
7
Gakuto Mikumo
ILLUSTRATION BY
Manyako
STRIKE THE BLOOD
KALEID BLOOD



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KALEID BLOOD

Gakuto Mikumo
Illustration by Manyako


Yukina Himeragi
Sword Shaman
The Lion King Agency's
beautiful observer
Nagisa Akatsuki
Sister of the Primogenitor
Innocent, outspoken, and wise
Kojou Akatsuki
The Fourth Primogenitor
The world's mightiest—and
laziest—vampire


Gajou Akatsuki
Returnee from the Netherworld
Armed archeologist who defies fate
Natsuki Minamiya
Witch of the Void
Vainglorious, noble teacher


Motoki Yaze
Hyper-Adapter
Cheerful classmate
or two-faced jester?
Asagi Aiba
Cyber Empress
Gorgeous, selfish
high school cyber genius

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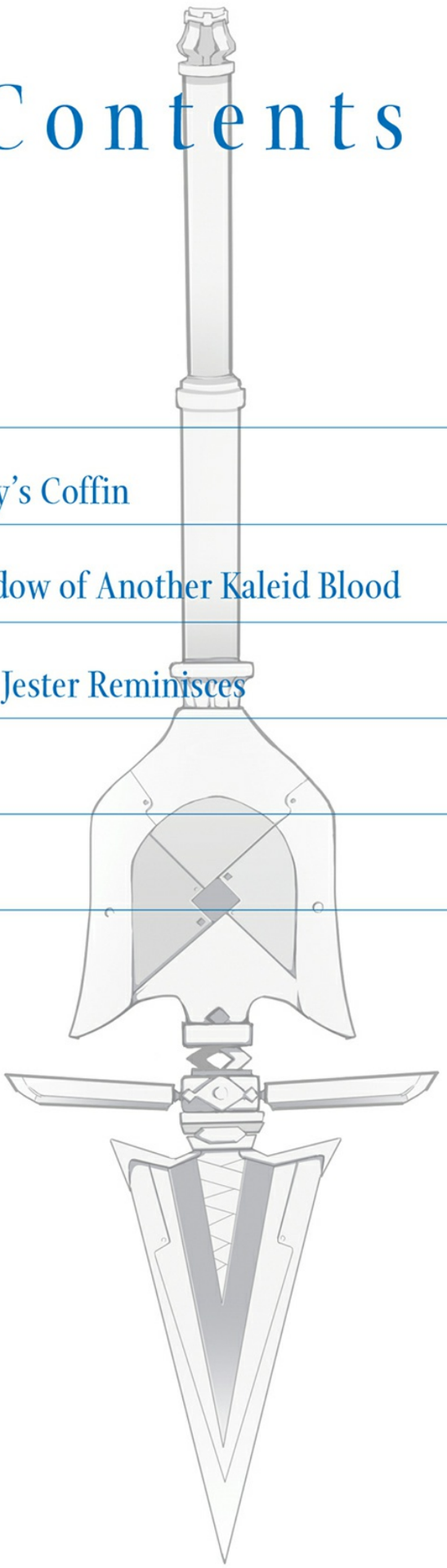
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Design / Hirokazu Watanabe (2725, Inc.)

STRIKE THE BLOOD

KALEID BLOOD

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GAKUTO MIKUMO

ILLUSTRATION BY
MANYAKO

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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STRIKE THE BLOOD, Volume 7

GAKUTO MIKUMO

Translation by Jeremiah Bourque

Cover art by Manyako

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SUTORAIKU ZA BURADDO

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Intro

INTRO

In the distant past, a man was born.

He was brought to life by the first people to descend upon the land, cast out of the paradise of the gods— In other words, he was the first man fashioned by the people's hand.

In their anger, the gods banished the man to a place beyond the firmament, branded him a murderer, and cursed him with immortality.

And thus, he became a criminal. Only the last of his brethren, and their descendants, remained upon the land.

Teeming with life, the earth forsook the man and continued to reject his arrival.

In return, he hated the land. Alone in eternal darkness, his tears and blood flowed through the firmament, enveloping the world, and gave birth to many kinds of demons.

Instead of bounty, he brought civilization and war to the land denied to him. Through him, men found learning and sorcery; through him, men fashioned each and every blade of bronze and iron.

Finally, those remaining upon the land constructed a new city that violated all laws of the earth: an artificial city, born of carbon fiber, resin, and steel.

His name was Cain, Source of All Sins, Father of all demons.

Even now, he slumbers in the land beyond the firmament, dreaming of his return, so that he may take vengeance upon the world.

†

The cavern was shrouded in flickering light. Periodically, the rainbow-like flame changed its colors and shape. The air was white and frozen, as if time itself stood still.

Here, in the hollow world governed only by tranquility and isolation, a boy was lying down, alone. He was twelve years old, still young, only half-grown. However, he was already aware he was dying.

One of his lungs, his heart, and countless bones and internal organs had been blown away, fresh blood scattered everywhere.

Just before his death, he saw an explosive flash and a giant, ferocious beast man, mad with rage, a horde of living dead, and…

A girl inside a coffin, continuing to sleep even as glistening fragments of ice danced around her like feathers in the air. Her pale flesh, as white as a glacier, was stained red from the boy's blood— "Why do you not fear me, boy?"

The solemn voice reverberated in a world cut off from the flow of time.

A giant shadow enveloped by white frost floated in empty space. Perhaps it was a monstrous bird spreading wings of ice, or maybe it was a mermaid. Its form wavered like a mirage as it gazed coldly down at the blood-soaked boy.

With a faint tremble of his lips, the boy answered, "Who…knows…?"

However, his voice had not made a sound. The child had already lost his physical body. As a result, his soul had been maimed anew, about to be sucked into that empty world.

Despite this, the boy's eyes revealed no fear. He smiled weakly up at the giant, monstrous bird, as if defying the fading of his life.

"It's probably 'cause…I still have stuff left to do…"

The monstrous bird watched the boy with its majestic, transcendent eyes.

In that frigid world, her will was law. If terror seized him for even an instant—if he accepted his own death—no doubt she would have immediately ripped his soul asunder with her overwhelming power, as she had done to the countless human sacrifices taken into that world before.

However, the boy did not avert his gaze. He forced his messy body to sit up, silently conveying his fortitude.

With a voice completely devoid of emotion, the monstrous bird calmly imparted the truth.

“You have already expired. There is no longer anything you can do. This is the Blood Memory of the Fourth Primogenitor…a graveyard for the infinite accumulation of time in an eternal life. We, immersed in her blood, feed upon the primogenitor’s memories to live. You are now but a single part of that whole.”

Her form changed to a beautiful girl—one with blazing eyes and rainbow-colored hair billowing like flames. She continued: “Dying child of man, why do you not fear me? Why do you call my name?”

The boy interrupted her questions with a shout, as if to blow her off. “Shut *up*…!”

Even as his blood-soaked arms sank into the void, he tore them away through force of will and rose.

“It’s not over yet! I could protect her! For that, I’ll use whatever power I have to, even one that can destroy the whole world…!”

The girl smiled in admiration. It carried a sense of innocence that suited her fairy-like features.

“You, not a primogenitor but an ordinary person, feasting upon my eternal Blood Memory—?”

From the empty space, everything he had lost—his blood, his flesh, his bones, his organs—was restored. Instead of being consumed, he was absorbing the Blood Memory instead. He, a powerless human being, using the infinite “negative life force” belonging only to primogenitors— The girl narrowed her glimmering eyes. “The cost…shall be dear, pitiable child of Man—”

From within her clenched hand, a tiny fragment of ice appeared. In the blink of an eye, it grew into a long, single spear—a spear of ice with a forked tip.

The boy earnestly stretched out his blood-drenched arm and called the girl’s name.

“I’ll do it anyway. So please, lend me your strength…*Avrora*!”

That instant, the girl’s eyes softened, holding back happy tears. A pleasant smile came over her as she whispered, “Very well. Take it.”

Then, as the boy stood defenseless, his hand outstretched, she thrust the icy spear deep into his chest.



Chapter One
Fairy's Coffin

CHAPTER ONE

FAIRY'S COFFIN

1

The island of Gozo floated in more or less the center of the Mediterranean Sea.

As a part of the European Commonwealth of Malta, it was primarily a tourist attraction. Its bountiful, diverse coastline made for a beautiful sight, and the contrast between its gray cliffs and the blue sea charmed many visitors.

However, Gozo was also known as an island of ruins.

Every corner of the isle's interior was littered with subterranean tombs, ring cairns, and giant stone buildings, said to be mankind's oldest, predating the Neolithic Age. Even in modern times, many of their mysteries remained unsolved, including whether human hands or powerful deities had created them.

And so—

A lone man stood at the dig site of one such ruin of import, a nameless subterranean tomb, and yelled with abandon:

"Whoooooaaa—! This is delicious!"

He was a fairly good-looking, tall Japanese man. He had sunburnt skin and an impetuous face. His hair was a mess, as if he'd cut it himself with a knife, and his unkempt beard stood out. His red-dyed leather trench coat and fedora made him look less like a surveyor of ruins and more like a member of an old-time mafia. More than anything, he resembled a washed-up private investigator.

He was middle-aged, around forty years old, perhaps—

The man gripped a bottle of Bajtra, an alcoholic drink produced in Malta made from cactus fruits. He sat deeply in his camping chair, legs spread out, drinking it with his midday meal.

He brought some smoked sausage to his lips as he said, “Isn’t this nice? Blue skies, white clouds, tasty food and wine… Really makes a man feel alive.”

The coarse sausage, also native to Malta, gave off a particular fragrance. He tore into his food before taking another sip from the bottle. Almost as an afterthought, he made a deep, chagrined sigh.

“Now if I just had even one hot babe with me it’d really be perfect, but…”

A white woman appearing to be in her twenties replied coldly to the man’s complaint. “—What are you trying to say, Doc?”

Even though she was dressed as if she were on a safari, the woman gave off an air of competence, punctuality, and class. Her symmetrical face had barely any makeup, and her beautiful hair was cropped short. She had the appearance of a first-rate researcher.

He noticed her annoyance as she approached and, making the expression of a mongrel being scolded by his owner, chuckled carelessly as he showed her the wide-open swimsuit model magazine he had been reading.

“Ah… Well you see, Miss Caruana, the weather’s so fine. Shouldn’t you learn from the other girls here and wear clothing a little less…restrictive? I think it’d raise the morale of the digging team.”

Liana Caruana, senior adviser to the Fourth Gozo Ruins Joint Examination Team, brusquely snatched the magazine from the man’s hands.

“I regret to inform you such services are not part of my professional duties.”

The man she had called “Doc” slumped his shoulders and shook his head in exasperation, somehow looking sympathetic as he shifted his gaze toward Liana’s bust.

“Well, aren’t you a stick-in-the-mud? We’ve come all the way to the Mediterranean, so why not act the part? When in Rome, do as the Romans do. I mean, no need to worry about it. Back in my homeland, we have a saying: Small

tits are precious things. Just ’cause your breasts are tiny doesn’t mean they aren’t in high dema—”

Liana shielded her breasts with both hands, glaring icily at the man with an icy look on her face.

“—Pursuing a sexual harassment lawsuit is troublesome in a variety of ways, so I would rather you not add that to my workload. And for that matter, why don’t you work a little more seriously with that diligence Japanese are famous for? Plus, you appear to have the preconceived notion that the people living in Latin countries are a hedonistic, laid-back lot. Do not forget that this island has been a crucial component of Mediterranean culture and commerce since ancient times.”

The man called Doc drank the last drop in his bottle and strained a smile.

“I haven’t forgotten. History tells us that it was the world’s oldest Demon Sanctuary, part of the Atlantic Imperial Federation, and the front line of a brutal war from when the Dominion of the Second Primogenitor, Fallgazer, invaded. But, well, it’s got nothing to do with my job. It’s not like we can do anything until we’ve lined up all the staff we need.”

“That is…certainly true, but…”

The man spoke in an easygoing tone as he reached for another sausage.

“So let’s take it easy. It ain’t like anything good’ll come from getting worked up and groping around without a clue—”

The next moment, they heard an explosion behind them so powerful they could feel it in their chests.

A giant pillar of flame soared into the air as the ground shook. The dust cloud blocked the sky, shrouding it in gray.

The explosion’s center was located in the rear of the rocky area where the pair was sitting, putting it near the ruins’ entrance. The use of explosives at a dig site wasn’t rare, but the blast was far too large. A section of the ruins was blown into the air, with rubble hammering down to the earth like hail. They could hear the cries of confused workers trying to get away and sounds akin to gunfire. Clearly, the scene was not consistent with a controlled detonation.

Some kind of unexpected trouble was afoot.

“Ah…yeah. Kinda like that…,” the man said languidly as he watched the smoke encircle the ruin.

“Th-this is no time to relax! What in the world is—?!”

“Ah… Hey, Miss Caruana…”

Faster than the man could tell her not to, Liana dashed to the rocky area and climbed down. Even as the winds kicked up from the blast hit her face, she recklessly ran toward the heart of the explosion.

The man clicked his tongue slightly and, left with no other choice, clutched his beloved rifle case as he followed her.

The dust cloud lingered over the area as they heard the repeated bellow of gunfire.

Because excavation work at the ruin had been suspended, few workers were around, and they were already limited to several members of the academic research group sent by the North Sea Empire and combat personnel from the Private Military Corporation taking care of guarding the ruin. The combatants were fighting an ominous, wriggling shadow inside the cloud. It did not seem to be a proper living creature, nor did it seem to be a man-made construct. Furthermore, it was frighteningly huge. Perhaps this was what a state-of-the-art main battle tank would look like if it could walk upright like a person…

A bearded, well-built guard ran out of the dust cloud toward them.

“Gaho! Give us a hand, Gaho! Doc!!”

He was the private military contractor, Dimos Carrozzo, head of the guards protecting the ruin investigation team. He was an imposing man over a hundred and ninety centimeters tall. The sight of a large man carrying an automatic weapon and an ammunition belt created an impression of a huge boar outfitted with modern armaments. But now his body was wounded all over, with his face warped with panic.

The Japanese man called Doc spoke to Carrozzo in a lighthearted tone that seemed very out of place. “Heya, Carrozzo. What’s the fuss? I told you not to go

into the third strata, didn't I?"

Carrozzo, realizing the man was right there, dropped to his knees as if all strength had deserted him.

"Sorry, Gaho… The investigation team from Daktram University broke the agreement and went in on their own…!"

"Sheesh. Well, I figured it was something like that…," he muttered dismissively. "Also, correction. My name isn't Gaho."

With the cloud of smoke finally beginning to thin, the enemy's true face emerged. It was a monstrously shaped idol over four meters in height, clad in a metal shell like a suit of armor—a humanoid weapon. Its giant, featureless head resembled a sperm whale, solemn and overwhelming. Perhaps it had been modeled after a Cetus, a monster in the Mediterranean Sea depicted in Greek mythology.

"Doc, what is *that*…?!" Liana's expression tightened.

The man nodded in apparent joy. "Ah, that's a type of gargoyle. I heard the Third Investigation Team wiped them all out, but to think there was still somethin' this big left behind. Gets the juices flowing, huh?"

Liana clutched her head, distraught as she watched the man admire it like it wasn't his problem. "How can you be so casual about…?!"

The idol had emerged from under the ruin. Apparently, it was a type of automated defense system for dispatching those trespassing in a tomb, and it had awakened when the investigation team members recklessly entered the ruin. The idol had then busted its way through thick limestone walls, forcing its way to the surface.

The guards desperately fought it, but mere automatic weapons were no use against the idol's armor. Not only was it likely built from strong metal, no doubt sorcery had further strengthened it.

Conversely, the pale, bluish-white beams from the idol sliced through the guards' armored vehicles, setting them aflame one after another.

Liana bit her lip in horror.

“Ugh…!”

She touched the bracelet on her left wrist and seemed about to rush toward the idol all by herself when her companion grabbed her collar and held her back by force.

“Don’t be in such a hurry, Miss Caruana. It’d take a vampire primogenitor to take down a monster like that through brute force. If we don’t think this through, we’ll just be adding to the damage.”

“B-but…!”

Liana grimaced as she glared at the man. Right beside them, Carrozzo was desperately engaging the idol. But neither bullets nor direct hits from hand grenades were able to even scratch the armor.

Carrozzo yelled, “Can’t you do something, Gaho?! At this rate, we’re all done for!”

The man sighed in annoyance as he put a hand to the rim of his fedora. “I told you already, it’s not Gaho…” Then he took a picture of the standing idol with his cell phone, murmuring with an oddly buoyant tone, “It’s a lot like the Nalakuvera from Mehelgal Number Nine… Not so much a trap against diggers than a tomb protector…a guardian to make sure whatever’s inside doesn’t wake up. Looks like we hit the jackpot.”

As the man continued his calm observations, Carrozzo glared at him. “Gaho!”

The man laughed at the huge, impatient guard.

“Don’t worry, Carrozzo. He’s the guardian of the ruin. He won’t attack people if they’re outside the area. As long as the investigation team doesn’t put up a useless fight, it’ll just…”

Before he could finish his sentence, smoke and flames enveloped the idol. A rocket had struck it squarely. Reinforcements from the private military had come running from the base camp and used a portable rocket launcher.

The idol had taken a direct hit from a high-explosive anti-tank warhead, yet even then it stood unscathed. It immediately commenced its counterattack against the guards that had fired upon it.

The idol's bluish-white beams were actually from a high-powered laser cannon, able to melt down a large boulder in an instant. The flames engulfed the examination team's base camp. The armed guards weren't the only target of the counterattack: The idol began indiscriminately attacking equipment used for exploring the ruins, tents in the base camp, and even the team members themselves as they ran about in confusion. It was only a matter of time until the base camp was completely annihilated.

The man put a hand over his eyes in dismay.

"Hoo boy… Well, this isn't good."

The Cetus-modeled idol apparently registered the entire examination team as an enemy force. There was little doubt—it would not stop until every human being in the area had been destroyed.

Liana hastily urged him. "Doc…!"

"Yeah, yeah. I'd have preferred to recover it undamaged for study, but it looks like we're long past that."

The man gently deflected her words as he put down the rifle bag he was carrying. The weapon he removed from it was a 1.8-meter-long sniper rifle weighing about thirty kilograms, give or take. Its firepower was so massive that the term *cannon* seemed more fitting for it than *rifle*.

Liana stared blankly at the ridiculously large gun, forgetting even to blink. "A… an anti-materiel rifle?!"

"With a twenty-millimeter-diameter barrel. Weighs a ton, but I made the right call to put up with lugging it."

Speaking like a child boasting about his favorite toy, the man set the rifle on top of a bipod.

The idol slowly turned his way, perhaps sensing its enemy's intentions. Even so, the man did not rush. He smoothly loaded a round and carefully took aim.

The icon, now completely turned to face him, opened the laser cannon port on its head and began to open fire—

When suddenly, the man pulled the trigger, launching a bullet accompanied

by a loud boom. His target was that very laser port—the sole gap in the idol's armor.

No matter how great its caliber, a mere rifle bullet couldn't possibly destroy an idol that had shrugged off a square hit from an anti-tank rocket. The anti-materiel rifle's advantage lay in the precision of the bullet track for sniping.

The shell plunged through the gap in the armor, no more than several centimeters wide, almost like it was being sucked in and fatally ravaged the delicate mechanisms in the idol's interior. With the firing port destroyed, the high-powered laser cannon's energy had lost its outlet and exploded in a bluish-white bolt of lightning.

Liana clenched both fists and shouted in delight.

"You did it…!"

It was the first real damage inflicted on the idol after it had fended off so many attacks. However, the man's expression did not change.

"No, not yet…"

Gazing at the damaged golem with intense interest, he calmly unloaded his spent bullet casing.

The idol had stopped moving immediately after the explosion but promptly returned to operation, marching straight toward the man with the gun. Apparently, the laser cannon explosion had not inflicted fatal damage. The armor-clad giant seemed intent on trampling the man underfoot. Furthermore, the area around the "destroyed" laser cannon was wriggling around like a living creature as it began to repair itself.

Liana shouted, "…It's regenerating?!"

"Well, that figures. Quirks aside, it's a legacy of the Devas. It won't buy the farm from that."

"Just as I expected," muttered the man, a satisfied smile on his face. It was Liana who was shaken.

"D-Doc—!"

Carrozzo, now out of bullets, seemed almost ready to cry as he shouted to the

man, “What’ll we do, Gaho?! How the hell do we bring that thing down?!”

No doubt he really wanted to run away, but his duty as a guard would not permit such cowardice. At the very least, they needed to buy some time so the people in the camp could flee.

In contrast, the man’s expression was cheerful, as if he was enjoying the crisis.

“Don’t worry. Now I have a pretty good idea of its locomotion ritual pattern. These kinds of gargoyles all have a common weakness—and my next bullet’s special order.”

The man took a fresh cartridge out of his leather trench coat. It was a golden bullet tipped with a gemstone. There was a strange pattern etched on the casing.

“Even if it is a legacy from an ancient civilization,” he continued, “there’s pretty much no internal engine that lets something keep moving over thousands of years, which is why a lot of gargoyles draw magical energy from the ruins themselves. So if you send excess magical energy flowing through that circuit—”

The man loaded the next round into the rifle and prepared to fire again. He aimed at the idol’s chest and calmly pulled the trigger. With an accompanying boom, the golden bullet smashed against the giant’s torso.



Of course, an anti-materiel rifle bullet did not have the force to penetrate the idol's armor. The bullet instantly smashed apart into countless tiny fragments, simultaneously releasing an enormous surge of magical energy that crystalized into a large magical circle.

Liana, realizing the true nature of the bullet the man had fired, looked back at him in shock.

"A spell bullet…?!"

Spell bullets were special projectiles with cartridges made of precious metals that sealed enormous amounts of magical energy within. Very few of these even existed, and the guns that could fire them, fewer still. They were so expensive that their use was considered exclusive to a fraction of royalty; however, each round held enormous power.

"Where on earth did you get something like that?!" Liana asked.

The man made a charming, laid-back smile as he rose to his feet.

"I told you, special order."

The match had been decided. The idol with the body of a man and the head of a whale, imprisoned by the magic circle, shot beams all around it as it crumbled. The enormous magical energy released by the spell bullet had overloaded the magical ritual animating the idol, causing it to destroy itself.

Carrozzo tossed his weapon aside as he rose to his feet, laughing heartily as he went to hug the man.

"Ha-ha… You did it… I knew you could do it, Gaho…!"

The man's face scowled in annoyance as he gruffly kicked Carrozzo aside. Carrozzo, born on the Iberian Peninsula, had difficulty pronouncing Japanese names. The man seemed quite fed up as he rose, carrying the rifle with him as the barrel sizzled.

"I told you already… Don't make me repeat myself, Carrozzo. My name isn't pronounced *Gaho*. It's *Gajou*."

Liana was a step removed from the two men as she listened to their conversation. She murmured inside her own mouth, as if to ensure no one

overheard her, gazing longingly at the man's dust-covered back as she spoke—

"Gajou… Gajou Akatsuki…"

2

When Kojou Akatsuki landed at the airport in the Roman Autonomous Region on the Italian peninsula, it was spring already, just past the middle of March. He had to switch planes there to continue on to the Mediterranean island nation of Malta.

There was only one more passenger with him: Nagisa Akatsuki, his little sister. Their mother had been traveling with them at first but had split off when they stopped at Hong Kong.

Kojou had just graduated from primary school, and Nagisa was a year younger. Normally, the two wouldn't be traveling on their own outside the country at those ages, but circumstances in the Akatsuki family were somewhat peculiar.

Their mother, employed by the international conglomerate MAR, spent nearly half the year working overseas. Their father was staying in Malta for a ruin excavation and exploration scheduled to begin in March.

And that was how Kojou and Nagisa, stuck between two globe-trotting parents, already had several experiences with overseas trips. Their father had insisted they come this time, too, so they had made the long trek over from Japan.

Nagisa Akatsuki, eleven years old, exited into the airport's reception lobby, raising her voice in admiration as she surveyed the sights.

"Whoa…! Look, Kojou. A foreign country! Foreign people everywhere! All the signs are in other languages! Wow, it sure has been a while!"

The two picked up their luggage as Kojou murmured in a voice that had yet to deepen, "Well, it's a different country… And hey, *we're* the foreigners here."

Nagisa was oddly wound up, probably from being trapped inside the fuselage of a plane for so long. Even without that, her long black hair, which reached all

the way down to her hips, made her stand out. Kojou was embarrassed because he felt like everyone was staring at them.

Nagisa chirped, “What is it, Kojou? Not feeling well? Ah, food cart sighted!! That looks delicious! Biscotti! Biscotti, please!! Four! *Quattro*!!”

Nagisa clutched the coins she’d only just exchanged and rushed off to a food cart in the lobby. The employee had replied in a helpful manner, “Two should be plenty,” but Nagisa insisted on four and began haggling over the price in broken Italian.

“…So the usual,” Kojou remarked.

After Nagisa finished her purchase, she posed for a picture with another passenger who had requested a photo with her while Kojou was looking the other way. She adjusted very quickly.

Staring at her as she finally returned, Kojou sighed at length. “You sure look happy.”

Nagisa tilted her head a bit as she peered at Kojou’s face. “Well, you sure don’t, Kojou. Isn’t it a waste not to have fun when we haven’t been overseas in forever? Wanna eat some biscotti? I’ll give you half.”

Kojou answered with a yawn.

“Nah, I’ll pass. Geez, you ate on the plane, and now you’re eating again?”

The time difference between Japan and Rome was seven hours. His body was sluggish from jet lag. Now that they’d reached Malta, it’d be another hour and a half until the next flight.

“Dammit,” Kojou grumbled. “It’s Dad’s fault for sending us cheap airline tickets. There’s too many layovers. And anyway, this may be an overseas trip, but we’re actually going to help Dad with his work, right?”

Nagisa’s tone dropped a little. “…Yeah. Sorry to drag you along, Kojou.”

Their trip was a chance to see their father, but properly speaking, he’d only asked for Nagisa. Kojou was just her chaperone.

“Hey, it’s not like you need to apologize. So what should we do now?”

“Hmm, Gajou said his friend would come and pick us up. He said to wait near the airline counter… Oh, right, he gave me a map.”

Nagisa began fishing things out of her coat pocket. Kojou was holding the luggage and casually watching her when someone suddenly bumped into his shoulder rather roughly. The man, a foreigner with a small build, had a conflicted look as he spoke.

“Scusi—”

Kojou couldn’t understand what he meant, but apparently the man was apologizing. He looked about thirty years old, give or take, and was dressed in plain clothes that made him blend in with the crowd.

“Ah, sorry… Err…*mi dispiace*?” Kojou replied, using half-remembered Italian.

The foreigner gave Kojou a satisfied, toothy grin. *“Huh…? Di niente. Buon viaggio, stronzo—”*

“Ah, thanks, thanks. *Grazie, grazie*.”

Kojou watched the smiling fellow wave and depart. Suddenly Nagisa gasped, raising her face and pointing at the man.

“Kojou, my bag—!”

“Huh…?”

The foreigner, realizing Nagisa had begun to raise an alarm, suddenly broke into a sprint. He was carrying Nagisa’s bag, which Kojou had been holding under his arm after she gave it to him. The instant their shoulders had bumped, the man had stolen it, along with its contents: the airline ticket, passport, bank card, and other precious things.

“Bastard—!”

That second, Kojou’s mind went white, seething with rage. The instant he realized what had happened, his body broke into a full sprint. He pursued the purse snatcher with ferocious speed well beyond a typical child’s capacity. However, the opponent was running no less desperately. Though Kojou gradually closed the distance, catching up with him was no simple task. If the thief managed to get outside the airport, it would be nearly impossible for

Kojou, ignorant of the lay of the land, to catch him.

I'm not gonna make it—! Kojou despaired, but at that very moment, a lone traveler calmly walked in front of the thief. It was an East Asian girl shorter than both Kojou and Nagisa. Clothed in a frilly, extravagant dress, she resembled a beautiful doll.

"—Per Dio!!"

The bag snatcher had apparently opted to knock the girl aside rather than try to avoid her. He barreled straight toward her without any drop in speed. The next moment, the parasol in the girl's hand lightly lashed out.

Perhaps the action surprised the thief, because he lost his footing as if he'd tripped on an invisible step and tumbled forward with great force. Even then, he immediately rose in an attempt to flee again, but Kojou caught up to him first.

Kojou cut off the bag snatcher's path of retreat. "—I'm taking back Nagisa's purse."

"Figlio di puttana…!"

The irritated thief clicked his tongue and pulled out a knife, twirling it around in an effort to intimidate Kojou, who lowered his stance, silently staring at the man as he remembered his time playing defense in elementary school basketball.

Of course, Kojou was unarmed and at a disadvantage in size. But oddly, he felt no fear. Observing things calmly, he could see tons of openings in the man's movements. He fell for Kojou's clumsy feints so easily that it was funny.

The man, apparently at the end of his wits, lunged toward Kojou with his foot forward. That instant, Kojou slipped into the man's flank, swiping back the stolen bag as if he were stealing a basketball.

Kojou showed him the reclaimed luggage, his lips curling up ferociously.

"Sorry, old man. I've got the ball."

The man gaped at the reclaimed bag, groaned, and hurled some kind of foul insult as he took off running. Watching him from behind, Kojou went limp,

thoroughly exhausted.

Kojou was still drained when the girl in the extravagant dress spoke to him.

“Hmm, hmm. Not bad at all, brat.”

Based on her appearance, she looked younger than Kojou, but her tone of voice and demeanor were haughty and aloof. Yet it seemed to fit her oddly well.

“Same to you. Bailed me out there. Hey, what did you do to him, anyway?”

“Don’t pry. I helped out on a whim, and that is all.”

The girl in the dress laughed gracefully. Kojou unconsciously let out a fairly strained chuckle. Her attitude was bigger than she was, but however oddly menacing it was, she was a hard girl to hate.

Nagisa, out of breath, finally caught up with her brother.

“Kojou!”

Seeing for herself that he was safe, her eyebrows furled in a pouty look.

“Sheesh, don’t be reckless like that. What would happen if you got hurt in a place like this?!”

“It’s all right. Someone helped me out, too.”

“Eh? Who?”

When Nagisa asked him that in confusion, eyes wide, Kojou shifted his gaze.

“What do you mean, wh—Er?”

The girl in the dress who he was sure had been there only moments before was nowhere to be seen. It was as if she’d simply melted into thin air without a trace—

“Well, that’s weird. There was this Japanese girl in weird clothes here just a second ago… I think she was, like, your age.”

