"Yeah. Hopefully Shigure is just as dense."

"Hey, what do you mean by that?" Yahiro pouted, feeling like they were saying he was just as airheaded as Iroha.

Yahiro didn't think of himself as sharp when it came to other people's romantic feelings, but at the very least, he was sure he was sharper than Iroha. Yet the kids didn't seem to agree.

"But hey, he's also pretty dense himself, don't you think, Rinka?"

Yahiro whispered to her before they left, making sure Ren wouldn't hear him.

"Sh-shut up! Don't mind me! And don't you dare say anything!" Rinka blushed and punched him in the side.

Yahiro writhed for a while as a result of the surprising force of her fist.

†

Yahiro exited the log cabin wearing a T-shirt and narrowed his eyes in the bright sunlight.

Before him lay the peaceful sight of the coast of a nameless island. But the view was different from that in his memory.

The facilities and fields the underworld sentries had destroyed were once again in good shape, thanks to Galerie Berith's repairmen. But that was not the only thing they had built. New structures lined the cape surrounding the beach. Thatch-roofed bungalows on the water, connected by wooden bridges.

It looked like a premium beach resort.

"Yahiro, are you done with the job I gave you?"

Rosé lounged on a deckchair on the beach, in a swimsuit.

Next to her was Giuli, sipping a tropical drink.

They wore tiny bikinis that accentuated their well-toned bodies. Men would've been flocking around them if this were a real tourist spot.

Yahiro only rolled his eyes at them.

"Your silly job? What the hell is this thing?" Yahiro shook the papers in his hand.

The twins had arrived at the island the day before, saying they would take a vacation. Iroha's siblings had also come to spend their summer break. That much was fine, but the problem was this thick bunch of papers.

"Didn't you read it? The development plan for the island?" Rosé furrowed her brow as she pushed up her sunglasses.

"Wasn't this island supposed to isolate us from the world?"

"Developing it doesn't mean that you would no longer be isolated. It would only be eight thousand people coming every year."

"You're making it a tourist resort!" Yahiro yelled at the sky.

They were trying to turn it into Tahiti or the Maldives. A luxury resort primarily for honeymoons. It was Galerie Berith's new business plan.

Yahiro and Iroha would still live on the island. As the resort's managers.

Basically, the Beriths were asking them to stop being a couple of bums and work for the Galerie. The proposed salary wasn't bad, but the working conditions were horrible. They must think some overwork was no harm when he couldn't die anyway.

"We've reconsidered after what happened. We thought you would attract less attention as members of society rather than hiding behind a barrier," Rosé said with a serious, convincing tone; she was a good negotiator.

"I know that, but why a resort?"

"We already bought the island, so hey, why not get something out of it?" Giuli explained.

"*That's* why?" Yahiro's shoulders slumped.

"Look, you realize how much of our yearly earnings go into maintaining this island? Moving a submarine around isn't free."

"I know that. And I'm grateful for it."

"And if we target honeymooners, there shouldn't be any repeat customers. That way we don't have to worry about anyone suspecting you of not aging."

"I guess…" Yahiro couldn't argue.

Yahiro and Iroha didn't age after becoming part of the Ouroboros. Their lives would only end with the end of the world.

Giuli, Rosé, and the siblings would one day die and leave them behind. It would be dangerous for Yahiro and Iroha to be cut off from society when that eventually happened. Rather than isolating, it was better for them to be involved with other humans, even if it required a slight risk.

Hearing that, Yahiro was unable to argue further.

“It was also Iroha’s request,” Rosé said.

“Iroha’s?”

“She’s excited to plan wedding ceremonies.”

“I see…” Yahiro smiled awkwardly as he pictured it.

She was conscientious, liked entertaining people, and valued family more than anything—of course she would be excited to organize weddings. And knowing her, she would suggest livestreaming them sooner or later.

Yahiro sighed at the thought of all the trouble.

Right then, he heard voices coming from the cape. From the bungalow the siblings were staying at. Iroha pulled them out of the bungalow, dressed in an outfit he hadn’t seen her in.