Nagisa stared at him as he fumbled for an explanation. She sighed, exasperated.

“…Well, as long as you’re all right…”

Somehow, they'd managed to get their luggage back, but the thief had created quite a stir in the airport. This time, it definitely wasn't Kojou's imagination that everyone was watching.

Maybe we should hoof it before we get into more trouble, Kojou considered, when a woman he didn't recognize pushed through curious onlookers, calling to them as she approached. She was a young Caucasian woman dressed in a navy blue suit. She wore minimal makeup, but she was very attractive and gave off the impression of a capable secretary for a corporate president.

"—Pardon me, but would you be Nagisa Akatsuki?"

"Yes, I am… Ah, and you are?" Nagisa was a little thrown off as she replied.

The woman replied in fluent Japanese, "I am Liana Caruana. Professor Gajou Akatsuki asked me to come pick you up."

"Eh?! Then you're Gajou's…er, my father's friend, then…?"

"Yes. I have been assigned to the Fourth Gozo Ruins Joint Examination Team as senior adviser," she answered in a serious tone.

Being the senior adviser at such a young age implied she was as capable as she looked…and she was beautiful, too.

Kojou and Nagisa exchanged glances, murmuring with some resignation.

"Guess this is why Mom was in a bad mood when Dad called."

"Even with those looks, Gajou's oddly popular with the ladies, huh…"

Liana expressed some concern. "Um… Is something wrong?"

Nagisa smoothed things over with a vague smile and courteously bowed her head. "No, nothing at all. Ah-ha-ha-ha. It's a pleasure to meet you."

3

When Kojou and the others arrived on the island of Gozo, a lightly armored, military four-wheel-drive vehicle awaited them. Liana took the wheel, cutting through Città Victoria in the center toward the opposite side of the island.

Gozo's natural bounty made it a magnet for tourists, but the island was also a registered World Heritage Site due to the ancient ruins. A particularly famous ruin among them was a giant stone temple known as the Temple of G˙gantija.

Liana explained away, with Kojou offering perfunctory responses.

"That temple is one of the world's oldest, constructed in the Neolithic Age some fifty-five hundred years ago. According to local legend, the temple was constructed by a female giant called Sansuna. The name G˙gantija means Tower of the Giants."

"Giant…huh?"

Liana certainly had an encyclopedic knowledge of ruins befitting the adviser of an examination team. However, Kojou, not being an expert in the field, couldn't understand more than half of what the young woman was saying.

She continued:

"The beings called giants were said to have ruled the world prior to the emergence of mankind, a mythological theme that can be found in every land. Greek mythology has the Titans, Norse mythology has the Jötunn, Chinese mythology has the Pangu, the Old Testament has the Nephilim… It is written that these were descendants of Adam and Eve that towered above humans."

Nagisa, sitting in the back, watched Liana through the rearview mirror. "So you, Gajou, and the others are studying the legend of these giants?"

The question put a somewhat bewildered look on Liana's face.

"Don't tell me the two of you haven't heard anything about it from Doc?"

With little enthusiasm, Kojou and Nagisa nodded and said in unison, "Not a thing."

Liana bit her lip a little. "Is that…so…? Then why did Doc…?" she murmured, mostly for her own benefit.

Nagisa, deciding it was best to change the subject, called out to Liana in a cheery voice. "Ah, by the way, Liana, that bracelet… Is that a…?"

Liana lifted up her left hand.

“Bracelet? You mean this registration bracelet?”

The band around her arm was about twice as thick as a watch. It was a demon registration bracelet—specially made in Demon Sanctuaries to guarantee the safety and prove the identity of a demon, and a transmitter for monitoring that demon.

“I thought so!! So you’re a demon, Liana?” Nagisa countered.

Seeing her surprise, Liana appeared somewhat forlorn.

“Y-yes. I am a vampire born in the Warlord’s Empire. I am also here to protect the examination team, you see.”

Even though the Holy Ground Treaty had been in effect for over four decades, a considerable number of humans still feared and loathed demonkind. Liana must have been concerned about how Nagisa would react now that she knew the woman’s true nature.

But Nagisa’s eyes twinkled as if to blow those concerns away.

“Wow, that’s awesome! This is the first time I’ve spoken to someone from the Warlord’s Empire. Oh, right, this island’s a Demon Sanctuary, too. I’m surprised Gajou has such a pretty vampire friend… How long have you known each other? The sunlight’s really strong on this island. Are you all right?”

“Er, ah… Umm, that’s…”

Kojou reluctantly intervened before Nagisa’s rapid-fire interrogation went any further.

“…Let’s leave it at that, Nagisa. You’re scaring Liana here.”

Liana was still in shock as Kojou strained a grin and bowed his head.

“Sorry. She talks a lot.”

Liana sighed but smiled pleasantly.

“…You are quite an eccentric pair, as I would expect from Doc’s children.”

It probably wasn’t just Kojou’s imagination that she looked…happy. He replied, “Not sure I get all of this, but there’s no way that’s a compliment, right?”

Liana broke out in giggles.

“Hee-hee, forgive me.”

Even though her first impression was very proper, her smiling, unguarded face was simply adorable.

Kojou looked back as the stone wall of a ruin receding into the distance and asked, “Is that all right? We passed right by it.”

“It’s fine, since the Temple of G̈gantija isn’t the ruin we’re studying.”

“So it’s some other ruin, then?”

“Yes. Last year, an underground tomb was discovered at a hill about two kilometers from here. It has no formal name. We call it the Fairy’s Coffin.”

“Underground tomb? A grave?”

“Yes. I think it’s a ruin from just before or after The Cleansing.”

“The Cleansing…? That’s what Dad’s doing research on, isn’t it…?” Kojou didn’t express much confidence.

For some reason, Liana’s cheeks reddened as she nodded. “Yes, it is. There are traces of a great genocide and large-scale destruction left in every corner of the world…all said to be the Great Calamity wrought by the Fourth Primogenitor.”

“Huh…”

Kojou and Nagisa’s father, the man named Gajou Akatsuki, was an archeologist, but not the studious type who sat in an office, calmly poring over ancient documents. He worked in the field, slipping into every war-torn country on Earth to plunder antiquities unguarded amid the confusion, little better than a looter after a blaze.

The theme of Gajou’s research was an event known as The Cleansing. It was recorded in the bibles of the Western Church and was apparently a large incident over the course of history.

“But that’s just a legend, right?” Kojou said. “I heard no one’s actually found any solid proof that it actually happened…”

For some reason, Liana looked morose as she muttered, “Yes. It would be nice if it was just a legend, but…”

Kojou thought her demeanor was a little suspicious, but before he could follow up with a question, the car left the main road, entering a rough, boulder-strewn stretch. Apparently, the ruin was just ahead.

Liana desperately clutched the steering wheel as she said, “I see it now. This is the examination team base camp.”

The car was shaking violently as it moved over a large section of uneven rock. It was so bad that careless dialogue could lead to a bitten tongue.

Finally, they arrived at the base camp, a collection of tents and prefabricated huts. Several heavy excavation machines were sitting idle, with little in sight that could be called proper surveying gear. Instead, what stood out were the armed Private Military Corporation guards and their heavily outfitted armored cars. It looked more like the forward base of a guerilla unit than the site of a ruin excavation.

Nagisa and Kojou mouthed off on their own as they exited the car.

“Wow, lots of guards here. Maybe there’s buried treasure?”

“If there was, I’m pretty sure Dad would’ve swiped it first and run off…”

Out of the blue, a man came close and embraced their shoulders from behind.

“—Who’s swiping what?”

He was middle-aged, wearing a fedora and a leather jacket, with the scent of alcohol and explosives hovering over him.

Reunited with her father after so long, Nagisa looked up cheerfully. “Gajou!”

Gajou casually picked up his daughter and hoisted her onto his shoulder like she was a little child.

“Ohh, Nagisa! Here I was thinking an angel had arrived, and it turns out to be my own daughter! Ha-ha, it’s good to have you here. Have you become even more beautiful since the last time I laid eyes on you?”

Nagisa, atop his shoulder, objected as her cheeks reddened. “Wait a—Gajou, you’re embarrassing me!”

Gajou continued smiling heartily with his sunbaked face.

“You must be tired from the long trip. Nothing bad happened to you?”

“Nah, because I had Kojou with me.”

“Mm…Kojou?”

That moment, Gajou seemed to finally remember that he actually had a son. With a thoroughly mystified look, he asked in a rather blunt tone, “Hey, runt. What are you doing here?”

“I’m her chaperone, *chap-er-one*! As if we could let Nagisa go on a trip by herself!”

With Nagisa’s small frame still resting on his shoulder, Gajou put a hand to his chin and mulled something over.

“…I don’t think you’re gonna be any use while you’re here, but…oh well. Don’t get in the way of my work, runt.”

Kojou curled his lips in resentment. “You sure treat Nagisa differently than me. Shitty dad you are.”

Certainly he was annoyed, but he was also used to the man’s foul tongue. When you looked at it as banter between two equal men, it didn’t seem all that bad.

Gajou redirected the conversation. “Anyway, how ’bout something to eat? The cooking on this island’s pretty good stuff. The special sausages and local beer go together real well.”

Kojou felt a sudden headache coming on from Gajou’s typical nonsense.

“I’m totally a minor here, you know!”

But Nagisa, usually the first to complain at a time like this, wasn’t even listening to them speak.

“Nagisa…?” her brother asked.

Noticing the shift in her behavior, Gajou murmured gravely, “She noticed,

huh…?”

The girl was silently gazing at the base of the rocks. It was a stonework entrance for a passageway that called to mind a shrine.

It was by no means a magnificent ruin. The reddish-brown volcanic rock sat in a pathetic state, eroded by wind and rain, and it hadn’t been adorned in any way. Wreckage from destroyed vehicles was strewn around the area. Perhaps there had been some kind of accident during excavation.

But more than that, an eerie presence hovered over the place. There was an oppressive feeling, a kind of majesty within telling others not to approach lightly.

“That’s…a ruin?” Kojou inquired.

“Yeah. A relic of The Cleansing—*the twelfth Fairy’s Coffin*.”

“Fairy’s…Coffin…”

Kojou pondered how that poetic echo in his mouth clashed with the plainness of the ruin.

Nagisa continued silently examining the structure from afar, as if captivated by something within…

4

Before daybreak the next morning, Kojou and Nagisa slipped out of the base camp, heading toward the nearby forest.

On Malta, which was surrounded by the sea on all sides, fresh water was a precious commodity. However, the island of Gozo was comparatively rich in water due to its natural springs.

Nagisa immersed her body in one such small spring. This bath was to clear her mind and rid herself of all impurities.

Malta’s Mediterranean Sea climate was said to be temperately warm, but even so, it was decently cold that morning. The only thing she was wearing was a thin white undershirt. The water-drenched fabric clung to her flesh, making

the petite girl's body look even smaller.

Nagisa shouted to Kojou, who was waiting in the shadow of a rocky area.

"Keep a good lookout so no one comes, Kojou!"

"You got it," Kojou replied with a desultory wave. He didn't think there were any perverts ready to peek on a kid in the bath out in wasteland well removed from human habitation, but he couldn't just let her go alone, so he tagged along.

But Nagisa looked in the direction of her thoughtful brother and said, "Don't you peek, either, Kojou!"

"As if I would!"

"Wha—?! I told you, don't look this way!"

Nagisa, who had just finished bathing and was in the middle of changing clothes, yelped. She threw something at him. A wet bath towel blocked his vision, followed up by a leather boot that hit him solidly, provoking a loud groan.

"Kojou, your nose is bleeding! You're gross!"

He ferociously objected to the unspeakable slander.

"That's because you hit me with your boot!!"

Meanwhile, Nagisa finished changing into a shrine maiden's outfit, complete with a white robe and a red pleated skirt. Her long black hair was tied with a string made of twisted paper.

"Sorry for the wait! All right, let's go. This is what I came here for, so I've got to do my best!"

Kojou was still holding his nose when he said with a muffled voice, "No need to overdo it. It's not like you have to help Dad with his work."

Nagisa glanced up at him with a teasing smile. "Yeah, but I'm interested in these ruins, too."

The girl in shrine maiden garb walked with a spring in her step, the heels of her wooden footwear clicking against the ground. She continued, "I feel a sad

presence filling the ruins, you see.”

“A sad presence…?”

“Like there’s…someone who’s lonely and crying by herself.”

“Well…if there’s a coffin, it means that someone’s been buried here…”

Kojou followed behind Nagisa as they returned to the base camp.

A burly man with a heavy beard stood at the camp entrance. He looked tough, but he didn’t act intimidating. A friendly smile came over his thick lips as he spoke in somewhat awkward Japanese.

“So you’re the kids Gaho said he was calling in from Japan, huh?”

The unfamiliar name made Kojou do a small double take.

“…Gaho?”

“My name’s Dimas Carrozzo. Gaho’s helped me out on the job a whole bunch of times. Right now I’m head of the staff on-site. Pleased to meet you.”

The man offered his right hand. Kojou, figuring that the man was speaking about Gajou, accepted the handshake.

“Same here. I’m sure Dad’s caused you lots of trouble.”

“Ha-ha. Incidentally, what’re those clothes the little lady’s wearing? I’ve never seen a dress like that.”

“It’s a Japanese shrine maiden outfit. She doesn’t actually need to wear it, but it puts her in the right frame of mind, I guess.”

Nagisa smiled happily, blushing heavily, as Carrozzo gazed at her in admiration.

“Shrine maiden outfit? So Gaho’s daughter is a shaman, then…?”

“Well, it’s not like she got formal training. She just helps out Grandma at her family’s temple once in a while. Inheriting Mom’s Hyper Adapter blood helps out a little, I think.”

As Kojou complimented her, Nagisa adopted a determined pose that seemed to say, *I’ll do my best!*

Carrozzo went “Mm-hmm,” nodding in apparent acceptance. “I see. That’s good to hear. After all, ultrasonic probes and scrying magic won’t work on these ruins, so we were pretty stuck, to tell the truth. We’re counting on you.”

Nagisa was an extremely rare variety of Hyper Adapter, inheriting both the qualities of a spirit maiden from her grandmother on her father’s side, and her own mother’s Hyper Adapter power. That was why Gajou requested she come all the way from Japan.

Several times before, Nagisa’s psychometry had accurately pinpointed the location of buried ruins and had decoded “indecipherable” ancient writing. Those exploits had made universities and scholars the world over beg her for volunteer help.

This was actually the first time Gajou was using Nagisa’s power for his own work. That made Kojou feel uneasy somehow. If rumors could be trusted, Gajou had been opposed to having Nagisa come over until the last moment. But the sponsors of the examination team for these ruins strongly insisted on contacting her, with Gajou reluctantly consenting. In other words, there was something more important, and more dangerous, about this ruin than anything before. He’d vaguely figured as much from glancing at the airtight security all around base camp.

Carrozzo, in charge of that very security, asked Kojou in a nonchalant tone, “So are you spirit sensitive, too?”

“Nah, not at all. I’m just a chaperone.”

“That so? Well, everyone has their place in the world. Do a good job protecting your sister, then.”

Kojou shrugged his shoulders as if to say, *Will do.* He turned his attention to look at the automatic weapon Carrozzo held.

“That’s quite some gear you got there. Guess keeping law and order is pretty rough in a Demon Sanctuary.”

“Not at all. Management’s on the ball out here, so the sorcerous crime rate is way under what it is in other countries.” Carrozzo smiled cheerfully in an attempt to ease Kojou’s and Nagisa’s concerns and continued, “But as for

what's inside this ruin here… I don't know the details, but apparently it's something pretty valuable, enough that the Warlord's Empire sent that noble girl over."

"…Noble? Wait, you mean Liana's some kind of big shot?" Kojou said in surprise.

A noble of the Warlord's Empire would make her a pureblood descendant of the First Primogenitor, the Lost Warlord, complete with her own fiefdom and personal military force. And without exception, they were served by powerful Beast Vassals, summoned creatures rivaling state-of-the-art fighter aircraft and heavy tanks. That would make Liana Caruana the mightiest protection this ruin had.

Carrozzo laughed. "Oh yeah. When I got drunk and gave her a pat on the butt, I almost got myself killed. The woman has no sense of humor."

Kojou gaped up at him. "You sure like to live dangerously, old man."

Certainly, Liana was an alluring beauty, but she was also a powerful vampire with might rivaling an army unit, and yet he'd sexually harassed her. That wasn't so much bravery as it was stupidity.

Carrozzo continued, "Well, we've got the perimeter of the ruins locked down tight, and if anything happens, the army'll come running. Any looters hunting for treasure won't get close. Relax. As long as you're in the camp, no one's setting one finger on either of you."

With that firm declaration, Carrozzo gave Kojou a hard pat on the back. The force of it elicited a smile and a nod from Kojou, as well as a cough.

"Gotcha. We're counting on you."

"Yep, you leave it to me—"

The young Japanese siblings walked toward the entrance to the ruin. No doubt Gajou and the others were inside, waiting for them to arrive.

Thanks to Nagisa's ability, the excavation work was about to advance by leaps and bounds. If they could recover what was inside the "coffin," their work at the ruins would be finished.

Carrozzo stretched his stiff body and scanned the base camp.

“Well, then… Now that I’m all pumped up, I better get back to my post, too.”

It was just past four in the morning, shortly before daybreak—the time when spiritualists’ senses were at their sharpest and, since time immemorial, the ideal moment for a surprise attack. The real job for Carrozzo and his men was just starting.

To begin with, Liana Caruana had deployed a powerful barrier around the base camp. Not even a powerful demon could come near…or rather, the more powerful a demon was, the more difficult it would be to approach the camp. Thanks to that protection, Carrozzo and his men could breathe a little easier and focus their energies on guarding against human adversaries, he thought as he watched the Akatsuki siblings go.

Abruptly, he stopped walking, sensing that something was off. Some kind of straight object resembling the branch of a tree was poking out of the ground, still wet from rain the day before. Carrozzo sucked in his breath when he realized it was actually a shriveled human arm.

“What…is that? A corpse…?”

It was a comparatively recent human corpse buried inside the base camp site. Carrozzo squatted down to discover what he could about the body. At that moment—

“—!!”

What Carrozzo thought was a completely shriveled corpse arm attacked him with incredible vigor.

His throat ripped out, the burly guard perished, unable to even raise a shout.

5

In contrast to the plain vanilla exterior, the stone chamber inside the tunnel had glossy, beautifully polished walls. On the way in, it was hard to miss the rubble from repeated bedrock demolition and vestiges of the giant monster clawing its way out, but the interior was largely unscathed.

It was a mysterious room that suggested it had been constructed sometime long before, only to be completed within the last several years. Small wonder it was baffling the explorers.

Kojou genuinely appreciated his first look at the inside of a ruin.

“It’s really a pretty place. I was thinking an underground tomb would be a little darker and scarier, but…”

The stone chamber’s interior was moderately bright, letting him see the layout without even needing a flashlight. Apparently, the rock walls were made out of something that collected and emitted sunlight.

Gajou, entering last as if he was Nagisa’s bodyguard, explained in an uncharacteristically serious tone, “Seems like this was built more as a temple than an actual tomb.”

“Some ancient god sleepin’ here or something?”

“God, you say?” Gajou made a delighted chuckle in his throat and continued, “Nothing that holy. I suppose if you’re gonna compare it to gods, a fallen god’s not far off.”

“Doc…!” Liana scolded Gajou.

But Gajou laughed without restraint and shook his head.

“No point hiding it now. It’s not like I’m trying to scare you here. It just happens to be the truth.”

Kojou glared at his father. “What do you mean?”

“Where should I begin?” Gajou said, scowling ever so slightly. “Have you heard of the Fourth Primogenitor?”

“The Kaleid Blood thing, the phantom primogenitor served by twelve Beast Vassals, was it…?”

Of course Kojou knew the name. It was an urban legend famous enough that pretty much everyone had to have heard it once. *He’s probably pullin’ my leg*, Kojou thought, annoyed.

“That’s right,” Gajou replied. “He has no blood brethren, standing alone as

the World's Mightiest Vampire. It's said he's appeared at turning points in history several times, bringing genocide and devastation to the world in his wake."

"But there's no actual proof of that, is there? Even elementary schoolers wouldn't believe occult stuff like that nowadays."

Gajou pointed to the far side of the stonework room before he answered.

"There is proof, and it's right before your eyes."

There stood a thick, stonework door. Kojou couldn't see any seams or hinges, nor could he figure out how someone was supposed to open it. Trying to blow up the door might bring the whole stone room crashing down, burying everyone alive. It was probably a trap constructed with incredibly high-end technology.

He figured Nagisa had been called in to help them figure out how to open the thing.

Unwittingly lowering his voice, Kojou asked, "So what, the Fourth Primogenitor's asleep inside that thing?"

Gajou cackled without a care in the world. "That'd be real funny, wouldn't it?"

Kojou did a double take and shouted at his father, "What the heck?! You can't go digging up valuable ancient ruins with a ridiculous theory like that!"

"It's not ridiculous at all!" Liana yelled, pain clear in her voice.

"L-Liana…?"

Kojou looked back at her, dumbfounded. The echo of Liana's cry reverberated faintly inside the huge stonework chamber. Liana, perhaps embarrassed when she regained hold of herself, said, "I'm sorry" in a small, apologetic voice, hanging her head in silence.

Gajou seemed to be sticking up for Liana as he spoke in a careless tone. "Well, we adults have our reasons. You kids don't need to sweat the little stuff… This here's the third strata of the underground tomb, the Room of Reminiscence. There should be one more room to go, but it's locked up so tight we can't figure out how to get in. That's why we brought Nagisa over, so…"

Gajou's words trailed off as his gaze shifted to the side of the girl's face. That was when Kojou realized it. The normally ever-chatty Nagisa hadn't spoken a single word since they'd arrived—

Kojou haltingly called out to his little sister. "Nagisa…?"

However, she didn't turn toward him. Her irises were open wide as she simply stared expressionlessly at the stonework door.

Kojou suddenly realized that the pale glow from the ruin's walls had increased. The stone became as transparent as crystal; inside it, something like an electric current was forming giant magical symbols.

Nagisa's lips uttered words in a foreign language Kojou didn't know. It was as if she was using those words to communicate with the thoughts that people had left behind in the ruin—

Naturally, the people who'd built the structure knew how to open the stone door. Nagisa was attempting to communicate with their departed spirits to decipher the seal. However, Nagisa had already lost her own consciousness from accepting into herself a being that was simply too powerful.

At the moment, she had no volition of her own. She had become one of the magical circuits making up the control system for the ruin.

Surprised, Liana began to ask, "Doc! What's…?"

Gajou's expression contained only the faintest trace of nervousness. "Looks like the ruin's getting a reboot. Considering the gargoyle, I had a pretty good idea that the magical power source was still running, but it's a bigger show than I expected."

Nagisa remained in a trance. She took a step forward, as if expecting something to happen, and on cue, the light radiating from the stone door grew brighter.

Then, without warning, the door vanished without a trace. Not a single pebble remained.

Most likely, the door had been transferred to another dimension via a spatial control spell. Kojou couldn't even fathom the level of sorcerous technology

required for such a feat.

Liana was beside herself, murmuring as she gazed at Nagisa, still in a hypnotic state.

“It can’t be… A seal that not even the Warlord’s Empire sorcerous engineers could decipher, in but a single moment…”

Gajou shivered violently as a fierce cold blew in from the passage, making even their breath visible.

“Whoa… This thing’s givin’ me the chills!”

The sudden, frigid air caused a dense fog to begin forming within the ruins. Nagisa stepped into the corridor, seemingly melting into the mist.

Kojou hurried to try to stop her.

“Nagisa?!”

Gajou’s voice interceded. “Wait, Kojou! Don’t get close to her!”

“But Nagisa’s…!”

“Leave it to her. At the very least, she’s channeling successfully. It’s more dangerous to shake her out of it.”

“Ugh…!”

Kojou stayed in place and bit his lip. He hated to admit it, but his father was right. All he could do at that moment was desperately follow Nagisa so he didn’t lose sight of her.

When he came out the other side of the clouded passageway, the final chamber lay ahead.

It was a room with high, nearly cylindrical walls. The altar at the chamber’s center resembled a giant block of ice, like a glacier from the farthest reaches of the world. In that icy coffin slept a petite figure—a girl about Nagisa’s size.

Her skin was so pale you could almost see right through it. Her youthful facial features were inhumanly symmetrical, and her faintly pigmented blond hair seemed to reflect light so that it glittered like a rainbow.

Kojou looked up at the girl. “That’s the Fairy’s Coffin…? Is…she dead?” he

murmured.

Certainly, the girl sleeping in the ice coffin formed the picture of a fairy trapped in a piece of clear amber. Somehow, the beautiful being felt ominous.

Even if she was the Fourth Primogenitor, the World's Mightiest Vampire, he wouldn't think she could be alive in that condition. However, everyone in the stone chamber had already realized—it was this very girl in the coffin who was the source of the magical energy coursing through the ruins. And it was she who had called Nagisa.

"We've finally found you… The twelfth Kaleid Blood…!" Liana muttered to herself.

Kojou didn't understand what she meant. But somehow, he felt like that sterile title didn't fit the ephemeral girl sleeping in the coffin.

Countless sharp icicles covered her resting place, fending off all who would approach. They resembled a wall of thorns meant to protect the dormant girl.

Kojou unwittingly said out loud the words that came to mind.

"It's like she's a sleeping princess…"

Yes, the girl trapped alone in the coffin of ice seemed less a vampire than a tragic princess out of a fairy tale.



Apparently, Kojou wasn't the only one to think that. Liana glanced sideways at Kojou's face as a pure smile welled up from inside her, like a white flower taking bloom.

"Sleeping princess… Then, Avrora Florestina…daughter of King Florestin?"

Gajou offered uncharacteristic words of praise.

"That's great. It sounds a hell of a lot more poetic than just naming her after a number."

Kojou felt acutely embarrassed at his father's lack of concern. "This isn't the time to be so laid-back! At this rate, Nagisa's gonna get frozen with her!"

"Ah…yeah…"

Gajou didn't exactly refute his son.

A cold mist shrouded Nagisa, who stood in front of the coffin. At the rate things were going, she would be pulled into the ice, the same coffin that kept Avrora trapped.

Or, perhaps Avrora herself would suck Nagisa's spiritual energy dry in order to return to life—

Yet Gajou, fully aware of these concerns, made no move to rescue Nagisa. To the contrary, he said, "Miss Caruana, do you mind if I leave this in your hands?"

This time, Kojou's mouth hung open as he watched his father suddenly turn his back on Nagisa.

"Dad—?!"

His body moved before he realized it. He leaped, his small clenched fist aimed at his father's face.

But it was not Gajou who stopped him. Before Kojou could smack him in the face, the entire ruin shuddered. It was as if a giant hammer had smashed down, with a shock wave shaking the earth, causing Kojou to lose his balance and fall over.

"…An earthquake?!" he exclaimed.

The whole stone chamber cracked ferociously, and scattered pieces of rubble

rained down on them. The shaking did not continue for long. A powerful wind blew in its place—a blast with the scent of explosives.

Perhaps that shock wave pulled Nagisa out of her trance. Without a sound, her petite figure in its shrine maiden outfit crumpled to the floor.

Liana wore a grave expression as she looked behind her.

“Doc, just now…!”

Gajou took up the rifle he had been carrying over his back, flipping the safety off. It was a bullpup-style automatic weapon for military use.

“Yeah… Looks like we’re running into a bit of trouble.”

The oppressive aura from Kojou’s father told the boy loud and clear that something had suddenly taken a turn for the worse.

“Sorry, Kojou. Take care of Nagisa. I’ll be back soon.”

“Dad!!”

Left behind, Kojou stared dumbfounded at Gajou’s back.

He remembered the imposing atmosphere at the base camp guarded by Carrozzo and the others. They’d known from the start that someone was after the ruin. Kojou was the only one who hadn’t. And Gajou had called Nagisa over to such a place, fully aware there would be danger—

Kojou forcefully pounded the floor with his fist.

“Shit! What the hell is that man thinking?!”

Liana looked down, wincing, as she squatted beside Kojou.

“…I apologize for dragging you into all this. However, please don’t blame Doc. This has been harder for him than anyone else.”

With Liana close to him, Kojou asked her, “What the hell’s with this ruin? It’s not just an underground tomb, is it? Twelfth Kaleid Blood, what *is* that—?!”

Liana quietly released a deadly aura, seemingly to cut Kojou off and brush aside his concerns.

“Let’s save that conversation for later. Kojou, please get back.”

“Eh?”

Liana glared toward the ruin’s entrance as she removed the bracelet on her left wrist. Her eyes glowed crimson as fangs poked out between her lips.

Kojou remembered her true nature. Liana was a noble from the Warlord’s Empire, an Old Guard vampire.

“—Enemies have arrived.”

Before Liana even finished speaking, an avalanche of human silhouettes poured into the stone chamber.

The sight left Kojou at a loss for words. He knew them, the faces of the “enemy” soldiers that had blown open the entrance to the ruin, forcing their way in—

They wore flak jackets and were armed with automatic weapons; they were the very Private Military Corporation guards that had been protecting the camp.

6

Flames engulfed the examination team base camp. The rows of vehicles and heavy machinery were wrecked, and even structures and tents well removed from the ruins had been meticulously torched.

Gajou, heading outside the underground tomb, ground his teeth audibly.

“Man… Really making a mess out here…”

He didn’t know who the enemy was. There were simply too many possibilities. It wasn’t just humans who were opposed to the revival of the Fourth Primogenitor, but plenty of demons were, too—even inside the Warlord’s Empire.

“Did they break Miss Caruana’s barrier? The only ones able to do that ought to be vampires of the same class as the Caruana family… Wait…”

That’s odd, Gajou thought, raising an eyebrow.

Liana Caruana had three Beast Vassals in her care. The barrier protecting the base camp was no doubt one of them, altered into a different form. There was

no way the host, Liana, would be unaware of an attack powerful enough to break it.

Also, the low number of casualties nagged at his thoughts. For all the damage that had occurred, he saw virtually no corpses aboveground. It was possible that the examination team's scholars might have been able to evacuate someplace, but he didn't think the private military guards would collectively abandon their posts.

In the first place, he couldn't see any enemy soldiers—

Gajou kept his guard firmly up as he headed out of the ruin. He was greeted by the unexpected sight of a burly, bearded guardsman.

"Gajou! Thank goodness you're safe."

Gajou glared at Carrozzo, who'd emerged from the shadow of some boulders. "Carrozzo… What happened here?!"

Carrozzo seemed to be injured. The combat outfit he wore was marred with black streaks of blood.

"Sorry, they got us by surprise. They breached the barrier, and you can see the state the camp's in. We managed to drive the enemy off somehow, but we took heavy casualties. Can you lend us a hand, Gajou?"

Gajou listened to his friend's untrustworthy report, gazing at him with a hint of sadness. Then he lifted the barrel of his rifle, aiming it squarely at Carrozzo's chest.

Carrozzo's eyes opened wide in shock.

"Gajou…?!"

But Gajou paid him no heed and pulled the trigger. The bullet hit its target in the right side of the guard's chest, sending fresh blood and pieces of flesh scattering. The gun in the man's hand dropped to the ground.

Carrozzo's dying eyes glared at Gajou.

"What…are you doing, Gajou Akatsuki…?!"

Gajou pulled the rim of his fedora over his eyes, suppressing his anger as he

growled. “Quit the third-rate acting job, you terrorist bastard. There’s no way the real Carrozzo would be pronouncing my name right… Besides, you’ve got the stink of death all over you.”

“Ugh…”

Carrozzo—or rather, the living dead that was once Carrozzo—made a short grunt as if thrown off his game.

With his rifle, Gajou proceeded to unload shot after shot toward the ground, taking out new corpses as they crawled out of the earth one after another. Gajou dispatched the unending wave of emerging zombies.

“Necromancy… I see,” he muttered. “I thought it was odd the barrier would be broken, but you buried corpses all around the ruin before we even got here. Then you animated them and attacked the camp from the inside—”

Dead bodies had no body warmth, no heartbeats, and projected no bloodlust. Even the best detection gear would never expose buried corpses. Thanks to their proximity to the powerful magical energy coursing through the underground tomb, the sorcerers that had come to the excavation site hadn’t sensed the presence of corpses, either.

The enemy had capably laid its trap. Even if Liana’s barrier couldn’t be broken from the outside, it could not fend off an enemy that had lain in wait on the inside from the very beginning.

“A terrorist group that uses necromancy… I’ve heard of that MO. You’re the Black Death Emperor Front!”

The sorcerer controlling Carrozzo shouted with the guard’s voice. “Gajou Akatsuki, the Death Returnee…you have done well to see through my plan…but you are too late!”

His yell signaled new zombies to surface from the ground all around them. Their thick hides made it clear these were not human corpses. Their stout flesh was enough to repel the bullets of Gajou’s rifle.

“Beast men living dead—?!”

Overwhelmed, Gajou took the hint and retreated. A beast man’s physical

strength and agility were fearsome even after zombification.

The Black Death Emperor Front was the name of a terrorist organization born in the Warlord's Empire. They were beast-man supremacists rebelling against vampiric rule over the Dominions. They were also militants dedicated to destroying the Holy Ground Treaty, established so humans and demons could coexist peacefully. They took their name from their leader, the Black Death Emperor, a beast man as well as an astute necromancer spreading terror to every corner of the globe. The enemy far exceeded even his worst expectations.

"You bunch of morons… You know what's in this ruin, and you're attacking anyway?!"

The man controlling Carrozzo brushed off Gajou's question.

"We know not. Nor do we care. However, we do know that the filthy vampire primogenitors have taken a keen interest in this ruin, enough to send the heiress of the Caruana family to keep an eye on it! That gives us more than enough reason to burn this place to ash!"

"Tch…!"

Gajou's expression twisted in impatience. As he thought, the ruin was their target. But he couldn't let them get past him into the ruin—not with Kojou and Nagisa inside.

The necromancer laughed in Carrozzo's voice.

"Do not be concerned. The treasure resting in this ruin shall serve us well. We shall extract all there is to know about the ruin from the brain of your corpse—"

"Hey, it's not like a rotting soup-for-brains like you can understand what's in my head!"

Gajou's rifle ran out of ammo right around when he'd finally managed to take the zombies out of commission. Its duty done, he cast the rifle aside and pulled out a new weapon from the back of his jacket—a sawed-off shotgun.

"Sorry, Carrozzo…I couldn't save you!"

"Hmph… As if a pea shooter like that could bring this body down—"

The burly, zombified form ferociously charged at Gajou. A direct tackle would

no doubt take him down with one blow. But he made no move to evade. Instead, he trained the shotgun's barrel at his old friend and blasted him in the face.

A buckshot cartridge fired from a shotgun could hit a wide area at the cost of penetration. Now that Carrozzo was a living dead, there should have been no way such a round would stop him.

And yet Carrozzo released a terrible scream and rolled onto the ground.

Freed from the sorcerer's control, he had reverted to a mere corpse, lying motionless with his eyes closed.

In his place, a figure wobbled out from behind a nearby clump of boulders. It was the necromancer who had controlled Carrozzo. He groaned in anguish and shot Gajou with a hateful stare.

Gajou loaded a new shell as he said in a somber voice, "An anti-demon, silver-palladium fléchette round. It even works on your astral body."

The bullet had been infused with ritual energy. The tiny fléchettes filling the cartridge had delivered damage not only to Carrozzo's zombified body, but directly to the sorcerer controlling it, too.

"Damn you…damn you! A lowly human maiming my flesh like this—?!" the man wailed, wiping off the fresh blood flowing from his brow.

Every muscle in his body bulged as he shifted forms to morph into an enormous figure—a huge beast man with a pitch-black mane.

Gajou's face froze in astonishment.

"A beast man using necromancy…?!"

There were precious few stout-bodied beast men that had also learned the art of spells. Being an exception marked him as a member of a select few families that inherited such powerful demonic energy. Besides the Black Death Emperor himself, there existed only one other person in the Black Death Emperor Front with the power to pull it off—

"Don't tell me…you're Golan Hazaroff, the Prince of Death?!"

The dark beast man howled.

“I praise you for knowing my name. I shall send you to the afterlife with honor, Gajou Akatsuki!”

Gajou met his gaze and fired his shotgun. However, the beast man evaded the barrage with overwhelmingly swift reactions. With speed beyond what Gajou could track with the naked eye, the man rushed in and drove a powerful knee strike toward him.

“Gah…?!”

The blow bent and snapped the shotgun, and Gajou’s face twisted in agony. The dull sound of breaking bones echoed. Gajou spat out blood as he flew backward.

The flames enveloping the burning base camp dyed the pre-dawn sky scarlet.

7

“Nn…!”

The girl Kojou was carrying in his arms let out a small moan and stirred.

With a flutter of her long eyelashes, she opened her eyes. They were still somewhat unfocused but seemed otherwise normal. She was out of the trance.

“…Ko…jou…?”

Kojou did his best to maintain a calm as he spoke.

“Awake, Nagisa? Might feel like a waste, but you should probably close your eyes a little longer.”

The state of the surrounding area unnerved her. The blond girl trapped in a giant block of ice, the countless icicles reminiscent of thorns, the subterranean stone chamber, the soldiers invading—and the beautiful female vampire that had protected Kojou and Nagisa from the horde of zombified guards.

The vampiress’s perfectly coiffed hair was now disheveled, her entire body covered in blood splatter. She seemed to have sustained her own injuries as well. However, all the zombies assaulting the ruin lay fallen, corpses once more.

She, an Old Guard, had laid waste to dozens of zombies single-handedly. If

she had not been shielding Kojou and Nagisa, she would have probably emerged without a scratch. Her overwhelming combat capability brought no shame to the reputation of the Warlord's Empire nobility.

Nagisa weakly called out to her. "Liana…"

When Liana noticed, she smiled, albeit conflictedly.

"I am sorry. I had my hands rather full with them."

Two beasts were curled around the woman's sides. Each was a huge, glowing wolf, one gold, one silver. They were probably between three and four meters long from head to tail. They were clearly not normal life forms, but rather, magical energy so dense they had taken physical form.

"Beast Vassals…," Nagisa said.

"Yes. Beasts summoned from another world that reside in our vampiric blood…sentient masses of demonic energy. Please be at ease. No matter how many terrorists there may be, they will not touch the coffin or either of you as long as Skol and Hati are with me."

Kojou echoed a word.

"Terrorists…?"

He didn't understand why a group of self-declared terrorists would assault a ruin in the middle of nowhere.

Liana paused briefly, choosing her words carefully as she spoke.

"This is likely the work of the Black Death Emperor Front—beast-man supremacists. They are international criminals claiming beast men are foremost among demons and agitating for the dissolution of the Holy Ground Treaty."

"Why is a group like that after this ruin?" Nagisa inquired.

"They are likely aware that this ruin is connected to the Kaleid Blood. To beast-man supremacists, vampire primogenitors are their most hated of enemies."

Kojou gasped. "I see… So if Avrora really is the Fourth Primogenitor…"

"Yes. To them, she is worth destroying, even at the cost of their own lives."

Liana sighed. Truthfully, she wanted to rush to Gajou's side and protect him at that very moment. However, as the survey team's ace in a fight, Liana could not leave. After all, the Fairy's Coffin, the terrorists' target, was right there with her and the siblings.

"Avrora…?" Nagisa asked, perplexed.

Kojou smiled a little, pointing at the block of ice behind them.

"The name of the sleeping princess. Liana gave it to her."

"Oh…I see."

Nagisa softly squinted up at the girl trapped in ice.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just…feel like she's happy somehow—"

"She? You mean Avrora…?"

Kojou felt a slight unease as he studied Nagisa's face. He'd thought the trance had lifted, but perhaps it hadn't. Or maybe part of Nagisa and Avrora's shared consciousness was still connected—

As this hypothesis sent a great fear through Kojou, Nagisa's entire body suddenly stiffened. Kojou crouched down with her as she fiercely trembled in apparent terror.

"…Nagisa?"

"Something's…coming. What…is this…? No… I'm scared…! Kojou, run…!"

"Hey, Nagisa?!"

His little sister's extreme reaction made him look all around the area. Then a boom, the sound of an explosion, accompanied the collapse of one of the walls of the stonework room.

A huge beast man emerged, beating away the rubble pouring down upon him. This dog-headed, black-maned figure must have been nearly three meters tall. Thanks to his incredibly huge frame, he'd been unable to enter the ruin by coming through the passage.

The dark beast man laughed derisively as he stared at the vampiress.

“—So you were here, Liana Caruana, making a mere human fight me while you quivered like a wild rabbit in a hole in the ground. Just as I would expect of the famously timid daughter of Duke Caruana…taking after her cowardly father.”

Liana’s cheeks flushed. “…Silence, foul beast! I shall permit no further belittling of my father!”

Apparently, the beast man not only knew Liana’s identity but was using it to taunt her. Liana’s predictable response brought a satisfied smile to the beast man’s face. “Don’t make me laugh, little girl. What can you accomplish? Gajou Akatsuki was far more resilient than you.”

The beast man’s implication that he had already disposed of Gajou completely robbed Liana of her composure. In a rage, she launched her own Beast Vassal at him.

“—Skol, tear him to pieces!”

A vampire’s Beast Vassal was a powerful mass of demonic energy. Surely not even the stout physique of a beast man could endure a head-on collision with the powerful servants. Anyone would have been certain of that—save for the beast man himself.

“Do you really think such a Beast Vassal can stand against the Prince of Death?!”

Liana’s charging servant turned into a beam of light, but the pitch-black foe blocked it with his right arm alone. He pinned it in place and moved to squash it completely.

Liana stood rooted in place, dazed at the unbelievable sight.

“Wha…?!”

A beast man able to trade blows with a Beast Vassal unaided—surely such a thing was impossible?

Before her shocked expression, the jet-black man transformed. Now he was not a beast man but a complete beast—one swollen to several times his previous size. His flesh brimmed with dense, powerful demonic energy equal to

—no, superior to Liana's Beast Vassal.

As she realized what the man's power truly was, she exclaimed, "It can't be… divine bestialization?!"

It was a special ability possessed only by a tiny handful of the uppermost ranks of beast men. Through use of vast demonic energy, they temporarily transformed their own flesh and blood into divine beasts, beings of myth and legend on par with angels and dragons.

The beast man explained, "We are not like you vampires, relying on the power of summoned beasts. We are the descendants of the demon wolves that consumed the hearts of giants. It is beast men that are the pinnacle of demonkind! Know the power of the superior race of the surface!!"

Liana recovered from her shock and commanded her other Beast Vassal to attack.

"Enough babbling…! Tear him to pieces, Hati!"

Driving back the transformed foe with two Beast Vassals at once was an attack that abandoned all attempt at defense. But—

"Ka-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha…! As expected of a Warlord's Empire noble, even one fallen from grace. Stubborn girl! But victory is indeed mine!"

"You sound like a sore loser!"

Liana's expression twisted as she unleashed nearly all the demonic energy she could afford. This gave her tunnel vision, slowing her reaction to danger.

As if waiting for that very moment, several zombies flew out of the rubble in the stone room, bearing down upon the now-helpless Liana. The pitch-black beast man had purposely smashed through the wall during his entrance so that he could hide corpses under the rubble.

"Living dead—?!"

The beast man fiercely smiled, certain of victory.

"Too late, Liana Caruana."

Vampires were said to be the mightiest of demons because they possessed

trump cards of overwhelming power: their Beast Vassals. But physically, they were comparatively frail. That was especially true of Liana, a slender woman not blessed with a strong physique. Without the protection of her Beast Vassals, she had no way to withstand the hail of gunfire from the zombified guards.

The zombies blindly fired bullets that pierced Liana's chest and gouged her heart. Kojou could only watch in a daze.

"Lia…na…?!"

Even the young Kojou knew at a glance. An Old Guard vampire could not regenerate from such a deep wound. It was fatal. Liana could no longer be saved—

Nagisa's voice struggled out from her throat. "Ah…"

Liana's body swayed. Her eyes were filled with tears as her now-pale lips weakly formed the words, "I'm sorry, Doc… I…"

Her words never reached Kojou's and Nagisa's ears, drowned out by the beast man's roar. The transformed creature beat away the Beast Vassals that had lost their master. Unable to maintain physical form, the familiars' vast demonic energy burst apart and scattered. The ruin began to collapse from the shock wave.

And Liana, covered in blood, gently toppled forward. Nagisa screamed to the heavens.

"No… Noooooooooooooooooo—!"

The dense demonic energy hovering in the ruin, the aftereffects of combat, and Liana's thoughts at the moment of her demise flooded the young priestess's heart.

The jet-black beast man stared scornfully at the anguished Nagisa. But he immediately lost interest in her and raised his head higher. No doubt he had judged that the young human siblings were not worth the effort to kill.

"The Fourth Primogenitor—?"

He gazed at the block of ice behind Kojou and Nagisa, as well as the girl

slumbering within.

Liana's rampaging Beast Vassals had half-wrecked the huge block of ice, leaving part of the girl's lifeless body exposed to outside air. However, she showed no signs of awakening. There was no reason why the limp form trapped inside the ice should rise.

"I have no interest in whether the ruin is genuine or not, but the fact Liana Caruana risked her life to protect it makes it worth smashing…," he said. "Young siblings, curse your ill fortune for being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

The zombies had raised their guns before the beast man even finished his words. No doubt they intended to smash Avrora's body to pieces in one volley so she could never be revived again, and the beast man was well aware Kojou and Nagisa beside her would be collateral damage—

"Ah…ahhh……," Nagisa quietly cried.

Kojou embraced his suffering little sister as he desperately struggled against despair. Gajou wasn't coming back. Liana was dead. There was no one left to protect them. The young Kojou had no way to take on the vile beast man and the zombies.

Even so, he did not give up. He needed to protect Nagisa. *Think*, Kojou urged himself.

Think, think, think. What can I do to save Nagisa? What can I—?

Time would not wait for Kojou's decision.

"The legend of the Kaleid Blood ends here—blow her apart!" the beast man commanded.

The zombies pulled their triggers. The gun barrels all spewed fire.

8

The inside of the dimly lit ruin was buried in thick mist, gun smoke, and ice fragments—the remains of the zombies' volley. Surely, the lifeless body of the girl trapped in ice, showered in innumerable bullets, had been ripped to fine

shreds. Even if the girl really was the Fourth Primogenitor, she could not rise again.

Of course, the Prince of Death, Golan Hazaroff, didn't believe the Fourth Primogenitor could really exist, but he didn't care if it was a fake. The only thing that mattered was the story that the Prince of Death had destroyed the Fourth Primogenitor, the World's Mightiest Vampire. The fact that Liana Caruana had protected her would only add to the rumor's credibility. As a consequence, the name of the terrorist group *The Black Death Emperor Front* would gain even greater prestige.

Though, the price paid for that had by no means been small—

Wiping blood from the corner of his mouth, Hazaroff murmured, "So it is done…"

He had burn marks from his side to his back thanks to the still-raw wound from his battle with Gajou Akatsuki. Though a mere human, he had caused Hazaroff no minor annoyance and even landed a spell bullet on him in the process.

Undergoing divine bestialization while so gravely wounded had shaved a good amount off Hazaroff's life span. The battle with Liana Caruana was far from an overwhelming victory on his part. Indeed, had he not resorted to employing the zombies, he would have been the one backed into a corner. But none of this changed the fact that Hazaroff had won. He felt exhilaration as never before, reveling in having defeated a powerful enemy in spite of his difficulties.

But as if to pour cold water on Hazaroff's satisfaction, a faint voice echoed from within the mist, the voice of an Eastern girl dressed in shamanic clothing.

"Kojou! Kojou… Open your eyes, Kojou! Please, I'm begging you…!"

She was clinging onto the body of the boy, apparently her older brother, desperately attempting to save him.

No matter how she tried, the outcome would be evident to anyone. The teenager's body had endured a battery of bullets and was completely soaked in blood. Countless shots had ripped through his chest. Even a vampire with high regenerative ability was likely beyond saving with such wounds, let alone a

mere human.

However, the little sister's survival had surprised him. He'd been certain the volley had finished both off—

Hazaroff looked down at the expired Eastern boy, exhaling in admiration.

"I see… You protected your little sister. I praise your strong spirit, boy."

A split second before he was caught in the salvo, he'd likely thrust away his little sister with all his might into a corner of the stonework room away from the target area. Then he had acted as a decoy, drawing the living dead's gunfire.

"A reckless plan, but I accept that your conduct was brave. However, your body is but that of a frail human. Unfortunate…," he said in a pitying tone.

Then he transformed into a giant divine beast once more.

It bothered him that the teenager's body was more or less intact in spite of that great hail of bullets. If so, it was possible that the Fourth Primogenitor's body was similarly intact. Even if the chance was small, prudence demanded he burn everything, just in case.

Hazaroff laughed cruelly and announced to the shamanic girl, "—Fear not. This time I shall put you out of your misery!"

The vast demonic energy inside the jet-black beast man condensed into a powerful, divine bestial breath of flame with which he intended to annihilate everything in the ruin. But just before he unleashed his attack, a faint misgiving arose in the back of his mind.

Why had the teenage boy *stood right in front of the coffin*?

He was sure the boy had known the living dead were aiming at the coffin. There was no need to expose himself to the gunfire like that, even to protect his little sister.

Could he have tried to save the Fourth Primogenitor—? No, that couldn't have been it. Protecting his little sister took everything he'd had. There was no place for anything else. No, he had tried to save his little sister, to the point of sacrificing himself.

Why, then, had he willingly chosen death?

Even if his little sister had survived the initial gunfire, there was no guarantee that he would let her go. It was natural for him to expect that someone might finish her off, just as Hazaroff was doing that very moment.

If he really wanted to save his sister, he himself had to survive. Liana Caruana was no more. There was no one to protect her except the boy.

But what if he knew that a being existed who *could* save his little sister?

Hazaroff continued charging his demonic energy when he involuntarily blurted, “The Fourth Primogenitor…! Where are the Fourth Primogenitor’s remains…?!”

Hazaroff commanded his living dead subordinates to search. The body of the Fourth Primogenitor, the girl who should have been trapped in the coffin, was nowhere to be seen.

The Prince of Death’s voice quivered. “Boy… You could not have…?!”

Back when Liana’s Beast Vassals had run amok, the ice coffin had cracked, and the girl’s remains had come into view. If she was the genuine Fourth Primogenitor, her flesh was immutable, said to be a curse from the gods themselves. It would be small wonder if one little nudge was enough to revive her. One little nudge—

For instance, a human sacrifice offering her his own blood?

“You planned this?! To have the gunfire pour your flesh and blood upon the Fourth Primogenitor?!”

Then Hazaroff finally realized that the girl trapped inside the block of ice wasn’t gone. She was merely submerged—in a pool of blood under the tattered and torn body of the boy!

He thought he heard the supposedly deceased boy call out someone’s name.

“Av…ro…ra……”

The next moment, an icy chill suddenly blew in, filling every corner of the ruin’s interior.

Hazaroff’s face contorted in shock.

“What is…thiiiiiiis…?!”

The bloodstained girl rose up, visibly supporting the wounded boy’s body. She was a fairy-like girl dressed in nothing but a thin, plain cloth.

Her hair glimmered like the rainbow and billowed like flames, and when she opened her eyes, they released a pale, blazing light.

Bathed in the cold emanating from the girl, the living dead froze, shattering one by one. Even the transformed Hazaroff was cowed by the massive demonic energy.

“It is no use. Even if you are the genuine Fourth Primogenitor, you have barely awakened. You are no foe of mine!” Hazaroff roared.

He unleashed all the demonic energy he had in a fiery breath of the highest caliber—hellish, highly condensed demonic flames able to annihilate even vampiric Beast Vassals in a single blow.

However, the fiery-eyed girl easily fended off that lethal black inferno.

Behind her back, a giant shadow rose, translucent like a glacier. Its upper half resembled a human woman, while the lower half resembled a fish. Wings grew from her back, with the tips ending in razor-sharp, talon-like claws. She seemed like a mermaid of ice, or perhaps a siren—

It was a summoned beast from a different world, wavering like a mirage…

“A…Beast Vassal…?!” Hazaroff exclaimed.

The servant the girl had called completely annihilated his black flaming breath. The remaining demonic energy then became a wild icy torrent, instantly freezing the divinely transformed Hazaroff. It froze him below absolute zero, a negative on the Kelvin scale, where matter could not maintain itself as matter—

He moaned, “Im…possible… Such incredible power…cannot exi…”

He could maintain his consciousness no longer.

His flesh and blood completely faded away without a trace. As well as any sign he had ever existed.

Inside the collapsing stonework room, Nagisa Akatsuki weakly murmured,

“Kojou…”

Then everything went white—

9

Under the dazzling rays of the sun, Gajou Akatsuki awoke.

The horizon was cast in blue. Night had broken.

Gajou’s body was covered in wounds. His beloved leather jacket had been ripped to tatters, dyed red and black from blood. Thanks to excessive blood loss, he was very cold. But he was alive. With so many of his comrades dead, Gajou—and Gajou alone—had survived. Again.

As he lay upon the hard outcropping, he heard a voice from a girl with a small hint of a lisp.

“—It seems you’ve come to.”

Gajou let out a small groan as he tried to turn his head toward the voice. Even the slightest wiggling of his fingers sent fierce pain shooting through his entire body. Apparently, he was pretty beat-up. Even so, he forced himself to sit up so he could see the speaker. She was a small-statured Eastern girl wearing an elegant, frilly dress. She had a beautiful face, reminiscent of a doll’s, and long hair. For some reason, though it was early morning, she was holding a parasol over herself. Her face seemed less young and more like it only resembled a child’s, and the aura she gave off carried a strange gravitas and charisma. No doubt she was older than she looked.

“It is best you do not move as of yet,” she said. “Your left arm is broken. Though, to face the Prince of Death and survive with just injuries… The luck of the Death Returnee, Gajou Akatsuki, is as strong as the rumors say.”

Gajou clicked his tongue in dismay at the hateful title. It was an infamous name, granted because he had faced danger at numerous ruins, only to be the sole survivor—thus, the Death Returnee. He didn’t like being known by that epithet, but it couldn’t be helped; facts were facts.

“That outfit… I see. You must be Natsuki Minamiya, the demon-slaying Witch

of the Void.”

Gajou had purposefully used her moniker in an attempt to return the verbal barb. However, the small girl in the dress merely hmphed and gave a small, scornful smile. Then she lowered her eyes with a hint of sadness.

“I am pursuing remnants of the Black Death Emperor Front at the request of the Warlord’s Empire’s Master of Serpents. I’m sorry. If I’d arrived a little sooner, there would not have been so many casualties.”

“Nah… This ruin was hidden by a magic barrier. Of course you couldn’t find it.”

Gajou listlessly shook his head. Investigating the ruin of the Fairy’s Coffin was a top-secret project known only to precious few in the Warlord’s Empire and the Japanese government. The blame didn’t rest on Natsuki’s shoulders or anyone else’s.

Natsuki casually stated, as if to console the dejected Gajou, “There are twenty-three survivors of the survey team—about half the staff aboveground were able to evacuate thanks to the time you bought holding off the Prince of Death.”

Gajou shrugged his shoulders as he shifted his gaze to the former ruin. The collision of giant demonic energies had collapsed the underground tomb completely.

It was unrecognizable. Restoring the interior was virtually a lost cause.

“And Miss Caruana?”

“The daughter of Duke Caruana? …Unfortunately…”

“I see.”

Gajou sighed briefly. He’d guessed Liana was dead from the dissolution of the barrier around the camp. It probably meant that Kojou and Nagisa, whom she had been protecting, were beyond saving.

In a dry tone, Gajou made a hollow laugh and rose to his feet.

“You’ve been a lot of help. You have my thanks, Natsuki.”

“Do not speak my name so casually, Gajou Akatsuki. Besides, I did nothing that you should be thanking me for.”

“Weren’t you the one who took down Hazaroff?” he asked, perplexed.

Natsuki’s eyes conveyed no emotion as she silently shook her head.

“It was all over by the time I entered the ruin. I did not destroy the Prince of Death.”

“Who, then? You don’t mean he and Miss Caruana took each other out…?”

Gajou was beside himself as he spoke. Liana had died fighting Golan Hazaroff, the Prince of Death. There was no one present besides her, a vampire noble, capable of defeating Hazaroff. None, save a single exception—



Natsuki smiled provocatively as she twirled her parasol round and round.

“All I did was bring the children buried underground outside.”

“Chil…dren…?”

“It seems you gave the twelfth Kaleid Blood the name of Avrora Florestina?”

“The sleeping princess… She woke up…?!”

Who knows? Natsuki seemed to be saying as she smiled. She said in a noncommittal tone of voice, “I have no evidence that Avrora awakened. Who destroyed the Prince of Death remains unclear. For now, at least.”

She knew full well just how dangerous the present situation was. She understood what the awakening of the twelfth Kaleid Blood meant.

She continued: “Nagisa Akatsuki is alive with heavy injuries. I’ve arranged an aircraft to get her to a hospital in Rome.”

Natsuki pointed to the camp, scorched but still standing, to punctuate her assertion. A Demon Sanctuary medical team was treating the wounded in portable tents. Among them was a girl dressed like a priestess, sleeping like the dead inside a translucent medical capsule.

They’d apparently abandoned all hope of on-site treatment and intended to transport her to a hospital outside the country while still in a coma.

Gajou looked around the camp and asked, “What happened to Kojou? He had to have been with Nagisa!”

His son was nowhere to be found among the wounded receiving treatment.

Natsuki’s beautiful eyes narrowed in a smile that seemed dangerous somehow.

“The boy is unharmed. He is simply sleeping.”

He felt his entire body go numb.

“Unharmed?”

“Yes, despite all the signs that his entire body had been riddled and gouged with bullets, including his lungs and heart.”

“…What?!”

“—The twelfth Kaleid Blood and the Akatsuki siblings shall come under the care of the Far East Demon Sanctuary. The Warlord’s Empire has agreed. No complaints, Gajou Akatsuki?”

Gajou finally grasped what Natsuki was getting at. “The Far East Demon Sanctuary…?! I see, Itogami Island…!”

Itogami Island was an artificial island floating in the Pacific Ocean, a special administrative district under the jurisdiction of the Japanese government. It was also the stomping grounds of Natsuki Minamiya, the Witch of the Void. Once one was on Itogami Island, far removed from Europe, the other Dominions couldn’t touch them. They wouldn’t reach Avrora nor the Akatsuki siblings—
“Nicely played, Witch of the Void—” he muttered.

Natsuki Minamiya giggled with a proud smile as she said, “It concerns The Cleansing, so I twisted a few arms. Surely it is not a bad arrangement from your perspective? Are you dissatisfied, Gajou Akatsuki?”

“…Nah. I hate the fact it’s all going as you please, but I don’t see any other options.”

He lifted the edge of his scorched fedora. Then he turned his back to Natsuki.

She raised an eyebrow slightly. “Where do you think you’re going?”

Gajou never turned back, languidly waving with his still-broken left arm.

“…I’ve got no right to face those kids right now, and it seems I can trust you. Sorry, but you’re gonna have to look after ’em for a while longer.”

“Do you intend to search for a way to save those children?”

Natsuki’s question stopped Gajou in his tracks. He grinned with a twitch of his cheek, like he was mocking himself.

“I’m a scholar… Looking for stuff is my specialty.”

Gajou resumed walking, nearly dragging his unsteady body forward. Natsuki made no move to stop him. Finally, he vanished amid the dazzling rays of the sun.

The wind blew across the scarred outcropping, still carrying a whiff of gunpowder.

That was the first meeting of the twelfth Kaleid Blood and the Akatsuki siblings—and the prelude to a new tragedy.



Chapter Two
Shadow of Another Kaleid Blood

CHAPTER TWO

SHADOW OF ANOTHER KALEID BLOOD

1

The narrow alley was heavy with the scents of salt water and rusted steel.

A jumble of abandoned structures lined the street. The walls of the buildings were cracked, and even the interior steel framework was exposed. Unsightly graffiti decorated the shutters. Finding an intact pane of glass would have been a substantial task.

However, a large number of drunken souls reveled in that filthy district, searching for decadent pleasures—men fishing the waters for women, as well as the prostitutes they sought. Others were drowning under large quantities of alcohol and illegal narcotics. Those roaming that place were finely attuned to the scent of blood, violence, and money.

It was a heretical district, unworthy of the Demon Sanctuary city that was the pinnacle of scholarly research. Yet, in another sense, this was the inevitable by-product of that success. The district was known as Itogami Island Abandoned Zone No. 27. It was the ruin of Island Old Southwest, which had sunk into the sea due to an unforeseen accident—the “erased district” literally wiped off the map.