A stunning pure-white dress. Layers of translucent fabric glowed like jewels under the sunlight. The skirt was short, and a lot of her back and shoulders were exposed. Yet in contrast, a long veil covered her hair.

A wedding dress. Iroha had come out in a wedding gown.

“Look, Yahiro! Look at this dress! The twins brought it as a sample!”

Iroha spun around in front of Yahiro, who was astonished.

It took a moment for him to unpetrify. He remembered how much she loved cosplaying.

“The wedding planner’s not meant to wear it…”

“But I couldn’t miss the chance! So? How do I look? Awesome?”

Iroha demanded compliments, and Yahiro nodded halfheartedly. Then, he drew his lips to her ear and whispered, “You look beautiful.”

“Wha…?” Iroha was paralyzed in shock. She turned red and looked up at him bashfully. “I… Umm. Th-thank you…”

They looked into each other’s eyes as her siblings surrounded them. And around them, Giuli, Rosé, and the Galerie Berith operators who had deployed there for construction.

It felt like a real wedding, Yahiro thought.

Although this world was but an illusion created by the dragon, in this moment, the smiles of the people here were real. This reality would remain no matter how much time passed.

“Yahiro. Stay with me forever, yeah?” Iroha looked up at him with a beautiful smile on her face.

Then they spoke those words—the spell that bound them. The simple wish of a girl. The spell that saved the world. The vow that was still ongoing.

“Yes. I promise.”

“Until death do us part.”





HOLLOW REGALIA

Prequel

Side Story: Ayaho & Iroha

Side Story: Ayaho & Iroha

1

On that day—that summer day four years ago.

A giant dragon appeared in the skies of Tokyo, and blood rained all over the city.

Then the Japanese were wiped out.

†

Iroha proudly announced that she'd made lunch for that day. "Rice balls, egg rolls, pork stew, and braised burdock root. The pork and burdock were canned, though." She giggled, holding her backpack tenderly in her arms.

Her long, light-brown hair glowed under the soft spring sunlight. Iroha was three years older than me: sixteen. She was thin, her face was small, and her eyes were big. She was very pretty.

My impression of her hadn't changed since the day I met her, four years before. Even the red school jacket looked cute when she wore it.

"I could've made it if you had told me." I pouted.

I felt bad about making her do it. She had so much more to do back home, and I only knew how to cook.

"I just felt like it this morning. I figured it would be better to have some food when going out into the city."

"Yes. That's true," I agreed.

Our destination was the former Shinjuku ward. We didn't know it well, and nothing guaranteed that we would find usable food in the convenience stores and supermarkets. Securing the minimum

necessary food and water was important.

"Besides, I'm already making you come with me," Iroha said while grabbing my hand.

Despite being older, she was pampered and wanted physical contact all the time. I didn't mind it, personally.

"So what are we looking for today?"

"Hmm… Clothes?" Iroha replied ambiguously.

"Shouldn't you have brought Rinka instead then?" I wondered out loud.

Rinka was one of our little sisters. She was eleven, but she was our family's fashion guru. She was very particular about everything fashion, and I was clueless about it. Surely she would have been a better choice.

Iroha had a troubled look on her face and was avoiding eye contact.

"I, um, I think she's still too young…"

"What do you mean? Are we…going to look for bras? Don't tell me it's that again…" My gaze dropped to her chest.

Iroha was slim, but her chest was big. Huge. It always had been, but it just kept growing. From an outsider's perspective, she looked pretty, and honestly, I was jealous, but she said that it only made her look fat, and it was hard to find bras that were the right size.

"N-no! I mean, this one's getting a bit tight, but I'm still fine…!" Iroha shook her head while covering her chest with both arms.

I had already accompanied her to look for underwear three months ago. Yes, Rinka was still too young for that.

"Let's hope we find something cute."

"Yeah… Wait, I said no!" Iroha turned red.

I waved off her protests dismissively.

The abandoned roads were all cracked and potholed, and the weeds made it difficult to walk. Still, it felt nice to walk with Iroha along the river under the gentle sun. It had been a while since we had gone out, just the two of us.

We walked in silence for a while, holding hands.

As we were reaching the outer moat, Iroha remembered and said, "Wait, are we going the right way?"

"Huh? You didn't know?" I looked at her aghast.

Iroha smiled bashfully. "I was just…following my gut."

"The one thing someone with a poor sense of direction should never do."

"No, I'm pretty confident in my skills. I figured it'd be fine if we just went west."

I ignored Iroha's excuses while unfolding the map. I checked the nearby ruined building and broken traffic signs to work out where we were.

"We're going the right way. We just have to turn at the intersection. We took a roundabout path, though."

"Sorry, Ayaho. But hey, look. It's so pretty." Iroha sighed in relief before pointing ahead.

Cherry blossom petals were blooming on the trees by the promenade.

"Cherry blossoms."

"Yeah! It's already the season, huh?" Iroha reached for the falling petals.

I stared at her in fascination. She spun around in place and looked at me with an impish smile on her face.

"Hey, let's have lunch?"

"Huh? Already?" I asked, baffled.

It hadn't even been an hour since we left home. We were only halfway to Shinjuku. Iroha insisted, like a child throwing a tantrum, and pulled my sleeve.

"Pleeease. Okay? I want to look at the flowers."

"Well…I guess we can." Caving, I smiled awkwardly.

I wasn't giving in to her demands; I felt like enjoying the flowers, too.

Iroha pumped her fist, then turned around and shouted, "Nuemaru, c'mere! It's lunchtime!"

A giant beast appeared in response to her voice. It was about six or seven meters long to the end of its tail. It looked like something between a wolf, a fox, and a tiger. A monster with white fur—a Moujuu.

Nuemaru summoned thunder with a roar. The other Moujuu that

were hiding in the ruins and looking at us flinched under his intimidation and ran away. Iroha smiled and thanked Nuemaru as he slowly walked up to her. He hunkered down and purred as she petted his forehead.

The Moujuu were man-eating monsters that had appeared out of the blue in this country. We were able to walk around their territory, the 23 Wards, thanks to Nuemaru's protection.

Iroha could talk to Nuemaru, and she treated him like family.

As far as I knew, Iroha was the only Moujuu tamer in this world.

2

On that day—that summer day four years ago.

A giant dragon appeared in the skies of Tokyo, and blood rained all over the city. At the same time, Moujuu appeared all over Japan. They had power like mythical monsters and attacked and devoured people and wrecked the city indiscriminately.

International leaders, political and religious, decided there was only one solution and commanded: Kill the Japanese. Exterminate them. A chain of massacres spread all over the world in the blink of an eye, and armies from every country began their invasion into Japan.

Amid the frenzy, the country of Japan disappeared, and the few Japanese people overseas were persecuted and killed.

We called the event the J-nocide. After it, the Japanese died out. It took only half a year after the massacre began.

†

"Whoa! This place is amazing! I've never seen so much food!" Iroha cheered while holding up the luxurious canned foods meant for gift baskets.

We were in the ruins of a big department store in Shinjuku. We found a mountain of untouched goods in the basement. Basements

of the abandoned buildings tended to be flooded, but since there was a subway tunnel right below this store, the water had gone there instead.

Naturally, all the fresh food was already rotten and unsightly. But the canned and preserved foods were fine. I was as excited as Iroha looking at the rare food we couldn't find in convenience stores or supermarkets.

"We can't take all of this," I said to Iroha, who was gathering an absurd number of cans.

Iroha held her head in shock. "Ahh! I should've brought Tabby. Nuemaru can't carry anything… What should we take? I can't choose!" She crouched down and began picking through the cans carefully with a serious look on her face.

She wouldn't worry that much if it was all just for her, but she was thinking of our siblings back home. There was a total of eight kids, me and Iroha included. The oldest, Iroha, was sixteen, and the youngest, Runa, was only seven. We weren't related by blood, but we worked together to survive. We were the few Japanese survivors, and we were now family.