A lone man walked along a chaotic street in that district. He was a tall, handsome young fellow.

He was not wearing his beloved white coat, but rather a black leather biker jacket. Due to the district’s atmosphere, the outfit did not stand out much. Even so, the young man himself attracted a great deal of attention thanks to his perfectly combed blond hair and flawlessly symmetrical face—as well as a refined elegance in his every motion. He shone among men as brightly as a gold

coin among mere pebbles.

A few minutes after entering the district, the young man found himself at the center of a group of roughneck men.

“Hold on, bro.”

It was the instinct of all district residents to drive outsiders away, but they directed outright hostility at him. Another voice came from behind, apparently cutting off his avenue of escape.

“What are you doin’ ’round here? Had a fight with Mommy and left home?”

Before he realized it, the number around him had swelled to about ten. However, he paid that no heed, glancing sullenly at the locals.

The residents pulled back a step, seemingly cowed by that silent gaze. The young man resumed his walk like nothing had happened as the locals stared without a word.

The roughnecks were not especially smart, but their instincts told them loud and clear that, should the blond young man have willed it, they would have been instantly annihilated. And they had been allowed to live thanks only to his whim.

The young man was headed to a run-down tavern, a less than popular establishment making use of a condemned building. The number of patrons could be counted on one hand. The scent hovering inside came from a narcotic made from cactus extracts. It was a powerful hallucinogen, enough that a normal human taking even a small quantity would die from an overdose. It worked fairly well even on demons resistant to drugs.

Behind the counter was a bartender who appeared to be the owner. He was over three meters tall, and beyond that, his physique was clearly not that of a normal human. He was a so-called Gigas, a race of giants low in number and rarely seen, even in Demon Sanctuaries or Dominions.

The barkeep addressed the young man in a rumbling voice like a bass instrument.

“Haven’t seen your face before.”

Behind those words was a clear undertone stating, *Now get lost.* However, the young man calmly walked to the barkeep and put a stack of bills on the counter. It was probably more than a half-year's worth of profits for the tavern.

The blond young man quietly asked, his voice elegant yet acidic, "I've heard that a young female vampire has been hiding out here. Could you introduce us?"

The barkeep took the stack of paper while bluntly shaking his head.

"Haven't heard one word about that."

"Hmph." As he smiled charmingly, sharp fangs protruded from the gap between his lips. He casually realized that a pair of men who had been drinking inside the tavern had walked over to the counter, hemming him in on both sides. Like the owner, each was over three meters tall, likely weighing over four hundred kilograms each, forming an impressive and imposing wall of muscle.

"—Get lost. This place is for Gigas only," one of the giants threatened.

However, the young man calmly disregarded the warning.

"Not enough chips on the table? How about this?"

He placed a few dozen coins known as Northern Imperial krones on the counter. They had to be worth over one hundred thousand Japanese yen. Special measures were employed to prevent counterfeiting of the North Sea Empire's silver coins, and many were used for dealings among criminal organizations.

Without thinking, the storekeeper stretched his hand toward the silver coins, but he stopped at the sound of patrons' angry voices.

"Hey, you have a lot of nerve ignoring us, brat!"

The giant on the right wrapped his arms around the young man and lifted him in the air in a bear hug.

"What, you thought you could walk all over a Gigas in the middle of a Sanctuary?"

The young man probably weighed less than twenty percent of any of the giants. However, his expression revealed no panic. On the contrary, he gazed at

the bracelets the giants wore as he used one hand to restrain the giant's arms.

They were demon registration bracelets issued by the Gigafloat Management Corporation—simultaneously serving as citizen identification and a monitoring shackle. When demons committed acts of violence within Itogami City limits, that information was conveyed to the Island Guard. However, in spite of the giants' rage, the bracelets showed no response.

The blond man calmly surveyed the area as he said, "Hmm, so the bracelet infrastructure doesn't work out here?"

Apparently, the erased district was outside of the operating range of the system, like an electromagnetic blind spot. In other words, even if demons ran riot in the district, no one would notice, not even if someone were to die as a result…

"Even in a district that shouldn't exist, it would be quite a problem if word of this got out."

"If you understand, then get the hell out right now. Or do you want me to suffocate you?" the giant to the right replied.

"…What is making you so nervous, hmm?"

The man's chuckling comment froze the two giants' faces.

"What?!"

He easily released himself from the vice grip. This was not a feat that his body ought to have been able to perform. And yet, it was the giant whose bones creaked against overwhelming strength.

The young man's eyes were dyed red as his fangs gleamed white once more. The giant staggered back as he was completely thrust away.

"A vampire?! But that power…!"

In the meantime, the man on the left drew a weapon from his back. To a giant, it was no more than a simple knife, but its blade looked like a great sword to human eyes.

"You're…Dimitrie Vattler?!"

The eerie man—Vattler—smiled up at the knife-wielding giant in obvious delight.

“And you turn your blade toward me, knowing this? I see. It seems you are not simple thugs.”

Vattler’s tall body suddenly swayed. The concrete building’s floor warped as if about to collapse, but only in the area near him. Surely it was the air inside the tavern, groaning in agony from a sudden change in air pressure, causing innumerable cracks in the walls and pillars of the building.

Utterly calm, Vattler endured the incredible pressure bearing down on his entire body.

“A weapon of the Gigas, who control elemental power… I would expect as much from self-declared children of demigods.”

The Gigas did not rely on the strength supporting their giant bodies alone. Perhaps their suitability for barren deserts, wastelands, and other harsh climates made their flesh especially compatible with elemental spirits. In other words, many Gigas were natural-born Spirit Mages. In addition, since ancient times, giants had been renowned for their mining, metalworking, and forging techniques. Weapons forged by them borrowed power from spirits to enable high-end sorcery for a variety of special powers. Indeed, the kingdom of Aldegia’s Völundr System had been developed from the study of Gigas weaponry.

The Gigas man’s knife was one such magic weapon, a vile demonic blade able to manipulate gravity. At a hundred times normal gravity, Vattler’s body weighed several tons; a ten-centimeter fall had the same impact as falling ten meters to the ground. Furthermore, the super-gravitational area of effect was confined to where Vattler was standing. The two giants were unaffected by the magic blade’s effects and could attack him at will.

But a moment after the giants became certain of their victory…

“…G…wah?!”

Thud came an impact with the force of an iron maul, sending both giants flying.

Vattler had not yet summoned a Beast Vassal. He had merely loosened the reins holding the demonic energy inside his body for one brief moment. The explosive magical energy easily nullified the gravity attack and battered both Gigas.

In the process, the surge of power blew away an exterior wall of the aging establishment, and fragments of the collapsing ceiling poured into the tavern.

The bloodstained giant on the right side murmured ruefully, “Ugh…damned rabid dog…”

…and promptly lost consciousness. The giant on the left was more gravely injured, the price he had paid for using the magic blade until the bitter end in the hopes of weakening the vampire’s counterattack even a little.

Vattler stood alone amidst the thick dust, completely unharmed.

The only other person in the tavern, the barkeep, simply stood behind the counter, dumbfounded.

Vattler glanced at the two giants, satisfied by their will to fight to the end. Then he turned his crimson eyes toward the shivering barkeep and smiled cruelly enough to turn his blood to ice.

“Now, if I may continue my questions…”

A woman was standing on the roof of a half-collapsed building.

She was a foreign girl wearing a white hood, and her graceful legs were as pale as a ghost’s. The unmoving figure staring at the sea resembled a beautiful piece of engraved glass.

And at the dark bottom of the clear water lay a vast ruin. She was by herself, gazing at this submerged urban area.

Vattler walked up a set of half-destroyed stairs as he spoke to the girl.

“—Island Old Southwest, the tragic district that sank here a half a year ago.”

His tone was as conceited as always, but his words were tinged with frigid bloodlust. The reason for his anger was not that he had been unexpectedly delayed in discerning her location. Rather, the fact that she was standing in that place at all rubbed Vattler the wrong way.

The ruin of Island Old Southwest was holy ground that held a host of feelings for him. It was the gravestone of a particular group of girls and not a place for unrelated outsiders to tread.

However, the girl in the white hood did not even turn her head as she murmured, “So you have come, Dimitrie Vattler…”

His lips curled into a smile. The girl knew he was coming. In other words, she had prepared herself for the eventuality of combat.

“Who are you? When did you sneak into Itogami Island? And what are you looking into here?” he asked quietly.

She was not a legitimate citizen of Itogami City. She was an unregistered demon and an illegal visitor. But on the other hand, she knew about the erased district and the existence of Island Old Southwest at the bottom of the sea. She knew, then, a great level of detail about the happenings on Itogami Island.

On top of that, she had co-conspirators concealing her even at the risk of their very lives. He very much doubted members of the proud Gigas race would offer their loyalty to a simple vampire girl.

But the little girl casually blew off Vattler’s doubts.

“Pay me no heed… I am very generous tonight, so as a special exception, I shall let you go. Leave, Master of Serpents.”

A joyful look came over Vattler.

“How lovely. Snuck in on a boat, did you? All the more amusing for me…!”

Behind him, the vacillating shadow of a giant Beast Vassal floated up into the air. If the opponent was a fellow vampire, there was no reason for Vattler to refrain from summoning his Beast Vassals.

The girl waved with a sleeve of her robe as she slowly turned around. “Hmm, so you disregard my warning? Just as well.”

“Quick and to the point.” Vattler laughed. Apparently, the girl meant to fight him head-on. A combat maniac such as himself couldn’t ask for a better situation. Worst case, he would *consume* the girl and extract his information that way.

Vattler summoned two Beast Vassals.

“—Nanda! Batsunanda!”

He merged both of these together to create a new Beast Vassal, its magical power amplified several times over. Together they became a steel-colored dragon engulfed in incandescent flames. The vast magical energy, on par with a Beast Vassal from a primogenitor, made the abandoned artificial ground shudder and created turbulent ripples on the surface of the surrounding seawater.

The girl exhaled in admiration.

“Ohh…!”

Vattler had two reasons to use a Fusion Beast Vassal at the outset. First, to rob his enemy of the will to fight with a display of the overwhelming superiority of his might; second, to unleash maximum power against an opponent of unknown caliber, faithfully adhering to the fundamentals of tactics.

Even if the opponent was a little girl, Vattler did not underestimate his enemies—his pure combat instincts had always saved his life in the past.

“So this is your much-rumored Fusion Beast Vassal? Certainly, its strength is impressive.”

The instant the mighty creature attacked the girl, she raised her right hand, fending off the attack with the greatest of ease. The fused Beast Vassal was annihilated in the shock wave of its own attack.

Vattler groaned from the ferocious backlash. “Ugh?!”

Unable to maintain its physical form, the fused Beast Vassal split apart, returning to the alien world from whence it came.

The girl had not blocked Vattler’s attack—quite the opposite. In the instant the Beast Vassal had collided with the girl, it had barely managed to nullify the incredible demonic power she released. Even the stalwart Fusion Beast Vassal had been unable to withstand the girl’s attack.

“That’s crazy… How could you…?”

The girl looked back at the shaken Vattler with delight. “Why are you

surprised? I am *the World's Mightiest Vampire*. Is my blocking your attack so unexpected?"

A surge of wind blew back the girl's hood, revealing her face. She was around fourteen or fifteen years old with fairy-like beauty. The hair that reached her hips was blond, but in the light of the sun, it reflected all the colors of the rainbow. Her large eyes glimmered like blue flames.

She continued, "What is wrong, Master of Serpents? Have you forgotten my face? Or do you find it mysterious that I am here when I should be dead?"

Vattler's teeth ground deep inside his mouth.

"Flaming eyes… Avrora…Florestina…?!"

The density of the destructive magical energy flowing from his entire body was on a completely different level than before. He summoned three serpents at the same time, merging them into a single, four-legged golden dragon. The miasma it released was enough to turn the nearby air into poison. The vegetation in the surrounding area turned brown, withering and crumbling away.

The girl let out a small giggle, smiling with childlike innocence.

"Triple fusion… How amusing. To be so frenzied at the mere sight of me—there is an adorable side to you, young Vattler."

"—Since you have shown yourself in that form, surely there is no need for restraint. Apologies, but I will make you pay an appropriate price," Vattler said coldly.



It was not possible for Avrora Florestina, the previous Fourth Primogenitor, to be standing before him.

It couldn't be her because Kojou Akatsuki had already inherited the power of the Fourth Primogenitor. Avrora no longer existed. There was a reason why she *could not* exist.

However, these were trivial concerns to Vattler. Whether the girl before his eyes was the real Avrora Florestina or not mattered little. His reasoning was straightforward: If she was the true Fourth Primogenitor, she would survive Vattler's attack, and if she was an imposter, she would perish then and there.

Without a single moment of hesitation, Vattler made his decision amid the chaos.

The girl's fangs protruded as she grinned, pleased with Vattler's judgment.

"Indeed."

He charged at the girl with the giant Fusion Beast Vassal. He was enveloped in incredible demonic energy well surpassing that of a vampire noble. His reputation as a man who had butchered several Wisemen above that rank wasn't for nothing. Surely, only the true primogenitors themselves could stand against Vattler now—any one of the three primogenitors occupying the thrones of their Dominions, or the Fourth Primogenitor, whose very existence was in question—

Then the girl narrowed her blazing eyes with delight as she noted to herself, "Eliminating you first was indeed the right decision, Master of Serpents."

The next instant, he saw the girl move away from him at incredible speed.

No, it was not the girl who was moving away. Vattler and his Beast Vassal alone were cut off from the real world. Darkness obscured his vision, leaving him unable to see anything. Sound, scent, and even gravity disappeared. Finally, he was even doubting his own existence.

"…Spatial control… No, this space itself is a Beast Vassal?!"

It was Vattler's abundant wealth of combat experience that enabled him to grasp his current situation. The girl had landed her attack on Vattler before he

managed to strike her.

The space itself, a world of infinite darkness, was a materialized Beast Vassal. Her weapon now comprised the entire world around him.

Unsurprisingly, even Vattler could not contain his shock. She *had* to be a real primogenitor to control a Beast Vassal of such a scale.

Imprisoned by darkness, Vattler heard the girl's voice speaking directly to the back of his mind.

"Do not think I shall take your life. You will remain on the sidelines here until I have concluded my business."

He could detect no hostility in her words or in the wry laugh that accompanied them.

Vattler exhaled and then murmured, "I see—So this was your objective from the beginning. To cut Kojou off from the Warlord's Empire surveillance…"

Somehow, his expression looked like a pout, something he would never display under normal circumstances.

The girl abruptly altered her tone, sounding amused yet somehow sincere.

"This is not personal, Dimitrie Vattler. I understand why you are attached to the Fourth Primogenitor. However, it is not the Lost Warlord alone who takes an interest in him."

"You will pay dearly for this—" he threatened, still floating in darkness.

"I shall remember, Dimitrie Vattler—my good, old friend," she teased.

With that, the girl's presence grew distant, leaving the vampire aristocrat in darkness, alone.

2

Thursday, near the end of November—

It was late autumn on the calendar, but on the tropical Itogami Island, the rays of the sun still streamed down in force.

That morning, the slumber of Kojou Akatsuki, the World's Mightiest Vampire, was disturbed by his apartment's doorbell. The melodic electronic chime stubbornly echoed throughout the household several times.

Kojou had pulled up his sheets in an attempt to ignore it, but this, of course, could only do so much.

He sluggishly sat up, reaching toward his bedside alarm clock.

"A guest…huh?"

The sunbeams filtering through the curtain burned Kojou's defenseless skin. Well, not that it dealt any actual damage, but it was uncomfortable and distinct unpleasant. His mind felt like it was covered in cobwebs, still vague and nonfunctional. Now that Kojou was a vampire, he was decidedly not a morning person.

"Who the hell is it on a normal morning like this…? Do they even know what time it is…?"

Kojou grumbled to himself as he peered at the face of the clock. A moment later, he was unable to control the idiotic-sounding cry from his throat.

"Nuoooooo!"

The small arm of the clock was at an impossible angle, displaying that it was a full hour past his normal wake-up time. At this rate he'd be late for sure. He didn't even know if he'd make it if he left the apartment right that moment—

In haste, Kojou leaped off the bed and picked up the intercom receiver.

"H-Himeragi?!"

He heard the voice of an all too serious girl from the microphone at the front door.

"Good morning, senpai."

It was Yukina Himeragi, a girl in her third year of middle school at Saikai Academy—and Kojou's watcher, dispatched from the Lion King Agency.

In contrast to the flustered Kojou, Yukina was calm and composed. Thanks to her being a federally licensed stalker, she was always monitoring Kojou's

activities through the use of mysterious ritual spells. She had known from the start that he'd been asleep. And having waited until the last possible moment for him to wake up, she had no doubt begun ringing his doorbell rapid-fire in exasperation.

With Yukina waiting for him at the front door, Kojou offered a tentative suggestion.

"Sorry, I overslept. I'm getting ready right now, so go on ahead, Himeragi."

An honors student like her doesn't need to be late on my account, he thought with, for him, great consideration.

Yukina brushed off his words and said, "No, I will wait."

"But that might mean you'll be late with me—"

"Surely you are not thinking of skipping the first hour of classes, senpai?"

With a quiet "ugh," Kojou was lost for words as Yukina hit the bull's-eye. If he was going to be late even if he rushed, he thought the damage would be lessened if he just accepted his lateness and got to school on his own time, but…

She tolerated no dissent.

"Get ready as fast as you can. I will be waiting right here."

He abandoned further resistance. He ruefully felt like Yukina's stalker tendencies had grown even fiercer of late, which scared him a little.

Kojou put the intercom receiver back down and headed for his little sister's room. Normally, she was the one who'd be waking him up if he overslept. It was rare for *her* to be in bed this late.

"Nagisa, I'm coming in!"

Deliberately knocking loudly in rapid succession, Kojou opened the door to his little sister's room.

The bedroom was scrupulously neat and tidy, unsurprising for a neat freak like her. Nagisa Akatsuki, lying atop a bed next to the wall, her belly on display and her pajamas in disarray from sleep, lifted up her head, rubbing her eyes.

“Mm… Kojou…what’s wrong? Had a nightmare or something?”

“Wake up. It’s morning.”

“Mm?”

Roll. Nagisa did a 180-degree turn and looked up at the digital clock on the wall. Then her eyes suddenly snapped wide open.

“Wha—no way?! Why didn’t you wake me up earlier?!”

“I only just woke up myself. Get changed fast or you’ll be late.”

“R-right. That’s right!”

Nagisa raised a shrill yelp as she rolled off the bed in a panic. Her long, sleep-disheveled hair swished wildly as she retrieved her uniform from its hanger.

For his part, Kojou offhandedly mused, *No breakfast, huh*, and began to return to his room when—

“Oh, right. Himeragi’s waiting out front, so—”

He stopped right before leaving his sister’s room and suddenly looked back.

“Hyaaa?!” Nagisa shouted.

Though he didn’t mean to, he saw that Nagisa had stripped off her pajama top. Apparently, she was so flustered at being almost late that she’d begun changing before he’d even left the room.

Nagisa, taken by surprise a second time, tried to turn around, but her ankle got caught in the pajama top, making her lose her balance and tumble forward. Her pose thrust her panties straight out toward Kojou, giving him an eyeful.

Nagisa, rubbing her forehead after bumping it against the bed, made an even bigger fuss in a loud voice.

“Hey, why are you looking?! Kojou, you pervert!”

How’d it turn into that?! He unwittingly stared all the more.

“How am I the bad guy?! You’re the one who started stripping before I’d even closed the door—”

“Shut up! And get out!!”

Nagisa righted herself and hurled a teddy bear Kojou's way as he left her room.

They caught sight of the Saikai Academy campus moments before classes were set to begin.

They could still see students filtering onto the school grounds from the street in front of it. Kojou and the others, judging they had somehow managed to avoid being late, slowed the pace of their run. Nagisa panted heavily as she said, "Looks like we made it…somehow."

As one might expect, she, too, had survived the full-strength morning scramble. She was incessantly fussing over how her loose hair, usually bound in a ponytail, was a mess from sleeping.

"But how strange. You usually don't oversleep."

In contrast to Nagisa, Yukina, carrying her black guitar case on her back, had an invigorated expression. Her breathing was perfectly calm even though she'd run the same distance as Nagisa. No doubt it barely qualified as a warm-up by her standards.

As someone hiding his own true nature, Kojou would have preferred it if his watcher put a little more effort into pretending to be an ordinary high school girl, but—

"Looks like I fell back asleep after I turned the alarm clock off the first time. That's not something that happens often," Nagisa said. "It's, like, even monkeys fall out of trees—wait, I'm not a monkey! Oh, by the way, they say you can tell monkeys and humans apart because monkeys have tails. And because humans swim. A bit of trivia there. Also—"

With his little sister functioning as both comic and straight man, Kojou lightly bopped her on the head to shut her up.

"Cut it out, Nagisa. You're scaring Himeragi stiff and being annoying."

She was a comparatively well-rounded little sister, but one of her few flaws was her chattiness. Apparently, she'd put aside the shock of oversleeping and had returned to her usual self. If anything, she was even more hyper than usual.

For no reason at all, Nagisa looked up at the sky, suddenly changing the subject.

“Oh, right, it’s going to be winter soon.”

Thanks to Itogami Island’s eternal summer, the four seasons looked the same, but it was nearly the end of November. Winter vacation was less than a month away.

Kojou felt a vague sense of unease. “Yeah… Come to think of it, Himeragi, what do you do for New Year’s?”

He wondered if the Lion King Agency intended to have Yukina continue her surveillance of Kojou even on the holiday.

“New Year’s Day…?”

“Err…I mean, like—you’re not going back to see Professor Kitty or anything?”

“No. I do not have any special plans at present, but…”

Yukina looked up at Kojou. Based on her reaction, it was plain that she indeed intended to continue her mission to watch Kojou during winter vacation.

Incidentally, “Professor Kitty” referred to the sorceress who was Yukina’s mentor. Kojou had decided to call her by that name on his own.

“Do the two of you have plans?” she asked.

“Kind of… If the Public Corporation gives us a permit, I’d love to go up to see our grandma, but…”

As Kojou murmured, Nagisa piped up in obvious agreement.

“Wow, I really wanna go see her! I mean, we haven’t seen her in four years. I hope Grandma’s doing all right.”

At Nagisa’s fond comments, Yukina tilted her head with a questioning look.

“By your grandmother, you mean…?”

“Yeah. She does some kind of religious work at a little shrine in the Tanzawa Mountains,” Kojou explained.

“Religious…work?”

Yukina blinked her eyes in mild surprise. Kojou scowled with a hint of a bitter smile.

“She’s really sweet on Nagisa, but she’s a strict old lady… She’s pretty scary when she’s angry, and rumor has it she used to be some unregistered Attack Mage or something.”

“Eh…?”

Yukina’s face stiffened as she stopped in place. Kojou followed suit and halted, with Nagisa promptly colliding into his back. She’d apparently been strolling along with her head in the clouds and hadn’t even noticed Kojou had stopped.

“Owww!”

“What are you doing…?”

Nagisa, still on the ground after grandly falling on her butt, glared at Kojou unhappily.

“Ugh… It’s because you stopped all of a sudden, Kojou…!”

It was apparently Nagisa’s destiny to randomly fall down that day, perhaps a jinx because of her oversleeping. Kojou was lending his little sister a hand when he saw the car parked in front of the school gate and frowned.

“…So what’s that? Is something going on around the school here?”

It was a luxury car manufactured in Europe, the sort of thing you didn’t see much on Itogami Island, and a black, armored limousine at that.

“Perhaps there’s…been an incident?” Yukina muttered in concern.

Certainly, he could understand the girl’s worry. No respectable commoner would come to school in a car suited for a shootout. Kojou and Yukina traded glances and hesitant musings.

“Nothin’ to do with me…right…?”

“That…would be good, but…”

Heedless of their concerns, a clamor spread among the students on the school grounds when they noticed people coming out of the limousine,

obstructed from view by the gathering flock of curious onlookers—

3

Despite the difficulty of getting to school, the first class of the day was study hall. Apparently, seven short-term exchange students had shown up without prior arrangements, throwing the school administration into chaos. The morning staff meeting must have dragged on for a while. The armored limousine in front of the gate had dropped those students off. Naturally, the exchange students warranting such a high level of security posed challenges in the classroom as well.

Kojou, in a classroom separate from Yukina and Nagisa, was bewildered when he heard:

“…Oceanus Girls?”

He wasn’t familiar with that group.

Asagi Aiba pulled out her beloved pink tablet computer and held it out to Kojou.

“Haven’t you heard? They’re a girl group that’s been popular lately on some video-sharing sites.”

The screen displayed a group of foreign girls clad in adorable outfits. Their ages ranged from the low teens into the early twenties. He felt like he’d met them somewhere before, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on it.

“The singing and dancing seem pretty amateur, but those five are pretty by Japanese standards, right? They show up in magazines a lot, too,” Asagi said.

Motoki Yaze wedged himself into the conversation. “Incidentally, I recommend the blond.”

To leave no room for doubt, he pointed to the shortest girl at the edge of the image. He instantly broke into a falsetto, singing a catchy techno-pop song as he began a robotic sort of dance. His singing was nothing to write home about, but his dancing was surprisingly good.

Yaze's got some talent for that, Kojou thought in silent admiration.

"Ahh, yeah, come to think of it, I've been hearing that song all over the place," he remarked.

"Gotta say, Motoki, you're copying that dance *way* too well. Totally gross," Asagi chimed in.

"Why?! What's wrong with me being good at it, dammit?!" Yaze seemed genuinely wounded, raising a tearful objection.

Truth be told, Kojou thought it was a bit creepy, too. He gazed at the tablet's screen with a dubious expression. "So why is this girl group studying here at Saikai Academy?"

"Dunno. Isn't it just a coincidence?" Asagi sounded uninterested.

Yaze, stubbornly continuing his dance, nodded along. "The timing is a little odd, but it's not exactly rare Itogami Island gets short-term exchange students from a Dominion. Just happens to be some famous people this time."

Kojou relaxed his expression and exhaled.

"Well, that's certainly true."

The fact they were popular mainly on a video-sharing site meant they were on the amateur end of the scale. It wasn't exactly strange for them to go to school like normal people. Given that only a Demon Sanctuary would be accepting exchange students from the Warlord's Empire, the chances of Saikai Academy being chosen to receive them was actually pretty decent.

But in spite of all that, Kojou wondered why he still felt an undercurrent of unease—

As if in support of Kojou's premonition, a group of unfamiliar girls poured into the classroom, a bright, cheery voice leading the way.

"Ah, he's here. Master Kojou!"

The five foreigners were wearing the Saikai Academy girl's uniforms. They seemed like sisters who got along nicely, but their faces and hair color had nothing in common. If there was a commonality between them, it was that all the girls were beautiful, suggesting they had been high-class from birth.

“It has been a while, Master Kojou.”

“I-I wanted so much to meet…you.”

With the other classmates paying rapt attention, the five surrounded Kojou and lavished words of passionate affection upon him. His eyes remained wide open in shock as he stood as stiff as a statue.

Someone in class murmured in a quiet voice, “The Oceanus Girls…?!”

That signaled everyone inside the classroom to erupt in envious surprise.

“Eh? No way? The real deal?”

“Oh, damn, they’re cuter than I thought.”

“But why are they around Akatsuki…?”

“…Him! Again!!”

Cold sweat rolled down Kojou’s brow as he stood exposed to his classmates’ curious gazes.

“…”

Finally, he remembered who the Oceanus Girls *really* were. These were the daughters of royals and high ministers of nations neighboring the Warlord’s Empire. At first, they were “hostages” handed over to Dimitrie Vattler in exchange for the safety of their homelands, but the combat-manic Vattler took no interest in female hostages, so he treated the girls as simple guests, or so Kojou had been told.

Along the way, the Warlord’s Empire noble had used the girls as bait to try to awaken Kojou’s Beast Vassals, and the girls themselves had aimed to use the power of the Fourth Primogenitor as a tool to rise above their station—things that made dealing with them extremely difficult for Kojou.

Asagi glared at the bewildered Kojou and asked in a foul mood, “Kojou, these girls are acquaintances of yours?”

He stiffly shook his head in denial.

“Errr… I don’t know them well enough to call them acquaintances…”

The real problem was that Kojou had no idea what the girls were doing there.

On Vattler's cruise ship, the *Oceanus Grave II*, they enjoyed a lavish lifestyle and wanted for nothing, didn't they?

The blond girl acting as the group's leader forcefully hugged one of Kojou's arms and said, "Whaat? You're horrible, Master Kojou!"

She was probably twenty years old, give or take, but the outfit suited her. While her figure was nothing glamorous on its own, even a regular school uniform looked oddly risqué on her.

Dressed in that seductive uniformed look, she gently entwined her arm with Kojou's and said, "Have we not already bathed together?!"

"B-bathed together?!" Asagi shouted in a shrill voice over the rest of the class's eruption.

Kojou shook his head as vigorously as he could. "It's not like that! When we were on Vattler's ship a while back, they barged in all on their own!"

"No way! That ship's bath was where I joined you, wasn't it…?!" Asagi insisted.

Her careless statement only increased the classroom uproar. Yaze quietly said, "Ohh," to himself.

"Ah…?!"

Seeing her childhood friend's reaction, Asagi realized her own verbal slip. She clutched her head with both hands. With an "Ahhh!" she turned deep red to the tips of her ears. "No! It wasn't like that! Aw, just shut up!!"

Asagi shouted defiantly and vented her rage with a smack to Yaze's head. Unable to react to the sudden surprise attack, Yaze spun and sailed straight into the nearest wall.

During that time, the five Oceanus Girls were clinging all over Kojou, completely reducing the study hall to a hopeless mess. But the voice dripping with hostility brought the chaos in the classroom to a screeching halt.

"Pathetic. Do not get overly excited, Kojou Akatsuki. The girls merely tagged along because they were bored."

Kojou reflexively turned his head and retorted, "I'm not excited! I'm seriously

in a bind here—!”

Standing in the doorway to the classroom was a silver-haired exchange student with a demon registration bracelet on his left wrist. He was a handsome young man as cold and sharp as a naked blade.

“Wait, you’re that vampire from Vattler’s ship…!” Kojou exclaimed.

“Tobias Jagan. We shall be attending this school for a little while from today onward.”

The exchange student named Jagan gave his uniform a malevolent glare as he spoke. Apparently, it wasn’t his idea to attend the same school as Kojou.

“What are you all doing as exchange students…?!”

On the surface, there wasn’t much difference in age between them, but Tobias Jagan was an Old Guard vampire. His actual age was probably in excess of two centuries. Having to pretend to be a high-school student had to be humiliating for him. But the true reason for his irritation was because he would be at this particular school.

Jagan approached Kojou and said aggressively, “I’ve heard that Japanese schools are very strict about senior and junior hierarchy…”

He showed off a sophomore badge on his uniform. Apparently, he intended to pull rank as a second-year student.

Kojou glared back at him with such force that they seemed ready to physically butt heads. “Sorry, this is a shut-in island nation. It’s Japanese tradition to give the new guy a hard time, y’see?”

Jagan continued scowling at Kojou at point-blank range, clenching his teeth.

“Ugh… If His Excellency didn’t command it, I would never serve as bodyguard for someone like you…!”

Kojou suspiciously raised an eyebrow. *Hmm?*

“Vattler ordered this…? What do you mean my bodyguard…?”

“I have no obligation to explain it to you, fool.”

As Jagan dragged his feet, a soft, androgynous voice gently rebuked him.

“—Tobias.”

A handsome, mild-mannered vampire—Kira Lebedev Voltisvala—intervened to defuse the explosive situation between Kojou and Jagan. He possessed gray hair and jade green eyes and was small for a boy, with a very refined appearance. He wore a hooded jacket, no doubt to avoid sunlight, but under it he, too, had a Saikai Academy uniform.

“Kira? Don’t tell me you’re here at our school, too…?” Kojou said.

“Yes. Please take good care of us.”

Kira timidly offered his right hand. As Kojou shook it, he felt a light headache coming on.

Certainly, he’d heard there were seven short-term exchange students from the Warlord’s Empire. If the five Oceanus Girls had simply *tagged along*, that made the original exchange students Kira and Jagan.

Kira whispered in Kojou’s ear, “The Duke of Ardeal left written instructions; namely, should anything happen to him, we were to serve and protect you, Master Kojou.”

“Written instructions? From Vattler?”

As if taking pride in that for some reason, Jagan haughtily declared, “That’s how it is. At least try to behave and not cause us any trouble.”

Kojou’s lips curled in annoyance.

“Well, your being here is causing *me* trouble, you know—”

At Kojou’s sarcasm, Kira lowered his long eyelashes, as if troubled. “I’m quite sorry.”

“Ah, nah, you don’t need to apologize, Kira… Wait, Vattler’s not around? Did something happen to him…?”

“I do not know. Just…this is hardly the first time the Duke of Ardeal has given commands on a whim.”

Kira bit his glossy lip, concerned.

Jagan announced, “We’re done here,” and stormed out to return to his own

classroom. At some point, the five Oceanus Girls had disappeared.

With half-lidded eyes, Asagi looked up at Kojou still clasping Kira's hand.

"So…just how long are you two gonna hold hands here?"

Kojou didn't even realize he was red in the face as he hastily withdrew his hand.

"Oh, ah, right."

Asagi knitted her eyebrows in even greater chagrin and exhaled.

4

At the time, Yukina and her fellow classmates were in physical education class. It was girls' volleyball that day. Once the basic preliminaries were complete, the class continued training for matches.

Yukina, dressed in a gym uniform, mingled with her classmates and earnestly participated in the match.

The serve from the opponents' side descended like an avalanche. The rear guard received the serve at the very edge of the court. The ball danced up into the air, sailing toward the unguarded edge of the net. *It'll probably hit the sideline and be out*, everyone thought, but that instant…

"Geh… Yukina?!"

"Yes!"

Yukina ran under the ball and lunged lightly from the floor. Her small body effortlessly sailed into the air, gently touching the ball with her left hand and tapping it into the opponents' court.

She landed soundlessly. The opposing students just stared dumbly at the ball before them on the floor, unsure of what had just happened.

Seeing what she had done, Yukina was a bit crestfallen.

"Ah…"

Raised and trained as a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, Yukina's

athletic ability was far above the norm for girls her own age, even without augmentation via ritual spells. She was able to hold back appropriately during individual events like track and field, but it was much harder to do so in a volleyball match.

As Yukina stood rooted in place, a current member of the basketball club, Minami Shindou, aka Cindy, smiled and ran over. She was a sports prodigy in her own right, so maybe seeing Yukina's crazy ability was no big deal to her.

"See what I mean? You're really cut out for sports, Yukina," Cindy said.

Yukina's smile twitched a little as she took the praise in stride.

"Y-you think so…?"

Cindy gave Yukina a rather amused look.

"You sure don't look it, though, what with that ditzy, spaced-out look you have."

"D-ditzy…?"

The unanticipated change of direction gave Yukina a rude shock. Seeing herself as a very levelheaded girl, she couldn't hide her consternation at her friend's assessment.

With Yukina's match concluded, Nagisa and other girls came on to the court. Cindy remarked, "Ah, Nagisa there is pretty lively, too, huh?"

Just as Cindy said, Nagisa was a trooper on a mishmash of a team. Due to her short height, she wasn't good at spiking, but she more than made up for it with how she received serves. Somehow, she seemed like an adorable little animal.

As they sat on a bench against the wall, Yukina asked Cindy, "I heard Nagisa was in the hospital a while back?"

Cindy smiled fondly.

"Yeah, she was. When I was in my first year here, she was away from school for almost six months. She was always watching from the sidelines in gym class, too. I'd say she's been doing better since about autumn of last year… That's about when she joined the cheerleading club, too."

“Autumn of…last year?”

Yukina bit her lip and fell silent. Her Sword Shaman instincts told her something was odd about that.

She’d heard that an incident had been the reason Nagisa Akatsuki came to Itogami Island. Heavily injured in a demon-linked terror incident, she’d needed treatment that could only be found in a Demon Sanctuary. No doubt the treatment had worked on her, and she’d been fully healed as of the preceding autumn.

And a very short time later, her older brother, Kojou Akatsuki, suddenly obtained the power of the Fourth Primogenitor, the World’s Mightiest Vampire. It was too unusual to be mere coincidence.

What further worried Yukina was the power Nagisa had used during the Wiseman incident just a short time earlier, and the mysterious spiritual entity that had possessed her—a sentient mass of enormous demonic energy capable of instantly creating a mass of ice several hundred meters across. As far as Yukina knew, only the Beast Vassals controlled by vampires could manage such a feat, and only those of Old Guard vampires, or even primogenitors, at that.

She couldn’t understand how Nagisa had summoned such a thing. But if she truly had controlled a Beast Vassal, it was surely connected to Kojou obtaining the power of the Fourth Primogenitor for himself.

Maybe Yukina had it all wrong. Maybe it wasn’t that the Fourth Primogenitor’s little sister just happened to wind up in a Demon Sanctuary hospital. Maybe it was because she’d been in the hospital that he’d become the Fourth Primogenitor to begin with—

Yukina felt her entire body go cold when she realized what that frightening possibility would mean. Because of that, she didn’t realize what had been happening on the volleyball court.

Someone had sent the ball off the court, right for the wall where Yukina was sitting. Another student was running after it, with her attention completely focused on the ball, not even noticing Yukina. They were just about to collide.

From the court, Nagisa yelled, “—Yukina, look out!”

Yukina moved subconsciously before Nagisa's voice brought her back to her senses. She beat away the flying ball with the back of her hand and turned to face the charging girl. Dodging her would be simple, but that would guarantee the girl would get hurt. Instead, Yukina moved forward. She caught the lunging student's arm in a lock and redirected her momentum.

Direct motion transformed into centrifugal force. Before Yukina's eyes, the girl floated up, flipped over once, and landed softly on the floor in a near perfect cross-legged position, with virtually no force of impact.

No doubt the schoolgirl herself had no idea what had just happened. After the two switched places, the ball fell down in front of their eyes. The Sword Shaman quietly caught it as if nothing had happened.

Yukina suddenly paled when she realized just what she had done.

"Ah…"

The gym had gone silent as everyone in the class stared at Yukina. However, not a single one of the stares directed at her had any hint of fear. Ordinary schoolgirls couldn't even grasp what a crazy-high skill level Yukina's maneuver had involved. They might not have understood what was going on, but seeing that everyone was safe and sound, someone began a round of applause.

Still clutching the ball Yukina couldn't help but blush.

Only Cindy, having witnessed the event from right next to Yukina, asked with some surprise, "What did you do just now…?"

A thin bead of sweat trickled down Yukina's forehead as she seemed somewhat dazed.

"Er… It just, ah, happened?"

"You see? You *are* a ditz," Cindy declared, clearly amused by that reaction.

But the next moment, she suddenly paled. Yukina's breath caught in her chest when she realized why.

With the action on the court purportedly paused, someone there collapsed without a sound. It was a girl with a familiar hairstyle—a long ponytail. Lying prone on the court, she looked even smaller than usual.

Yukina cast aside the ball she'd been holding and rushed to her side.

"…Nagisa?!"

Cindy immediately followed. The other students realized something was wrong, staring at Nagisa from a distance. Misaki Sasasaki, the gym teacher refereeing a match at an adjacent court, came running.

"Hey, Nagisa, what's wrong?! Nagisa—?!" Cindy yelled.

But Nagisa did not respond. Even though she'd been moving fine only moments before, her breathing was heavily labored, and she seemed to be in great pain.

When Yukina lifted Nagisa up, her friend's entire body felt very cold, like Yukina was touching a corpse. And as soon as Yukina had touched her, she knew the cause of Nagisa's deterioration.

"Nagisa… It…it can't be… How could this be…?" she murmured, but no one heard her pained whispers over the classmates' loud voices.

Nagisa's still-sleeping body was surprisingly light. With her eyes closed, her profile resembled a fairy's…

5

That afternoon, Kojou heard what happened and rushed over to the MAR laboratory.

Magna Ataraxia Research Incorporated, or MAR for short, was a huge conglomerate based in Eastern Asia.

It was one of the world's few sorcerous manufacturing groups, handling everything from foodstuffs to military weaponry.

Kojou's mother, Mimori Akatsuki, was Chief of Research at MAR's medical research and development laboratory on Itogami Island and the attached hospital. She was also the primary care physician for her beloved daughter, Nagisa Akatsuki.

Yukina was sitting in a corner of a waiting room when she noticed Kojou

rushing over.

“—Himeragi! Is Nagisa all right?!”

She nodded awkwardly. Apparently, she’d declared herself a next-door neighbor and half-forced herself on the ambulance that brought Nagisa to the hospital.

“I believe she will be fine,” Yukina replied. “She hasn’t regained consciousness yet, but her breathing and pulse are completely stable.”

“Is that…so…”

She could almost hear the taut wire of tension being cut as Kojou squatted down, depleted. No doubt he’d heard that Nagisa was all right over the phone, but he had worried nonetheless.

Yukina giggled with a little smile, her expression seeming to say, *That’s his sister complex speaking.*

“Earlier, your m—Miss Mimori came and took Nagisa to the medical wing. I am waiting here because unrelated persons are not permitted to enter, but you are family, senpai, so—”

“No, I’m not allowed over there, either… Well, they’re the experts, so I think it’ll be all right. It’s not like I can do anything by being there, anyway.”

Yukina sent a dubious glance over Kojou’s shoulder and said, “I must say, though, you came with quite an entourage.”

“Eh?”

At Yukina’s comment, Kojou looked behind him and yelped, “Whoa!” like a complete idiot. A group of people in student uniforms was entering the waiting room through the automated doors. Kojou saw Asagi, Yaze, and the two so-called exchange students from the Warlord’s Empire—

Kojou glared at the quartet that had nothing to do with any of this.

“Wh-what the hell are all you doin’ here?!” he wailed.

Yukina looked amazed as she muttered, “You had not noticed this whole time…?”

Asagi averted her eyes with a somehow guilty look.

“W-well, I was worried about Nagisa and all… And then these two guys were chasing after you, so—”

Asagi had shifted responsibility to Jagan, but he grandly stuck out his chest without the slightest reservation.

“We have not come to visit your younger sister. We are merely fulfilling our duty.”

Beside him, Kira nodded in complete seriousness.

“Yes. So please pay the two of us no heed.”

Kojou, forgetting he was in a hospital, yelled out, “I *do* heed!!”

He had little doubt Vattler had put them up to protecting him, so they were only faithfully carrying that out, but…

“You’re exchange students! Why the hell are you skipping class on your first day?! And why are *you* here, Yaze?!”

“Er, well, it looked interesting so—I mean, of course I’m worried about Nagisa, too.” Yaze deliberately affected a serious expression as he spoke with obvious delight at the unfolding spectacle.

“Geez.” Kojou roughly clicked his tongue.

He hadn’t thrown the lot of them out yet because he had a faint grasp of Asagi’s and Yaze’s real feelings. It wasn’t that they were worried about Nagisa; Kojou was their true source of concern.

Yukina, still sitting on a little bench in the waiting room, slumped her shoulders in dejection.

“I’m sorry… I was right there with her, but I didn’t notice that Nagisa wasn’t well…”

Apparently, she felt responsible for Nagisa’s collapse right before her eyes.

Kojou sat down beside her and shook his head tiredly.

“If anyone should be saying that, it’s me. The fact she overslept should’ve been enough to make me wonder if she was sick. It’s not like this is the first

time she's had a weak body."

Her waking up late, her tumble when getting to school… There'd been any number of chances to deduce that Nagisa hadn't been well. It was Kojou, part of her own family, who was responsible for not noticing. He knew well enough that Nagisa never complained about anything—she only increased the number of words flying out of her mouth.

Asagi spoke out of concern for Kojou. "Then Nagisa's injuries…weren't completely healed?"

Kojou made a weak smile with a sigh.

"Nah. It's nothing that stops her from living a normal life, but they said she still has to get regular checkups. They're still trying different drugs and stuff."

"Oh… That's rough."

Kojou gazed at the familiar sight of the waiting room and mused aloud, "She hasn't collapsed much since she got out of the hospital, though…"

During middle school, he'd been in that very room numerous times, waiting to see Nagisa.

Yukina sent Kojou a serious look. "Senpai, about the reason Nagisa was hospitalized—"

Kojou shrugged his shoulders slightly. Even if it was technically private, there was no point hiding it from Yukina, who'd gone with Nagisa all the way to the hospital.

"Demons made a terror attack in Rome four years ago. They set a bomb on a train. You know about it, right?"

"Yes…"

Yukina's eyes narrowed in surprise for some reason. Kojou paid no heed and continued, "Nagisa and I just happened to be there at the time. Neither of us can remember much about what happened before or after…but Nagisa's had a fear of demons ever since. I think it's probably leftover fear from back then."

"…Is that so."

Yukina then fell into silence. Kojou felt faint unease watching the side of her face as she considered this information. The attack four years earlier was a slaughter, with numerous casualties, but it was in the past. All the assailants had been shot and killed, and the organization behind it had been wiped out. He didn't think there was anything left for her to ponder. That incident no longer had anything to do with Kojou's and Nagisa's current lives—

Kojou looked up at the waiting room clock. "Sitting here won't solve anything, so how about we get some dinner?" he suggested.

Since they had run off from school as soon as lunch break began, Kojou and the others hadn't had dinner. Given the fact Kojou had missed breakfast, too, it was small wonder that he was famished. *A full stomach clears up a lot of worries*, he thought. Then…

Asagi responded with a buoyant voice that was completely out of place. "Eh?! Dinner?! You're going to treat me, Kojou? MAR's employee cafeteria is *famous*. It's listed as a hidden gem in Itogami Island's Gourmet Guide!"

"Why you…"

Looking back at Asagi's twinkling eyes, Kojou rued his verbal slip. In spite of her slim appearance, Asagi was a glutton. She could eat four or five servings' worth of a family restaurant's lunch plate and still have room to spare.

If she went to a "hidden gem" she wouldn't normally get to visit—on someone else's tab, no less—she undoubtedly meant to order without mercy.

"Ah, well. I'll just bill it to Mom anyway," Kojou said defiantly.

Besides, it would calm the general mood. After all, the odds of Asagi making a huge fuss out of it probably weren't zero.

"Hmph. I have no intention of playing nice with you," Jagan said bluntly. "We will go our separate ways."

Kojou listlessly rested his chin on a hand and glared at him. "Do what you want. I didn't invite you in the first place."

With only the smallest hint of regret, Kira smiled pleasantly and courteously bowed his head. "I am sorry. Then, if you will excuse me…"

“Ah, yeah. Later.”

“Yes.”

With that exchange of oddly amiable pleasantries, Kojou good-naturedly bid them farewell. Asagi glared at Kira’s back as he left, as if on guard.

Yukina watched them leave with an identical look of suspicion. “Those two are nobles of the Warlord’s Empire, are they not? Why were they with you—?”

Kojou scowled as if something had caught in the back of his mouth. “I’m not too sure myself. From what they said, apparently Vattler wrote for ’em to protect me if he disappeared.”

Yukina looked conflicted as she let out a murmur. “…The Duke of Ardeal has disappeared?”

Her bewilderment was entirely natural. Dimitrie Vattler might be a whimsical vampire, but his conduct was easy to understand. His goal was to fight strong opponents—period. To a vampire aristocrat with a nigh-unlimited life span, fighting a powerful foe able to threaten his own life was the greatest, and only, way of killing time.

Vanishing without a word to his subordinates was uncharacteristic behavior for a man who viewed combat as the highest form of amusement. What Kojou understood even less was why he’d assign his own subordinates to guard Kojou.

He didn’t think there were all that many opponents capable of harming the Fourth Primogenitor and World’s Mightiest Vampire. And if such a powerful foe were to arise, it would be Vattler himself merrily rushing to challenge him.

Asagi, listening in on their conversation, looked at Yukina with a provocative smile.

“Well, I was thinking it could be something like that, anyway. So, Miss Himeragi, you *do* know Mr. Vattler? This is a good chance, so how about I finally ask it: What’s your relationship with Kojou? What are you hiding? Mr. Vattler and Kojou don’t have *that* kind of a relationship, right?”

From the side, Kojou instinctively retorted, “—Hey, what do you mean, *that* kind?!”

Apparently, Asagi still suspected that Kojou and Vattler were in some kind of amorous relationship. He couldn't dismiss it as a complete misunderstanding, but it was a rather dangerous one nonetheless—

Yukina, receiving Asagi's gaze head-on, said, "Understood."

The girl's unexpected reply startled Kojou. "Uh…um, Himeragi…"

Yukina continued, "However, before I answer, would you consider a request of mine?"

"Ugh," Asagi groaned as she faltered, perhaps not thinking Yukina would attach a condition. In spite of that, Asagi recovered and nodded, having come too far to back out now.

"S-so that's how it is? Fine then. Let's do this."

"Please do. There is something I would like you to look into, Aiba."

For some reason, invisible sparks were flying as Yukina and Asagi glared at each other. A strangely tense and oppressive atmosphere began to hover over the waiting room, and Kojou was beset by a vague urge to flee for the hills.

Then, as if to forestall Kojou from doing so, Yaze suddenly began smoothly backing away.

"Ah… Excuse me."

"Y-Yaze?" Kojou asked.

"Sorry to interrupt with everyone worked up, but my stomach hurts all of a sudden. Gonna go to the john for a bit."

"Th-that so. Then I'll go with—"

Kojou immediately tried to piggyback on Yaze's escape, but Asagi cut him off.

"You stay right here, Kojou!"

"Please stay right here, senpai!"

Vetoed by both girls, Kojou groaned and stopped moving.

"Sorry, Kojou. See ya later!" Yaze said.

Kojou sighed in exasperation as Yaze seized the chance to make his getaway.

Asagi got her beloved notepad PC out. “So what did you want me to find?” she asked Yukina.

You couldn’t tell from her gorgeous looks, but Asagi was actually a world-renowned hacker known as the “Cyber Empress.” If she felt like it, she could probably access the most confidential files of the North American Union’s intelligence agencies.

And so, Yukina calmly made her request.

“The incident four years ago. I want to know if the terror incident really happened as claimed, and if senpai and Nagisa were truly caught up in it by chance…”

6

Tobias Jagan was leaving the MAR-operated hospital when he sullenly spat out, “I can’t stand it.”

He was directing his anger at Kojou Akatsuki, of course.

“—He lacks class, ambition, and grandeur. Can someone like that truly be the Fourth Primogenitor? We need to guard *him*? His Excellency’s whims are truly vexing.”

“It looks to me as if you get along with him surprisingly well,” Kira said in his energetic, prepubescent voice.

Jagan twisted his lips in anguish, appearing wounded as he immediately fired back an objection.

“Don’t even say that as a joke, Kira. It disgusts me.”



“Ha-ha…”

Kira laughed merrily as he leaped off the ground. The off-the-charts strength peculiar to demons vaulted him to the roof of a neighboring building six stories high.

“Besides, we do understand the reason His Excellency commanded us to guard him.”

Jagan landed right beside Kira, grimacing from the strong sunbeams as he strained his eyes.

“Yes, that we do.”

He was glaring at an organic jumble of buildings—Island North’s research and development district. It was a futuristic, heavily mechanized mini-city that strongly reflected its artificial island roots. Atop a gray transmission tower that loomed above its peers was a girl with a white hood pulled over her head.

The girl was gazing down at the MAR-operated hospital, monitoring Kojou Akatsuki’s location like a sniper in pursuit of her prey.

The instant Jagan was sure of her, he unleashed his Beast Vassal.

“Irrlicht—!”

A giant bird of prey materialized from a flash of light with immense demonic energy. Its body was composed of highly concentrated magical flame reaching tens of thousands of degrees Celsius. This became a searing beam that instantly traveled the several hundred meters toward the place where the girl stood.

Beautiful fireworks scattered against the backdrop of the blue sky, with a shock wave following a moment later in its wake.

The ultra-high temperature created by Jagan’s Beast Vassal did not cause anything as crude as an explosion. By executing a slash like a sword master, he had instantly sliced through the steel tower with the precision of a plasma cutter. Of course, no living creature should have been able to survive the aftermath of such an attack.

None save the girl before their eyes, in all likelihood—

The edge of the girl's hood fluttered as she landed on the roof of a nearby building.

"A rather rough welcome."

The attack from Jagan's Beast Vassal hadn't even scratched her. A delighted smile came over the girl's beautiful, fairy-like visage.

"Perhaps I should have expected as much from Vattler's right-hand man, Tobias Jagan?" she said.

Jagan had recalled his Beast Vassal and had it stand by overhead as he glared at the girl.

"That was your one warning. The next shall strike you instead."

He was not disturbed that the girl knew his name. He believed she had just saved him the chore of stating it himself.

Kira moved into position to cut off the girl's retreat and inquired, "We know that you are tailing the Fourth Primogenitor. May we know the reason why? Along with your name and affiliation."

Vattler had commanded Kira and Jagan to guard Kojou Akatsuki. In other words, he had anticipated the arrival of an enemy endangering the Fourth Primogenitor.

If that was the case, this girl must be that enemy. Anyone who could sustain a Beast Vassal attack and still smile calmly was certainly a foe powerful enough to warrant the pair's combined strength.

However, the girl's shoulders shook as she burst into giggles.

"I, tailing the Fourth Primogenitor, you say…? It seems you do not know anything. Vattler did not tell you?"

"…What are you trying to say?" Jagan's hostility oozed out of every word.

The girl's apparent attempt to undermine his trust in Vattler got on his nerves. But she continued warmly, as if to mock Jagan's indignation.

"I suppose Vattler dispatched you to guard him. If you wish to protect the Fourth Primogenitor, I am no enemy of yours. Or do you intend to waste the

consideration I have shown Vattler?”

A bewildered expression came over Kira.

“…What do you mean by this? Do you know the Duke of Ardeal’s whereabouts?”

The girl’s statement implied she knew exactly what Vattler was up to. Seeing Kira try to soberly extract information rather than rush to kill her, the girl gazed at him as if to say, *Good boy.*

“Do not be concerned,” she replied. “I have not killed him. As I expected, not even my power can completely destroy that one with ease. I shall release him once I have finished my business.”

Jagan’s handsome face twisted ferociously.

“*You* took His Excellency captive?”

“Indeed,” she murmured, apparently wondering what was surprising about that. “You do not believe me? Or rather, is there any credible proof the likes of Vattler can stand against me?”

A faint trace of doubt came across Kira’s face.

“Who are you…?”

He didn’t think the girl possessed the power to face Kira and Jagan, two pureblood vampires directly descended from the Lost Warlord, let alone someone with Vattler’s level of might. It was unthinkable that Kira and Jagan wouldn’t know the name of someone so powerful.

But the vampire’s veteran combat instincts told him that the girl’s unbridled confidence was probably not unfounded.

Jagan, finally at his wits’ end, coarsely spat, “Enough of this. Back off, Kira. There’s no reason to put up with this farce any longer.”

His crimson-dyed eyes radiated a ghastly, demonic light. This was the glow of Wadjet, an invisible Beast Vassal, permitting Jagan to enter an opponent’s brain through the eyes, seizing control of his opponent’s mind—

The glow of Jagan’s eyes increased.

“You will speak of everything you know, woman!”

The girl calmly looked back at him with admiration.

“Oh, a mind-control Beast Vassal? That is the Warlord’s bloodline for you. It seems you possess a rare power—”

Jagan’s body snapped backward before the girl had even finished speaking.

“Wh…at?!”

Jagan’s lips let out a loud *guoh* as the backlash of vast demonic energy drove him to his knees. He covered his left eye.

“It can’t be… Your eyes… Why you…!”

The girl had resisted the Beast Vassal attack, and the recoil had struck its summoner, Jagan. She stated in a sympathetic tone, “Do not take it personally. It is you who gazed into *my* eyes.”

The eyes visible under her hood emitted a pale blue light. That glow had blocked Jagan’s Beast Vassal’s attack, leaving Jagan to suffer the consequences.

A moment later, an energetic cry came from Kira as a bloody mist leaped from the tip of his finger.

“Nephila Ignis—”

The scorching cloud transformed into lava, covering the area around the girl like a spiderweb.

“Kira, what are—?!” Jagan exclaimed.

“Move back, Jagan. I shall deal with this—” Kira asserted with a calm laugh.

A beautiful, glimmering amber spider emerged at Kira’s feet. It was a Beast Vassal with molten rock coursing through it.

The creature’s webs were scorching lava, too. They formed a beautiful geometric formation as they completely enclosed the white-robed girl. If she so much twitched a finger, she would surely be burned to a crisp by the lava threads around her.

The girl impetuously scrutinized the network of amber webs that left her no avenue of escape.

“So this formation is a single Beast Vassal? Impressive indeed.”

Within the cage Kira had deployed, she could neither transform into mist, nor employ spatial control magic. It was impossible to escape from the formation.

“I, too, have only one warning. Surrender now,” Kira said quietly.

His voice was tinged with the worry that he would have no choice but to kill her if she didn’t.

However, her piercing eyes twinkled as she burst into laughter.

“Your warning is unnecessary, Kira Lebedev. You cannot harm me. Even if it is to protect your comrade, you shall pay for baring your fangs against me.”

“—?!”

That instant, Kira was struck speechless at the massive wave of demonic energy from the girl. The threads of lava around her, part of the flesh of Kira’s Beast Vassal, were ripped asunder. Unable to withstand the demonic power of the girl’s newly summoned Beast Vassal, it had blown apart from the inside. The girl’s violence declared, *If the formation is inescapable, simply rip it apart.*

Even Jagan was virtually lost for words at the cataclysmic energy of the Beast Vassal that had appeared.

“That’s a Beast Vassal?! That’s crazy, this power is—!”

The monster was bizarre, amorphous. It boasted a density of demonic energy far surpassing that of Kira’s and Jagan’s Beast Vassals, likely surpassing even Vattler’s fused one. The only beings that could control Beast Vassals of such a scale were the primogenitors, the oldest and mightiest of all vampires.

“This puts my plans in slight disarray, but it cannot be helped,” she declared. “No, you left them as guards in anticipation of this, damnable Master of Serpents. A fine nuisance you are.”

The girl laughed haughtily as she unfurled her might.

The explosive demonic energy made the sky above the Demon Sanctuary quake, filling it with pale blue lightning.

7

Jagan and Kira weren't the only ones who had detected the mysterious girl's attack. Motoki Yaze, a Hyper Adapter, had picked up the presence of Kojou's pursuer through the Soundscape deployed around him.

Yaze had tentatively guessed that Jagan and Kira would engage the girl in combat, but the scale of the Beast Vassal the girl had summoned was leaps and bounds beyond his expectations.

"Hey, Mogwai.—What the hell is *that*?! No one told me about this!" Yaze shouted at his smartphone.

He was speaking to the artificial intelligence Asagi had dubbed Mogwai, the avatar of the five supercomputers that administered Itogami Island.

Mogwai replied in an oddly human-like voice, "Ahhh…to be honest, I'm surprised, too. There's no record of entry, and the magical power wave is off the charts, so I can't analyze it. She's a complete unknown."

Yaze didn't think he was genuinely surprised, but his claim that he lacked data was probably true. Mogwai had no reason to deceive Yaze in a situation like this.

"What about images? Can't you do a body structure analysis?" he suggested.

Mogwai should have an enormous stockpile of photographic data on Itogami Island's residents from surveillance cameras all over the island. Matching the girl to one of those images was likely to provide some sort of lead.

Naturally, Mogwai must have had the same thought. His reply was accordingly swift.

"There's only one hit. She matches the sample with 98.779 percent certainty —"

"And the sample's name is Avrora Florestina?"

"Got it in one. The twelfth Kaleid Blood," Mogwai replied with amusement.

Without thinking, Yaze slammed a fist against the building wall beside him.

“That’s crazy…!”

“Keh-keh… It couldn’t really be Avrora, huh? So who is she, then? She’s a monster that can squash nobles from the Warlord’s Empire flat. Maybe she’s the real thing after all…?”

Mogwai posed the question as if he’d sensed the doubt troubling Yaze’s heart. The rainbow-colored hair like surging flames, the blazing eyes, and the fairy-like, youthful beauty—they were all specific to a girl who had once visited the island, one deeply connected to Yaze himself. And yet…

“Yeah, well, that isn’t possible…and you know the reason as well as anyone, Mogwai.”

“I suppose. But if the girl is an imposter, what are you gonna do about it?”

Mogwai’s verbal jab left Yaze’s words stuck in his throat. Yaze’s role was as a mere observer. Even with his heavensent skill and backup from the Gigafloat Management Corporation, there was no way he could hope to fight a monster like that head-on. It was a fact he resented at the moment.

“So all I can do is watch without lifting a finger, again…?”

Mogwai answered with some pity. “Ah…doesn’t look like you can do that, either.”

Just when Yaze was going to ask Mogwai what he meant by that, a voice suddenly said from in front of him—

“No, I suppose not.”

What the—? Yaze inhaled. A lone man was standing just a few paces away on the lonely roof of a building. He wore loose, black, Chinese-style clothes, giving off the air of an ancient hermit. However, that was all that stood out about him. Even close up like this, his presence was surprisingly difficult to sense.

Yaze was shaken by the impossible truth.

“You got close to me, and I didn’t notice…?!”

With his abilities amplified, Yaze could discern the footsteps of each individual human being within a radius of several kilometers. Even with the mystery girl holding his attention, how could he possibly have let someone get this close to

him without realizing?

The young man gazed unemotionally at Yaze as he drew his weapon. It was a short, metallic spear, just barely exceeding a meter in length. Both tip and shaft were composed of uniform blackness, as if they absorbed all light falling upon them. And then, he drew another just like it—

The young man touched the short spears in his left and right hands together to create a single spear—a bizarre, long spear with tips on both ends—and said, “Your ability is somewhat of a nuisance to me. This is where you depart from the stage, Motoki Yaze. There will be only one observer.”

At that, Yaze realized the identity of the young man.

“I see… There were seven escapees from the prison barrier. So you’re the seventh!”

He was referring to the prison escape of sorcerous criminals that had occurred about one month before. That day, Aya Tokoyogi, the Witch of the Notaria, escaped from the prison barrier with seven others.

Of those, six had been sent back inside the barrier, leaving only one escapee left, whereabouts unknown—namely, the young man in the black clothing. His crime and his abilities were unknown, for all records had been erased. The only data left was his name, which Yaze shouted out—

“…Meiga Itogami!”

Yaze took a capsule pill out of his pocket, popped it into his mouth, and crunched it down. The next moment, wind began to blow all around him and eventually turned into an incredible gust.

Held back by the swirling, whistling storm, the young man let out a light sigh.

“I would rather you did not call me by that name so casually… Ah, well.”

Finally, the light distorted before his eyes as a giant emerged, born from the gale force winds. Yaze had temporarily boosted his Hyper Adapter power to create a duplicate of himself—Aerodyne. Its body was a burst of air condensed to several times atmospheric pressure, possessing localized destructive power on par with a tornado. Furthermore, since it was formed of simple air, magical

defenses could not block it. Even Yukina Himeragi's Schneewaltzer was unable to nullify Yaze's attack.

Gazing at the wind giant, the young man calmly poised his weapon.

"A Hyper Adapter controlling the air flow… An interesting ability. However…"

The ominous grayish glow emitted by the pitch-black spear was like a will-o'-the-wisp quivering in the darkness. And when the gusting giant's attack touched that sinister light…the double vanished, and the raging flow of the air with it, as if it had never existed in the first place. All that was left afterward was a faint breeze.

Yaze gawked, short of breath.

"Aerodyne's been nullified…?!"

The young man had not destroyed the wind giant. He had not even blocked the attack. He had merely erased the power Yaze was using to control it.

"That spear… It's a Schneewaltzer?! No, not that…! It can't be!"

Yaze finally understood what the black spear truly was, and he realized this was a man he must not fight. He used the remaining trace of wind to propel himself backward in an attempt to evade the young man's counterattack.

Unfortunately, before Yaze could succeed, the slash of the black spear caught him. Fresh blood spurted from the slice in his chest. Yaze's body busted through a fence, tumbling toward the ground.

Meiga Itogami scowled at the shallowness of the cut and gazed down at the ground through the gap in the fence. Yaze, who should have fallen below, was nowhere to be seen. There was only a large pool of blood spreading over the asphalt below. He should not have been able to move with such a wound, and yet—

The young man in black calmly reflected to himself, "As tenacious as one might expect…but, mm, that is fine."

A smartphone that had rolled over to a corner of the roof abruptly caught his eye. Yaze had no doubt dropped it in the heat of combat.

There were cracks on the screen, but the characters identified the speaker on

the other end, and indicated that the call was still connected—

With a satisfied tone, Meiga Itogami murmured a reverent greeting.

“And so I finally meet our King.”

Then he slowly stepped on the smartphone. He added the full weight of his body, violently stomping it to pieces with his heel. The glass smashed into fine dust. The last thing he could hear from the phone before the line went fully dead was a strange laugh.

“Keh-keh…”

8

Asagi stuffed her cheeks full with thick pancakes, glaring at the screen of her laptop as she spoke.

“There was definitely a terror bombing on a train in the Roman Autonomous Region on the Italian peninsula four years ago—or more precisely, the March that was three years, eight months ago. The damage included over four hundred fatalities, including train passengers and people at the station. There was a lot of coverage about it even here in Japan.”

There was a pile of four large, empty plates near her. This amount, moderate by Asagi’s standards, no doubt reflected her concentration on her work.

Asagi was accessing local law enforcement’s internal data. Where political incidents like terrorism were concerned, there was always at least some information intentionally withheld from the public, or even falsified outright, in the name of averting panic.

Since it was past lunchtime, the MAR employee cafeteria was vacant. Kojou and Yukina forgot about their meals as they listened to Asagi’s explanation.

“The incident occurred at one PM local time. The same day, past eight PM, Nagisa was transported to Itogami Island on a MAR charter flight while in critical condition.”

Having said this much, Asagi covered her eyes in distress. She sighed and

shook her head.

“This is just…”

Much like Asagi, Yukina lowered her eyes and murmured in quiet pain, “So I was right…”

Kojou was shaken by the girls’ attitudes.

“Huh? What’s with those reactions…?”

Kojou thought that things were just as they’d been explained to him. He and Nagisa were at the scene when the terror incident occurred, and Nagisa, in critical condition, was shuttled to Itogami Island to heal. He didn’t think the time difference was an issue either.

Asagi looked at him with an amazed expression that seemed to say, *You are sooo dense.*

“Hey, you. How long do you think it takes to fly from Rome to Itogami Island?”

“Er? Ohh…”

Kojou finally picked up the discrepancy. Even by the shortest possible route, the flight time from the Roman Autonomous Region to Tokyo was eleven hours, give or take. From there, it’d take a bit under an hour to get to Itogami Island, and switching planes doubtlessly added even more time. Even with MAR providing a private jet, it was too fast to arrive at Itogami Island.

“Er, wait, there’s a time difference, too, right? It’s what, eight hours off or something…?”

Yukina calmly pointed out, “Rome has a seven hour time zone difference from Japan. If it is seven PM here, it is noon local time.”

Kojou felt like the floor had fallen out from under him as he shook his head, dumbfounded.

“…What does that mean?”

Asagi shrugged her shoulders. “It means Nagisa was already hospitalized when the terror bombing happened. Her injuries are unrelated to that incident. They just used something that coincidentally happened on the same day as a

cover story.”

Yukina picked up where Asagi left off.

“I think it is natural for you and Nagisa to have no memory of before or after the incident, senpai. After all, neither of you were involved in it to begin with.”

“That being the case, I have my doubts that you two were in Rome to begin with,” Asagi added. “The customs records definitely show that you were headed to Europe, but…”

Kojou stared at his own palms as he weakly muttered, “Then…they’ve been lying to us all this time…?”

The thought of all the adults gathered around them lying to their faces was unpleasant, if not outright creepy, because it meant both of their parents were fully involved in the deception.

“Why would they lie to us about that? Why would they need to?!”

Yukina quietly shook her head with concern for Kojou.

“I do not know… However, it is surely related to your condition, senpai.”

With a start, Asagi lifted her face and looked at Yukina. “Kojou’s condition?”

If you want to know what Kojou’s been hiding, I want you to look into this incident first—that was the iron-clad condition Yukina had set. Yukina had probably discerned from the start that the memory pushed onto Kojou was false.

Asagi continued, glaring seriously at Kojou. “I see… You did promise to explain, didn’t you? I want you to tell me everything the two of you are hiding from me.”

Kojou nodded in resignation. Either way, he’d figured he’d have to eventually come clean with Asagi.

But there was one thing he wanted to confirm for himself before he began.

“Hey, Asagi. There should be records of Nagisa’s treatment at MAR, right…?”

Perhaps sensing what Kojou was getting at, Asagi spoke with some hesitation for once. “Well…probably. Looking at it without authorization is illegal and a

violation of privacy, you know?”

But Kojou had a brooding look as his eyes shifted to an exterior window. A white-walled building stood on the other side of a broad, grass-covered courtyard—the MAR medical laboratory, and the building where Nagisa had no doubt undergone treatment.

“The MAR people lied to us first, so we’re even. If they’ve been using Nagisa without us knowing, that’s a crime in itself, right?”

Asagi exhaled deeply and called to her partner, the AI.

“…Well, you heard the man, Mogwai.”

Even with Asagi’s skill, hacking into MAR, one of the world’s few magical high-tech corporations, would be no easy task. Having the Gigafloat Management Corporation’s main computer backing her up might be a different story.

However, there was no response from the AI.

“Mogwai…?”

Asagi smoothly tapped her keyboard, inputting a search command. The sarcastic avatar normally popped up even when he didn’t need to, but that day, Asagi’s call to him went unanswered. Something or other seemed to be jamming the signal.

Simultaneously, Yukina and Kojou let out cries of surprise.

“Eh…?!”

“—?!”

They saw a titanic level of demonic energy in a place not far from the MAR complex. It was a magical power so great that even Kojou, not exactly the most sensitive person around, could keenly detect.

“Himeragi, that’s—!”

Yukina leaped to her feet, grabbing her guitar case as she ran to an open window.

“Yes, a Beast Vassal. But what is this off-the-scale demonic energy…?!”

She saw, in a gap between buildings, a broadcast tower gently falling and

collapsing as if it had been sliced by a giant knife.

This was most certainly the work of an Old Guard vampire's Beast Vassal, and a nobleman-level one at that. Furthermore, there was more than one source of demonic energy. A short time later, she sensed the presence of a newly summoned Beast Vassal.

Kojou and Yukina first thought of Jagan and Kira. As nobles from the Warlord's Empire, it would be no surprise if they could summon Beast Vassals of that class. The bigger problem was the existence of an enemy that required the use of multiple Beast Vassals. Furthermore, there was no sign of the battle abating. For two of Vattler's confidants to be struggling in combat—

The very next moment, Asagi let out a loud yelp.

"What the—?!"

It was as if the dead of night had fallen over them, with ferocious lightning filling the entire sky. The artificial island shuddered from a great impact, as if a meteorite had crashed right into it.

Kojou and Yukina stiffened, unable to say a word, because they realized just what that shock was.

The mass of demonic energy blotting out the sky above the man-made island was the Beast Vassal summoned by Jagan and Kira's enemy—if one could even call something capable of such an incredible change a Beast Vassal.

Similar to how a sufficiently large mass would interfere with gravity, the mere presence of a huge amount of magical energy sent the man-made island's systems into chaos. Their fields of vision were distorted, like they had been dragged up from deep underwater, unable to even breathe easily because of the difference in pressure.

Until now, Kojou and Yukina had known only one category of Beast Vassals in existence that unleashed such enormous demonic energy: those of the Fourth Primogenitor, the World's Mightiest Vampire.

A thunderbolt ripped through the air close by. Together with the lightning, a silhouette landed on the ground in the courtyard of the hospital. Asagi pointed to it and shouted, "—Kojou, over there!"

It was a girl wearing a white robe. This was no doubt the foe that Jagan and Kira had been fighting.

She gently pointed her finger.

A giant ball of lightning followed, hurtling to the ground. Any lightning rod or defensive barrier was powerless before its incalculable destructive might. An impact accompanied by enormous heat slammed right into the medical wing building, blasting the exterior wall to bits.

The cutting-edge research facility had been transformed into a ruin on the verge of collapse.

One more hit, and no doubt the structure would be annihilated without a trace.

Seeing this, Kojou finally regained his senses.

“What the hell’s with her?! Nagisa’s in there!!”

It did not matter to him who the attacker was. What mattered was that she was trying to destroy the building with Nagisa inside. That was an act of savagery he absolutely could not permit.

But Kojou wondered if he could really stop a girl who could control a Beast Vassal equal, or superior, to his own—

She turned toward Kojou and looked at him, giggling as if she saw right through his hesitation.

She stripped off her robe, revealing her fairy-like beauty for all to see. Her rainbow-colored hair rippled in the violent wind. She had blazing eyes and a defiant smile.

As Kojou shuddered, Yukina’s sharp voice reached his ears.

“Senpai, I’ll look after Nagisa—!”

From her guitar case she removed a long, fully metallic spear that glinted silver. Once in her hands, the thick blade deployed with a smooth *shing*.

“Himeragi?!”

“Take care of Aiba!”

With that one-sided statement, Yukina broke the reinforced glass and leaped outside.

In the garden, electrical currents were still running around from the girl's lightning attack. Yukina charged straight in. A single flash of her silver spear wiped the sputtering lightning out. Yukina's Schneewaltzer was a purging spear able to rend any kind of barrier and nullify magical energy. Yukina, bearing that spear, was the only human in that place able to withstand an attack from a primogenitor's Beast Vassal.

"What is that spear?! Just what is she…?!" Asagi said, dumbfounded.

Asagi didn't know who Yukina really was. Seeing her in Sword Shaman form for the very first time left her as overwhelmed as one might expect.

However, Kojou couldn't say a word to Asagi, because he was shaken far more than she.

"No…way…"

Asagi, noticing Kojou's abnormal state, looked up and to the side.

"Kojou?"

His eyes were wide open, absentminded except for the single thing he was focusing on: the girl with rainbow hair and a charming smile, enveloped by ferocious thunder—

The anguished question that came from Kojou's throat sounded like a lament.

"Avrora… How…?"

9

Magna Ataraxia Research, or MAR, was one of the world's few sorcerous manufacturing conglomerates. Even just the laboratory it had established within Itogami City was an enormous enterprise employing nearly a thousand researchers. It was designed with considerable security features in mind, like security pods constructed with sorcerous circuitry and colorful miniature robots about the size of a garbage can. Somehow, their rounded external appearance

was humorous and adorable. However, intended for security, this was simply for show. On the inside, MAR security pods were military-grade unmanned attack robots, prototype weapons developed with anti-demonic combat in mind.

These unmanned attack robots barreled toward the invading girl, slamming her with a downpour of gunfire. The bullets were small-caliber, high-velocity cursed rounds made with cutting-edge platinum-rhodium tips, able to inflict lasting damage upon demons.

Amidst the 2,000-rounds-per-minute volley inflicted by some thirty security pods, the rainbow-haired girl wryly smiled and commanded her Beast Vassal to attack. The darkness shrouding the sky above them unleashed giant balls of lightning, which then transformed into countless arrows of light that poured down onto the laboratory grounds. The high-temperature shock waves they released pulverized the attack drones, gouging huge holes in the ground and the exterior walls of nearby buildings in the process.

The security personnel on standby behind the security pods shrieked and began to flee.

The girl trod upon the wreckage of the autonomous attack robots as she gazed at those fleeing with a look of surprise. Her expression said that she found it strange they were still alive after having turned their guns upon her.

Licking her lips in obvious pleasure, she acknowledged the silhouette standing amid the smoke from the blast.

“Hmm. So you are the one who saved their lives—”

She was addressing the small girl with the silver spear who had fended off her Beast Vassal’s attack.

“I see,” she continued. “There was a rumor that a wielder of a Schneewaltzer had been dispatched to monitor the Fourth Primogenitor. How intriguing—I now have a modest interest in you. Name yourself, girl.”

Yukina replied to the girl’s haughty question with a firm tone of voice.

“Yukina Himeragi. Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency.”

Up close, the girl's dreadful aura was beyond Yukina's wildest expectations. If she faltered for a single second, she would completely lose all will to fight. Her enemy gave off a sense of overwhelming might far surpassing all the various foes Yukina had faced until that day.

Watching the Sword Shaman keep her spear poised at the ready, she grinned in admiration.

"Do not move. Please release the Beast Vassal you have summoned and obey my instructions," Yukina ordered.

With a giggle, the girl's lips formed a wild smile.

"You deign to command me? I rather like reckless young ones unaware of their standing, Yukina."

A particularly enormous ball of lightning emerged above the girl's head, with the static electricity in the air prickling Yukina's flesh. The giant storm cloud blotting out the entirety of the sky was likely the girl's actual Beast Vassal.

The girl continued: "I shall not comply, for my objective remains unaccomplished."

She unleashed a pale beam toward Yukina, but the spear swatted down the attack no normal human could ever have seen coming. The Sword Shamans of the Lion King Agency were able to see an instant into the future with their spirit sight. By reading the future, she had intercepted the Beast Vassal attack occurring literally at the speed of lightning.

Yukina ran toward the girl.

"So you will stop me by force? I like you even more!" the rainbow-haired girl said.

An expression of delight came over her as she unleashed another attack. However, Yukina did not stop. She slashed her way through the scalding lightning strike, making a beeline toward her.

"The purging spear that can rend any barrier and nullifies magical energy—you use it well for someone so inexperienced. But that is not enough to stop me!" her foe declared.

“—Eh?!”

The instant Yukina thought Snowdrift Wolf’s blade had impaled her foe, she let out a sound of complete shock. The spear, able to sever any demonic energy, had been struck from the side, throwing it off course. It hadn’t sustained a blow from the Beast Vassal.

Rather, the girl had knocked Snowdrift Wolf away with her bare hand.

Then she moved to press her advantage with a kick, but Yukina’s spear fended it off. By the skin of her teeth, she dodged the girl’s karate chop. With Yukina now off-balance, the girl launched a ferocious pummeling blow. The speed was too great for Yukina to counterattack; that instant, it took everything the Sword Shaman had just to fall back.

Intense anxiety came over Yukina as she moaned, “It can’t be… Those movements…”

The girl before her eyes was surely a powerful fully fledged vampire. The destructive might of the Beast Vassal she controlled was equal or superior to that of Kojou—of the Fourth Primogenitor’s Beast Vassals. But if that was all, she would prove little match for Yukina with Snowdrift Wolf in her hands.

Yukina was shocked that the girl had overwhelmed her in melee combat. Yukina, who had held her own and then some against a Lotharingian Armed Apostle and beast-man mercenaries, was being dominated one-on-one by a girl her own size.

However, the rainbow-haired girl also seemed to be evaluating her opponent. She gave a large nod of admiration that Yukina had escaped her attacks unscathed.

“Hee-hee-hee, you took that well. But… Go forth, Xiuhtecuhtli!”

A new Beast Vassal emerged at her feet, a pillar of incandescent flame reminiscent of a volcanic eruption. The explosive inferno surged around like a giant serpent and assaulted Yukina from above.

“Snowdrift Wolf…!”

Even as the off-the-charts level of heat struck her with awe, Yukina poured all

her spiritual energy into her long spear and intercepted the flowing flames. Even if it appeared to be a fiery torrent, it was still a pure mass of demonic energy underneath. A single blow from the magic-nullifying Snowdrift Wolf caused both heat and flame to vanish.

The rainbow-haired girl declared in a voice that seemed more lighthearted than ever, "…So you leaped in to slice the flames from within. Had you turned your back for a single second out of fear of Xiuhtecuhtli, you and your bones would have been consumed without a trace. Well done. Even if I am being discreet, there are few souls that have fended off my Beast Vassals twice. Take pride in this."

Her inexhaustible self-confidence wrapped Yukina in a doubt that resembled deep-rooted terror.

"What are you…?!"

The girl before her eyes was different than any foe Yukina had encountered previously. In terms of strength, Kanon Kanase had been closest during the time she had become Faux-Angel, possessing inexhaustible magical energy and absolute immortality, and an overbearing might that rivaled the gods. The girl was a being on a different plateau—compared to normal demons, she was in a different dimension.

What differed from Faux-Angel was that it was not divinity that hovered around her, but an infinite negative life force. Incomplete as he was, Yukina knew only one being similar to her: Kojou Akatsuki, the current Fourth Primogenitor. If he had obtained all the abilities that were properly due to him as primogenitor, that might have made him a being on the same level as the girl.

But the girl couldn't be a vampire primogenitor. The girl's young, beautiful features were completely different than anything she had heard about the three lords of the Dominions. They, and the Fourth Primogenitor, the vampire primogenitor that should not have existed, were the only primogenitors—

If Kojou was the Fourth Primogenitor, then this girl could not be one. If Kojou was the real Fourth Primogenitor—

Yukina's hands quivered as they gripped her spear.

“That power… Your appearance… No, it can’t be…?!”

It felt less like remembering than being suddenly struck by an unpalatable truth.

The rainbow hair like billowing flames… The blazing eyes of pale blue flame… This was the appearance of the true Fourth Primogenitor, Avrora Florestina, whose name was a synonym for terror.

The vampire whose form was that of a young girl as beautiful as a fairy…

If this girl had only Avrora’s willowy appearance, Yukina would no doubt have deemed her an imposter. However, she used Beast Vassals, and ones so powerful that none but primogenitors could employ them—

With Yukina standing frozen in place, the rainbow-haired girl seemed to lose interest in her.

“Go, Camaxtli.”

The black storm cloud blotting out the sky unleashed a dazzling bolt, but it was not aimed at Yukina. The electric flash ripping through the air struck the building behind Yukina—near the half-destroyed medical wing.

Even if Yukina had bought some time, the staff couldn’t have finished evacuating already. Furthermore, the hospital attached to the laboratory contained numerous patients who could not be moved.

However, the girl’s attack showed them no mercy. The building’s lightning rods had already been destroyed, and Snowdrift Wolf could not protect the entirety of an enormous laboratory. Yukina had no way to protect the people there from the attack—and the attack of a primogenitor’s Beast Vassal wrought destruction and despair on par with a natural disaster.

Yet a low sound of surprise escaped the girl’s lips.

“Hmm?”

The lightning strike falling from the heavens was struck down by another, from the surface. The bolts scattered by the ferocious collision shifted into the form of a giant lion enveloped by lightning. A roar ripped through the air.

Yukina looked up at the lightning lion and shouted:

“Regulus Aurum—!”

The rainbow-haired girl murmured, “So he finally comes,” shifting her gaze with a charming smile. Her eyes reflected Kojou, whom the Beast Vassal served. He glared at the girl without letting down his guard as he stepped forward in Yukina’s place.

With pale lightning wrapping around his entire body, Kojou turned to the Sword Shaman.

“Himeragi, you all right?”

Yukina stared at him, dumbfounded. “Senpai—”

Kojou’s dry voice seemed on edge somehow.

“Substitution. Take care of Asagi.”

Yukina and Kojou weren’t the only ones present. It went without saying that Asagi had seen him call his Beast Vassal forth.

Asagi was probably more shaken by the truth than Kojou was by the revelation of his secret. However, neither Kojou nor Yukina had any time for considering Asagi’s feelings. The only thing they could do was ensure her safety.

“Senpai, this person…”

Kojou made a weak, bitter smile as he glared at the rainbow-haired girl. “Yeah… She looks a lot like Avrora.”

Yukina hesitated before voicing what she feared was the truth.

“If it is her, does that not make her the real Fourth Primogenitor?”

Kojou’s eyes glowed red.

“Then that’s all the more reason I have to fight her.” His entire body was giving off dense magical energy. He continued, “And if she’s after Nagisa, that’s just more of a reason to fight her! I’m not letting you put one finger on this hospital. From here on, this is my fight—!”

Kojou’s shout was accompanied by the lightning lion’s roar. The giant mass of magical energy bared its fangs toward the rainbow-haired girl. However, there was no fear on her face. The only thing there was a delighted smile.

“Regulus Aurum. This really takes me back—Very well, go, Camaxtli—!”

The two Beast Vassals, each enveloped with enormous electric charges, clashed head-on. The ferocious shock wave became a blast of wind that indiscriminately assaulted the surrounding area. Kojou’s face twisted in nervousness.

“…Regulus Aurum’s being pushed back…?!”

It was an unbelievable sight. Regulus Aurum’s charge halted before it could touch the girl. The lightning lion, priding itself in its invincibility, was being overwhelmed by the might of the girl’s Beast Vassal.

The raging gale swept the girl’s hair as she shouted wildly, “You call yourself the Fourth Primogenitor, yet you indeed still lack full control of your Beast Vassals! Do not disappoint me so!”

A pillar of fire erupted from the girl’s feet, changing into an incandescent torrent that assaulted Kojou.

“Go, Xiuhtecuhtli!”

“Ugh! C’mon over, Al-Nasl Minium!”

Kojou shot down the scorching torrent with a blast from the Beast Vassal he had summoned. The girl released the summons of her own Beast Vassal to avoid the fiery backlash.

“Hee-hee-hee… You defended well! Then—!”

She suddenly leaped off the ground with monstrous speed only achievable with a vampire’s raw physical strength. A distance of several dozen meters turned to zero in an instant as the girl thrust her right arm at Kojou. Vile claws that seemed unsuited to the girl’s slender hands extended from her fingertips.

“Why you!”

Intuitively judging that he could not dodge the girl’s attack, Kojou summoned a new Beast Vassal. His entire body transformed into mist, and the girl’s right arm, on the cusp of impaling him, turned to mist as well.

“The Beast Vassal of Mist, Natra Cinereus—not a bad choice, but a careless one!”

The girl used her own demonic energy to materialize the right arm that had been turned to mist against her will.

This action seemed to drag Kojou back, releasing him from his own mist form, tearing his left breast and sending fresh blood scattering. Apparently, Kojou's Beast Vassal, able to transform any kind of physical matter to mist and annihilate it, was ineffective against a vampire equal or above his own level.

He moaned as he glared at the girl's bloodstained right arm.

"Guo…a…!"

The girl's arm had transformed into a beast man's even though she was a vampire—

"I…see! You're—!"

"So you finally realize it. But it is too late! Go, Xolotl!"

She summoned her third Beast Vassal. This was an enormous, skeletal giant. Its eye sockets, having lost their eyes, were large hollow cavities; the gaps between the exposed ribs were filled with a dark space that did not reflect even a single ray of light.

The rib cage opened like a door, unleashing the overpowering darkness as if firing a cannon. It was a ravenous black missile that consumed space itself.

This is bad, thought Kojou as his whole body froze. The skeletal giant's target was not Kojou, but rather, the building behind him. As if the rainbow-haired girl's aim was to goad Kojou, the target was the medical wing!

But how was he to stop an attack that consumed space itself?!

"C'mon over, Al-Meissa Mercury!"

Kojou summoned another Beast Vassal, a two-headed dragon covered in quicksilver scales. Its giant maws opened wide, swallowing the surrounding space, and the black cannonball, whole.

Still, taking the brunt of the attack from a Beast Vassal of equal class brought visible strain to the two-headed dragon known as the Dimension Eater. Its demonic energy evaporated, and Kojou dropped to his knees.

It was plain that the rainbow-haired girl was just as depleted. Perhaps she was satisfied at having used her power so much, for she released the summons of all her Beast Vassals with a pleasant, satisfied smile.

“—Splendid. To think you would gouge out Xolotl’s annihilation space and the dimension with it instead. I see, such quick-wittedness is how you survived the Blazing Banquet…”

“Blazing…Banquet…?!”

Those words, ones Kojou felt he had heard before, made him feel like his chest was tightening. He felt a stabbing pain from the purportedly lost memory.

At long last, the dazzling sunbeams returned and made the girl grimace as she said, “I had hoped to size you up a little more, but it seems I am out of time. That’s all well and good, for I have fulfilled my objective.”

She looked at the medical wing building. Even if Kojou had interfered, her Beast Vassal had gouged out a great deal of its exterior wall, ripping open the experimental facility constructed deep underground.

It had thick metallic interior walls reinforced with steel girders. There were high-voltage cables, devices for circulating liquid coolant, and countless monitoring instruments. It was as sterile as a factory floor.

A small girl slept atop the metal bed placed at the center. The girl, wearing nothing but a thin medical gown, looked like a human sacrifice lying upon an altar.

Kojou stood rooted in shock as he gazed at the sight of his still-sleeping little sister.

“Nagisa…?!”

Lying beside Nagisa, another girl slept; it was as if they were mirror images. This girl was enveloped in a clear, pale blue mass of glacier-like ice.

Kojou stared wordlessly at the block of ice that was once called the Fairy’s Coffin.

Apparently, Kojou's battle with the rainbow-haired girl had been tentatively settled. A silence descended, and what abruptly broke it was Asagi's question.

"So Kojou's really the Fourth Primogenitor?"

Asagi's question was addressed to Yukina, who had doubled back to protect her. Seeing her sullen expression, Asagi clutched her head.

"What the hell…? That idiot became the World's Mightiest Vampire? And you're a watcher assigned by a special federal agency? None of this makes sense. What's with all this…? Aw, geez!"

Yukina solemnly lowered her head. "I'm very sorry. I apologize for hiding it until now. However…"

There was a faint echo of bewilderment in Yukina's voice. Even if it was natural that Asagi was upset, her reaction was a little different than she had anticipated.

"Er, you do not seem especially surprised…," she timidly pointed out.

Asagi puffed up her cheeks as she stroked her hair back.

"I've lived in a Demon Sanctuary for over a decade. I'm not going to scream just because people I know turned out to be vampires and Attack Mages. Now that you mention it, a lot comes to mind. In the first place, I can't exactly not believe you after seeing *that* firsthand."

"Yes…I'm very sorry."

By rational thinking, Yukina had no reason to apologize, but she lowered her gaze nonetheless, cowed by Asagi's aggression.

"And another thing, Himeragi!"

"Y-yes!"

Yukina's whole body seemed to shrink as she lifted her head. Before Yukina's eyes, Asagi brought her face very close, staring at Yukina's slender neck.

"Have you done it with Kojou yet?"

"P…pardon me?"

Asagi violently pounded the table close at hand.

“I’m asking if he drank your blood!”

Yukina’s head went blank at the girl’s provocative question.

“Eh?! Er, that was… I mean, there were exigent circumstances…!”

“You have?! How many times?!”

“Th-that’s—”

Yukina began meekly counting on her fingers. Her heart having been completely unprepared, she was unable to think of any way to gloss this over.

The corners of Asagi’s eyes rose as she watched Yukina bend her fingers.

“Why, that guuuy…!”

“Ah, Aiba…?”

Apparently, the important thing from Asagi’s point of view was not whether Kojou was human, but whether he’d placed his lips upon Yukina’s flesh.

Yukina tried to find the words to smooth things over, but her face abruptly hardened.

“I’m very sorry, Aiba, but we must leave this for another time—”

Yukina turned her silver spear around and walked forward without a sound. She headed toward the young man who had unexpectedly appeared out of nowhere, a youth with delicate features wearing black clothes.

Asagi, having a bad feeling about the man’s presence, adopted a guarded stance.

“Who’s that…?”

“An escapee from the prison barrier.”

Asagi’s face stiffened at Yukina’s curt explanation.



“The prison barrier?!”

She had a very good reason for not laughing off that barrier as a mere urban legend. Back on Harrowing Festival night at the end of October, Asagi had engaged in a lethal running battle with one of its escapees. She knew better than anyone just how frightening they were.

The man in black, Meiga Itogami, laughed wryly at Yukina in a show of scorn.

“Ah… You are the Sword Shaman from back then.”

Meiga gripped one short spear in each hand. Then he powerfully fused them together to create a single long spear. Yukina’s eyes widened in surprise at the eerie glow of the pitch-black weapon.

“That spear, it can’t be—”

“So you have indeed noticed that this is Fangzahn—a failed, ‘rejected weapon’ of the Lion King Agency.”

“—!”

Yukina’s gaze sharpened further at the young escapee’s mention of the Lion King Agency. It was not out of anger, for she had understood from a single glance that the wicked spear he wielded was constructed from the same technology as Snowdrift Wolf.

No, what threw Yukina completely off was not the spear but the faint scent of what stained the spear—very fresh blood.

“What have you done with Yaze—?” Yukina asked.

Yukina’s question made Asagi’s shoulders tremble. In this situation, if the young jailbreaker had laid a hand on someone, the odds were high that it was Yaze, who’d never returned to the courtyard.

Meiga gently smiled, almost charming, as if to confirm Yukina and Asagi’s worst fears. “It’s all right. He is probably not dead…yet.”

“Urk—!”

The next moment, Yukina leaped at him like she’d been shot out of a cannon. In her mind, there was no point continuing the conversation. First, she needed

to render him powerless.

Yukina's blow, faster than a demon's reaction speed could handle, knocked down the man's spear, then struck him in the side of the head—or so she thought.

She stopped moving, in shock at the lack of feedback from her own spear.

"Eh?!"

The young man calmly spoke to Yukina from behind.

"What is the matter?"

He had done nothing save make a single step to the side to evade Yukina's charge.

"Impossible," she uttered.

Without a doubt, her Spirit Sight had seen the young man's next action. It should not have been possible for Yukina's attack to miss.

The young man's tone of voice sounded patronizing, as if he was scolding a bungling pupil.

"I suppose I should warn you that you cannot defeat me. It is precisely because you are an excellent Sword Shaman that you cannot do me any harm."

From the beginning, the young man had not regarded Yukina as any match for him.

Yukina quietly intoned a chant.

"—I, Maiden of the Lion, Sword Shaman of the High God, beseech thee."

She poured all the refined ritual energy inside her body into Snowdrift Wolf, changing its glow to a Divine Oscillation Effect that cut away magical energy. Surely, whatever sorcery Meiga Itogami had deployed, its effect would vanish within that glow.

However, the beautiful radiance emitted by Snowdrift Wolf winked out before touching the young man's body. It was not his spell that had been negated, but Yukina's Divine Oscillation Effect instead.

Seeing Yukina too shaken to move, Meiga smiled as if to mock her.

“…Fangzahn is a failure. Type Seven nullifies warped magical energy and amplifies your spiritual power as a priestess—however, Type Zero nullifies both magical and spiritual energy. And so, this spear was sealed away, for it was *too dangerous*.”

“But…with both spiritual and magical energy cut off, how can you be…alive…?”

Nervousness crept into Yukina’s voice. Just like how all things possessed yin and yang, the end and the beginning, spiritual and magical energy were the opposing poles of life itself. Whether one was human or demon, one could not survive when cut off from both spiritual and magical energy. It was less a matter of being alive or dead—without either, one could not even exist.

The young man turned his spear toward Yukina.

“Such is my physical nature. No supernatural power affects me. My flesh makes me nothing but a spectator so far as they are concerned. Indeed, were it not for this spear, this condition would be quite useless. However…”

Yukina’s Spirit Sight could not predict his next action. Certainly, it was as Meiga had said. His spear was the mortal enemy of a Sword Shaman employing Spirit Sight, for the more exceptional the Sword Maiden, the greater the power she lost as a result.

None of the martial art skills she had acquired through long training had been stolen from her. But Yukina, lacking the reaction speed brought by seeing into the future, and unable to amplify her physical strength through ritual spells, was reduced to a fairly athletic but otherwise normal girl. Could she really defeat an escapee from the prison barrier in her current condition?

Yukina resigned herself to a suicidal attack just before Asagi wildly shouted:

“Stop it, now!”

Then, suddenly, a ferocious gunshot echoed through the room.

“That’s far enough. Hold it right there!” Asagi continued.

Asagi had her notebook open as she gave Meiga a threatening look. At her feet sat a colorful machine like a loyal guard dog, an MAR security pod with its

gun barrel trained on Meiga.

Asagi had gone through the laboratory network to hijack control of the security pod. The unmanned attack robots were ineffective against vampires, but they were more than capable of inflicting fatal wounds against an ordinary human being.

Asagi kept her finger on the keyboard as she solemnly announced, “If you can nullify magical and spiritual energy, that means you can’t block physical attacks, right? Take one step, and I’ll have this security pod turn you into Swiss cheese.”

Yukina stared at the side of her face, dumbfounded. Asagi’s knees were faintly shaking. She certainly felt fear. Of course—she was an ordinary high school girl with no combat training whatsoever. However, that ordinary high school girl had saved Yukina in her moment of need.

Meiga was just as surprised as Yukina was, suddenly raising his voice in laughter.

“Ha…ha-ha-ha…ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Although, this was not a laugh of scorn nor was it resignation. It was a laugh of unbridled joy.

“Is something funny here…?” Asagi asked, obviously irritated.

She might have thought he was making fun of her. Meiga slowly shook his head, lowering his spear in a gesture of solemn respect toward Asagi.

“So in that brief span of time, you hacked into a security pod with heavy protections, reprogramming it to do your own bidding… It seems you truly have no idea what astounding ability you possess…”

“Huh…?”

Asagi listened to the young man in black’s praise with complete befuddlement. No doubt she was unsure how to react to his complete reversal.

Yukina was just as perplexed. Certainly, Asagi’s hacking skills reached a plateau above all common sense, but she couldn’t fathom why Meiga admired them to that degree.

Meiga smiled pleasantly in satisfaction as he separated his twin spear once

more.

“I have seen your work before. It is your power that He has awaited.”

Then the spiritual and magical energy he had previously blotted out returned. Yukina had regained her power as a Sword Shaman, but Meiga, too, was able to employ ritual spells. Countless glyphs seemingly drawn in ink floated into the area around his body.

“A spatial control ritual—?!” Yukina exclaimed.

“What the hell?! That’s not fair!” Asagi shouted.

She commanded the security pod to open fire. Her targets were the short spears in Meiga’s hands. However, the bullets bounced right off the ritual spell barrier deployed around Meiga.

With a calm voice, the black-clothed young man said, “Well, then. We shall meet again, Asagi Aiba, Cyber Empress—or rather, Priestess of Cain.”

With that, he vanished. Yukina and Asagi could do nothing but watch, astounded.

11

Kojou could hear sirens from somewhere, no doubt the Island Guard’s public order unit. Even if MAR hadn’t sent word, two primogenitor-class Beast Vassals clashing in an urban area naturally resulted in the Island Guard running over.

The MAR grounds had been reduced to a pathetic sight. The once-beautiful courtyard was burned to a crisp, ripped down to the innards of the artificial island. Rows of structural glass had been smashed to smithereens, particularly at the medical wing on the verge of collapse at the center of the destruction.

Although, if one looked solely at the results, the damage could be considered nominal. After all, two vampire primogenitors had fought head-on, yet that was as far as the damage went—

As Kojou and the rainbow-haired girl stood amid the still-smoldering remnants of vast demonic energy, he heard a witty and polished male voice.

“As expected of a battle between our revered primogenitors—I must say that I am most satisfied.”

Finally, with an ear-piercing sound like that of glass scraping glass, a rift opened out of thin air.

Then a golden mist appeared. The fog brightened and changed into a handsome man: a blond, blue-eyed vampire aristocrat.

The girl clicked her tongue in annoyance.

“To think that you made your own way out while my Beast Vassal held you captive… First, I suppose I should call it splendid. I imagine you could have escaped even sooner. Does the fact you did not escape mean that you aim to take my head as I sleep, Vattler?”

Vattler, now completely materialized, lowered his head in a gesture of respect.

“Surely you jest, Your Highness.”

His words seemed courteous, yet they did not carry a single whiff of submission. It was a gesture befitting such a snobbish, aggravating vampire.

The girl sighed with a twinge of exasperation.

“Such an unpalatable man. Small wonder you are a confidant of that damnable Warlord. I wish I could make my own daughters learn a thing or two from you.”

Kojou expressed some doubt as he asked Vattler, “Highness?”

Based on their conversation, it seemed Vattler had already fought the girl, who had then held him captive somewhere. But to Vattler, the rainbow-haired girl was apparently someone worthy of great respect.

Yes, he had definitely said that Kojou and the girl were primogenitors, plural —

“It is you, is it not?” Vattler inquired. “She is the ruler of the Chaos Zone in Central America, served by twenty-seven Beast Vassals, the formless Third Primogenitor of a thousand guises…the Chaos Bride.”

Instead of denying Vattler's deduction, the girl laughed teasingly.

"I do not like being addressed by such a bombastic name. You may call me Giada."

At some point, the girl's hair color had changed, from a blond that reflected the colors of the rainbow to a lustrous, emerald green. The glow of her pale blue, flame-like eyes changed to the jade of a deep lake.

Her outward appearance was still young, but the fleeting, fairy-like beauty had vanished. What emerged in its place was a powerful but lovely beauty reminiscent of a wild leopard. She looked like a completely different person than she had a few short moments before. This was no doubt her original appearance—the true form of the Chaos Bride, the Third Primogenitor.

"Impersonation…?" Kojou asked. "A transformation ability? You used that power to turn into Avrora?"

"I apologize for my impoliteness, Kojou Akatsuki. It was not my intention to mock you," Giada replied quietly. The girl's jade eyes looked straight at Kojou, as if probing deeper into him. She continued. "But I thought this would be the easiest way to make you serious."

Kojou's voice shook with quiet anger.

"…Yeah, I suppose so… Thanks to that, I remember. Everything—all of it."

He didn't direct his anger at Giada; he was indignant at his past self and enraged at himself for forgetting all about that incident—Nagisa and the girl sleeping in the block of ice. His battle with the girl taking Avrora's form had dredged up his memories from where they had sunk into the sea of oblivion, along with the anger and despair frozen with them.

"Is that so? Then my role ends here."

Then a cruel glint appeared in her eyes as she glared at the half-destroyed medical wing building.

"However, I believe the humans of MAR should pay an appropriate price for toying with the remains of poor little Avrora—"

Kojou's eyes were filled with silent rage as they shifted toward Giada. "Stop."

Their gazes crossed like clashing blades.

“You’re not involved, so hands off. This is my fight,” he said.

Giada nodded in satisfaction.

“…A strong spirit. So this is why Vattler has taken a liking to you. Very amusing. Then I shall leave this in your hands, Kojou Akatsuki. Sooner or later, my Chaos Zone shall paint it with blood. You should reclaim that which you have lost before this comes to pass.”

The girl became insubstantial, seeming to dissolve into thin air and vanish. She’d no doubt used the power of the same Beast Vassal that had shut Vattler in a space in another dimension.

The vanishing of her presence made the air around them feel lighter somehow. The Chaos Bride possessed a sense of overwhelming might far beyond Kojou’s expectations.

Vattler shot Kojou a sympathetic glance.

“A frightening old crone as always, yes? You’ve gone through quite an ordeal, Kojou.”

The words seemed like a joke, but Kojou sensed it was mixed with an echo like a smoldering flame. Vattler, a cannibal combat maniac, no doubt saw Giada as one of the enemies he would eventually consume. And Giada, fully aware of Vattler’s schemes, had let him go. Perhaps both of their abominable demonic instincts craved ever more powerful foes.

Kojou’s face scowled in annoyance.

“You’re not one to talk here, geez.” Then he added with an extremely grudging tone, “…But you saved my bacon back there, so thanks.”

Hearing Kojou’s words of admiration, Vattler murmured, “Hmm?” with a small smile. It was a wry one that seemed to say, *Ah, you noticed?*

At the end of her battle with Kojou, Giada had said she was out of time. By that, she probably meant Vattler’s return from other-dimensional space. If Vattler and Kojou fought her at the same time, even the Third Primogenitor might get the short end of the stick. That was why she was compelled to give up

fighting with Kojou at that point.

If combat had continued at that rate, even if Kojou did manage to survive, the damage would have been far more extensive. Consequently, Vattler had saved Kojou and Itogami Island both.

The Duke of Ardeal opened his arms wide as an invitation and said dramatically, “Ha-ha, how reserved you are, Kojou, my beloved Fourth Primogenitor!”

Instinctively sensing danger, Kojou unwittingly retreated a step.

“Kojou!”

A third party interrupted Kojou and Vattler’s fight, changing the looks on their faces. The girl had extravagant hair, wore a Saikai Academy school uniform, and was using her favorite notebook as a shield to check Vattler’s advance.

“A-Asagi…?”

“I knew it! The two of you really are…!”

“Eh?!” The gaze Asagi directed at Kojou, as if she had witnessed something highly impure, prompted a vehement, shrill reply. “Y-you’re wrong. This guy’s sayin’ that stuff all on his own—”

“Is that so?!”

Asagi glared at him, clearly with her guard up. Thanks to having hidden so many things from her, Kojou had completely lost her trust. Clearing up this misunderstanding would be no easy task.

Vattler seemed fairly bemused as he looked at the interaction between Kojou and Asagi.

“I’m really sorry, Kojou. I would like to speak words of love in leisure, but I am concerned for my subordinates. I shall leave the cleanup in your hands.”

“Eh?!”

Vattler’s unhesitating words made Kojou even more nervous.

A large Island Guard force would soon be pouring in. The MAR facility was in ruins. There were numerous wounded. The damage to the facility wouldn’t be a

mere one or two hundred million yen. And Giada, the culprit, had long fled. Was he telling Kojou to take responsibility in her place…?

“The Priestess of Cain… Lovely. This should be fun. It is time you prepared yourself for the inevitable.”

With that, he transformed into mist and vanished.

Kojou, left behind and drenched in despair, looked up at the needlessly clear, blue sky. Next to him, Yukina got his attention.

“Senpai, that girl…?”

Yukina was staring at the girl lying in the giant block of ice in the medical wing’s underground facility.

With a broken voice, Kojou spoke the name he had once forgotten.

“…That’s the real Avrora, the twelfth Kaleid Blood.”

Asagi drew close to Kojou and gently tugged at his sleeve.

“Is she sleeping?”

“Nah.” He shook his head.

Inside the eternally frozen block of ice, the girl’s eyes were closed.

Her hair was all the colors of the rainbow, billowing like flames. She had fleeting, fairy-like beauty. Once, those very lips had smiled when they spoke Kojou’s name.

But she would never open her eyes again.

“She’s already dead.”

A silver light glowed in the chest of the girl in the ice. It came from a small, metallic stake, apparently impaling her heart.

Painfully, Kojou lowered his eyes and murmured…

“I killed her with my own hands—”



Chapter Three
The Jester Reminisces

Chapter Three

The Jester Reminisces

1

Motoki Yaze was twelve the first time he visited Keystone Gate. It was a springtime day just before he enrolled in middle school.

The Demon Sanctuary of Itogami City was formally a part of the Tokyo Metropolis, but the Gigafloat Management Corporation ran the special administrative district. The Yaze family currently headed it, and Akishige Yaze, who happened to be his father, was the corporation's chairman. He had been called in personally in his father's name.

He passed through multi-layered security checks before arriving at the corporate offices, only to be greeted by an unexpected individual—Kazuma Yaze, his half brother who was more than ten years his senior. Kazuma was an elite with a master's degree from a North American Union university, and presently was employed as something resembling Akishige's personal secretary, working in research conducted in total secrecy at a university inside Itogami City. Both his ability and his exploits marked him as Akishige's likely successor.

Sitting in the middle of a ridiculously large room, Yaze carelessly echoed back to Kazuma, "—Kojou Akatsuki? Who's that?"

To be blunt, Yaze was much happier to be speaking to Kazuma than his own father. Unlike the rest of his family, Yaze got along with his sly, ambitious half brother rather well. Even to that day, the family held a strong bias against Kazuma, an illegitimate son, regardless of his status as a more than capable successor to the family name. Perhaps Yaze, scorned throughout his childhood as a lackluster Hyper Adapter, related to him on some level.

Kazuma motioned to the image of a young-looking boy on a screen as he

spoke.

“A boy the same age as you. He’s going to enroll in Saikai Academy’s middle school.”

Judging from the hospital backdrop, the picture had been taken while he was in recovery. His athletic ability seemed decent, but aside from that, there was nothing especially noteworthy about him. Staring at the soft features of his face, Yaze cursed under his breath. *He’s still a little kid.*

“Motoki. This is an order from the family. You are to monitor him.”

Kazuma’s words brought a highly dubious look over Yaze’s face.

“Monitor?”

It wasn’t that his brother’s order was unexpected. After all, it had been determined from Yaze’s birth that his Hyper Adapter ability was good for observation and nothing else. The Yaze family, scion of many generations of Hyper Adapters, was quite accustomed with dealing with children like him.

However, to date, Yaze’s surveillance targets had been limited to criminals—politicians suspected of dirty dealings and corporations involved in illegal black market schemes. As a result, being ordered to conduct surveillance on an ordinary, law-abiding citizen—and someone his own age at that—was a first for him.

Kazuma ignored Yaze’s bewilderment and continued his explanation in businesslike fashion.

“I’m not asking you to do anything specific. Just get close to him and make regular reports about his actions. We’re making arrangements on the school side of things. You’ll be in the same class.”

Yaze browsed the file that had been handed to him. *Huh.* He pouted a little in apparent surprise. Kojou Akatsuki’s physical data seemed unexpectedly… normal.

“So he’s not actually a demon, is he?” Yaze remarked.

Kazuma looked vaguely disgusted. “Well, no, not really… If he was a normal demon, this would be a lot simpler.”

Yaze glared at Kazuma in even greater confusion. It always pissed him off how hard it was to drag the important stuff out of his ever-logical brother.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Look at this.”

Kazuma pulled an envelope out of his desk and placed it in front of Yaze, who furrowed his brow as he took it. The envelope contained what was apparently a photo of the boy’s rib cage.

“This is…?”

“An x-ray of Kojou Akatsuki. Can you see how the fourth and fifth ribs on his right side are colored differently?”

“Well, yeah…”

Yaze immediately saw the discrepancy without even needing to hold it up to the light. It was plain as day that those two ribs were not those of a normal human being. Even with a black-and-white x-ray, it was evident that they glowed like translucent crystal.

Yaze absentmindedly gazed at the picture. The fourth and fifth ribs on the right side—wasn’t that where a so-called Son of God was stabbed with a spear?

“Those are not his original ribs. They are transplanted—or more accurately, exchanged,” Kazuma said.

“Exchanged? From whom?”

“The girl who might become the Fourth Primogenitor.”

“Huh…?” Yaze answered Kazuma’s blunt, emotionless words with a silent *Come on*.

However, there was no indication Kazuma was joking. He continued, “You’re familiar with vampire Blood Vassals, right?”

“Yeah. A pseudo-vampire created when a vampire grants a part of his or her body, right?”

As Yaze finished explaining what was common knowledge for any Demon Sanctuary resident, he audibly gasped.

“Wait, you don’t mean that—”

“Vampires have ridiculous regenerative capability, but the parts they grant to their vassals don’t regenerate. That’s why they normally create their vassals with blood, but they can use more important organs for more powerful vassals, or so it’s said.”

Deep-rooted terror welled up in Yaze, making goose bumps rise all over his body.

“So he has a Primogenitor’s ribs in him…!”

A vampire’s Blood Vassal possessed abilities heavily influenced by the master vampire. It was said that a vassal with a high-spec body, combined with strong compatibility with his master, could make him even more agile than a real vampire. If this Kojou Akatsuki really was a primogenitor’s Blood Vassal, didn’t it mean he was just as much a monster as a primogenitor…?

“Hmph.” Kazuma murmured a rare stab at humor. “A boy with ribs granted by a woman—someone got their mythology backward.” He was likely quoting an obscure Biblical reference, of how God created Eve from Adam’s rib. He continued in a cold voice, “Either way, it’s a top-class part to grant to a vassal. After all, human ribs are part of the body’s blood production system.”

Yaze had little medical knowledge of his own, but merely listening to his brother helped him understand the bizarre situation Kojou Akatsuki had been placed in. A vampire’s blood, synonymous with the source of vampiric power, literally flowed through his veins.

Gazing at the picture of Kojou Akatsuki once more, Yaze murmured, “You’re saying this is a primogenitor’s Blood Vassal…?”

Kazuma quietly corrected him. “He’s a boy who could become a primogenitor’s Blood Vassal. Right now, he’s still just a human…albeit one who has ribs from the twelfth Kaleid Blood.”

“Twelfth…? What’s all that about?”

Kazuma stroked back his hair as if it was a nervous habit as he said, “That’s on a need-to-know basis.”

Then he tossed a large paper bag Yaze's way. The bag contained boxes of capsules. Neither the bag nor the boxes listed the drug or the manufacturer.

"What's this?"

"Boosters… Chemical drugs synthesized to match your body type. The effect is temporary, but your Hyper Adapter abilities will be amplified by a factor of roughly four hundred. Think of it as insurance for worst cases. There are no direct side effects, but don't overuse them. It'll shave years off your life span."

Yaze smiled with wry amazement. "Wait, you're worried about me?"

Given he'd just handed such a dangerous thing to a younger brother who'd only graduated primary school, Kazuma's concern sounded like pure sarcasm. However, Yaze's pragmatic half brother remained serious as he replied, "You are useful to me, so I'm using you. That is all."

"That so?"

Yaze stuck out his tongue and glared at Kazuma, like a sulking child completely acting his age.

As the younger brother was about to leave the office, Kazuma sighed.

"Motoki?"

"Mm?"

When Yaze looked back, Kazuma averted his eyes and spoke as if it was more for himself than for Yaze.

"Your role here is an observer. I don't mind if you're friendly with him, but don't get emotionally involved. It'll only make things harder."

"Speaking from experience here?"

Yaze casually lifted up the paper bag he'd received with an apparently pained laugh.

"I'll remember that, Big Bro. Say hi to Dad for me."

2

To be blunt, the surveillance assignment was boring.

Kojou Akatsuki, enrolling in late April, did nothing to counter Yaze's first impression of him. Nothing deviated from the pattern of a completely ordinary boy living a completely ordinary middle school life, day in and day out.

Even so, Yaze faithfully continued his surveillance as commanded by the family.

One reason Yaze did this was for the mother he revered, who was part of that family. She didn't have any powerful relatives backing her up. Furthermore, she was sickly and had little standing in the clan. Yaze had to demonstrate his own capabilities to protect her livelihood.

The other reason was the simple fact that he'd come to like Kojou.

Kojou Akatsuki always looked lazy and unreliable, but when he got serious, which wasn't often, his destructive instincts took ferocious hold. Seeing him up close, Yaze took a deep interest in the self-control and decision-making prowess the boy demonstrated from time to time.

Perhaps the source of that interest was the fact that Kojou's underlying nature impressed Yaze with a sense of danger, telling him not to take his eyes off him.

At some point in the two years since meeting Kojou, Yaze forgot his duty as an observer and came to see Kojou as his best friend, even if somewhere, deep inside, he knew he was violating his half brother's warning—

"—Hey, Kojou!"

It was a bright autumn day. Yaze was on his way home from school when he saw Kojou and called out to him.

Kojou was in a vacant lot near the train station closest to Saikai Academy, facing a beat-up street basketball hoop, silently practicing free throws on his own.

"The hell are you doin' on a stupidly hot day like this? Do that stuff in the gym. The freshmen'll love you for it."

Noticing that Yaze was approaching, Kojou lazily shook his head. "I don't

wanna. Why do I have to coach all those guys for free?”

Kojou and Yaze were basketball teammates. As third-years, they’d technically retired after the summer tournament. But Kojou and Yaze were headed straight from Saikai Academy middle school to high school. Students not expecting to take external exams weren’t supposed to complain about showing up for club practices.

However, Kojou resumed his solo practice.

Itogami Island’s eternal summer meant that daytime temperatures exceeded thirty degrees Celsius even in “autumn.” Kojou’s school uniform was drenched with sweat.

Yaze sat on a nearby set of stairs and watched him shoot basketballs toward the hoop.

“Hey, are you really done with basketb—”

“There’s not enough people in the senior club, so it’s on hiatus, right? Igarashi and Yanagi quit, too. Well, I’ll just take it easy for a while.”

Kojou’s reply cited the names of two seniors who’d helped him a while back like they were excuses.

Yaze sighed in exasperation and put his chin in his hands.

“You really cool with this? If you quit basketball, you’ll kiss your one redeeming feature goodbye.”

A completely off-course ball bounced off the wall as Kojou shot Yaze a resentful look.

“Oh, shut up! And don’t dump on all my possibilities in life all of a sudden!”

Ever since final middle school exams, Kojou had abruptly stopped going anywhere near the gym. He still joked around with his club mates if he bumped into them, but he deliberately avoided the subject of basketball. Yet there he was, unable to let go of his attachment, continuing to practice shooting in secret.

It hurt to see him like that, but Yaze couldn’t laugh. He knew what Kojou was really afraid of.

It had happened at the tournament final they'd lost—

Kojou always concentrated a lot more than usual during a match, enough that it was hard to say a word to him, but everything he did that day was bizarre. His leaping ability and reaction time were inhuman. He made tons of freakish shots. Many of his passes went astray, but that was because his teammates couldn't keep up with the speed of his throws.

From the middle of the match on, it became Kojou's show, and that's when *it* happened.

Kojou was running to the basket when he made contact with a player on the opposing team trying to stop him with a foul. The opposing player was seriously injured as a result, bad enough that the game was put on hold while an ambulance was called.

It wasn't a mistake on Kojou's part, but the incident had heavily shaken him. What shocked him further was the attention of his classmates. They all looked at him with fear in their eyes. When Kojou sat on the bench to recover, his teammates had no drive left to continue the match. All Kojou could do was sit on the bench and watch his team slide toward defeat—and he never walked onto the court again.

In a joking tone, trying not to make him feel any worse, Yaze said, "Man, and you were such a great source of info for making nice with chicks from other schools, too—"

"Was that what you were doing?!" Kojou bared his teeth. "Gimme a break."

Yaze whistled with an innocent look on his face. Basketball had brought him good food and even girlfriends. Regardless, Yaze had to write detailed reports containing all sorts of data related to Kojou. Even if he had used the information for his own ends here and there, it still sat poorly with his conscience to a painful degree.

So with all that had happened, why was Kojou still practicing free throws anyway…? As soon as that simple question crossed Yaze's mind, he heard a voice from behind belonging to a flashy middle school girl running down the stairs. She was wearing a decked-out middle school uniform and carried a can of juice in each hand.

“Sorry, Kojou. Did I make you wait? I had to talk to the teacher. Shiromori’s talk dragged on and on—I got this to make up for it.”

Yaze blinked in surprise and looked up at his childhood friend.

“Oh? Asagi?”

At that moment, she noticed Yaze, which for some reason made her voice go shrill.

“Wh-what the heck are you doing here, Motoki?”

“Err…well, ah… Wait, were you meeting up here? Huh… My, my, my.”

Yaze didn’t reply to Asagi’s question and acted with exaggerated surprise. His reaction made Asagi’s cheeks flush deep red.

“Y…y…you’ve got it all wrong, stupid Motoki!”

“Bwoah?!”

Yaze let out a loud groan as his stomach took a square hit from the can of juice she had thrown.

“Hey! Do normal people throw juice cans around?! You could kill somebody?!”

Yaze cried out in anguish as Asagi pounded his back and made excuses.

“It’s because you said something weird! Kojou told me he was gonna visit Nagisa at the hospital, so I figured I’d tag along, that’s all!”

Yaze desperately endured the assault as he looked up at Kojou. “Visiting? Nagisa got sick again?”

“A bit, yeah… Happened around the weekend,” Kojou muttered.

Yaze knew just how seriously Kojou worried about his little sister. Her medical treatment was the reason Kojou had come to Itogami Island, yet he never said one cross word about that fact. Even playing basketball was apparently something he did with the thought of cheering up his little sister.

However, Kojou’s devotion for his little sister was underlined by a deep sense of guilt. No doubt he still blamed himself for not protecting her during the incident that had put her in the hospital.

But his memories had been taken from him, so he no longer knew just how great the peril he himself had been in during that incident—

Kojou invited Yaze along for the ride, and it didn't sound like he was joking. "Yaze, if you've got the time, how 'bout you come with us? Nagisa'll probably talk up a storm with anyone. It'll help to have one more sacrificial lamb."

Yaze instinctively gave a strained laugh. One of the few flaws of the girl Nagisa Akatsuki was how much she talked, far greater than the norm. With her bored out of her mind in a hospital room, "lambs to the slaughter" was truly an apt metaphor for the people speaking with her.

"Yeah, I can imagine. Well, if it's like that—"

Yaze was about to carelessly accept the invitation when he swallowed his words, suddenly feeling a dagger-like gaze. When he turned his head, he saw Asagi quickly averting her eyes like a pouting child. Asagi awkwardly tried to gloss things over.

"Wh-what?"

The sullen look on her face said, *It might be easier with Yaze there, but then I won't be alone with him.*

It wasn't out of consideration for Asagi, but Yaze rose to his feet and said, "Ahh, sorry, I'll have to pass for today. I've got a few errands to run."

Later, he added with a wave, watching Kojou and Asagi head off into the sunset toward the train station.

Then Yaze silently looked up at the basketball hoop.

"…"

The blood test after the match hadn't revealed anything unusual. Kojou Akatsuki was, without doubt, a normal human being. Perhaps Kojou had subconsciously realized for himself the source of the incredible performance he'd put on at the middle school basketball finals…



He'd already made his report, but the family had issued no new orders.

Yaze held his side, still sore from the juice can bombardment, as he trudged forward. All he could do was continue monitoring his best friend…and pray Kojou would not endure any more suffering.

He was fully aware that was one prayer that would not be answered.

3

When twilight shrouded Itogami City, Yaze was standing in front of the Island North monorail ticket booth, getting his ticket out. About five hundred meters ahead of him, Asagi was walking side by side with Kojou.

From a distance, it looked like the two had their arms entwined, but in reality, Asagi had just delivered an elbow jab to Kojou's side. Yaze couldn't overhear their conversation, but it seemed that Kojou's obtuse nature had become the butt of Asagi's jokes. They didn't get along perfectly, but they were far from an awkward couple. Somehow, they gave off the air of a comedy act, a pair of "bad friends" knowing the other through and through.

"What does she think she's doing…?" Yaze subconsciously covered his eyes at Asagi's typically poor romantic skills.

One other reason Yaze liked Kojou was the presence of Asagi Aiba.

Asagi and Yaze had been acquaintances even before primary school. They were always the last kids at the same day care center waiting for their guardians to pick them up. Both had a number of issues with their family environment, too; really, they knew each other better than most siblings would.

But unlike Yaze, who'd had the support of others since the day he was born as a Hyper Adapter, Asagi hadn't had any close acquaintances. In particular, she spent a lot of time during primary school isolated from others.

In truth, it was less a result of being hated than being feared. Asagi was blessed with great grades and looks that were almost too graceful, but other girls stayed far away from her. With the exception of a sister removed in age, Asagi had few people of her own gender to play with. She spent far more time

doing stuff with Yaze.

It was none other than Kojou Akatsuki who'd turned that situation around.

For some reason, spurred by a brief conversation during a chance encounter in a hospital waiting room, Asagi had taken a great liking to Kojou. From then on, she had a new mission in life. Despite her awkwardness at getting along with people, she invented excuses to speak with Kojou, and poured her body and soul into makeup and fashion—perhaps a bit too much. She even mastered the rules of basketball, to the point that she could argue NBA game strategy with Kojou.

Asagi's demeanor changed the attitudes of the other girls in class, the way girls always rallied around the many tragic heroines in the world. Her clumsiness unexpectedly became common knowledge in school. Her previous reputation as beautiful and unapproachable changed into that of an adorable classmate who was hopeless in all matters of romance.

Once that wall came crashing down, Asagi's good looks were enough to make her well regarded by her classmates. The once-hidden Asagi became the Asagi known to everyone around her.

However indirect the process, the end result was that Kojou had saved Asagi. Of course, Yaze never said a word about it, but he was secretly grateful toward Kojou.

In spite of all that, Yaze had not declined going to visit Nagisa in the hospital out of consideration for those two. He had other reasons for being unable to accompany them.

"…"

There was an unfamiliar individual behind Kojou and Asagi, keeping a more or less constant range of two hundred meters. The bondage-style, black leather one-piece coat was rather suspicious on a young woman. She was carrying a metal attaché case that was just the right size to hold a submachine gun.

Island North, where Kojou and Asagi were walking, was a research and development district lined with corporate and university facilities. The pursuer, dressed in the attire of an old-fashioned assassin, couldn't help but

conspicuously stand out from the modern atmosphere of the district—all the more so because of the gleaming, brand-new metal bracelet on her wrist.

Yaze carefully kept his own distance as he observed her conduct.

“A demon registration bracelet… Why is a registered demon…?”

Yaze had detected her presence when Kojou had quietly continued his free throws in the park. There was no doubt she was tailing him, but Yaze couldn’t put his finger on why. Not even a single demon had gotten close to Kojou in the two years since Yaze began monitoring him.

Kojou and Asagi crossed a pedestrian bridge as they neared the hospital.

The suspicious woman walked up the stairs to follow them. And a moment after she left Yaze’s line of sight, all sense of her presence vanished.

Yaze was immediately shaken.

“What the—?!”

He pulled his headphones off his ears and focused on his sense of hearing.

Yaze was a Hyper Adapter specializing in sound. If he felt like it, he could detect the footsteps, breathing, and even the heartbeats of everyone in a radius of several hundred meters around him. However, even Yaze’s ability couldn’t find any trace of the girl who’d been following Kojou and Asagi—

The only thing left behind on the pedestrian bridge was the metal attaché case she had been carrying.

Yaze murmured in bewilderment, “I…lost track of her?! That’s crazy!”

His voice echoed across the empty pedestrian bridge and vanished.

With his ability deployed, Yaze heard a very faint discrepancy in the echo, a slight delay in the speed of the sound. The cause was an abnormality in the moisture of the air.

Yaze looked over his shoulder as he realized what she was.

“She turned to mist?! I see, a D-type—!”

If Yaze had been a trained Attack Mage rather than a natural psychic, he would have no doubt noticed the high density of magical energy hovering in the

area much sooner.

She was a vampire, and more specifically, an Old Guard vampire of the Lost Warlord's bloodline. Such vampires could turn to mist to conceal their presence with little difficulty.

So she must have realized Yaze was tailing her, turning to mist to conceal herself. He had completely fallen for the ruse.

The woman materialized atop one of the bridge's railings with a flutter of her black coat.

"An Itogami Island resident…a student? It would seem you are no mere human."

She looked a lot younger than she had from behind. She was perhaps seventeen or eighteen years old, certainly no more than twenty. Her glossy, silk-like brunette hair fluttered in the twilight as she glared at Yaze with crimson eyes.

She removed her demon registration bracelet before asking, "Do you intend to honestly answer why you were tailing me?"

She might well have intended to summon a Beast Vassal, even at the risk of informing the Island Guard. Naturally, Yaze lacked the power to do battle against a vampire's powerful servant. His back was drenched in cold sweat.

"…Well, what are you doing quietly following a middle schooler around? Trying to rob the cradle?"

He shoved his nervousness down and boldly smiled.

It was said that in spite of vampires' long lives, their mental ages often corresponded with their external appearance. If she was mentally immature, that'd give him an opening.

And just as Yaze had planned, the vampiress swallowed the bait whole.

"Wh-who—?!"

She forgot she was standing on a slippery railing and stepped forward, losing her balance in the process. The girl fell right onto the bridge, and the hard hits to her hip and back made a painful sound.

The vampiress held the back of her head with tears in her eyes.

“Owwwww…!”

The look on her face was adorable somehow. Yaze stared at her, having completely lost his fear. This was no vampire who fought for a living; she was too full of openings to be anything but an amateur. Perhaps he should have expected that from how inappropriate her clothing was for tailing other people.

“Um… Hey, are you all right…?” he asked.

The vampiress desperately pressed down on the hem of her short skirt as she rose to her feet.

“O-of course I am all right! I, a daughter of Caruana, can withstand this much…”

Yaze felt faint consternation at the word she had inadvertently uttered.

“Caruana…? A survivor of the house of Duke Caruana of the Warlord’s Empire…?”

A look of abject shock came over the vampiress.

“Wha—?! How do you know that…?!”

Yaze stared at her with a vague sense of exasperation.

“Uh, you just said it yourself, didn’t you…?”

“Er…gh?!”

The girl, upset by what Yaze had pointed out, furiously shook her head.

“N-no… I mean, a resident this far east shouldn’t know something like that. Er, meaning—You shouldn’t know the name of Duke Caruana, or the slaughter of the family—”

“Nice comeback there…”

“Shut up!!”

The girl’s temper finally snapped. She grabbed Yaze by his neck and violently lifted him off the ground. Though she may have been an amateur, she still had a vampire’s physical strength. Yaze could put up minimal resistance, but he didn’t

have any hope of escape. Seeing that he wasn't so tough, she finally smiled. Her beautiful, pure white fangs poked out from her lips.

"That uniform is the same as Kojou Akatsuki's!" she said. "So you were purposefully placed at his school to monitor him? What faction assigned you?"

Yaze found it hard to breathe. "…Faction?" he groaned.

Based on the vampiress's statement, there existed multiple forces besides her that were after Kojou. Yaze could not ignore that situation, neither as Kojou's watcher nor as his friend.

"I don't think either of us wants to make a scene here…," he noted.

The girl apparently judged that Yaze's lack of an answer meant he was noncompliant. Her fingers slowly increased the pressure on his neck.

"Why…is a vampire after Kojou…?!" His voice was breaking.

That instant, her eyes betrayed hesitation. Apparently, she had finally realized Yaze might be completely unrelated to her objectives.

"Me, after Kojou…? What are you talking about? Are you not searching for the Key?" she asked.

"…What…key…?"

After biting on her lip in apparent thought for a time, the vampiress's fingers relented and let Yaze go.

He frailly coughed as he silently glared at his attacker.

Apparently, the brunette vampiress wasn't after Kojou. Even so, she'd been following him. The jury was still out as to whether she was friend or foe.

Yaze might not have had the strength to fight a vampire directly, but it was a different story if she was a registered demon afraid of causing a ruckus. Furthermore, the girl was careless by nature and easily goaded. Yaze was sure he could drag useful information out of her if he deftly made use of those traits —

"—?!"

But before he tried to bargain with her, his entire body was wracked with

incredible pain, driving him down to his knees. A tremendous impact seemed to rip through the very air, rending asunder the Soundscape he was using to track Kojou's and Asagi's movements. The evening sky was dyed pale blue, reflecting the thunderbolt that had abruptly appeared.

She gasped, her eyes narrowing at the dazzling electric crackles.

"It can't be!"

She contorted her face in fright as she gazed upward at the roof of a building lit by the sky behind it—where a single girl stood, enveloped by pale lightning.

4

Yaze's gaze shifted to the girl he'd never seen before.

"Who's that…?!"

A moment later, the calamity began.

His vision was whited out by a dazzling beam that made his skin burn like it was on fire and blew him and the brunette off the top of the pedestrian bridge. The stench of ozone pricked at his nose, and the charged atmosphere made his hair stand up.

Yaze saw the headphone around his neck give off sparks. He clicked his tongue and tossed it aside.

"Ugh…a lightning strike?!"

It happened so fast that he didn't know what was going on. The impact had blasted Yaze and his previous attacker the instant his eyes met the girl on the rooftop.

The vampiress, having collided with the pedestrian bridge railing hard, held the back of her head as she rose back up.

"No! That's—"

"You know her?" he asked as he shifted his gaze to the brunette. He unwittingly let slip an "Ah!"

Without warning, Yaze had a clear view of what was under the skirt on her upraised butt. The black lace garter belt was a little too much for a middle school boy.

“Y-you saw?!”

“Is this really the time?!”

“What a humiliation for a daughter of Caruana such as I—!”

The vampiress’s cheeks went red as her entire body shuddered. *She’s not listening*, Yaze thought, giving up on her as he looked to the top of the building again.

The girl enveloped by lightning was petite, fourteen or fifteen years of age. Her blond hair was cropped boyishly short, and her flame-like eyes gave off a pale blue glow. She was wearing a silvery suit of armor embroidered with gold —clearly some kind of combat outfit.

“Shit. What the hell’s with her—?!” Yaze said.

The vampiress looked up at the armored girl and muttered in shock, “That lightning… Pemptos! Directly from the King?! Why…?!”

No doubt the shudder through her whole body wasn’t from the thunderbolt alone. She was afraid of the armored girl.

“Is she a vampire, too?” he asked. “That attack… It didn’t seem like a Beast Vassal, but…”

The vampiress shouted in reply, “Vampire?! That isn’t funny. She’s a simple monster, a god-killing weapon!”

The term surprised Yaze. The beautiful girl dressed in silvery armor looked nothing like any weapon he could imagine.

Then the armored girl commanded in a dignified tone:

“—Veldiana Caruana, hand over the Key.”

Based on where the blazing eyes were directed, Veldiana was apparently the name of the vampiress at Yaze’s side.

“Key…?” he murmured.

Thanks to her words, Yaze understood what was happening. The earlier beam was purely for intimidation. She'd kept the power under wraps and deliberately avoided a direct strike, apparently to obtain some sort of key Veldiana possessed.

The armored girl spoke again. "Hand over the Key. Or do you wish to die?"

"Urk." Veldiana bit her lip as she glanced at Yaze. "You, what is your name —?"

Yaze replied honestly, "…Yaze. Motoki Yaze."

He thought, *If that's what it takes to buy her trust, it's a bargain.*

Veldiana nodded in visible satisfaction. She stood in front of Yaze, apparently shielding him.

"Listen to me, Motoki. I will buy you time. So please get this case to Mimori Akatsuki at MAR!"

"Hey, uh…?!"

Yaze's face froze over when he realized just what Veldiana was asking him to do.

Bloody mist shot out from the vampiress's entire body, changing into a giant, ferocious dog, a three-headed Beast Vassal. Apparently, she intended to duke it out with Beast Vassals right there in an urban area.

Even a Demon Sanctuary native like Yaze had rarely seen a vampire's Beast Vassal so close. The explosive demonic energy from the monstrous canine was overwhelming.

"Ganglot, please—!"

Veldiana commanded her own Beast Vassal to attack the girl in armor.

As she did, Yaze picked up the metallic case that had tumbled to a corner of the pedestrian bridge. The contents were likely the Key that the girl in the armor was after. By taking the case, Yaze was making the girl in armor his enemy. Even so, he did not hesitate. After all, Veldiana had spoken the name of Mimori Akatsuki, Kojou's mother. If Veldiana was working with her, he had to be correct in seeing her as Kojou's ally. That gave him reason enough to

cooperate with her.

And Yaze had a chance for victory—the boosters he'd received from his half brother.

He'd already tested the effect of those vile-tasting capsules on his own flesh and blood. Amplified by the chemical drug, Yaze could freely manipulate the flow of the air with his Hyper Adapter ability, creating a tornado. With that, he could sprint at the incredible speed of ninety kilometers per hour—enough to cover a hundred meters in four seconds flat. It wouldn't take even forty seconds to arrive at the MAR lab and Mimori. All Veldiana had to do was hold on for under a minute and Yaze could fulfill his objective.

But before Yaze could put the capsule into his mouth, Veldiana screamed and buckled.

"Aaaaaah—!"

A giant lion enveloped by lightning had appeared in the evening sky.

Veldiana's Beast Vassal was approximately four meters long. That made the Beast Vassal a shocking monster suitable for an Old Guard, but the giant lightning lion was far larger than this. It generously cleared ten meters long, and its presence felt like it filled the entirety of the sky.

Yaze stood rooted in place, dumbfounded as he gazed up at the scene overhead.

"What the hell is that…?!"

The lightning lion was likely also a Beast Vassal, a mass of dense, sentient magical energy that could take material form. But that thing was simply too huge. It was a summoned beast impossible for a single vampire to employ. If it released its demonic energy indiscriminately, worst case, half of Itogami Island would be wiped out, burned to cinders.

Veldiana, having lost her Beast Vassal, collapsed in a half-dazed heap. The armored girl glared down at her.

Obeying her command, the lightning lion raised a front paw once more.

Stop, Yaze mouthed, extending a hand, but his action was meaningless. The

beast's attack enveloped Yaze as well as Veldiana—an attack that would instantly annihilate the huge walkway all the way to the next crossing.

However, Yaze was not assaulted by the impact he dreaded. He could no longer hear the sounds of the explosion, the scream, or even the wind. Yaze and Veldiana were enveloped only in perfect silence.

That silence was broken by the gentle, slightly removed voice of the girl that had appeared out of nowhere.

"Stop, Pemptos—fifth Kaleid Blood."

The moment she spoke, sound returned to the world.

The hot shock wave from the vaporized walkway became a gale that slapped Yaze in the face.

He lay on top of Veldiana at a street curb only thirty meters or so from the walkway. They had been instantly relocated without even noticing. Yaze violently shook his head with the sick feeling that he had a hole in his memory.

"What…the heck…?"

He wasn't feeling the seasickness peculiar to spatial control spells. It was more like the disorientation from watching a movie with dropped frames.

As Yaze embraced Veldiana and sat her up, she lifted her face and murmured in a daze, "Paper Noise…!"

What she saw was a girl wearing a school uniform and standing in the center of the deserted roadway. She wore glasses and held a book under one arm, appearing rather plain.

The armored girl called Pemptos raised her eyebrows in anger.

"Why you…!"

She pointed at the book-carrying girl with her right hand and commanded the lightning lion to attack.

In that instant, once again the world was ruled by silence. Without a sound, the armored girl's right arm was cleanly severed at the elbow.

"—!"

Her body was blown back as if struck by an invisible iron maul. She crashed right before Yaze's and Veldiana's eyes, forming an impact crater in the asphalt.

A moment later, sound returned to the world.

"Gwah!" She coughed up clotted blood. The huge lightning lion, perhaps cut off from its supply of demonic energy, wavered like a mirage and faded away.

Neither Yaze nor Veldiana knew what was going on. The uniformed girl known as Paper Noise slowly turned around and looked down upon Pemptos.

"Your conduct violates the rules of the Banquet. Should you continue to engage in combat activities, I would be forced to immediately disqualify you by my authority as Bookmaker—"

Paper Noise was holding the severed right forearm. She tossed it back to the other girl with ease.

Pemptos rose up, armor creaking all over her body. Glaring at Paper Noise with hatred, lightning enveloped her entire body once more. Then, at the speed of light, she flew off to somewhere unknown.

Paper Noise watched her go with a sigh. Next, she looked at Yaze and Veldiana. Or, more accurately, her frigid gaze focused on Veldiana, propped up in Yaze's arms. She asked in a gentle tone, "Now then, Veldiana Caruana—would you explain to me why you are here? The house of Duke Caruana has already lost its qualifications to participate in the Banquet, has it not?"

Veldiana audibly clenched her fangs, desperately wringing her voice out from her throat.

"It was my older sister who protected the twelfth Kaleid Blood. The Caruana family has a right to wager upon her, upon Dodekatos—!"

With Veldiana's crimson eyes glaring at her, Paper Noise stared back without emotion. A faint sound like clothing rubbing together pricked Yaze's ears.

"Very well. I shall postpone my decision concerning your qualifications. However, until such time—"

With that statement, Paper Noise displayed the metallic attaché case that had come to rest in her hand—Veldiana's case that Yaze thought he'd been holding.

“I shall take custody of this Key,” Paper Noise casually declared.

Veldiana glared at her in obvious anger, wildly slamming her blood-soaked fist against the surface of the street. She quivered in humiliation as she spat, “Lion King Agency…!”

Paper Noise turned away from Veldiana, leaving her back unguarded, and departed. When she was no longer visible, only Yaze and Veldiana remained.

Taking notice of the wrecked pedestrian bridge, a crowd of onlookers had gathered. It would no doubt be mere minutes before the police and Island Guard came running. Yaze, a Gigafloat Management Corporation spy, was practically part of the Island Guard himself, but this time, being arrested would be troublesome even for him. It was surely best to go while the going was good.

But there was something that Yaze had to find out first.

“Could you explain what this whole thing’s about, Vel?”

Veldiana, who’d been hanging her head, lifted her sour face to look at Yaze. “Why are you cozying up to me with such a nickn—”

Suddenly, her eyes opened wide in shock.

“Yaze, is that—?!”

“I thought something like that might happen, so just in case…”

As he spoke, Yaze lifted up the thing he’d been hiding behind his back: a metallic rod covered by cloth. Somehow, the meticulously engraved magical symbols on its silver-glowing surface gave it a futuristic feel.

It was about three or four centimeters in diameter, and about fifteen centimeters long, give or take. One of its ends had been tapered to a sharp, polished point. It was too short to be a spear, and too heavy to be an arrow; the closest thing to it was a stake.

This stake had been inside the attaché case Veldiana had entrusted to Yaze. He’d used a momentary opening during Paper Noise’s battle with the armored girl to take it out, hiding it from the girls’ sight in the back of his school uniform.

Veldiana made a heavy sigh of relief.

“To pull that off in such a situation… You are quite the knave.”

“So this is what you called the Key—”

“Yes…the Key to open the lid of the coffin.”

With that said, Veldiana moved to retrieve the stake from Yaze’s hand, but he deftly pulled it away.

“Before I hand this back to you, could you tell me what this twelfth Kaleid Blood thing means?”

For a while, Veldiana shot Yaze a resentful look but finally thought better of it and composed herself. Perhaps she saw Yaze as someone who’d cooperated with her, and was therefore due an appropriate gesture of thanks.

Her calm expression had the grace worthy of a self-described noblewoman. He felt it prick at him like subtle perfume.

Veldiana quietly asked him, “—Do you know of the Fourth Primogenitor?”

Yaze scowled as he nodded.

“The Fourth Primogenitor that shouldn’t exist, the World’s Mightiest Vampire, or something?”

“Correct. Have you not wondered…if there are only three primogenitors publicly acknowledged to exist, why are there records throughout history of the emergence of a fourth primogenitor that shouldn’t exist, bringing chaos to the world? Why do even the other primogenitors acknowledge the Kaleid Blood as the World’s Mightiest Vampire?”

Yaze made a low “hmm.” It was an urban legend he’d heard as a child. He hadn’t given it any deep thought, but that last question nagged at him in an odd fashion.

Veldiana saw Yaze go silent and smiled, seeming a little proud of herself. She continued.

“The truth is simple once you have heard it. The Fourth Primogenitor was produced artificially. The World’s Mightiest Vampire, designed by none other than the first three primogenitors themselves—and Kaleid Blood is the name of the project that gave birth to the Fourth Primogenitor.”

Every hair on Yaze's body stood up. The girl's words didn't sound like the kind of crazy talk he could just laugh off. After all, he'd seen the lightning lion at the armored girl's command. It was a summoned beast with ridiculous might on par with a natural disaster. Wasn't that exactly how the Fourth Primogenitor's Beast Vassals were described…?

Yaze finally remembered. A kaleidoscope's pattern was created by an object with three mirrors on the inside… Therefore, wasn't the name Kaleid Blood symbolic of the Fourth Primogenitor's role? The role of the World's Mightiest Vampire, artificially born by the hands of the three primogenitors—

"You said the Fourth Primogenitor is a weapon…?" Yaze asked in a low voice.

If it was a weapon, mass production was far from out of the question. You could produce twelve of them, or even more. That wasn't the problem.

"Weapons exist to fight something," he continued. "What the hell would make the primogenitors go out of their way to create the World's Mightiest Vampire?"

"That is obvious, is it not?"

Then Veldiana Caruana fell into silence.

The golden sun sank into the horizon, its rays silently illuminating the side of her determined face.

"—The Cleansing."



Outro

OUTRO

Motoki Yaze awoke on the slope of a coastal breakwater.

The sky was already thick with twilight. He could feel the ocean breeze turning cool. The gentle waves echoed against the fiber-resin wave-reduction blocks, prickling his nose with the scent of salt. Even stronger was the smell of his blood-drenched uniform. He remembered being cut in his encounter with Meiga Itogami on a building in Island North.

He'd used his control over the air to hurl himself backward, somehow evading a fatal injury, and by landing on a cargo truck that just happened to be passing through at the time, he'd escaped Meiga's pursuit. However, that was all he could remember.

As Yaze lay on his side, he heard a voice right beside him. There was a girl wearing a Saikai Academy school uniform, shutting the book she had been reading as she looked over her shoulder.

"So you've come to, Motoki."

Yaze made a wry smile and exhaled at the girl's ever-brusque demeanor.

"You, huh?"

Yaze sat up, letting out a yelp at the pain shooting through his entire body.

Paper Noise, Koyomi Shizuka, was unmoved by the anguished Yaze.

"It is best if you do not get up just yet. I have reattached the torn flesh and blood vessels, but it is an emergency measure only. You will not be able to move normally until two weeks pass, I would imagine," she calmly stated.

"Seems like that's about right."

Yaze lay prone on the breakwater again, furiously rubbing his disheveled hair.

Koyomi watched him as he did so, not offering to wipe his sweat, let alone

provide her lap as a pillow. She was acting as if she did not wish to touch him with her own bloodstained fingertips.

Yaze haltingly murmured, as if to himself, “I had a dream about the first time we met.”

She continued to watch him. A sad smile came across her face, and it seemed as fleeting as the snow.

“It was only a year ago, yet it feels like the distant past, does it not?”

“Yeah, it does.”

Damn straight, he thought, closing his eyes as if berating himself. Far too many things had happened since that day. A planned artificial island sank, and a great many humans perished. And Kojou came to bear a destiny that was altogether too cruel.

Yaze sat up once more and looked at Koyomi.

“You being here must mean Kojou and the others are safe?”

Koyomi looked somewhat beside herself as she nodded in affirmation.

“Yes. The Third Primogenitor, the Chaos Bride, has departed.”

“The Chaos Bride, you say…?!”

So that was it. Yaze stared at Koyomi in obvious discomfort.

The Third Primogenitor, Giada Kukulkan—if it was all her doing, that explained everything, from the giant Beast Vassal down to Vattler’s confidants getting beaten down.

Koyomi continued:

“The MAR facility sustained heavy damage, but they will no doubt hold their silence concerning this incident.”

“…That’s ’cause they’re up to shady no-good things themselves.”

“No. They merely see greater profit in their Itogami branch office’s…rather, Mimori Akatsuki’s research, than the expenses required to pay for the damage.”

Yaze scowled as he made a heavy, languid sigh.

“There’s some nasty stuff in this world… Not that I’m one to talk or anything…”

After all, shady dealings for the sake of profit greatly resembled the activities of his own family—in other words, the Yaze conglomerate.

Koyomi broke the momentary silence.

“It seems that Meiga Itogami has realized your childhood friend’s secret.”

Yaze’s face froze. The panic he couldn’t hide elicited seeming satisfaction on Koyomi’s face—an innocently cruel expression, like a child working to monopolize someone’s affections.

Yaze forgot the pain of his wounds and glared at her.

“Asagi’s secret…?! So that’s it! Shit, so that’s what it is…!”

Koyomi appeared undisturbed as Yaze proceeded to chew her out.

“If you knew that, why did you let him go?! With your power, you should have been able to stop him!”

Bluntly dismissing him, Paper Noise declared, “Because it was not necessary. The Lion King Agency’s role is to protect the nation known as Japan from large-scale sorcerous disasters and terrorism. I have judged that Meiga Itogami’s conduct does not hinder our objectives.”

“You really are a—”

Though Koyomi looked expressionless, her slightly moist eyes wavered. She knew. She understood just how much future unhappiness and tragedy her decision courted. Yet even so, she, one of the Three Saints heading the Lion King Agency, had not stopped Meiga Itogami.

Yaze looked at Koyomi directly. “Tell me this. What is Meiga Itogami trying to use this island for?”

Meiga Itogami bore the same family name as Senra Itogami, the designer of Itogami Island. Surely it was no mere coincidence that he had been held in the prison barrier as a sorcerous criminal. Yaze had no doubt that Meiga’s crime had a deep relationship to some critical secret hidden within Itogami Island, as well as why he had taken an interest in Asagi.

“Have you not realized it already, Motoki?” Koyomi said.

“…Meiga wants to call *him* back?!”

The Demon Sanctuary of Itogami City was an artificial island born from metal and sorcery, a symbol of civilization and strife.

As an altar for calling upon “him,” it was surely a stage appropriate like none other.

He, the exile from the land abundant in life.

He, the First Sinner.

He, the Father of all demons, and the mortal enemy of Man and Demon alike.

He, the one who had laid waste to the surface several times in past “cleansings”— As Yaze became captive to despair, out of the blue, Koyomi quietly whispered…

“It is all right—we shall win, for this Cleansing is not *his* battle alone.”

Her whisper was like a prophecy.

“Hmph.” Yaze smiled wryly as he slumped.

For an instant, the back of Yaze’s mind held the images of Kojou, and cuddling beside him, a small-statured girl.

Of course, Yaze had no spiritual power, so he could do nothing like Spirit Sight. Even so, the sudden rise of the image in his mind managed to make him feel stupid for worrying about them.

Yes, it was different from back then. Kojou Akatsuki no longer had just one watcher— Koyomi had vanished at some point.

Exhausted, Yaze sighed and collapsed on the spot, closing his eyes.

He surely had just a little more time. Enough to immerse himself in memories.

Then Yaze fell asleep.

He had a dream. A dream of fondness and sadness. A dream of the girl called the Kaleid Blood…

Afterword

So *Strike the Blood*, Vol. 7, seventh in the series, finally made it. And with this volume, crucial information about Kojou's past and the true nature of the Fourth Primogenitor is revealed. It is with enormous gratitude toward all of you who have stuck with this series to this point that I wrote my heart out with an as-yet-unrevealed episode, crucial secrets, new characters, and little spoilers. If you enjoyed it, I'm very happy.

Readers have probably already noticed, but this volume is written in the somewhat irregular format of four years ago → present → (mostly) one year ago, jumping from one period of time to another. This is because the story is not about the past that is confined to the past, but previous events that have great importance to the present and future lives of Kojou and others. The individual episodes work just fine as is, and you could always read them in chronological order, though. Of course, enjoy reading them in whatever style you like.

Incidentally, if immortal and unaging vampires did exist, I think historians and archeologists would have just about the crummiest jobs out there. You'd go through all that trouble to investigate an ancient ruin and make hypotheses, and then some vampire primogenitor who was there seeing things in real time would go, "No, you're wrong," and all your work falls to pieces.

Actually, from the vampire's point of view, archeologists might find some trace of the sins of their youth or some long-ago piece of dark history he or she would prefer left forgotten, making them mortal enemies in a sense. So that's kind of how one character appearing in this volume, the suspicious middle-aged guy, came to be. I had fun imagining how he and Mimori must've gotten along. For that matter, it looks downright criminal. (There's a ten-year-plus age difference and all…)

On a personal note, I really enjoyed how I got to portray the underlying

sentiments and emotions for Yaze, who normally hides all that. If the opportunity arises, I'd love to write about Kojou and Yaze in their middle school years again. Maybe it's just my imagination, but Yaze seems to wind up in worse and worse spots the more time he gets in the story… Anyway, in one sense, Yaze is even closer to the center of events than Kojou, so I think it's fair to expect him to get a lot of screen time from here on out.

Once again, Manyako's illustrations have been an enormous help. On top of publishing every other month, there are a number of new characters, plus changes to the designs of existing ones, so I think it is fine work indeed. I am extremely appreciative!

Also, I am grateful as always to TATE-sensei for his handling of the comic edition. The girls are even cuter than in the original version, even Kojou looks dashing, and the combat scenes are very cool. I'm enjoying each and every issue. Keep up the good work!

Beginning once again with Yuzawa's editing, I thank from the bottom of my heart everyone involved with this work and its publication (especially for all the scheduling trouble).

Of course, I heartily thank all of you who have read this book.

I very much hope to see you next volume.

Gakuto Mikumo

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