We were only able to survive the hellish massacre thanks to Iroha. We were attacked by Moujuu and were preparing for death when Nuemaru and Iroha came to our assistance. And ever since, the Moujuu she tamed had protected us from the others. Tabby was one such Moujuu.

Iroha saved around seventy Japanese people. Among them were teachers, nurses, and engineers. They serviced the building that became our home, built solar panels and drinkable water pumps, and gave us the foundations to continue our lives.

Not a year went by before everyone left.

Some of them ran away out of fear of Iroha. Some died in accidents or illness. But more than that ended their own lives. They were all in despair. They couldn't handle the reality of the end of the Japanese people and the desolate ruins they lived in.

In the end, only us eight remained. For that reason, Iroha treasured us. She treated us like family, if not better.

So, in the middle of these dark underground ruins, she carefully

selected the cans to bring back to our siblings.

"Should we just take the cans? Weren't we going to look for bras and stuff?" I reminded her from behind.

Iroha quickly lifted her head. "Clothes! Not bras!"

"Look, there's a guide. The underwear is on…the third floor. And it says they have large sizes."

"I feel like the large sizes they're referring to are a different sort of large."

Iroha pouted as she left the cans behind and stood up.

3

"It's huge…"

I was overwhelmed by the sheer size of the ladies' clothing section.

I didn't expect a lot since it had been abandoned for four years, but most of the floor was in good shape, and almost all the items remained. Luxury brands' clothing, bags, shoes, accessories—it was all so shiny and fancy. It told of the country's bountiful past, when there had been peace. It was as sad as it was exciting.

"I wish we could see it with better lighting." I sighed while staring at a mannequin wearing a summer dress.

The vivid colors of the clothing looked dull in the darkness of the store.

"I did bring the strongest flashlight we had." Iroha raised it above her head with the outdoor LED set to max output.

We could see far away thanks to it, but it was far from the store's original brightness.

"Right… It was swimsuit season…"

Iroha and I shared a glance as we wandered into the seasonal area. The J-nocide had happened in the summer. The store at the time must have been full of people shopping for new swimsuits.

"Wanna try one on?" Iroha asked me, her eyes seeming to sparkle.

I shook my head quickly. "No, no. I don't wear this flashy stuff.

Maybe you can pull it off."

"Really…? I think this one looks great."

"No way, no. I can't swim to begin with."

I wasn't lying. The J-nocide happened when I was nine, and I hadn't been to a pool ever since. Obviously, I hadn't taken swimming classes.

Iroha grabbed the bikini with a regretful look on her face.

"I wanna go to the beach… Let's go once it's summer. And we'll set off fireworks. And have watermelon."

"Can we make it in time for summer if we plant watermelon now?"

"I dunno. I'll look into it. We gotta look for watermelon seeds," Iroha said, always so positive.

The beach trip was already set in stone inside her mind. I didn't hate the beach. I also wanted our younger siblings to get to bathe in the sea. And maybe we could even get some fresh clams. But I didn't want to wear a swimsuit.

Although nobody would have to see me who wasn't family, since there were no more Japanese.

But just the thought of standing next to Iroha in a swimsuit had me so embarrassed I wanted to run away. She was so pretty and had such a nice body. Our little sisters were cute, too, sure to grow up to be beautiful in the future. It was an unfair world.

"The future…," I muttered to myself while looking at the store.

After the J-nocide, the 23 Wards of Tokyo had been put in quarantine and forsaken by all the countries that shared territory in Japan. No criminals would set foot inside a Moujuu-infested area. Which meant we were safe here, under the Moujuu's protection.

We had a garden and pet chickens for eggs. The rest of our provisions we got from canned and preserved food in the ruins. We had no trouble getting by. But I couldn't think the peace would last forever. We had only a few years until the preserved foods expired. We would have to leave the 23 Wards eventually.

I was lost in thought while walking around, and it took me a moment to realize that Iroha had disappeared.

"Iroha?" I stopped and called her name.

The lantern she'd been holding was on a shelf. But she was gone. Was she trying on the swimsuits? But why would she go inside a changing room when it was only the two of us?

"Iroha, where are you?!" My voice trembled.

I was alone in an unknown place. Fear took over. Nuemaru wasn't with us. He was too big to fit into the building, so he had stayed by the entrance. If a Moujuu were to attack, I'd be defenseless.

We could only move around this place that even the armies avoided thanks to Iroha. Without the Moujuu tamer, we were…

"…!"

My toes caught on something.

The clothing on display swayed, and something rolled from under them.

The first thing that caught my eyes was the long hair. A bony arm. Bare teeth. Hollow eye sockets.

I gasped instead of screaming.

Then.

"Ayaho!"

Someone picked me up as I fell. Warmth and a sweet smell.

"Iro…ha…"

She held me up, trying to catch her breath. Just seeing her melted the fear away.

"Sorry I left you alone. I saw this guy coming…"

Iroha looked equally sorry and relieved.

"What guy…?"

I turned around and this time I screamed. Behind Iroha stood a beast taller than me. A Moujuu that looked like a bipedal raccoon.

The monster, enemy of all humanity, followed Iroha like a loyal pet, clinging to her back. She had found it in the building and run over to tame it without me noticing. I had no idea how she could do it. She said she didn't know, either. But in any case, that power of hers had saved me, and nothing else mattered now.

"She's been dead for a long time. It must've been in the J-nocide," Iroha said while crouching down before the skeleton.

It was the remains of a woman wearing the store's clothing. She must've died in the middle of the pandemonium and been left

behind. A Moujuu wasn't responsible. It seemed like she had been crushed by the panicked crowds, but there was no way to be sure now.

It wasn't the first time I had seen a dead body, but I still wasn't used to it. I held back the tears, and Iroha held my shoulder and softly said: "Let's bury her. Help us out, Donburi."

"…Donburi?" I frowned at the odd word.

"It's his name. I named it after the pattern on his tail that looks like a bowl—ramen *donburi*." Iroha pointed at the Moujuu with her chest puffed out proudly.

The raccoon-like monster had a swirl pattern on its tail. I could sort of see the resemblance. But it was a weird name for a Moujuu.

"You're not good at naming things, Iroha." I sighed, all tension gone from my voice now.

"What? No way! It sounds cute!" Iroha's eyes went wide, and her shoulders slumped.

†

We returned to the shop after burying the woman in the garden on the department store's rooftop.

Iroha found what she'd been looking for about an hour later. The spacious, clean shop had a wide selection of shirts, blouses, blazers, and skirts.

"These are…"

"Yup. Uniforms." Iroha smiled at me. "Ayaho, you should be a middle schooler starting this year, right? I wanted you to wear a uniform. You can't go to school anymore, but at least you can experience wearing the uniform."

"Ah…"

I scanned the mannequins by the wall with wonder.

There was no middle school for me to attend in this world without the Japanese people. The day when I became a middle schooler would never come. But I was moved by the sight of the uniforms.

The symbols of past peace and hope for the future.

Pieces of a place I used to admire that I had nearly forgotten. Even in this cruel world, I still lived and continued to grow up. The uniforms here felt like proof of that. It was the best gift Iroha could have given me.

"Well, choose whichever you like." Iroha illuminated the assortment and grabbed uniform after uniform.

They had everything from old-school sailor uniforms to unfashionable blazers, all so charming.

"But should I…?"

"Don't you worry. Middle school is part of compulsory education. You don't need to take a test to enroll."

"I think some privates schools do tests… Ah, this one looks cute."

"There's too many options, huh? Maybe I'll grab a high school uniform for myself," Iroha said while giving the high school corner a yearning look.

It was such an Iroha thing to say. I smiled. "You sure love cosplay."

"Cosplay?! No, I'm still of high school age…!" Iroha protested.

Meanwhile, I grabbed one uniform. A very normal blue sailor uniform. A plain middle school design I found lovely.

"H-how does it look?" I held it up in front of me.

"Amazing! Adorable! You're so cute, my sister!" Iroha hugged me.

I felt like I could accept her overexaggerated compliment now. Because she was my precious family, my only older sister.

"…Thank you, Sis," I said, suppressing my embarrassment.

Then I staggered at the sight of the tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Ayahooo…"

"D-don't cry, Iroha! You can't be moved to tears just from that!"

"But… But I…!"

"Geez, what am I going to do with you…?" I chuckled and patted her back. *It's more motherlike than sisterlike to cry at the sight of your family member wearing a uniform for the first time*, I thought.

This couldn't go on forever. The day when we had to leave these ruins would come. But the time we spent here as family was real.

And until then, we would keep living here.
In this hollow world.

Afterword

A southern island
A slow, calm, and peaceful life,
I want to enjoy—
(a haiku)

Here it is: *Hollow Regalia*, Volume 6.

It's been three years since the world was saved in the last volume. Yahiro and Iroha disappeared into the Ploutonion and obtained the power of the Ouroboros. The story here comes after that, but it is not an extra chapter nor an epilogue; it is a continuation.

But since the world was free from danger for a while, I wanted Yahiro and Iroha to get some rest and peace in a happy paradise. My two ideas were a southern island and the mountains, and after much careful consideration, I chose the island. The reason being that the last volume took place in the mountains of Kyoto. Not because I wanted to write Iroha wearing a swimsuit. Please believe me.

The theme for this volume was, simply, dragons and angels.

I am not very well versed in religion, but the theme of battle between these two is common in paintings and the like, and I find it very interesting. It is only natural that the enemy would be an angel now that the protagonist has the power of a dragon. And I had already considered angels as the ultimate foes since I set this story to take place in the underworld.

To tell the truth, this was sort of background lore, and I didn't think I would really use it. But the series got to continue for longer than I expected, and so this side of the setting got to have its

moment in the spotlight.

I also got to write the lovey-dovey(?), slow lives of Yahiro and Iroha, and show her siblings all grown up, so personally, I'm quite satisfied. It was a good choice to keep the angel battle for later.

Now for a little announcement: The second volume of the manga adaptation of *Hollow Regalia* by Ugatsu Matsuki is now on sale. The serialization in *Dengeki Maoh* is also reaching its climax. Iroha is so expressive in the manga, and she looks cute even when she's being annoying. Please give the manga a look.

All the chapters of my series *Sword of the Stallion* are available for free on the novel and manga site Dengeki Novecomi+. The second volume is on sale now, too. It is a fantasy set in another world with a flavor a bit different from *Hollow Regalia*. Please go check it out.

Now then, as for *Hollow Regalia*, the story has reached a stopping point for the time being. Thank you for following it until now.

I want to thank Miyuu for providing such delightful illustrations for this series. The designs for this volume, with Ellie and the grown-up versions of everyone else, were as wonderful as ever.

I also want to thank everyone who was involved in the production and distribution of this book.

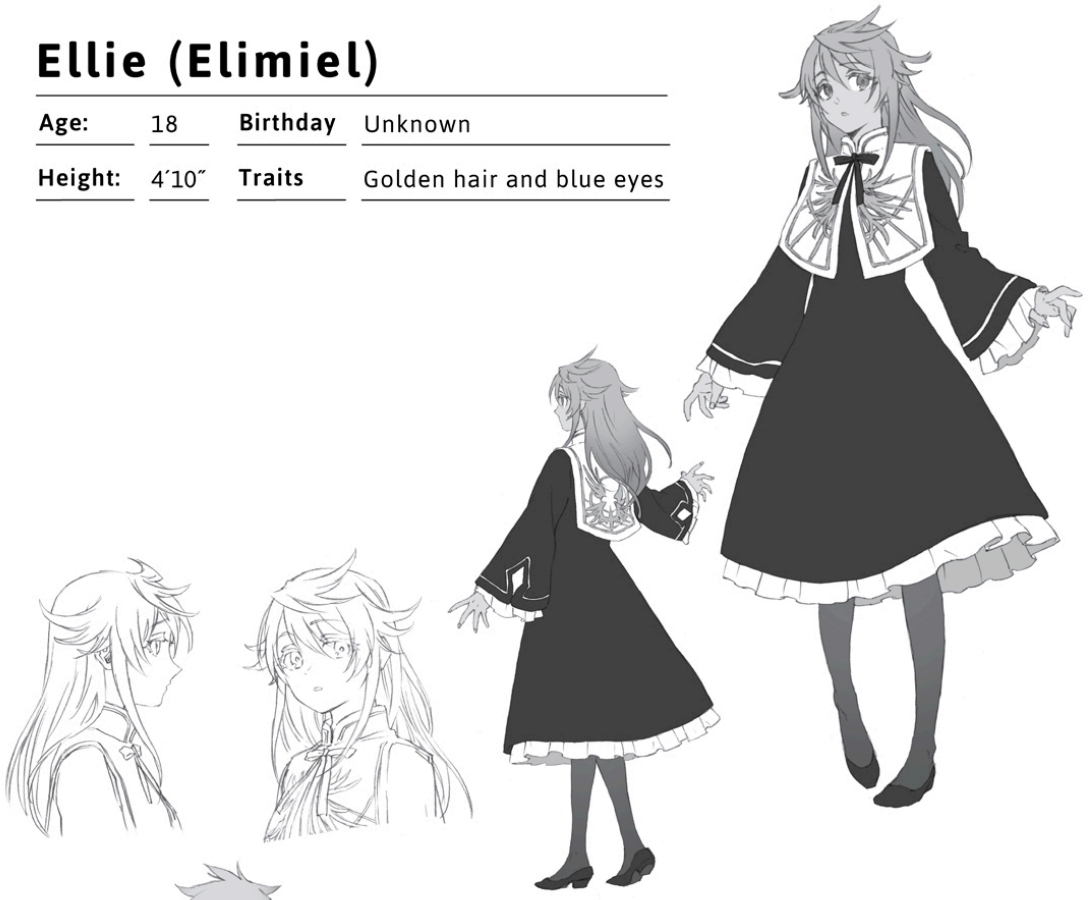
And, of course, my biggest thanks to everyone who read this book.

May we meet again somewhere.

Gakuto Mikumo

Ellie (Elimiel)

Age:	18	**Birthday**	Unknown
Height:	4′10″	**Traits**	Golden hair and blue eyes

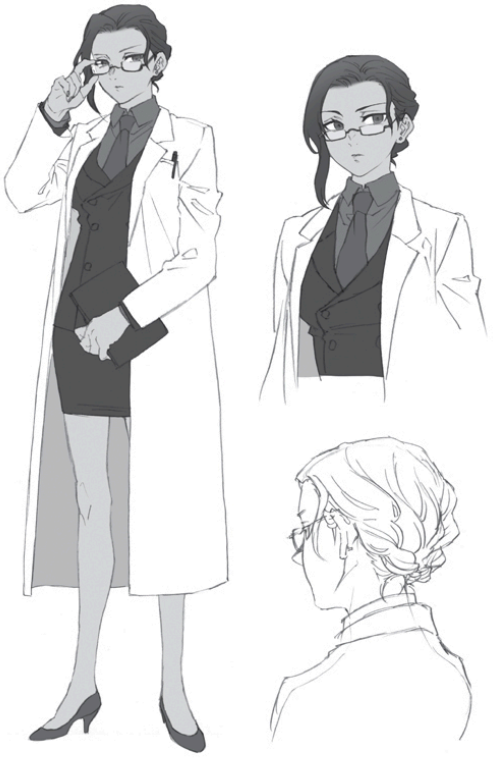


Shigure Shindou

Age:	20	**Birthday**	Unknown
Height:	5′8″	**Traits**	White hair and gray eyes



CONFIDENTIAL



Suria Almiron

Age:	27	**Birthday**	Unknown
Height:	5′4″		
Traits	Brunette hair and hazel eyes		

Iroha's Children (Grown Up)

Honoka

Iroha (Farmer Style)

Kyouta

Kiri

CONFIDENTIAL

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink