
17
Gakuto Mikumo
ILLUSTRATION BY
Manyako
STRIKE THE BLOOD
THE BROKEN HOLY SPEAR



17

STRIKE THE BLOOD

The Broken Holy Spear

Gakuto Mikumo

Illustration by Manyako


Yukina Himeragi
Sword Shaman
The Lion King Agency's
beautiful observer
Kojou Akatsuki
The Fourth Primogenitor
The world's mightiest—and
laziest—vampire
Reina
The Impostor
An adorable vampire
who suddenly appears,
full of mystery


Shizuri Kasugaya
Castiella
Paladin
A pure and noble knight
of the fiery blade
Kiriha Kisaki
Priestess of the Six Blades
Beautiful, menacing, jet-black
wielder of the demon spear


Shio Hikawa
Another Shamanic War Dancer
Steady of mind, pure of heart, and princess of the demon-purging bow
Yuiri Haba
Another Sword Shaman
Pristine maiden of the silver sword

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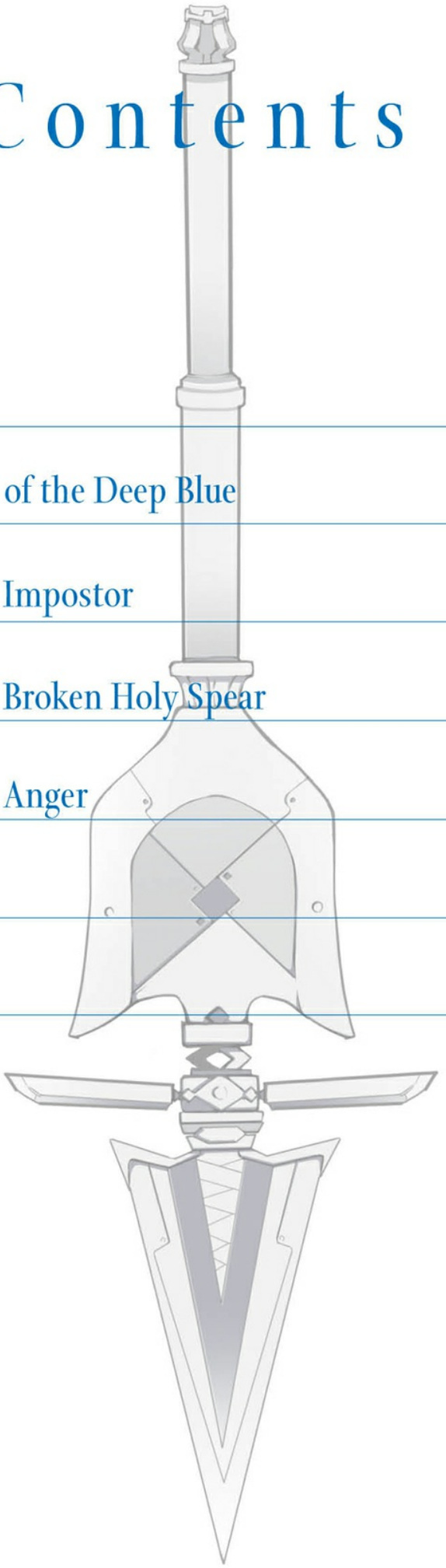
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Design / Hirokazu Watanabe (2725, Inc.)

STRIKE THE BLOOD

THE BROKEN HOLY SPEAR

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GAKUTO MIKUMO

ILLUSTRATION BY
MANYAKO

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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STRIKE THE BLOOD, Volume 17

GAKUTO MIKUMO

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Intro

INTRO

It was a ruined city—

In a dark, underground city beyond the reach of sunlight, Rui Miyazumi's steps came to a halt.

Beside him was a girl with chestnut-colored hair and bestial ears—Yuno Amase. Behind them followed a middle-aged man wearing a construction company's helmet and work overalls, his face twitching.

"This is the passage? You're certain?" Rui asked as he observed a marker written in chalk. It almost resembled graffiti.

"Yeah," replied the man in the overalls. He used a flashlight to illuminate a simplified, handwritten map as he pointed a finger to a fork in the tunnel.

"Accordin' to the network logs, two people from Squad Four passed through here yesterday. Their job was just settin' up a guide beacon, so it should've been done in two hours flat—"

"But they failed to return even after an entire night," Rui said with a nod, squinting at the darkness ahead.

The image coming into view was of the raw inner workings of an inorganic city.

Like a large city of the Industrial Revolution, it resembled a factory, idle in the dead of night, yet also like the interior of a giant, unoccupied spaceship continually adrift.

This city was Itogami Island.

More precisely, it was the Sixth Cluster of New Itogami Island, one part of the gigafloat cluster known as the Ark of Sin, a legacy from an ancient superculture hailing from another realm. It was a city-fortress wrought from composite materials, ceramics, metal, and sorcery.

Amid the hundreds of islands composing the Ark, the Sixth Cluster comprised three artificial islands. In total, its surface area was roughly equal to that of the Shinjuku district of Tokyo Metropolis. Underneath it spread forth a complex subterranean city four strata deep.

Once, this had been a housing facility for a vast quantity of ancient weapons, but at present, it was nothing more than an empty ruin. After all, about two months prior, the weapons sealed within that land had all been destroyed in a large-scale conflict—the war of the primogenitors.

That said, it had not lost its value as the Legacy, for it was still part of the Ark; such a large, empty piece of land held a simple charm for immigrants, too. Itogami Island, being the only Demon Sanctuary inside Japanese territory, had many corporations hoping to enter for the sake of conducting demonic biological research and sorcerous engineering development.

To begin with, a sorcerous relic with so little known about it could not simply be left to its own devices forever. This rather exceptional, urgent situation was the driving force behind the redevelopment of New Itogami Island.

Scientific study and survey of the innards of the horde of artificial islands, consolidation of infrastructure such as waterworks and electrical grids, and large-scale construction of temporary housing for construction workers and immigrants—such work had begun in parallel all across New Itogami Island. Cluster Six was no exception. It had already been two weeks since local workers had begun surveying work for Cluster Six's underground city.

However, that work had run into unexpected headwinds. Rumors of bizarre phenomena occurring therein had spread across the island; construction crews were hesitant to work on Cluster Six.

As a matter of fact, they weren't merely rumors. A string of indecipherable incidents actually had occurred in Cluster Six. There were abnormal tremors and electromagnetic waves, and seabirds and fish had vanished from its environs—odd phenomena along those lines. According to reports, this was all due to a fluid leakage, cause unknown, plus the severing of a communications cable. To top it all off, two construction workers had vanished without a trace since the day before.

“Of course, given the lay o’ the land, they might’ve gotten lost in a side tunnel for all I know. But there’s them rumors goin’ on, so I figured I’d get you two down here, just to be on the safe side.”

“Those rumors—meaning what, specifically?” Rui narrowed his eyes as he prompted with a suspicious look on his face.

“Ah, err,” said the man, awkwardly hemming and hawing. “I mean, well, you know, the one about the curse of the Warlord Empire’s Master of Serpents. That the ghost of Dimitrie Vattler is still wanderin’ around under New Itogami Island after losing to the Fourth Primogenitor.”

Rui sighed. At hearing the term *Fourth Primogenitor*, Rui’s gaze wandered aimlessly, a tinge of conflict in his expression. Yuno pressed a hand against her lips, curled mischievously, holding back a giggle on the verge of trickling out.

“Er, of course I don’t believe in curses like that, but you know, just in case…” The man trailed off.

“I suppose so. I believe your judgment is sound. Setting curses of the Duke of Ardeal aside, it would hardly be strange if some kind of magical trap had survived in this area,” Rui said with a glance at his sorcerous device, a wristwatch-style magical energy detector. The ferocious shaking of its analog-design needle indicated that the latent magical energy density in the surrounding area was rather high.

“Yeah, probably.” The man exhaled in relief. “Sorry to spring this on you all of a sudden. You’ve only just arrived on Itogami Island.”

“No, it is a great help to me. I’ve been quite interested in the underground works of New Itogami Island for a while now. Without an opportunity like this, permission to enter them is difficult to come by.”

“Yep, yep,” Yuno cut in with a grin. “Having clients willing to hire newbie civilian Attack Mages like us is a really big deal. Please call again next time you need us.”

Not everyone who was a card-carrying, internationally qualified Attack Mage was a federal Attack Mage. Many were employed as sorcerous engineers or researchers for private security companies. Some resolved sorcery-related

troubles through contract work they directly received from their clients. Rui and Yuno, attending high school through distance education, had elected to work as such civilian Attack Mages part-time.

“Ah, well, I heard the president of Genhoku Construction sing your praises, y’see. He said ya were pretty darn good in spite of bein’ so young. That rumor about you being Iroise survivors true?”

“Yes, I would suppose it is.” Rui shrugged his shoulders and made a pained smile.

Indeed, they were survivors from the European Demon Sanctuary of Iroise, destroyed some six years ago.

From their point of view, it was not exactly something to be proud of, but the world at large viewed it somewhat differently.

A variety of irresponsible rumors had spread, for example, that they’d been trained in endless combat simulations in another realm ruled by a Witch, or that they’d been in deadly combat with the Fourth Primogenitor himself; at some point, just being an Iroise survivor was enough to warrant being put on a pedestal.

Though to begin with, many of those hailing from Iroise—Rui and Yuno included—were Attack Mages with combat experience, so it wasn’t as if the rumors were wholly baseless. Thanks to that, even Rui and Yuno’s tiny Attack Mage agency had quite a few job contracts rolling in, the current search for construction workers being one of them.

“Huh?” murmured Yuno, in the lead, widening her eyes as if she’d noticed something. As a beast person, she had excellent nocturnal vision. Her large, broad irises, able to magnify faint sources of light, picked out a golden glow from within the darkness.

“Ruirui, look. There, the wall over on that end.”

Rui turned in the direction Yuno indicated, and his expression hardened. “… Stairs? No, is that a depression in the floor?”

It was an underground street flanked by the backs of tall buildings. Along this street was the gaping maw of a large, bowl-shaped hole. The hole was seven or

eight meters in diameter. The depth was not quite five meters, but one of its sides had a crevice, and there was no telling how far that opening ran.

“The guide beacon was scheduled to be set up in the next block ahead, yes?” Rui asked, turning to their client.

The man looked perplexed as he nodded. “Yeah, but when we did a drone inspection the week before, I’m pretty sure there wasn’t a hole like this…”

Yuno peered deep into the hole, murmuring as if posing the question to herself, “Maybe the people got lost and fell down this hole…?”

“Only way to know for sure is to go down and see.” Rui let out a brief sigh.

Somehow, the terrain gave off an ominous impression, but because this was their only lead in the search for the missing workers, they could not overlook the anomaly right before their very eyes.

Anticipating they would head farther down, Yuno immediately began double-checking her beloved armored gloves and boots. Since she was equipped with the agility, razor-sharp senses, and high combat capability many beast people inherently possessed, this kind of armored reconnaissance was her personal specialty.

“I am sorry, but could you wait here? If anything happens, please contact those on the surface immediately,” Rui instructed.

“S-sure…”

Overwhelmed by the serious look on Rui’s face, the client wobbled backward as far as the nearest wall.

Yuno suddenly gasped in surprise.

“Wait!”

“Yuno?”

“There’s something here! Below us!”

Yuno placed a palm against the ground, able to detect even the slightest tremor.

There was a faint air of bewilderment hovering in her eyes. Even with her

powerful senses, she could not ascertain exactly what rested beneath them.

“Someone in distress?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t think it’s human. The heck, it’s like something’s crawling around underground.”

“With the latent magical energy this thick, we can’t use detection magic…”

Rui clicked his tongue slightly; he had been ready to activate the spell tablet he’d taken out.

New Itogami Island, freshly summoned from another world, still had dense magical energy lingering all over the place. This was especially pronounced beneath Cluster Six’s surface. The amount of magical energy was insufficient to have harmful effects upon the human body, but it was enough to hinder delicate magic, such as that used to detect living creatures across walls, rendering it useless.

“What has been happening with the stratum below us?” Rui glared beneath his feet. The surface of the ground was covered in a mysterious gray paving material; he couldn’t tell by sight whether it was stone or resin.

“Well, the investigatin’ isn’t finished yet, but they say this is part of the artificial isle’s inner workings,” the client replied, though his tone lacked confidence in his words.

“Hmm.” Rui faintly furrowed his brow. “Is there a route I can take there?”

“Of course not. Ain’t no way in, ain’t no way out…”

“As I imagined. Certainly, that would not exist.” Rui nodded to himself, drawing pistols from his hip holsters.

These were strange weapons with large gemstones embedded into their barrels. This type of pistol was a Spell Thrower, a personal sidearm used to fire not bullets, but spells themselves. Thanks to it not being very user-friendly, few could make use of one, but among civilian Attack Mages, not permitted to carry firearms, they came as highly rated weapons. In the hands of a high-level caster, their range and might were said to far surpass that of genuine firearms.

“I’ll go down alone. Yuno, please guard the client.”

Rui approached the hole gouged out of the street.

That instant, there was a ragged tremor, a sound from beneath his feet resembling that of an earthquake.

“Ruirui! To the right!”

Yuno called out as she kicked off from the ground. At the same time, Rui twisted his body, just barely evading the crevice formed in the ground without any forewarning.

Bursting forth was a long, slender living creature that resembled a snake. Even the sole part they could see emerging above the street was nearly three to four meters in length, and it was about as wide as Yuno’s torso. Moving its entire body like a whip, it moved to constrict Rui’s body.

It was Yuno who shot that effort down. Her armored fist slammed into the creature’s flank, sending it flying.

“Eeek…?! Eeeeeeeek—?!”

The very next moment, Rui heard a scream behind him. As he turned back, Rui’s eyes were met by the sight of the man who’d hired them, fallen with his body entwined by the mysterious creature.

Looking up, his face was contorted in fear as he was being dragged along the ground’s surface. However, at that moment, neither Rui nor Yuno had the luxury of moving to save him, for that one was not the only creature to have emerged.

The ground was being torn open left and right, with the snakelike creatures emerging one after the next. Launching themselves from the ground, ferociously leaping about like flying fish, they assaulted Rui and Yuno with uncanny precision.

“What in the world are these things?”

Rui was firing consecutively with Spell Throwers in both hands. The spell rounds he’d loaded were penetrating types. The masses of ritual energy, honed to a needle-sharp point, bore holes through the torsos of the creatures.

Yet the creatures seemed utterly unfazed. Transparent fluid scattered forth,

but even the ones ripped into two continued their attacks on Rui and Yuno.

Yuno was faring no better. No matter how many punches she threw, her opponent didn't seem to feel any of them. If the combat continued for long, there was no doubt that she would run out of stamina before they did.

The creatures' movements were akin to the chaotic flailing of tentacles, yet they also seemed to be guided by a single unified will. They were somewhat different than a horde of insects. It was as if they were individual portions of a single living creature—

"Could it be that…these are actually tentacles?! Then the main body is elsewhere…?!" Rui exclaimed, realizing why the serpentine creatures were abnormally resilient. Even though each was as large as an adult person, they were nothing more than individual portions of a far vaster creature.

Similar to how an octopus was fine with losing an arm or two, this creature would probably be okay no matter how many of those tentacles they damaged. The only way to stop the tentacles from moving was to directly attack the main body.

"There—!!"

Turning toward the bottom of the hole gouged into the surface by the tentacles, Rui fired a spell round at maximum power. The gemstone embedded in the gun's barrel let off a dazzling glow the color of blood. The strain of the ritual energy made the barrel turn red-hot.

Even so, Rui did not relent in his attacks.

Finally, Rui and Yuno heard a ferocious, thunderous roar beneath their feet.

As if struck by an electrical jolt, the dozens of tentacles that had emerged shuddered and ceased to move all at once.

"We…did it?" Warily remaining on guard, Yuno looked back at him.

"No…"

Breathing raggedly, Rui fell to his knees, his strength seemingly spent.

As if aiming for that very instantaneous opening, the ground shook with incredible force.

It was an impact reminiscent of a gigantic explosion. The paving material covering the street was blown away, its fragments dancing in the air. Thrusting through and breaching the ground's surface was a creature enormous enough to bury their fields of vision.

"Wha—?! The hell is this thing…?!" Yuno yelped as she stared up at the monster's enormous frame. Without a sound, that same moment, Yuno was sent flying. A monstrous front paw had mowed her down without the slightest effort.

"Yuno?!!"

Rui screamed as he poised his Spell Throwers. However, the meager ritual energy he had remaining was insufficient to activate the spell rounds. Even if he'd had enough, just what kind of attack could he have managed against such a monster…?

No matter how much magical energy he might smash against it, this monster could not be defeated.

Likely, that was true even with the power of the World's Mightiest Vampire.

After all… Yes, after all, this was…

"Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa—!!"

Rui suffered many blows that seemed to break his entire body into smithereens, and then his vision was shrouded in darkness.

Amid his thinning consciousness, he last saw gigantic eyes.

There were six red eyes that burned like flames.



Knock, knock, went the sound. It was the sound of someone tapping the desk with his fingers.

He was unwittingly displaying his internal annoyance, which only added to the ire of all those within hearing range—such was the nature of the sound.

It was a dimly lit room deep inside an old building.

Sitting at that extravagant antique desk was an elderly, broad-shouldered man.

He was about seventy years old. In contrast to the relaxed flesh of his cheeks, the glint in his eyes was sharp and powerful. Everyone who dwelled in that nation had likely seen his face at least once. He was the leader of the largest political party in the governing coalition, a famous politician known as “the lynchpin of the political world.”

Several photographs rested on his desk.

They were pictures of a giant artificial isle, resembling a galaxy formed of countless islands.

One photograph showed a normal-looking boy wearing a hooded parka. Behind the boy was a small-statured girl who was wearing a school uniform and carrying a black guitar case on her back.

“Itogami city-state, the so-called domain of the Fourth Primogenitor…”

The old man spoke with a weighty tone of voice, dignified, cunning, and deep. It was gentle, but there was still the chord of arrogance distinctive of those accustomed to giving orders to others.

Responding to the old man’s words was a figure at the corner of the room. “Negotiations with the Gigafloat Management Corporation are largely settled.”

He was nearly two meters in height. His ample white beard gave off the impression of a massive, no-nonsense man like some sort of countryside samurai. He turned toward the old man, going down on one knee as he reverentially bowed his head.

The outfit the man wore was an all-black ceremonial robe, the formal attire of an ancient warrior. Strange symbols were etched into the scabbard of the sword he wore on his hip. The symbols were identical to those etched onto the spear known as Snowdrift Wolf.

“In conclusion, this ruckus over independence is not a poor deal so far as our nation is concerned,” the man in black continued in a measured manner. The tone of his voice clashed with his coarse external appearance. “We shall reap rewards from the Demon Sanctuary largely as before, and furthermore, we will

be able to assert to other nations that affairs occurring on Itogami Island are beyond our jurisdiction."

The elderly man nodded. Once again, his eyes fell to the photos atop his desk. "Meaning, that island is a pawn we can cut loose at any time."

"Precisely."

"How clever. Were Hanamori and Yomoda wooed by such honeyed words?"

Heh, went the cruel sound in the old man's throat as he posed the question. The person in the robe said nothing in reply.

Hanamori, Yomoda—both were leaders of their own political parties. His memories of these so-called opponents, having seen most of their expectations flipped on their heads, cooperating with him in an unprecedented modification of existing law to grant Itogami Island autonomy, was still fresh.

"Heh-heh," went the old man, making that creepy laughter in apparent scorn.

"Itogami Island…? Who cares about that pile of scrap metal? The issue is the Fourth Primogenitor. Am I wrong?"

"No," said the black-robed man's shake of the head. "You are not."

The old man nodded in satisfaction. He picked up the boy's photo, which immortalized the sight of him drenched in blood, fresh from a deadly duel with an aristocrat from the Warlord's Empire.

"Undying and immutable. Without any kin to call his own, not desiring to rule, served by twelve Beast Vassals that are nothing save disaster incarnate, a vampire apart from all the doctrines of the word, existing solely to kill and destroy—certainly, the existence of the Fourth Primogenitor is a blade pressing against our nation's throat. That does not mean we can allow other nations to have him. Now then, what are you of the Lion King Agency going to do?"

"We have placed a bell around the Fourth Primogenitor's neck," he replied eloquently. "We would assert that this has served us quite well up to this point —"

However, the old man gave the girl in the photo an extremely sober, scornful gaze. "That is not sufficient."

“Pardon?”

For the first time, the man in the black robe raised his head, obviously perplexed. As he did so, the old man tossed the photo displaying the girl in front of him.

“The priestess of the purging spear; I have heard the rumors. But I do not think her adequately trustworthy. She is far too young, too immature for us to entrust our fates to her. I have heard that she has no blood relatives to call upon. No matter how excellent her spiritual power might be, I cannot move a government based upon this—you understand, do you not?”

“You are telling us…to replace her?” The man prompted back to make sure he was correctly reading his intention.

The old man replied to the question with his silence—a “yes.”

“I will leave choosing the replacement to you. Do try not to ruffle the Fourth Primogenitor’s feathers, if you please.”

The old man piled the photos upon the desk atop a large, glass ashtray. Then, with a gold-plated lighter, he set them ablaze. The photos burned up with flickering red flames. The old man gazed upon this with a neutral expression.

Finally, the photographs finished burning. They had become nothing but white ash.

By then, the man in the black robe had already vanished. It was as if he were a shadow at twilight—



Chapter One
Out of the Deep Blue

Chapter One

Out of the Deep Blue

1

Kojou Akatsuki awoke next to a naked girl.

She had big eyes and long eyelashes. Her lustrous hair fell to around collarbone length. She still had a faintly childlike look, but the girl had a face pretty enough to make one gasp.

Her slender body gave off an impression of being exquisite but not fragile. The girl's flesh, shorn of every bit of excess, was reminiscent of that of a beautiful, whimsical, and ferocious feline predator.

The swell of her breasts poked out from a gap in the blanket wrapped around her body. Her skin was as white as freshly fallen snow, fair enough that he could faintly make out her veins.

"…H-Himeragi?" Kojou, bewildered, called out to her.

Glancing with upturned eyes at the lightly pale look on Kojou's face, the girl narrowed her eyes with amusement.

Her cheeks were faintly reddened. Her eyes were wet. Her expression was charming and mischievous.

Her skin was so smooth, it practically drew you in, and the areas that came in contact with him were faintly warm.

"Why are you addressing me as if I am a stranger?"

She curiously tilted her small head slightly as she drew her face closer to his. The unexpected sense of closeness caused Kojou to bend backward, feeling

unable to calm down whatsoever.

“Er… I wouldn’t say like a stranger…”

“Could it be you think you can escape from me?” The girl lowered her voice, seeing plain as day that Kojou was eager to run for it. She proceeded to sit up, climbing onto Kojou as if to pin him down. “You cannot. I am watching you, always.”

“H-Himeragi… This is more like you scrutinizing me rather than my simply being seen…,” he murmured.

As the girl stared down upon him from a mounted position, Kojou gazed up at her. With a slight sound, the blanket slipped from her shoulder, and her nude body became exposed.

“You are the one who made my body like this, so take proper responsibility, yes?”

Gently touching a hand to her abdomen, she giggled with a beautiful smile. Kojou’s stiff expression was reflected in her wide, emotionless eyes.

“R-responsibility…meaning?”

“Meaning, this.”

The corners of her grinning lips curled up into a smile. Poking out of her red lips were opposing pairs of sharp, tapered fangs, one on top, one on the bottom.

“Himeragi, you—?!”

As Kojou’s cheek twitched, she pressed his shoulders down, drawing their bodies closer together.

She pressed her lips against Kojou’s bare neck.

After tickling Kojou’s windpipe with the tip of her tongue, she used her white fangs to mercilessly pierce his skin. The girl sipped up the fresh blood that coursed forth. Indescribable pleasure ran up Kojou’s spine.

“No…stoooooooooooooooooop!!”

Kojou screamed amid pleasure, fear, and sorrow, and this time, he awoke for

real.

“Um, senpai…?”

Entering his hazy vision was the face of Yukina Himeragi, gazing at Kojou with visible concern.

She was wearing clothes, of course—a sailor suit with a vivid blue collar. It was the girls’ uniform of Saikai Academy.

“Hime…ragi…?”

Kojou called out her name in a raspy voice. Yukina smiled and nodded.



“Are you all right? Your face is red, and you’re sweating like crazy…”

“Y-yeah. Er…i-it’s nothing…”

When Yukina pressed a hand against Kojou’s forehead to check his temperature, Kojou subconsciously averted his eyes from her. Naturally, he felt a little awkward about having stared at her naked body in the dream up until then.

Nagisa poked her head over Yukina’s shoulder, fully intending to tease him.

“You were dreaming about Yukina, huh? You were calling out her name in your sleep, and something about responsibility, about being seen—some kind of perverted thing, right?”

“It wasn’t perverted! Any dream about Himeragi is going to be a nightmare any way you slice it!” Kojou rebutted in desperation. He glared at his little sister.

At Kojou’s reaction, sullen to a degree seldom seen, Nagisa *hmmm*’d, watching him with deep interest.

Yukina’s face twitched, as if she’d been hurt in some unexpected manner.

“…A dream of me is nothing but a nightmare…? Really now…?”

“More importantly, what’s Himeragi doing at our place? It’s not time to go to school yet, right?”

Kojou asked after checking the bedside clock. Yukina, the self-declared observer of the Fourth Primogenitor, came to pick Kojou up every morning, but it was still too early for that. Normally, even Nagisa was asleep at this hour.

“That’s because today’s the first day of the new school year. Yukina and I got our new uniforms ready together.”

In place of Yukina, silent in an apparent pout, Nagisa replied to Kojou’s question.

Kojou blinked with a dubious look. Nagisa and Yukina were wearing Saikai Academy uniforms, just like usual. He didn’t think there were any preparations that required an early wake-up call.

“Uniform preparations…like what?”

“You haven’t noticed yet?”

When Kojou tilted his head, Nagisa exhaled toward him, grumbling “Sheesh!” with visible exasperation.

“Ties, ties! Now that we’re in high school, the uniforms’ ribbons got swapped. Look!”

“You’re tellin’ me to look, but…”

Examining both of the uniforms, this time Kojou sank into serious thought.

The ties for the uniforms differed in form between Saikai Academy’s middle school and high school. In the middle school case, it was bow ties; in the high school case, neckties. However, in practice, this was purely on paper, and there was tacit acceptance that once you got into high school, you could wear whichever one you preferred. As a matter of fact, Asagi changed her tie on a virtually daily basis in accordance with her whims.

For that reason, even though Yukina and Nagisa had changed their uniforms, Kojou couldn’t tell them apart. Since ties were set as a single color in accordance with the school year, both of their ties remained blue. That, too, made it look exactly the same to his eyes, to the point that he wondered if it wasn’t some kind of trick question.

“Ahh, sorry. I can’t tell the difference at all.”

“Ugh, you’re the worst!” Nagisa yelled. “It’s fine, it’s fine. Let him be, Yukina. Kojou’s happy seeing perverted dreams all by his lonesome! Anyway, go eat breakfast, ’kay? I’m not responsible if you’re late after all this!”

Taking a breath, Nagisa spun, turning her back as she headed out of Kojou’s room. Kojou watched her go, still at a loss as to how he’d gotten her angry.

Yukina stared at him, letting out a deep exhale of resignation.

“Um, senpai? Are you really all right?” she asked, recovering from her sour mood.

“Y-yeah. It was just a bad dream, that’s all.” He smiled weakly toward her.

Then, as if suddenly remembering something, Kojou sat up, drawing his face close to Yukina, who was inches away. Kojou's abrupt motion made Yukina widen her eyes in visible surprise.

"S-senpai? Um, is something…?"

"Himeragi."

"Y-yes?"

Kojou touched her cheek with his right hand.

Even as Yukina's body tensed, she made no move to resist.

The two exchanged gazes at point-blank range. Kojou's finger gently touched her glossy lips.

Then, Kojou suddenly thrust the tip of that finger into Yukina's mouth.

The finger proceeded to yank her lips far to the side as he checked her rows of teeth. They were so white, you could almost see through them. The size of her canine teeth did not stand out in any particular way. They were so pretty, you could use them for dental plan commercials. Her breath carried the scent of fresh mint.

"Um…senpai? What is this about?"

Yukina asked Kojou in such bewilderment at what was happening, she completely forgot to be angry about it.

With his index finger still thrust into her mouth, Kojou spoke in a voice thick with relief.

"You're the same as usual, huh? I'm so glad."

"Huh?"

When Kojou sat, exhaling in relief, Yukina blinked hard and stared. Then, when she gasped loudly and came back to her senses, she grabbed a tissue and hastily wiped Kojou's index finger, drenched from her own saliva.

"Just what kind of dream did you have…?!"

Yukina glared at Kojou resentfully, the expression coming over her angry and bewildered in equal measure.

Kojou’s shoulders shuddered as he vaguely shook his head.

“Er, ah… Even if you ask me to categorize the dream, it’s kinda…”

“…Senpai? Why are you averting your eyes, senpai?!”

Perhaps feeling uneasy due to Kojou’s blatantly suspicious behavior, Yukina pressed close with a serious look on her face.

Gingerly backing away, Kojou awkwardly shifted his eyes beyond the window.

Spreading overhead was a sky so blue, it got on his nerves. The summer clouds hovering near the water’s horizon glimmered silver as powerful sunrays showered down upon them. The wind blowing in through the open window carried the musk of saltwater.

It was the morning of the first day of the new school year—as expected, as usual, a day on the artificial isle as hot as any other.

2

On that day, Saikai Academy was quite a bit more boisterous than usual.

There were announcements plastered over the campus entrance, divvying up the new year's classes according to the registry of names, and the students, harboring hopes, worries, and a mixture of sadness and joy, were moving to their new classes. Each classmate's face and the name of the homeroom teacher brought joy or sorrow, their heads anguishing over the contents of annoying personal introductions.

Even if he was called the World's Mightiest Vampire, Kojou's feelings about those things did not differ from any other student's. If anything, the fact that he had to hide his own true nature increased his stress about the shifting environs by an extra notch.

But when he arrived at school, the actual results made Kojou want to lower his shoulders. His expectations had been dashed.

In the new classroom on the third floor of the campus, Kojou pressed his cheek against his palm and murmured ruefully, "Even though it's a new school year, not a whole lot has changed."

Though there were numerous changes in the positions of the desks, for some reason, the scenery he could see from his seat was largely unchanged.

Due to how their seat numbers matched up, sitting in front of Kojou was Asagi Aiba, exactly the same as before.

With her chair tilted sideways, she rested her cheek on her palm, her elbow against Kojou's desk.

"We supposedly changed classes, but it's mostly familiar faces, huh? They left Natsuki as the homeroom teacher, too."

"In other words, it's, you know, *that*. They figured they'd gather all the troublesome types into one bunch to keep better tabs on 'em," another voice said.

Speaking those words was none other than Motoki Yaze, standing at Kojou's side with nothing better to do. That year, too, he was in the same class as Kojou like it was the most natural thing in the world. For an instant, Kojou wondered if he'd pulled strings as Chairman of the Gigafloat Management Corporation to set it up that way, but apparently not.

As if to underline that very fact, Kojou and the others suddenly heard a voice behind them. It was a youthful voice with a lisp, but in spite of that, it had a strangely grandiose ring to it.

"Very perceptive of you, Yaze. That's precisely it."

"Geh, Natsuki…?"

Looking down at the diminutive homeroom teacher suddenly appearing from his blind spot, Yaze backed away in apparent surprise.

Perhaps annoyed at being addressed by her given name, Natsuki struck the tip of Yaze's nose with the fan in her hand. Soaking up the invisible shockwave unleashed by that fan, Yaze's forehead rang out with a painful-sounding *bop*.

"Though it is not my preference to deal with you lot for a second year running, none of the other teachers want to be handed this class. Even I could not refuse after the principal wept and prostrated himself before me."

"The principal cried on his hands and knees…? Just how hated are we around here…?"

Natsuki's words, mixed in with a sigh, brought a fervent grimace onto Kojou's face. She wasn't the type to joke about that sort of thing. If she said the principal bowed his head to the floor, it was probably true.

What, you didn't know? said the gaze Natsuki turned toward Kojou.

"Well, fine. More to the point, Akatsuki. Speaking of self-awareness, you do understand that you advanced a grade truly by the barest of margins, yes?"

"Y-yeah. I'm grateful for all the help from everyone where that's concerned…"

Ugh. There was a tightness in Kojou's throat as he bowed his head to Natsuki.

Though he was all but guaranteed to repeat a year due to woefully insufficient days attended and poor grades, Kojou managed to squeak by thanks

to Natsuki's supplemental lessons and Asagi's dedicated personal tutoring, plus some sweet-talking by the Yaze family.

Of course, this was also for the political reason that it would sound really bad if the Fourth Primogenitor, ruler of Itogami city-state, was a dropout, and on the school's side of things, they no doubt wanted to get such a troublesome student to graduate as soon as possible…

"Since you are well aware, here is the abridged version: This year, have a change of heart and devote yourself to serious study. I do not want to see any more trouble from you."

"I get it already…" Kojou tossed a hand up and waved, annoyed. "Well, I'm sure there's nothin' to worry about. That bastard Vattler went off to Nod, Avrora's condition is stable, the political stuff has calmed down, and chaotic events like Tartarus Lapse, the war of the primogenitors, and Onrai Island don't exactly pop up every day."

"I can only hope that remains true." Natsuki grimaced and nodded.

Considering the vast number of troubles involving Kojou over a span not even amounting to one year, he kind of understood why she felt tempted to doubt.

"Hey, hey, Natsuki, incidentally, what's up with the Dem-Club?" Asagi asked, abruptly giving Natsuki's dress a little tug.

"Dem-Club?" unwittingly echoed Kojou. This was his first time hearing of it.

"Do not address your homeroom teacher by her first name," Natsuki scolded.

She thrust a document folded in two back toward Asagi. Kojou glanced over at it and saw the heading read NEW CLUB APPLICATION FORM. In Asagi's handwriting, Natsuki had been written in as the club's advisor.

"Huh? What's this? Hasn't gotten its seal of approval…"

Taking the form, Asagi sourly knitted her brows. Natsuki gave off a rather chilly sigh.

"It's been rejected."

"Huh? Why…?!"

“Read the student council regulations, would you? Establishing a new club requires a minimum of five dedicated members.”

“You mean people in multiple clubs don’t count toward that…?”

Asagi’s shoulders sank. But Natsuki didn’t twitch an eyebrow. Turning her back, she headed off to the staff room as if to say, *Don’t cause me any more trouble.*

“Asagi? What, you wanted to do something in a club?”

Kinda late, second year in high school and all, said Kojou’s dubious look as he asked.

Asagi seemed slightly peeved as she raised her eyelashes.

“Don’t speak as if it doesn’t concern you. You’re doing this, too.”

“I am?”

“Yes. The Demon Sanctuary Research Club, or Dem-Club for short. It’s a club to investigate and research the management of the Demon Sanctuary and the actual state of demons’ lives.”

Kojou made no attempt to hide his annoyance. “…Who the hell wants to be part of a pain-in-the-ass club like that?”

Asagi smiled, as if proud of some kind of victory.

“Well, aren’t you an idiot? People not wanting to join is a good thing.”

“Huh?”

“…Now look here, Kojou,” Yaze cut in. “You might’ve forgotten, but you are technically the head of an independent country; ruler of a Dominion. There’s only four people like you in the whole world.”

He muttered a quiet “good grief” as his shoulders languidly sank.

“Y-yeah…” He tried to wrap his head around what Yaze was saying. “What of it?”

“Normally, Itogami Island’s being run by the Gigafloat Management Corporation, but all that said, if trouble pops up, you’re the one who’s gotta head out and deal with it. I mean, in the end, Itogami’s defensive power rests in

the strength of the Fourth Primogenitor.”

“R-really?”

Of course, he understood the rationality. Unlike the other three “proper” primogenitors, the Fourth Primogenitor had neither vampires of the same bloodline nor demons under his command. If not for small-scale criminal incidents, if large-scale combat broke out, Kojou had no option except to head out personally. That was the unfortunate role he had as ruler of a Dominion.

“So that’s why I thought it’d be convenient to have a relay base inside school grounds with a direct line to the Gigafloat Management Corporation,” Asagi explained. “I wanted something that outsiders wouldn’t butt into, and that wouldn’t draw suspicion even if we’re heading in and out pretty often.”

“…What does this have to do with this Demon Sanctuary Research Club?”

“Because if we’re formally recognized as a club, we’ll get our own room on campus.”

“Ah!”

So that’s what this is about, Kojou thought, finally getting it.

Meaning, Asagi’s goal wasn’t the club itself, but the room that came with it. She no doubt meant to stuff communications gear for direct contact with the Corporation and electronic instruments into it, or maybe even quietly stuff that robotic tank of hers inside.

“But five people… If people in another club can’t be included, that’s pretty strict.”

“Recruiting people for the club is simple enough, but ones that’d cooperate with us once they know Kojou’s real identity, that’s kinda…,” Yaze said.

Asagi and Yaze clutched their heads as they gazed at the application form thrust back in their faces.

Itogami Island was a Demon Sanctuary. No one was discriminated against in public merely for being demons. Saikai Academy had its own demon students, and their homeroom teacher, Natsuki, was a powerful witch, known to some as “The Demonslayer.” Kojou concealing his having become a vampire was driven

by an extremely personal reason: He didn't want to be hated by his little sister, afflicted by demonophobia as she was.

And even if someone suggested, now that his secret had been exposed to Nagisa, that Kojou hiding his identity had lost all meaning…it wasn't as simple a story as that.

After all, the Fourth Primogenitor was the World's Mightiest Vampire—and the most notorious. There was no telling what grudges might be held against that being in places all across the globe. Even on Itogami Island, the repeated instances of his Beast Vassals running amok amounted to damages conservatively estimated at over a trillion yen.

Up to that point, publicly denying the Fourth Primogenitor's existence had somehow pulled the wool over people's eyes, but the day Kojou's true nature leaked and became public knowledge would be the day his existing life was ruined.

Thus, even at present, Kojou continued to conceal his own identity. In the sense of having troublesome circumstances, Asagi, the Priestess of Cain, and Yaze, new Chairman of the Yaze corporate conglomerate, were in much the same boat.

That said, given the objectives of the Demon Sanctuary Research Club, sooner or later, their secrets would surely be exposed to other members of the club. Members would need to know, yet strictly protect, the secrets of Kojou and the others' identities, and cooperate in club activities that might well put them in peril. He didn't think there were many students who would fit the bill.

"Wait a minute, so why did you think it'd be easy getting members for a weird-sounding club like this?" Kojou asked, voicing the doubt he felt toward Yaze's mysterious confidence.

His friend made a leering grin, narrowing his eyes with amusement. "Well, I figured we'd have Asagi and Himeragi cosplay anime characters if we had to, so invitations would be a cinch. It'd have to be something skintight, with lots of exposure and erotic ambiance—"

"Why does it have to be anime cosplay…?" Asagi's cheek twitched as she glared at Yaze, looking utterly displeased.

He blinked, nonplussed. “Of course, I don’t mind if it’s race queen or bunny-girl outfits, either…”

“I’m not doing any of them! If you’re gonna say that, why not have you and Kojou wear bunny suits or do a strip show or something?!”

“What are you involving me in this for…?! And who decided Himeragi would be in the club to begin with…?”

Kojou attempted a composed comical jab, but Yaze and Asagi coldly ignored him. Apparently, the two of them took for granted that Yukina would be one of the club members.

“I thought about asking Rin, but she’s on the student council this year.”

“Nagisa’s in the C-Club, and Kanase’s in the V-Club…”

“Man, this Fourth Primogenitor guy is surprisingly unpopular.”

“Oh, shaddap!”

Kojou curtly rebutted Yaze and Asagi’s self-centered arguments. Incidentally, C-Club was short for Cheerleading Club, and V-Club was short for Volunteer Club.

“…Wait. For members, it doesn’t matter if they’re in middle school?”

Kojou lifted his head as if he had just remembered something very important.

“I suppose so. I mean, it shouldn’t…”

Asagi nodded as she looked down at the regulations on the application form. Yaze raised his brows at the unexpected development.

“You have someone in mind?”

“Well, kinda, yeah.”

Kojou vaguely nodded. He shifted his gaze toward the middle school campus.

“Whether the person will agree to joining the club, dunno…”

3

On the first day of the school term, classes ended in the morning. Under the powerful rays of the midday sun, the students were all astir as they passed through the school gate on their way home.

Amid that group, like any of its ilk in the modern era, a single girl stood out.

She had a comely, deeply chiseled face, and distinctive, large eyes.

She was a demon of an endangered species, an Ogre, and the final surviving Paladin of Gisella—Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella.

Walking alongside Shizuri were two girls that seemed to be in the same grade. Perhaps they were returning home in different directions, because they waved good-bye to Shizuri right around the time they exited the gate.

“Shizurin, thanks for the help.”

“Later, Shizurin. See you tomorrow!”

“Do have a nice day.”

Waving her hand to the two grinning, sociable girls, Shizuri set out, walking in the direction of the monorail station.

Something suddenly brought her legs to a halt, eyes bulging—Kojou was there, waiting for her.

“Hey, Cas. You seem to be in good shape.”

“Kojou Akatsuki…? Y-you were waiting here for me?”

For an instant, Shizuri’s expression seemed radiant, eyes sparkling, but her voice held a particular bluntness, as if to paper over her own nervousness. Kojou did not notice Shizuri’s inner melancholy, gazing at the girls from her grade heading off in the distance with what seemed like an expression of relief.

“Surprisingly, it looks like you’re fitting right in with the class. I was worried you’d stick out like a sore thumb.”

“That is none of your business! I will have you know I have taken socializing to

heart as much as the average person!” Shizuri sighed after shooting a glare at Kojou, who genuinely seemed relieved.

Then, Shizuri’s eyes casually came to rest behind Kojou. There, standing without any hint of presence, was a small-statured girl with a black guitar case on her back.

“Y-Yukina Himeragi—!”

Shizuri, her cheeks twitching as she attempted to hide her fear, instantly touched a hand to her own hip to draw the crimson long sword that would normally be resting upon it. However, a girl returning home from middle school would not be wearing a sword on her hip. Despair hovered in Shizuri’s eyes when she realized she was unarmed.

In response, Yukina reflexively lowered her center of gravity, moving a hand to the guitar case on her back. She was moving to draw the silver spear stored inside.

“W-wait! Calm down! It’s not like I came here to start a fight! And Himeragi, don’t take the bait!”

Kojou hastily wedged himself between the two girls, chiding their hostile behavior. The grudging standoff gradually eased, but both Yukina and Shizuri respectively remained wary and on guard.

“I am not,” Yukina awkwardly rebutted. “I merely…sensed hostility, and so, I just—”

Without missing a beat, Shizuri stepped in, still harboring a defiant attitude ever since Yukina had defeated her soundly in a serious fight. “I am simply practicing self-defense…! That is because this woman suddenly came out trying to intimidate me—”

“Ahem. So…if conflict was not your objective, what is it you wish of me?” Shizuri cleared her throat, somehow managing to regain her calm and composure.

Kojou was a bit unsure of just where to begin.

“Erm, well, we wanted to ask you to join our club. It’ll take a little while to

explain, but…”

“…What precisely are you scheming?”

Naturally, the expression Shizuri turned toward Kojou was one she used when she discovered something suspicious. The reaction was truly easy to understand. Kojou, conflicted, scratched his cheek.

“Anyway, let’s change locations. We stand out way too much out here.”

“…Perhaps it is something you cannot discuss in front of other people?”

“I told you, it’s about a club!” Kojou remained desperate in the face of Shizuri’s guarded demeanor.

People’s eyes were drawn to Shizuri naturally, and when it came to attracting attention, the same went for Yukina. He could not fathom what rumors might spread by being spotted together with both of them in the same place.

“If you cannot tell me here, fine. Where shall we head?”

Perhaps even she was aware of just how much she stood out, for Shizuri reluctantly allowed him to persuade her.

Kojou hadn’t put any particular thought into it. *Yeah, where should we go?* he mulled briefly. “Dunno. The cafeteria on campus isn’t open today.”

Yukina offered in a reserved fashion, “How about Goetia Coffee at the north entrance of the station? There should still be plenty of open tables at this time of day.”

“I see. That might be good, then—”

Shizuri seemed displeased at the sight, tapering her lips as she gazed at the interaction between the pair. “I desire to go to a tea shop. I do not wish to drink anything as crude as coffee…!”

“Er, didn’t you glug coffee down all the time back at Onrai Island…?”

Kojou’s calm verbal thrust elicited a quick reply from a reddened Shizuri. “Th-that was because it was coffee Kojou poured *for my sake*, so I could not simply refuse it!”

As Yukina listened to this, her expression gently fell from her face. Quietly

pressing close against Kojou, she opened her mouth as if something had suddenly leaped to the forefront of her mind. “Senpai, you like the pancakes at Goetia, don’t you? The ones with cream and nuts.”

“Yeah. Those are delicious. Man, I’m surprised you remembered, Himeragi.”

“That is because previously, we went in and ate a rather tasty meal—*just the two of us*.”

Shizuri grumbled, sullenly glaring as the smiling Yukina nonchalantly landed the first blow. To defy her, Shizuri grabbed hold of Kojou’s right arm.

“I firmly insist on tea.”

“No, it will be coffee!”

Yukina was equally and oddly stubborn from the other side of Kojou, who was caught in the middle.

“Either’s fine, geez…”

With the pair pressing close from behind, Kojou spontaneously turned his face toward the clouds. With lukewarm eyes, passing students gazed at the bizarre sight of Kojou sandwiched between two eye-catching girls.

“So in the end, it’s a vending machine…”

Sitting on the bench of a public park near the school, Kojou gave the heavy sigh of one weary of life.

His right hand was gripping a partially consumed soda. Because both Yukina and Shizuri stubbornly refused to concede any ground, they’d ended up going to the park’s vending machine and buying their own preferred drinks.

“This is because Himeragi, who I might remind you is my *upperclassman*, was so childishly stubborn,” Shizuri said while she leaned against a fence, sipping tea from a PET bottle as she spoke. Any amount of respect she aimed toward Yukina somehow had a ring of sarcasm to it.

“Th-that is because you…!”

When Yukina reflexively tried to say something in return, Kojou offered a conciliatory “Now, now,” somehow holding her back. Kojou and Yukina were

there to give Shizuri an invitation, after all.

“So, about the Demon Sanctuary Research Club I was talkin’ about—Cas, you in?”

Who is this Cas? Shizuri’s fervent glare toward Kojou seemed to say. Then, she let out a brief sigh. “Well, I have a general grasp of your circumstances, and I’m not particularly opposed to becoming a member of this club…”

“Really? Thank you, seriously.” Kojou breathed with relief that the troublesome invitation had been resolved so easily.

“However, in tangible terms, what is it precisely that I should be doing?”

Kojou answered Shizuri’s sensible question rather irresponsibly. “Normally you wouldn’t have to do anything, I suppose. The gist being, unless problems come up, it’s no big deal.”

“Problems arising would mean Itogami Island being exposed to danger, would it not?”

“Pretty much, yeah. The Demon Sanctuary Research Club was made in case something happens to Itogami Island in the first place.”

“And in an extreme scenario, combat is also possible?” Shizuri asked, though not without glaring at Yukina.

“Naturally,” Yukina replied, not averting her eyes even as she nodded.

Kojou grew a little worried that the atmosphere might begin flowing in a negative direction once more. “Er, it’s not that Cas actually has to fight, but—”

“As the former captain of the Kasugaya Squad, ’tis my duty to look after Kojou, and as a Paladin of Gisela, I will offer my cooperation, of course,” Shizuri interrupted crisply and firmly.

“R-right.” Kojou couldn’t help being overwhelmed by the sheer force of her words. Put bluntly, he was conflicted by her dragging out her old title from within virtual space, but if Shizuri was enthusiastic about club activities, that was all well and good.

“Now that you mention the Kasugaya Squad, how are Amase and Miyazumi doing lately?” he asked, suddenly remembering his teammates from his days on

Onrai Island.

Ever since being freed from Onrai Island's barrier, Shizuri had been living with Yuno as roommates in a housing complex built in New Itogami Island for returners like them.

"Yuno and Rui began work as civilian Attack Mages a few weeks ago," she said, making a pattern in the ground with the tip of her shoe as she spoke. Kojou got the sense she was annoyed.

"…Civilian Attack Mages?" He tilted his head at word of the unfamiliar work title.

Yukina answered, "An occupation where one receives contracts from corporations and individuals to resolve trouble related to demons and spellcraft. It includes exorcism, removal of curses, and bodyguard-related work as well."

"Makes me think of a private detective, magician version. Sounds like something they'd be good at."

Kojou made a low and rather envious growl. Yuno had a close-range, hand-to-hand fighting style and was highly skilled in combat—plus, she had an agility distinctive to beast people that made her an excellent explorer. Rui was an excellent magic-gunner and a well-rounded caster. There were few magical fields he did not excel in. They were both far more suited to civilian Attack Mage work than someone like the Fourth Primogenitor, with no talent for anything short of large-scale demolition.

Besides, more than anything, the image of being independent professionals with your very own business tugged at his heart and came off as just plain cool. Kojou couldn't help but yearn for such a life.

Furthermore, it probably wasn't much fun for Shizuri to be the one left out.

"Were it not for the age restrictions in the Attack Mage Labor Laws, I would be working with them…!" she murmured with a sulk.

Even though she acted very adult due to her Onrai Island experiences, Shizuri was still only fourteen. Thanks to that, she couldn't get a license to work as a civilian Attack Mage.

“Goodness, why require that one needs to have graduated from middle school to get a license?!”

“Well, if you have to ask why, that’s because education’s compulsory until the end of middle school…but thanks to that, you ended up coming to my campus, so I’m kinda happy about that.”

“Wh-what do you mean? Are you saying you wished for the two of us to attend school together…?” Shizuri’s voice went shrill, her cheeks red. In response, Yukina gave Kojou an emotionless stare.

Kojou, finding the girls’ reactions surprising, looked right back at them. “No, I mean it makes it a lot easier to get enough people for the Dem-Club.”

“Ah… Yes, that is exactly the kind of person you are…”

Embarrassed at having harbored hopes for even a single instant, Shizuri hung her head, thoroughly deflated. Yukina shook her head a little in sympathy.

It was the very next moment that a sound like a synthesized xylophone coursed from nowhere in particular. Annoyed, Shizuri took a smartphone out from her bag.

“’Tis from Yuno…”

Looking at the name displayed on the screen, Shizuri murmured in apparent skepticism. After all, the timing of the call was so spot-on, it was like the saying, *Speak of the devil and—*

“Yes. Hello…Ah?” Her voice suddenly hardened. “Yes, this is Shizuri Kasugaya…”

From the odd shift in her tone, Kojou had a pretty good idea that it wasn’t Yuno on the line. The small fingers with which Shizuri gripped the smartphone grew tense as they trembled.

“Please wait a moment. What is the meaning of…? Y…yes…”

Shizuri wobbled backward with the smartphone still pressed to her ear.

Seeing her dramatic reaction, Kojou and Yukina soberly got to their feet.

“What’s wrong, Cas?” Kojou propped her up as she was on the verge of

collapse.

Shizuri tried to give him some kind of reply, but her voice caught in her throat, unable to form words. Her lips had lost all trace of blood, pale as if they had been frozen.

“I have been told…Rui and Yuno… They encountered a demon beast during their work…and are both in comas and in critical condition…”

“Those two…? No way…”

“A demon beast…?”

Kojou was dumbfounded. Yukina’s expression shifted to something graver still.

Right in front of the two, Shizuri’s body swayed visibly. She was dizzy from shock.

A demon beast had attacked, and her friends were wounded—perhaps that fact had made her recall the fear carved into her in the *Carceri* of Onrai Island.

“Miss Kasugaya!”

“Cas!”

As Shizuri collapsed, Yukina and Kojou both held her up.

The two embraced her strongly. Even so, Shizuri’s shivering did not cease.

4

Word that Yuno had regained consciousness came right before Kojou and the others reached the hospital.

She and Rui had been admitted to an emergency hospital on Island North that specialized in treating demons. After getting their visitor passes, Kojou and the others headed straight to Yuno's room.

"Yuno! Are you all right?!"

Shizuri was the first one to head into the room. After confirming the patient name on the plate attached to the door, she opened the door without knocking, still short of breath as she raced into the room.

Then, Shizuri gasped in shock, hardening as if she had been turned to stone.

Partly because she was a demon, Yuno had been assigned her own individual room. A female doctor who seemed thirty years old, give or take, and a young nurse were visible beside the patient bed.

Upon that bed was a topless Yuno, who was sandwiched between medical thermometers on her flanks, and the doctor was touching a stethoscope to her back. She was right in the middle of an examination.

Sticking out through the gap made by bandages and gauzes was the swell of the ample breasts that clashed with the small size of her body.

"Amase, you're awake already…? Er…ehh?!"

Kojou entered the patient room through the open door, his eyes instantly bulging in surprise.

"—Hey, d-don't looooooooook!"

Spinning around then and there, Shizuri delivered a full-force lariat to Kojou's neck. Unable to soften the blow from the sudden assault, Kojou was blown straight into the corridor, landing face-up. It was all over in one brief instant.

Yuno and the others gazed dumbfounded and wide-eyed at the tragedy that had occurred in the patient room without the slightest forewarning.

“—Sorry to worry you, Shizurin. Kojikoji, thanks for coming all this way, too.”

Several minutes after that event, having finished her examination without further incident, Yuno was giving Kojou and the others a proper greeting.

Both of her arms were bandaged, and her right leg had been put into a thick cast, but the color of her face was not all that bad. If anything, Kojou looked far worse than she did, thanks to that powerful pro-wrestling move used upon him.

“Are you all…friends of the patient?” asked the female physician with a chilly glare firmly directed at Kojou and the others. Her strict attitude was no doubt related to Shizuri’s earlier act of violence.

Yukina took the opportunity to rectify the situation; she stepped before the physician and displayed her Attack Mage license, which made the doctor narrow her eyes.

“I am a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency—a federal Attack Mage. Please explain the situation.”

“I see… So you are a federal Attack Mage as well.” The doctor gave a short sigh. She showed no particular surprise at a young girl like Yukina telling her this news. To the contrary, she came off as rather accepting of it. “Explain, you say, but this is a hospital, nothing more. I can only answer as to the condition of the patient.”



“Then please do so.”

The physician’s odd reaction left Yukina perplexed. The doctor met Yuno’s eyes, seemingly confirming the patient’s intent for herself, waiting for Yuno to nod before speaking in a businesslike tone of voice.

“Her— Miss Amase has sustained internal organ damage from powerful blunt trauma. In addition, four ribs and one femur are fractured. A normal person would require six months to fully heal. Well, in her case, being a species of beast person, we can discharge her in a week with no ill effects.”

“And Miyazumi?” Kojou inquired about the condition of the absent Rui. This had to be important to Yuno, too.

“The boy brought in with her?”

“Yeah.”

“The severity of his wounds was far lighter than hers, enough that no surgery is required.”

“O-okay.”

Kojou’s expression brightened. Shizuri also looked visibly relieved as she patted her chest. However, in contrast to her words, the tenor of the physician’s face was not so sunny.

“However, his blood loss was severe; he has yet to regain consciousness.”

“Blood loss…?”

“Can you not simply give him a transfusion?”

Kojou and Yukina, both surprised, pressed the doctor for more information. For a moment, the doctor broke off her words, seemingly overwhelmed by the force of their questions.

“Ahh, I’m sorry. ‘Blood loss’ is a slip of the tongue on my part. It is not that he has insufficient blood plasma. The problem is not the amount of blood flowing through him, but that the vital energy within his blood is parched. Perhaps it’s easier if I put it like this… His condition is similar to having a large amount of life force drained by a D-type.”

“D-type… You mean a vampire?”

The gravity of Kojou’s expression increased. Given what he knew, he couldn’t help but panic at the thought of Rui’s blood having been drained.

The physician spoke with a dismissive tone of voice. “It is simply an example. I am merely stating that we are searching for something with similar symptoms. I cannot say anything more until we have results from more precise tests.”

“I understand. Thank you for your cooperation,” Yukina said and lowered her head in a proper, formal bow. The doctor shrugged her shoulders without a word. Yukina proceeded to shift her eyes to Yuno atop the bed. “May we speak to Yuno for a short while?”

Once the doctor had consented, Yuno leaned against the recliner bed as she replied, “I’m fine with it, but there’s not a whole lot I can tell you. I had my hands full taking on some tentacle-ish things. In the end, I never got a good look at the opponent’s real body.”

To Kojou and the others, this was unexpected information. They never expected people as skilled as Yuno and Rui to have so much trouble fighting tentacles that were not even the demon beast’s true body.

“Tentacles… You mean like an octopus’s arms?” Kojou asked.

“Hmm,” Yuno quietly murmured, a bit hesitant before shaking her head. “They’re more like individual eels than the tentacles of an octopus… At first, we thought those were main bodies, though.”

“You are saying that the tentacles alone were as large as an average demon beast?” Shizuri asked, shocked.

“I don’t know about ‘average,’ but they were big enough to trade blows. The ones I ran into were around fourteen or fifteen meters long.”

“Wha…?”

This time, Shizuri gawked. Apparently, what Yuno and Rui had encountered was no simple demon beast, but a monster that far exceeded her expectations, with dozens of tentacles each on par with a demon beast themselves. Small wonder Yuno and Rui had been hard pressed.

The doctor, perhaps concerned about Yuno's fatigue, interrupted Kojou and the others' questions. "If you want more details about the incident, maybe you should go ask the man from the construction firm?"

"What do you mean, the man from the construction firm?" Shizuri asked.

The doctor gave the reposing Yuno a glance. "Miss Amase's client, yes? His injuries are minor. At the moment, he might be in the waiting room on the second floor. Your comrade said she wanted to ask him about the circumstances, after all."

Yukina formally bowed her head to the doctor. "…Thank you very much."

Certainly, it was cruel to make the injured Yuno recall the circumstances of the incident, and Kojou didn't think they could get any new information out of her beyond what they already had. Kojou and Yukina nodded to each other and left the room.

Shizuri was a little unsure whether she should remain close to Yuno, but in the end, she apparently settled on sticking with Kojou and Yukina. No doubt the nature of the demon beast that had hurt Yuno and Rui was gnawing at her.

As they headed down the hospital wing stairs, Kojou looked back at Yukina and posed a question. "Himeragi, who did she mean by 'your comrade'?"

"I have no idea," said Yukina, shaking her head. "Dispatching demon beasts is not within the Lion King Agency's jurisdiction… Perhaps it is an Island Guard Attack Mage?"

"I care not who it is. 'Tis none of her business!" said Shizuri, aggressively clenching her teeth to the point it made a sound. "It is my duty to avenge Miss Yuno!"

"No, no, you should look after Amase, Cas. I'm worried about Miyazumi, too, and hospital paperwork and stuff is a pretty big deal. You can leave the monster smacking to us," Kojou said, concerned by Shizuri's aggression.

Yukina hastily moved to reproach Kojou for his last phrase. "No, senpai. Do you intend to use the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor against a demon beast? Do you understand just how much damage the city would incur from—"

“It’s a demon beast that could send those two to the hospital, though. Who knows what kind of huge mess we’ll have if we let it run wild?”

“Then I shall investigate in senpai’s place,” Yukina firmly declared, knowing full well what he was going to say.

Hearing this from the side, Shizuri gawked at her. “Excuse me?! How did we reach this point?!”

“As senpai’s observer, it is the only natural decision. It is my duty as a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency to prevent large-scale destructive activities by the Fourth Primogenitor before they might occur.”

“That has nothing to do with it! The ones that came to harm are *my* friends! Letting you address the problem of this dangerous demon beast would bring shame to the name of the Paladins of Gisella!”

“Miss Kasugaya, you are a civilian, so please go to school!”

“You’re a student in the same school as I am, are you not?! In the first place, is this not precisely what the Demon Sanctuary Research Club was intended for?!”

“Ahh… Hey, Himeragi. Settle down, okay…? Cas, you, too.”

Kojou called out from the side as the pair glared at each other, but…

“I am completely calm!”

“Kojou, please be silent!”

Having caused the girls to shout louder instead, Kojou meekly backed away. In place of the so-called World’s Mightiest Vampire, a voice that sounded languid and cold scolded Yukina and Shizuri instead.

“You two are being somewhat loud. Were you not taught as children to keep your voices down in a hospital?”

“Huh…?” The familiar-sounding voice made Kojou gasp and turn around.

Standing against a bone-white wall was a slender figure.

She had long, black hair in an old-fashioned hairstyle and wore an equally old-fashioned black sailor outfit. The girl had a pretty face, but the look in her eyes,

seemingly mocking the world around her, somehow left an unapproachable impression.

“You’re…!”

“Miss Kisaki?!”

The sudden appearance of Kiriha Kisaki—Priestess of the Six Blades of the Bureau of Astrology—made Kojou and Yukina freeze in place like computers visited by the blue screen of death.

Shizuri, the only one of them meeting Kiriha for the first time, was completely at a loss as she gazed at Kojou and Yukina standing stiff.

“…Who is she?” she asked with a mystified tilt of her head.

5

Kiriha was carrying a small camera bag in her right hand with a large tripod case slung over her left shoulder. To people unaware of the circumstances, she looked like nothing more than a high school girl with an interest in photography. Of course, they would have no idea that her tripod case contained a forked spear, a specialized armament of the Priestesses of the Six Blades.

In particular, Shizuri, not being from Itogami Island, probably hadn't even heard of the Bureau of Astrology.

Even so, her gut instinct had likely made her discern that Kiriha was no ordinary person. Like a wild wolf encountering an unfamiliar human being, she glared at Kiriha from a safe distance.

Kiriha gazed upon Shizuri and her reaction with amusement as she sat on a waiting room sofa and crossed her legs. In no way were her manners poor, but her queen-like appearance and the holier-than-thou expression she wore no doubt accounted for her somehow coming off as haughty.

Sitting in a chair opposite to her, Yukina looked at Kiriha as if she was a nuisance and asked, "Miss Kisaki…why is a Priestess of the Six Blades of the Bureau of Astrology here?"

The federal Attack Mage whom the doctor had described as Yukina's "comrade" must have meant Kiriha. Certainly, in one sense, they were cut from the same cloth. But even if both were from special agencies working directly for the government, the Bureau of Astrology was an organization with interests that differed from Yukina's Lion King Agency.

Specifically, Yukina had engaged in lethal combat with Kiriha in earnest, yet had also fought side by side with her. Thanks to their shared history, she was unsure just what kind of reaction to have.

"How offensive. Why? I believe that's my line." Kiriha made a long sigh as if she were the one reproaching Yukina. "The Lion King Agency's mission is to

investigate large-scale sorcerous criminality. The Bureau of Astrology has jurisdiction over dispatching demon beasts. Am I wrong?”

“That is…correct, but…”

“And so, I, as a Priestess of the Six Blades of the Bureau of Astrology, have been assigned the task of countermeasures against an unknown demon beast that has appeared on Itogami Island. Yukina Himeragi, this decision comes straight from the Japanese government and is based upon a formal request by Itogami Island’s Gigafloat Management Corporation.”

Faced with Kiriha’s high-pressure statement, Yukina sank into silence, unable to say a single word in reply. Just as the Sword Shamans of the Lion King Agency specialized in anti-demon combat, the Priestesses of the Six Blades specialized in subjugating demon beasts.

That Kiriha, one of those Priestesses, would be involved in countermeasures against a demon beast was so painfully straight down the middle, Yukina had no room for rebuttal. The one thing that tugged at her mind was that the Bureau’s reaction was far too swift, but such speediness was something to commend, not something to levy complaints about.

“I…I cannot accept this! To begin with, what is with this arrogant woman?!” Shizuri, unaware of Kiriha’s identity, vehemently objected, unable to read the atmosphere.

“Hey, Cas. Cut that out!”

“Wh-what are you doing, Kojou?! Let me go! And where are you touching…?!”

When Kojou restrained Shizuri’s arms from behind, she began kicking her legs.

Kiriha, watching the jostling between Kojou and Shizuri with the gaze of someone observing a rare animal, suddenly realized something as her eyes rested on Shizuri’s head.

“…You’re an Ogre?”

“Wh-what if I am?”

Subconsciously concealing both her horns under her hands, Shizuri let out a frightened sound. Her hairstyle made them seem like hair ornaments, but she

was not concealing them under a wimple as she once had. It was obvious from a glance that she was a female Ogre.

“What is your relationship to Kojou Akatsuki?”

“I—I have no obligation to tell you any such thing!”

“Hmm… It would seem you have found yet another amusing lover, Kojou Akatsuki,” Kiriha murmured in admiration, effortlessly letting Shizuri’s hostility pass over her.

“His lover…?!”

Shizuri let out a wail with even greater ferocity, but Kiriha had already lost interest in the girl, toying with her own hair as if pointedly bored. Kiriha’s belittling demeanor drove Shizuri further into a rage.

Good grief. Kojou shook his head, exhausted. As a matter of fact, Kojou had as hard a time dealing with Kiriha as Shizuri did.

“Kisaki, the civilian Attack Mages hurt by the demon beast are friends of ours. At least tell us about it,” he said.

“Ahh, so that is what this is about.”

Kiriha’s expression softened slightly. When he thought more, it made perfect sense for her to be quietly on guard, given that she didn’t actually know why Kojou and the others were involved in the incident.

“That being the case, I am willing to speak to you, but my information comes at a high price.”

“You’re asking for money?!” Kojou retorted.

You’re a public employee, dammit.

Kiriha narrowed her eyes in amusement. “But of course not. Yes, how about this…? For this one evening, you will accompany me on a date.”

“Miss Kisaki…!”

“Wh-what are you thinking?!”

“Tee-hee. How frightening. I’m only joking.”

Watching Yukina and Shizuri's maidenly reactions, Kiriha clutched her belly and laughed out loud. Kiriha typically revealed no openings, but for once, her expression seemed like that of a normal, everyday girl.

"To put it bluntly, at present, I do not yet have information sufficient to share. Apparently, the construction firm worker who encountered the demon beast saw next to nothing, since the place was dark and he was desperately running for his life. He was quite agitated, making his testimony completely unreliable."

"Well, that's what you'd expect from a normal human being."

Kiriha's words had not a shred of evidence, but Kojou trusted them without any fuss. This time, at least, she had no reason to deceive Kojou and company, and her testimony had the ring of authenticity.

"To have returned to the surface with such dead weight intact, with such injuries themselves, the two civilian Attack Mages did quite well, I think. The construction worker thanked them as well."

Kiriha commented with what sounded like genuine admiration for Yuno and company.

"For Miss Yuno and Mr. Rui, that is only to be expected," Shizuri said proudly.

Kiriha quietly smiled and nodded. "At any rate, the construction worker was able to attest to—with certainty—the exact location the demon beast appeared. From here, I shall proceed along with our staff and perform a field inspection. Depending upon the results, I will require your cooperation. I trust this is acceptable, Kojou Akatsuki?"

"So that's what you meant by a high price."

Kojou gave a brief sigh of resignation. Perhaps it was slightly masochistic of him to think he ought to bless his good fortune if that was all the compensation it took to settle a debt with Kiriha.

Kiriha stood up with her luggage in hand and began walking to the waiting room exit, as if to say, *our business is done.* Then, as if suddenly remembering something, she halted her feet right at Yukina's side.

"Incidentally, Yukina Himeragi. I have a question for you."

“For me?”

Yukina looked back at Kiriha in apparent surprise. Kiriha peered straight into Yukina’s eyes.

“Has anything changed in your relationship with Kojou Akatsuki?”

“E-excuse me?” Yukina stiffened, not having expected that line of inquiry. “I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean.”

“If it hasn’t, then that is just fine. It was simply on my mind a little.” Kiriha’s gaze fell to Yukina’s left hand. On her ring finger, Yukina wore a silver band constructed of a metal very similar to Snowdrift Wolf’s.

“This goes for the current demon beast incident as well, but enemies lurk in places you least expect them,” Kiriha whispered softly into Yukina’s ear before leaving without even a wave.

To Kojou and the others’ ears, her whisper echoed with an oddly profound note to it.

6

“I suppose I really shouldn’t do things out of my comfort zone.”

In the gloomy darkness, on a roadway illuminated by chemical lighting, Kiriha murmured to herself.

She was at Cluster Six of New Itogami Island—the underground city where two civilian Attack Mages had encountered the unidentified demon beast the day before.

On the surface, dawn must have been finally breaking. That was because Kiriha only began pursuit of the demon beast in earnest sometime past midnight.

Accompanying her were eight investigators from the Bureau of Astrology who had just arrived from the mainland. They did not possess individual fighting capabilities on par with Kiriha, but they boasted a wealth of first-class skills when it came to pursuing and capturing demon beasts. But in spite of their tireless efforts, their search had yet to determine the demon beast’s whereabouts.

“Attack Mage Kisaki?”

Perhaps having heard Kiriha’s murmur, one of the investigators looked back at her with a tense expression. In terms of age, he was close to ten years Kiriha’s senior, but his demeanor toward Kiriha was tinged with reverence bordering on fear.

Faithful adherence to orders was all fine and good, but from Kiriha’s perspective, it was rather tedious to deal with. Whether it was teasing, or knuckling people under by force, it was far more amusing to overcome the resistance of someone defying her even a little. On that score, the Lion King Agency bunch and the Ogre she’d met at the hospital the day before were truly interesting, deeply stimulating opponents.

The unnecessary advice she’d given Yukina Himeragi was her thank-you for having put her in a rare, highly amused mood. That said, she reflected after the

fact that she had said too much.

“Speaking to myself. Pay no heed.” Kiriha smiled and waved to the investigator.

“Pardon me.” The investigator stood at attention, excusing himself before returning to his station, practically fleeing from her.

Sami Arashima, squad captain of the investigators, approached Kiriha in his place.

She wore a suit with a tight skirt and stylish heel loafers. She felt less like an investigator for the Bureau of Astrology and more like a beautiful music teacher possessing an exalted air about her. She was twenty-seven years old—or so she claimed. Single and ready to mingle. Kiriha was acquainted with her from time spent at the Six Blades training facility, and each knew the other’s disposition well. Sami herself was also a sorcerous engineer who specialized in high-end detection spells.

“Kiriha, would you come here for a moment?” Sami shone her flashlight upon an alley as she called out to Kiriha.

“Have you found something?”

Hoping to finally have found an escape from her boredom, Kiriha approached the alley as instructed.

It was a gap between one ruined building and another, a narrow underground street that seemed like a shortcut. They were not very far from where Yuno Amase and company had encountered the demon beast, with the direct distance some two hundred meters thereabouts.

A deep fissure ran along the surface of the ground at the back of the underground street.

The unfamiliar substance paving the street had been thoroughly gouged out by very sharp claws from the looks of it. However, mysteriously, there was no damage to the surrounding buildings. It appeared to have traces of something enormous having crawled out from under the ground.

Buried at the bottom of the fissure was a mass of metal that seemed brand

new.

The mass of metal was about the same size as an oil barrel; its shape resembled a bullet. Or perhaps it looked like the egg of a living creature. There was a large rift, as if something on the inside of the mass of metal had chewed its way out, leaving the contents hollow. All that was left behind were faint traces of some kind of slimy fluid.

“This is…?”

Kiriha spoke as she grimaced at the strange odor hovering in the air. It was not so much a raw scent as the pungent odor of some kind of chemical that had been vaporized.

“Unfortunately, its true nature is unclear, but I believe this might have been left here relatively recently. It is clearly made of a different material than any of the surrounding buildings.”

“Rather than being left here, it seems it had been shot in using a teleportation spell.” Kiriha grimaced, recalling a short witch skilled in the use of teleportation. She did not want to think that a witch equally skilled in the use of spatial magic was involved in the incident.

“Relationship to the Unknown?”

“I can say nothing until we have tested it. I do not believe it is unrelated, but I cannot conclude that,” Sami responded with a roundabout, cautious, and very analytical tone.

“It’s almost like a bacterial cultivation tank. I don’t like this.” In contrast, Kiriha spoke out loud according to her intuition. It wasn’t big enough to fit a demon beast, but the presence of such a suspicious thing could not be a simple coincidence.

“It seems photography of the site has finished. We’ll retrieve samples and request analysis from the Sorcery Lab,” Kiriha called out to a nearby investigator, who seemed rather bewildered.

“The Sorcery Investigation Laboratory? Isn’t that an organization within the Attack Mage Branch?”

“I’d rather we bow our heads to the police than the Lion King Agency. Anything related to sorcery is their jurisdiction, not ours. Are you dissatisfied in some way?”

“W-we shall do so at once!”

She hadn’t particularly intended to intimidate him, but the investigator shuddered as he awkwardly excused himself. *Is my smiling face so frightening?* thought Kiriha, sighing ever so slightly.

She turned to Sami, who stood right beside her as she tried to hold back her own smile.

“Now then, what about our precious Unknown? Can we track it?”

“We have found evidence of the combat between it and those two civilian Attack Mages. It is largely as the witnesses testified. Would you like to take a look?”

“Yes,” said Kiriha with a nod. When Sami set out walking first, she followed.

Shortly thereafter, she saw an underground street that was thoroughly ripped to pieces. It was a tragic sight that seemed less like the aftermath of a demon beast fight than what was left after someone had carpet-bombed the place. There was a depression that was dozens of meters across and deep in the ground; even the artificial isle’s foundation had been cruelly stripped bare.

“A terrible sight,” Kiriha muttered. Though not absolutely certain, she didn’t think any proper creature could have produced such destruction. *It is like the aftermath of a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor running wild*, she mused, keeping the thought in her own head.

However, it seemed that Yuno Amase and her partner had not simply taken a one-sided beating. Here and there across the battlefield were strewn pieces of demon beast flesh and fluid that had been sent flying. *Against an unknown monster, they fought well*, would be a very fair statement.

Sami gave her assessment of them, speaking with apparently genuine admiration. “The length of the demon beast is estimated at fourteen to fifteen meters. For civilian Attack Mages to have survived such a battle without proper armaments, they had to be almost impossibly good. Perhaps we should recruit

them.”

“They are apparently from that Onrai Island place. Perhaps they are accustomed to fighting monsters like these.” Kiriha bluntly shook her head.

Before Sami could give any kind of response, an impact came—one powerful enough to make the ground shake.

A roar accompanied the falling of debris. With a slight delay came a shriek and another angry roar. Kiriha and Sami had heard it from behind them; something must have been lurking inside the ruined building there.

“What is happening?”

“It’s here! The Unknown!”

With a shriek, the investigator replied to Kiriha’s sharp, scolding voice. The shriek was immediately blotted out by gunshots. The investigators had opened fire.

Illuminated by flying sparks, a bizarre silhouette came into view from the dark, gloomy building interior. Its appearance was like that of a giant lobster or lizard, or perhaps it looked like an ancient sea creature out of the Cambrian period. Its form was ferocious, eerie, and beautiful at the same time. It was around five or six meters long, certainly not off-the-charts huge, but still a size that rivaled the largest of crocodiles.

“Smaller than expected. A larva, I wonder?” Sami calmly said as she brought up a video camera.

Kiriha drew her fully metallic forked spear from the case on her back, holding it at the ready.

“Sami, do you remember what the civilian Attack Mages testified about the tentacles?”

“…That the severed tentacles self-propagate and regenerate?” Her expression hardened. “It couldn’t be…”

“If so, its life force is quite a thing indeed.” Kiriha was utterly unamused.

Sami trembled and sucked in her breath. If the severed tentacles really did regenerate on their own, worst case, they could not rule out a similar

phenomenon from the fragments of flesh being sent flying by the gunfire.

“Cease fire! Stop!” Sami shouted to the subordinates continuing to fire at the demon beast. So long as they were ignorant of the extent of the beast’s regenerative ability, she did not think continuing to fire upon it and send more pieces of flesh scattering was much of a plan. Safely quelling this demon beast meant they had to neutralize it without inflicting any external damage.

“If possible, I would like to capture it alive.”

Kiriha installed a ritual spell into the tip of her spear, the one resembling a tuning fork.

Owing to the need to battle demon beasts of many varieties and natures, the Ricercare of the Bureau of Astrology was not inscribed with one, set ritual. Instead, it had been granted the ability to amplify accumulated magical energy and expel it in accordance with the wielder’s will—in other words, the power to copy magic.

At the same time the investigators broke off their gunfire, Kiriha leaped toward the demon beast lurking within the building. Acutely sensing her presence, the demon beast turned toward her.

That would not be enough.

“Too slow! Mist Leopard—Twin Moons!”

Slipping past the tentacles swinging down at her like a whip, Kiriha thrust the tip of her spear into the demon beast’s flank. The forked spear’s opposing tines vibrated, activating the ritual stored within.

Kiriha had employed a freezing spell. Using magical energy to forcibly evaporate the water inside the target using its own heat, thus lowering the target’s body temperature, it was a very common spell. However, when combined with the vast magical energy accumulated in Ricercare, it became a fiendish attack spell that could instantly freeze even a huge demon beast.

Frigid vapor enveloped the demon beast’s entire body, its slime covered by a stark white frost.

“Ohh,” went the investigators, letting out awed breaths.

In an instant, Kiriha's freezing ritual had frozen the target's body to nearly -70 degrees Celsius. No matter how violent the demon beast, so long as it possessed flesh and blood, it was impossible for it to remain active while in such a state.

No, it *should* have been impossible, and yet—

"Wha—?!"

With a *swish*, one of the immobilized demon beast tentacles cracked the air as it assailed Kiriha from the side. Kiriha instantly leaped back, evading the attack.

The frost covering its entire body fell away, and the previously frozen demon beast roared.

It was not that Kiriha's spell had misfired; most of the magical energy the forked spear had sent coursing into the demon beast's body had been nullified. Or more precisely, rather than nullified, it had been—

"It absorbed…the magical energy…?"

Kiriha gripped the metallic shaft of her spear hard as she clicked her tongue a little. Most of the magical energy accumulated inside Ricercare had dissipated, as if ripped out from the root.

In contrast, even from a distance, it was plain that the beast's cellular structure had gone into overdrive. Even the gunfire wounds were healing with incredible speed.

"Urk…!"

Sustaining a blow from its large tail, Kiriha was sent flying. Her spear had blocked a direct hit, but she was unable to fully deflect the force of the blow.

"Assist Attack Mage Kiriha! Fire the electromagnetic nets, hurry!" Sami shouted in the immobile Kiriha's stead.

Metallic nets made from special materials entwined the demon beast's four legs one after another. Even so, the demon beast did not stop moving. Heedless of the high-voltage current coursing through it, the monster broke free of the nets, shaking them off.

“Everyone, avoid close combat! Don’t use ritual-type gear! Only chemical tranquilizer rounds permitted!”

Even Sami’s voice was tinged with nervousness. Neither magical attacks nor high-voltage currents were effective. The tranquilizer rounds pumped into it were already well past what would instantly kill an elephant. She didn’t want to think they would be wholly ineffective, but she could see no sign of the demon beast’s activity coming to a halt. At that rate, far from being able to capture it, the investigators were in peril of being wiped out.

Just as cold sweat began coursing over Sami, Kiriha angrily shouted at her from behind. “Pull back, Sami!” Though blood was coursing from Kiriha’s torn lip, her eyebrows were raised in a ferocious smile.

“Kiriha, what are you…?! That ritual…!”

Noticing the ritual energy wavelength stored in the forked spear, Sami stood in place, shocked.

Magical attacks were ineffective on the demon beast. The magical energy remaining in Ricercare was scant. However, heedless of this, Kiriha swung her spear up without warning.

“Lustrous Scale!”

Ting, went the ear-ringing sound as a silver flash surged forth. The invisible blade wrought by magical energy sliced through space itself. This was the pseudo-spatial severing ritual that was the specialty of Sayaka Kirasaka, Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency.

However, Kiriha’s attack was not aimed at the demon beast itself. Even if she’d bisected its body, she did not think that it would bring the bizarrely resilient demon beast to a halt. What Kiriha cut was the space above the demon beast, for there was the ceiling of the underground city—the ground surface of the artificial isle.

An enormous rock came crashing down.

Nothing remained of the demon beast, left without even time to let out an anguished cry.

In an instant, the boulder had squashed the demon beast's huge frame flat.

No matter how resilient the demon beast, it was impossible to maintain life activity while crushed under a great mass of rock. Even if individual cells were still alive, a great deal of time would surely be required before it could move once more. Of course, Kiriha had no intention of leaving the demon beast corpse for that long. As a Priestess of the Six Blades, she had fulfilled her bare minimum objective of quelling the menace of the demon beast.

"It seems you've managed somehow." Sami made a frail smile, seemingly drained of energy.

"Of course."

Kiriha made no move to conceal her irritation as she seemed to spit out the words. Wiping the blood coursing from her lip, she shot a glare filled with hostility toward the darkness of the underground city.

"The opponent was but a single tentacle, after all…!"

7

It was the day after the commencement of the new school term…

During the final class of the morning, Yukina and others were testing their endurance in gym class.

This consisted of handball tossing, standing long jumps, long-distance running, and shuttle running. These were all areas where Yukina had *difficulty*. Having been trained as a Sword Shaman, blithely forgetting to hold back would mean that even if she wasn't using ritual energy for physical enchantment, she would be head and shoulders ahead of top-class results for the same grade. Holding herself back to such an unnatural extent was hard work that wore down Yukina's nerves.

"Haah…"

However, it was not merely that weariness of spirit which made Yukina deeply sigh upon returning to the changing room after classes were over.

Nor was it distress concerning the demon beast that had appeared on New Itogami Island.

The Bureau of Astrology was a group of specialists in quelling demons, and while she had a few personality quirks, Kiriha Kisaki's strength was the real deal. Yukina knew that so long as they were the ones keeping people safe from the demon beasts, there was little reason for her to be concerned.

Somewhat surprisingly, it was not Kojou who was the cause of Yukina's worries.

The cause of Yukina's sigh related to her very own mission.

Her anguish came from something she'd received that morning from the Lion King Agency like a bolt of lightning out of a clear, blue sky.

"Substitute personnel, you say?"

Wearing her school uniform, Yukina was formally kneeling on top of the floor, face-to-face with a single cat.

This cat was actually the familiar of Yukari Endou, an elf and Yukina's mentor.

From time to time, Yukari, a magician in the employ of the Lion King Agency, personally communicated missions from the Lion King Agency to Yukina from the far-off Japanese mainland through that familiar. It was in that fashion that she had unexpectedly visited Yukina's room that morning.

"Yuiri Haba. You know her, yes?"

The chrysoberyl adornment hanging from the black cat's collar swayed as it spoke.

"Yes," said Yukina with a nod. There was a throbbing deep inside her chest, but Yukina herself did not know why. "Miss Yuiri is…being made the observer of the Fourth Primogenitor in my place?"

"That has not been formally determined. I am simply saying that such a substitution is possible, so you should prepare and be able to vacate the room at any moment. Though I am unsure what you might find inconvenient to be seen…"

For once, the black cat's words were rather evasive. *Likely, opinion even inside the Lion King Agency is far from settled on the matter*, Yukina surmised.

Breathing in briefly, Yukina wrung out all the spirit she could muster. "Um, has my work been deficient in any manner?"

However, if anything, the black cat's demeanor seemed rather laid back as she shook her head.

"Not a word of such a thing. You have done even more than we hoped. After all, you have become intimate with the Fourth Primogenitor to the point he will actually do as he is told."

"I-intimate…?"

Is that not a word indicative of a physical relationship between man and woman? the look on Yukina's face asked in humble protest. However, all the black cat did was turn up her little nose and laugh.

"But perhaps more than a few are not pleased with that, both within the Lion King Agency and the government itself. The issue is whether you are too close

with your target for observation, or so some would say.”

“…Eh?” Yukina’s eyes widened in surprise.

Foolish talk indeed, the black cat’s short sigh seemed to say.

“From the point of view of those wishing to make the Fourth Primogenitor act according to their will, having a single girl, an apprentice Sword Shaman, able to hold a Primogenitor in check is an undesirable situation. In particular, the Japanese government views you as unfettered because you lack any relatives, you see.”

“Meaning…I might spark a rebellion?” Yukina replied back in a quiet voice, feeling irritated as if her body temperature had quietly dipped. Rather than merely preposterous, the wording sounded outright malicious.

“Once suspicion rises, there is no end to it, of course—so long as there is no guarantee you will take the government’s side the instant Itogami Island’s interests diverge from those of the Japanese government, their concerns are quite natural,” the black cat replied with a cynical tone.

Yukina bit her lip hard, clenching the hands resting atop her knees. “Hence, Miss Yuiri… But why? Because she has family?”

“Family?” The cat shook her head without displaying any particular interest. Yuiri still had both parents, a rarity among the orphan-heavy graduates of High God Forest. Yukina had heard she had a younger brother of similar age, too. In other words, if all else failed, they could be used against Yuiri as hostages.

However, so far as Yukari was concerned, Yukina’s assertion was apparently wide of the mark.

“Nominating Yuiri as a candidate for substitute personnel is because there is no other Sword Shaman of the same grade as the Fourth Primogenitor. There are a number in training, but none of them are usable at present. There are insufficient Shamanic War Dancers to go around, and to begin with, Sayaka and Shio Hikawa’s personalities are unsuited to the role of watcher—yes?”

“Ah, um…I don’t know what to say…” Yukina gave a non-answer, unable to agree with or to refute the assertion.

Then, the black cat smiled somewhat teasingly. “Mmm, or do you think the Fourth Primogenitor lad gets along poorly with Yuiri?”

“No. I believe they get along quite well. Er…Akatsuki-senpai seems to admire Miss Yuiri a great deal…”

More precisely, he hadn’t said he admired her—he’d said she was pretty normal compared to Yukina and Sayaka. Certainly, upon meeting him for the first time, Yuiri had neither suddenly thrust a spear at him nor swung a sword at him.

Even setting all that aside, the simple truth was that Yuiri was an attractive girl.

She had a gentle personality, was well mannered, and as far as Sword Shaman skills went, she was equal or maybe even superior to Yukina. On top of that, rumor had it she was hiding a sizeable pair of breasts. To be blunt, Yukina wasn’t confident she could beat her in any category.

Of course, in the end, Yukina was with Kojou only because of her mission, so it was not necessary for her to compete with Yuiri whatsoever, but—

As if seeing right through Yukina’s melancholy, the black cat sarcastically nodded. “Indeed. And the two of them have already engaged in vampiric activities.”

“H-how do you know about…?!”

“Well, for the time being, I do not believe the upper echelons of the Lion King Agency are seriously considering making such a change. At present, you are the only one to have gained complete mastery of a Schneewaltzer. It is none other than the Three Saints that know this more than anyone.”

“…Yes, Master.”

The Schneewaltzer was a secret weapon of the Lion King Agency, able to nullify demonic energy and rend any barrier. It was literally a demon-purging spear, able even to destroy vampire primogenitors boasting infinite demonic energy.

Yukina had been told she’d been chosen to be Kojou’s watcher because she

had the compatibility to employ that spear. That situation was surely unchanged.

If she did not have the Schneewaltzer, what would become of her?

Suddenly captive to such doubts, Yukina sighed once more.

“—Yukina, aren’t you going to change clothes?”

When Nagisa Akatsuki called out to her, Yukina gasped and came back to her senses.

At some point, the number of students in the changing room had greatly diminished. No doubt everyone had changed clothes more quickly than usual and left because lunch break was beginning. Nagisa, too, had already finished changing; she was in the middle of tying up her long hair. Yukina was the only one left still wearing her gym suit.

“Ah, sorry. I was just spacing out a little.”

Yukina hastily put a hand onto the hem of her gym suit. Nagisa looked upon the sight with concern.

“What’s with the sigh? Something on your mind? Well, I can understand how you feel.”

“Eh?”

Nagisa’s unexpected comment made Yukina swallow, her movements coming to a halt.

Though she’d lost that ability for a prolonged duration, properly speaking, Nagisa was an excellent spiritualist. Yukina was genuinely wary that this power might have read her very own thoughts.

However, the words that came out of Nagisa’s mouth were far from what Yukina had expected.

“I mean, here we are in high school, and everyone’s growing. It makes you nervous. And I have cute underwear on and everything.”

“…Huh? …What?”

Covering her own rather modest breasts, Nagisa softly said, “It’s rough, huh?”

searching for agreement. Yukina was unsure what reply to give as her smiling face hardened and twitched.

“We’re all slender, so isn’t it fine?”

Adding herself to Yukina and Nagisa’s conversation was their classmate, Minami Shindou. The tall Minami gave Yukina a glare with an emotion that mixed exasperation with envy.

“In the first place, Yukina, worrying about your appearance is total overkill. What’s with that super-tight waist?! Are you looking down on us?! Even Nagisa has a figure a lot of the guys go for!”

“Hey, where I’m concerned, those don’t sound like words of praise…!” Nagisa retorted. She resentfully pouted.

Sakura Koushima, their class representative, listening to the conversation in silence up to that point, said with a quiet, delicate voice, “Is it possible you are concerned about the rumors of Nagisa’s older brother being interested in big breasts?”

“Um—ah…”

Unable to keep up with the wild leaps in the conversation, Yukina stood still in a daze.

During that time, Minami muttered, “Oh, I see,” accepting the idea all on her own. “This is about Akatsuki, huh? That’d make a girl worry. What do you think, Nagisa?”

“Hmm, I wonder. I don’t know Kojou’s tastes in breasts, really…”

“Um, actually, I’m not too concerned about something like that…”

Sensing peril and fearing that this might turn into quite a disaster, Yukina earnestly denied the assertion. However, Minami didn’t take her rebuttal the slightest bit seriously.

“I get it, I get it. Well, we can hear all about it nice and slow later. More importantly, better change clothes quick. Our squad’s running late cleaning up and all. If we don’t hurry, we’ll lose our seats at the cafeteria.”

“Sorry, everyone. Please go on ahead of me.”

Yukina gave up on persuading her friends and joined hands with the girls. Nagisa checked the clock, then communicated with Minami and company eye to eye.

“Suit yourself. Okay, we’ll keep your seat open, Yukina. Come quick, ’kay?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

Watching as Nagisa and the others busily left the changing room, Yukina gave a pained smile mixed with a sigh.

Sensing that her flagging feelings had risen just a little bit, she secretly thanked Nagisa and the others. If her mission to observe the Fourth Primogenitor came to an end, she would be forced to part from them, but she locked such thoughts away.

Yukari had said, after all, that Yuiri replacing her had not been formally decided.

“My figure…hm?”

Absentmindedly, Yukina stripped off her gym clothes.

She had never worried that her own figure was too childish up to that point, but the rumor that Yuiri was hiding large breasts made her mull over the issue for the first time. Perhaps it would be better to confirm whether Kojou truly did prefer big breasts or not—

Perhaps thanks to such silly thoughts, she noticed the abnormality a second too late.

Sensing powerful demonic energy behind her, Yukina whirled around, looking defenseless in the middle of changing clothes.

“—Who’s there?!”

A new figure had suddenly appeared in the changing room, where none besides Yukina should have been.

The girl was fairly small in stature with an exquisite physique. She remained down on one knee, her back turned toward Yukina.

Her back had pure-white skin without a single blemish upon it. The girl was

not wearing clothes. Never mind a schoolgirl uniform or gym clothes— she wasn't even wearing underwear.

In their place was thick demonic energy cloaking her body.

Some kind of powerful spell had sent the girl into that changing room.

Without a word, the naked girl stood up and turned toward Yukina. Then, Yukina drew in her breath in shock the instant she set eyes upon the girl's face.

"You're…?!"

Yukina, a Sword Shaman, had shown an opening for a single instant—and so, the naked girl moved, not allowing that opening to escape.

Sustaining a severe blow from point-blank range, Yukina's body was easily blown as far as the wall.

Realizing that a sleeping effect accompanied the attack, Yukina groaned. Her entire body was already too numb to move. Her consciousness was slipping at a dangerous pace.

"No… How…?"

As Yukina murmured, the naked girl looked down at her with a leering smile.

Staring in a daze at the girl's face, one she knew more than any other, Yukina blacked out.



Chapter Two
The Impostor

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The Impostor

1

The emergence of the demon beast on New Itogami Island had been reported on normally in the newspapers and on the local cable and TV channels due to there being no particular reason to cover it up.

The reports noted that a large demon beast, nature unknown, had assaulted workers of a construction firm, and two workers were missing. They further noted that there had been multiple casualties of varying severity, two civilian Attack Mages included. Furthermore, details concerning the Gigafloat Management Corporation's disaster countermeasures team, including photographs, were reported upon with ease. The report wasn't seen as a huge deal; on Itogami Island, mysterious demon beasts weren't exactly unheard of.

Actually, the photo of Rui and Yuno that had circulated for a mere instant had made the Civilian Attack Mage Handsome Boy and Pretty Girl Fighter combo a quiet subject of conversation, which would result in a further deluge of contracts heading their way thereafter, but that is another story.

The missing demon beast weighed on Kojou's mind, but with Kiriha, a specialist in such matters, on the case, there was nothing for Kojou and company to do. On top of that, it was only the day before that Natsuki had strictly warned Kojou about his attendance and grades now that he'd advanced a grade. He couldn't go skipping school on the second day of the brand-new term.

For those reasons, Kojou attended school normally as if nothing were amiss, undertook classes in a normal fashion, and arrived at his normal lunch break,

whereupon Kojou clutched his empty stomach as he headed to the cafeteria, Yaze in tow.

“Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella?” Yaze furled his brows in apparent surprise. “You mean the Ogre who created Onrai Island? The Iroise survivor? You invited *her* to Dem-Club?”

“Something wrong with that? Actually she seemed pretty pumped about it…”

Kojou found Yaze’s critical reaction rather surprising as he bounced a question back. Yaze stared at Kojou as if his friend was some incredible fool, shaking his head with a sullen, bitter expression about the travails that were to come.

“Nah, it’s fine. I’m totally fine with it, but…it was gonna be pretty prickly with Asagi and li’l Yukina together to begin with, and now li’l Kasugaya’s coming, too? What is this, a plot to divide the Empire into Three Kingdoms…?”

“…Empire?”

What kind of war of domination is he talkin’ about? Kojou mused to himself with a dubious expression.

Yaze sighed, seemingly putting his head back on straight, and said to himself, “Positive thinking, positive thinking,” almost as if it were some kind of spell.

“I suppose she’s really not a bad choice from an objective standpoint,” Yaze admitted. “It’s kind of normal for a Demon Sanctuary Research Club to have an actual demon in it. She already knows about you anyway… Well, I’ll go sweet-talk Asagi later. You had to work hard to convince Himeragi, huh?”

Kojou couldn’t understand what Yaze was so afraid of. “It was no big deal. She was with me when I went to invite Cas in the first place…”

Yaze simply gawked at him for a while.

“You brought Himeragi with you? Man… And they didn’t get into a big argument?”

“There was a lot of foot-dragging, but that’s what you’d expect at the start. It’s not like they seriously tried to kill each other like they did a little while back.”

“I feel like you becoming the Fourth Primogenitor was some kind of cosmic

inevitability.” Yaze pressed a hand to his forehead and weakly shook his head.

The hell does that mean? Kojou sourly narrowed his eyes at the words, which could not be pinned down either as praise or exasperation.

“Well, better watch your back, or else Himeragi might end up stabbing it.”

“R-right.”

Though he didn’t really get it, the reason Kojou politely nodded was because Kiriha had said something similar the day before. Enemies can appear where they are least expected—the fact that Kiriha had said as much left a rather strong impression.

“Oh, speak of the devil, it’s li’l Himeragi herself.”

Just as the cafeteria came into view, Yaze returned to his usual flippant tone of voice as he made the comment. From Kojou and Yaze’s location, they could see Yukina heading toward the cafeteria from the polar opposite side of the school yard, coming from the direction of the gymnasium. From time to time, the girl stopped walking, glancing around the area as if it was completely new to her; perhaps she was looking for an acquaintance of hers.

Gazing at the sight of Yukina in uniform, Yaze gave a drawn-out exhale and said, “With a view like this, she really is one pretty girl. A world where she lives by herself is just wrong. She’s adorable, she’s slender, her face is so small and cute… Well, not as cute as my girlfriend’s.”

“Y-yeah, I guess.”

So you haven’t been dumped yet? thought Kojou rather rudely.

Yaze’s girlfriend was an older girl named Koyomi Hiina. Two years their senior, she had graduated from Saikai Academy the month before, and was apparently attending a university within Itogami City.

Because there were few things connecting the two together, Kojou had wondered whether she might use entering university as a natural opportunity to part ways, but apparently that had been a needless worry on his part. Though he’d held out the possibility that the presumption Yaze was going out with her in the first place was a simple delusion on Yaze’s part…

Either way, as Yaze and Kojou watched her, Yukina finished coming down the pathway, entering the cafeteria building. Then, without the slightest reduction in speed, she slammed right into the glass door standing just before her eyes. *Thud!* came the painful sound after a moment's delay.

"…Did I mention she's also a bit of a ditz?" Yaze casually continued his words, seemingly to cover for Yukina, wincing with her back curled.

"No, that's beyond 'ditzy'…! What the heck is she doing…?"

Kojou raced over to Yukina, exasperated. Yukina groaned in pain as he called out to her from behind with a voice of concern.

"Are you all right, Himeragi?"

"Ah, yes… Somehow…"

With a hand over her red-nosed face, Yukina lifted her head with teary eyes. As Kojou looked down at her like that, their eyes met, and she drew in her breath, seemingly startled.

"Er, ah? Kojou?"

"…Kojou?"

Kojou narrowed his brows, taking Yukina's tone of voice, clearly different from the norm, almost like a slap to the face.

The only ones who addressed Kojou like that were his mother, Mimori, and his little sister, Nagisa—in other words, only his family. *Nagisa's way of talking must've rubbed off on her*, thought Kojou rather dubiously, when Yukina gasped and shook her head.

"Ah… I'm sorry. How rude of me, Akatsuki-senpai."

"Er, well, not that it really matters what you call me. More importantly, Himeragi, are you okay?"

"Yes, there is no problem. This door… It isn't automatic yet, is it…?"

Yukina shifted a resentful gaze toward the door leading into the cafeteria. Her casual comment made Kojou feel like something was faintly amiss. Ever since Kojou had enrolled, that somewhat old door made out of glass had been strictly

manual, and there was no sign of that changing anytime soon.

“Well, it’s not all that fancy a school,” Yaze replied, walking over in a carefree manner.

Yukina slowly checked over her shoulder, paying him an astonished expression. Then, her eyes opened wide in surprise.

“Don’t tell me, you’re Yazecchi… Er, I mean, my upperclassman Yaze? Eh, no way?!”

“What’s the big deal all of a sudden? Don’t treat me like a stranger, geez.”

Yukina’s exaggerated reaction left Yaze a little blushy for once as he gave her a pained smile. However, Yukina continued gawking at Yaze’s entire body.

“I—I mean… You’ve really slimmed down.”

“Eh? ‘Slimmed down’…? Had I been putting on weight…?”

Yaze had a rather conflicted expression on his face as he traded looks with Kojou, who tilted his head without a word. At the very least, Yaze’s body type hadn’t changed enough that Yukina ought to be surprised by it.

“Also, you have so much more…hair…than I remember.”

“Huh?! Wait a sec, can you stop saying things like that?! You’re making me really concerned about my future!”

Yaze’s voice was shrill as he ran a trembling hand through his spiky, combed-back hair. *That hit home, huh*, thought Kojou, finding that somewhat surprising as he gazed at the side of his friend’s face.

“I’m sorry, but I think it might be best if you take it easy with the hair gel. I mean, it could damage your scalp.”

“I—I mean…it’s true that the ultraviolet rays are pretty harsh on Itogami Island…”

Yaze nodded with an earnest face in response to Yukina’s roundabout words of caution. A stern expression came over Kojou as he listened to the conversation between the pair without a word. The doubts he’d been feeling toward Yukina since earlier had only grown stronger and stronger. He couldn’t

quite put his finger on it, but something about Yukina that day felt…off.

“What is it, Himeragi? You’ve been acting weird lately.”

Maybe it’s because she bumped her head, worried Kojou as he touched a hand to Yukina’s forehead. However, she had no injury that stood out at all, nor did she have a fever.

Then, Yukina looked up at Kojou, touching her without the slightest reluctance, with rather deep interest, the corners of her lips curling up into a leer.

“Ah…um, senpai? You’re touching me as if it’s the most natural thing in the world.”

“Ahh, sorry. Should I stop?”

“No, not at all. It is simply, rather presumptuous of…er, rather intimate, I thought. Perhaps I got the wrong impression. Were we always this close?”

When Yukina posed that odd question, as if she was talking about someone else, it was Yaze who nodded gravely and replied, “Pretty much, yeah. Everyone’s always going, ‘Both of them acting lovey-dovey in front of everyone else—die, Kojou, die!’ and all.”

“You say ‘everyone,’ but that sounds like your own personal feelings, sheesh!”

And I haven’t acted lovey-dovey with Himeragi even once, Kojou’s grimace added.

You’re not even aware of it, went the reaction Yaze displayed, which for some reason came off as quite exasperated, but Kojou ignored it and turned back toward Yukina. Lowering his voice, he brought his lips close to Yukina’s earlobe.

“Really, what is it? You’re the one always following me around because of your job, right, Himeragi?”

“I am the one following senpai around… Oho, is that so? Er, yes, that is correct, isn’t it?” Yukina put a hand over her mouth, seemingly holding back laughter as she nodded. Then, her eyes glimmered mischievously as she moved right against Kojou. “I see. By following you around, you mean going home with you together after school?”

“Er, well, yeah.”

“Coming and going between each other’s apartments?”

“Well, sheesh, you barged right into mine when I was sleeping just yesterday.”

Why did she have to ask about something like that she knows for herself? wondered Kojou.

“Of course! …And that includes drinking blood, yes?”

“W-well, that just sorta happened! I was on death’s door. There were all sorts of circumstances at play…!”

“…I certainly thought as much, but I must say, you are a thoroughly indecent person.”

For one instant alone, Yukina gazed far off into the distance with a very sober expression in her eyes. Her gaze held a mixture of emotions that could not be put into words, such as rebelliousness and dismay. Kojou looked back at Yukina with suspicion.

“…Himeragi?”

“Ah, er. It is nothing. Yes, nothing at all.” Yukina shook her head a bit frantically.

A moment later, they heard someone speaking in a rather boisterous voice.

“Ah, there you are, Yukina! We were waiting in the cafeteria the whole time, so I was worried when you didn’t show—er, ah, Kojou? And Yazecchi, too, it’s been a while!”

The speaker was a first-year high school girl wearing a blue necktie just like Yukina. Her hair, long but tied back with some side pieces left to frame her face, bobbed in concert with her movements.

“Nagisa?”

“Wha—? Auntie Nagisa?! You’re so young…!!” Yukina exclaimed, her voice heavy with shock as she raised her brows at the very familiar sight of Kojou’s little sister.

“A-Auntie…?!”

That single title Yukina spoke upon seeing her made Nagisa freeze. To her, having barely reached fifteen, being called *Auntie* by a classmate apparently did even more psychological damage than Kojou had assumed.

“Th-that’s so mean, Yukina… True, from time to time I’ve been told I talk too much like some kind of granny from out in the countryside, but still…!”

“Ah! I-I’m sorry, Auntie. I… I didn’t mean anything by it…”

“You called me Auntie again!”

Struck by Yukina’s repeated use of the term, Nagisa was brought to tears. Yukina not normally being one to say anything bad about anyone surely added to the sting to her psyche.

“…What’s up? What are you all excited about?”

Nagisa was shaken and wobbling on her feet when Asagi, who just happened to be passing by at precisely the right moment, caught her. Nagisa, with a face ready to break into tears at any moment, clung to Asagi like a weakened kitten.

“Asagi, do I come off as an old lady?”

“Wh-what? I’m sorry, what’s going on?”

Asagi, completely unaware of the situation, sought an explanation from Kojou.

“Um, I don’t really get what’s going on, either…”

Kojou casually shook his head. Of course, by this point he knew Yukina was not her usual self, but he did not know why. He really didn’t think that was the place to work it out, anyway.

Slipping past the bewildered Kojou, Yukina wobbled to the fore. She was staring right at Asagi with misty eyes, as if she had a fever.

“Miss Asagi?”

“…Hmm?”

Realizing that Yukina wasn’t acting like her usual self, Asagi subconsciously retreated half a step. She had been acting weird for a while now, but this had

completely crossed a line. Yukina looked at Asagi with the eyes of a carnivorous beast stalking its prey.

“Doctor… Why are—? Seriously? No way… S-so cute…!” Yukina murmured absentmindedly as she touched Asagi’s cheeks with both hands.

“H-Himeragi? What’s with…? Um, hey, Kojou, do something, would you?!”

Asagi backed away from Yukina bit by bit in apparent fear as she demanded aid from Kojou.

“Even if you say that…” Kojou hesitated, standing still as his thought process ground to a halt. It was as if Yukina were a completely different person. He couldn’t do anything about it without knowing why she was acting so weird.

If anything, her being possessed by some kind of evil spirit would make things a lot simpler, but that happening to Yukina was particularly hard to imagine; after all, she was a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, a federally qualified expert in anti-demon combat.

It was this Yukina who strongly turned toward Kojou. “What do we do, senpai?! Miss Asagi as a high-schooler is way too cute…!”

Yukina drew close to Kojou, arousal plain on her face, as she spoke in a rapid-fire delivery.

“Eh? W-well, yeah…”

“She’s beautiful, she’s young, she’s stylish, she smells nice, she’s beautiful… I knew about the rumors that she’d been an idol, but when I heard she was a bit of a free-spirited loose cannon, I imagined she’d be wearing some bizarre outfit, but…I…I see, no wonder Kojou couldn’t hold back…”

With the back of her hand, Yukina hastily wiped away the drool spilling from her mouth. When she proceeded to clear her throat with excessive force, Kojou instantly held her back.

“H-hey? Himeragi, what is it?”

“I am sorry. I unintentionally became rather worked up… Ah?!”

Droplets of crimson liquid were dripping from the cracks of the fingers she was using to cover her mouth. It was fresh blood. When he noticed this, Kojou’s

face twitched, and Asagi and the others drew in their breaths as they watched Yukina from a distance.

Yukina's shoulders trembled frailly after that, but suddenly, she shook off Kojou's hands without a word, spun on a dime, and broke into a run. She was acting desperate, as if exceedingly fearful of being seen marred by fresh blood.

"Hey, wait! Himeragi…!"

"Y…Yukina?"

"Himeragi?!"

Kojou made various attempts to stop Himeragi, but she'd vanished before their voices could reach her. Kojou and the others stood stiffly as they were left behind on that pathway, hectic during the noon hour.

"What the heck was all that just now?" Asagi asked, still in shock.

"Who knows…? Well, it's the new school term, and there was the Dem-Club invitation stuff, so whatever front she puts up, Himeragi was probably really stressed…," Yaze replied sensibly.

Kojou stared intently at the palms with which he had touched Yukina.

"Was that really Himeragi just now…?" he murmured.

It was the very next instant that Kojou felt a violent presence with a hint of bloodlust behind him.

When he whirled about, seemingly by reflex, a small-statured figure fluttered down right before his eyes. It was a schoolgirl wearing a short-sleeved white training shirt and shorts—the school's regulation gym uniform. She was carrying a case for a bass guitar in her right hand.

"Senpai!"

Leaping down from the emergency stairway, Yukina sharply called out Kojou's name.

"H…Himeragi?"

Kojou stared dumbfounded at Yukina, appearing from the completely opposite direction she'd run off in barely moments before. On top of that, the

speed and skill with which she'd instantly changed from her school uniform to her gym suit left Nagisa and the others speechless from surprise.

But what was on Kojou's mind far more than that was the guitar case she was carrying. Inside was most likely Snowdrift Wolf—the silver spear, secret weapon of the Lion King Agency.

"What's the big idea, carrying something like Snowdrift Wolf inside the school?"

Yukina greeted Kojou's question, spoken with an air of reproach, with a short shake of her head, killing it with silence. It was less a matter of ignoring him than not having the moment to spare.

Busily looking around the area as if she was searching for someone, she drew close to Kojou and asked, her words very swift, "Do you have any idea where I went?!"

An uncomfortable silence fell over the area. No one could understand what she was talking about.

However, Yukina didn't seem to be joking. To the contrary, she was dead serious.

As a result, everyone present had the same external thought:

""""…Huh?""""

I probably should have phrased that differently, said the awkward shake of Yukina's head. She continued to groan nervously as Kojou stared at her, sighing in exasperation.

2

With her right hand still pressed to her mouth, the girl wearing Yukina's school uniform sat in the shade of a tree behind the campus building, seemingly to avoid prying eyes. The handkerchief in her hand was stained red after soaking up blood.

Gazing at the Itogami Island sky, she made *nn-nn* noises with her nose each time she breathed. She then checked to see if her nosebleed had stopped.

"Ngh, it's healed up… I think."

Giving her lips a little lick, seemingly to check the taste of the blood remaining within her mouth, the girl briefly sighed.

Bleeding from the nose when she became overly aroused was a physical condition she'd inherited from her father. That it was a shameful display was very much fact, but it certainly wasn't just an inconvenience. That physical condition served a useful purpose, allowing her to hold other, more precarious urges in check—a check on the exceptionally powerful urges particular to her species.

"Vampiric urges, I take it?"

The girl heard a voice in her ear. The voice sounded oddly young, yet in spite of that, it was icy, as if the speaker saw right through her.

It was a vampire's destiny to be spasmodically assaulted by vampiric urges. They became governed by the biological phenomenon, a physical craving to drink a person's blood.

However, vampiric urges were triggered not by thirst, but by sexual arousal; in other words, lust. Most likely, her powerful sense of affection toward Asagi had triggered vampiric urges within her.

As the girl lifted her head, space itself swayed like a ripple right before her eyes.

As if melting out of thin air, a small woman appeared wearing an extravagant

dress. Her face was so youthful, the doll-like woman looked like a child.

“Natsuki…?!”

The girl raised her voice, her eyes glimmering not in surprise, but inquisitiveness.

“Wow, Natsuki, it’s really you! It’s like you haven’t grown at all…!”

“Is that so…?”

It was not the fact the girl knew her name, but rather the contents of the girl’s words that made Natsuki knit her brows and glare. Even looking at her up close, she resembled Yukina so greatly that the two were virtually indistinguishable.

However, Natsuki continued to stare at Yukina with unwavering eyes as her hands slowly reached toward her. Then, with her small hands, Natsuki diligently kneaded Yukina’s breasts.

“This sensation… Why you…!”

“Wait a… Natsuki, don’t! Cut that out—stop…!”

Natsuki had a firm hold of the girl’s breasts as she squirmed around and yelped.

If Kojou had been present, the sight would no doubt have instilled a powerful sense that something was wrong. The cause of that sense would be her bust size. The swell of the girl’s uniform over her chest was oddly large and captivating in a way that did not suit her. At the very least, the real Yukina surely lacked the volume that someone would instinctively want to grab and fondle.

All the same, it did not seem that Natsuki had touched her in order to ascertain the size of her breasts.



Pale sparks were scattering across the surface of Natsuki's hands as she groped the girl's body, which was imbued with such powerful demonic energy that it was causing a reaction from the magical bulwark covering Natsuki's own physical form.

"You're not Yukina Himeragi, are you?" Natsuki regarded the sparks with a neutral expression.

"Ah-ha-ha, I guess the cat's out of the bag. The girl stuck her tongue out a little without a single shred of guilt. White canines were poking out from the corners of the girl's lips—the fangs distinctive of vampires.

Just like Kojou, the true nature of the girl resembling Yukina was that of a vampire.

"You resemble her too much to be mere coincidence. I don't suppose you are siblings?"

"Ah, there it is. Getting mistaken for her has become something of a running gag for me, actually…"

The girl spoke flippantly. For whatever reason, she seemed to know Yukina well. Natsuki gazed at the girl's reaction with a rather amused look.

"Well, fine. I presume you are the one who caused the commotion in the changing room?"

"As expected. You noticed even that."

The girl smiled with what seemed to be genuine admiration. Natsuki's expression faintly grew more precarious.

"That was no normal teleportation spell. What formula did you use…?"

"Even if you ask me that, I can't tell you. I suppose what I can tell you is that I'm on a secret mission."

"Why did you enter Saikai Academy and pretend to be Yukina Himeragi? What is your objective?"

Natsuki readily switched questions. It wasn't that she had lost interest in the girl's spell; she had simply changed to a question that took greater precedence.

“Well, half of it was curiosity, see. I really wanted to meet them, so…”

The girl gave a surprisingly direct answer, perhaps judging that it would not touch upon her “secret mission.”

“You wanted to meet who? Kojou Akatsuki?”

“I suppose so. I mean, well, a bunch of other people, too.”

Natsuki prompted in a casual tone of voice. The girl smiled evasively and shrugged her shoulders.

“And the other half?”

“Well, you see, that’s… Whoa! This is bad!”

The girl was on the verge of proudly saying something when she nervously pulled Natsuki with her into the shadow of the campus building.

At the tip of the girl’s gaze were Kojou, plus Yukina Himeragi in her gym clothes. The girl was clearly hiding so that they wouldn’t find her.

Crouching and suppressing her breath, she waited for the pair to pass by. Finally, Yukina and Kojou passed completely out of view. The girl finally breathed out. “Safe!” she said, spreading both arms wide.

Natsuki gazed at the girl expressionlessly, seemingly bewildered.

“If you wish not to be found by Yukina Himeragi to such an extent, shall we change locations? I know a good place.”

“Oh?! Really?”

The girl beamed at Natsuki, who gently nodded and smiled. It was a beautiful, artificial smile.

“I would like to take my time speaking with you in a place where none may interfere.”

“—Wait, don’t tell me you’re talking about the Prison Barrier?”

The girl moved away from Natsuki, sensing a threat. However, in no way did this mean she was possessed by fear. She slightly lowered her center of gravity, entering a combat pose that greatly resembled that of the real Yukina Himeragi.

“Hmm, I wonder?”

Natsuki made a leering smile as a giant sway emerged in the space around her.

This was the entrance to the alternate dimension known as the Prison Barrier, constructed amid Natsuki’s own dream. This world was an endless dream, where not even the passage of time existed. Accordingly, escape from that prison was absolutely impossible, making it a specialized barrier for containing the vilest sorcerous criminals. Natsuki had become the warden of that prison through her witch’s pact with a devil. And so, she intended to haul the girl off to the inside of her dream.

“I knew it!”

Silver chains shot out from thin air, bearing down on the girl from four directions as she raised an objecting yelp.

The silver chains were actually ancient sorcerous devices wrought by the hands of the gods. These chains, intended to capture the vilest of divine beasts, could not be easily broken no matter how much demonic energy one possessed. But…

“I must, ahem, politely decline your invitation.”

A golden flash raced right before the girl’s eyes. The silver chains attempting to bind her entire body completely broke apart in that single instant. In addition, they had lost all of their magical energy, leaving the pieces to seemingly rot into nothingness.

“What…?!”

Natsuki’s expression contorted into shock. However, that shock immediately shifted to deep comprehension.

“You, that ability… I see. So that is what this is…”

“Well, pretty much, yeah.”

The girl gave Natsuki a bashful smile that made her white canine teeth poke out ever so slightly. Then, in front of the girl’s face, she brought both hands together, asking Natsuki to go easy on her in a pleading tone.

“I have a formal request. Could you shelter your *adorable pupil* for just a little while?”

The brazen spin the girl put on her words made Natsuki slightly curl her lips.

Natsuki had no memory of making a girl like this her adorable pupil, let alone the real Yukina Himeragi. However, she did not think that the girl’s words and gestures were complete fabrications, either.

The Witch of the Void stared the girl down. “I believe I have yet to hear your name.”

The girl glanced upward, mulling it over a little, then replied briefly with nothing but her name.

“Reina.”

3

Shizuri and Yuno were living in a temporary housing complex for expatriates in Cluster One of New Itogami Island. Though they called it temporary housing, it was really an experimental facility for ensuring people could settle in the fortress city known as the Ark of Sin, treating those who moved in, like Shizuri and Yuno, sort of like guinea pigs.

Because of that, the rent was cheap, plus the apartment had a kitchen, a bath, a toilet, and so forth. All the furniture and electrical appliances, etc., required for daily life came included from the start.

Between riding the monorail and the water bus, it was approximately one hour each way to and from Saikai Academy on Itogami Island proper. It wasn't exactly close, but it wasn't enough of a distance to be a hindrance to attending school. However, even that brief span of time coming back from school wore thin on Shizuri as she raced back to her own home.

"It is fortunate that classes ended quickly. I do not wish to be absent from school so soon after admissions."

Murmuring this in front of a mirror, Shizuri brusquely stripped off her Saikai Academy uniform. In its place, she retrieved her other uniform from the back of her closet.

This was a long coat with metal epaulettes. It included a cobalt blue wimple. This was her school uniform from the College of Magical Arts, a school that no longer existed. To Shizuri, this was her proper uniform as a Paladin of Gisella.

The sword belt wrapped around her hips held a long sword sheathed within a gold-colored scabbard. Checking how the outfit felt on her, Shizuri nodded toward the mirror.

"Bene!"

Middle school lessons had finished before noon, but high school apparently had classes in the afternoon as well. In other words, that meant Kojou and the others would not notice Shizuri's actions.

She'd taken care of visiting Rui and Yuno in the hospital on her way back from school. That left only one thing for Shizuri to do—she would dispatch the demon beast that had harmed Rui and Yuno, her precious squadmates, in their stead. But…

"May I have a minute?"

"Nyah?!"

Addressed by a girl standing before her the very instant she opened the door and stepped out, Shizuri let out a silly-sounding shriek.

She had long, old-fashioned hair and a sailor suit uniform that was primarily black. Her skin was white, and her lips were a glossy red. It was not so much the overwhelming sense her looks gave off that surprised Shizuri, but the fact she had not detected the girl's presence whatsoever before physically seeing her.

"Y-you are…the one from yesterday…!"

Keeping a hand on her sword, Shizuri somehow managed to regain her composure. The girl in black giggled a "tee-hee," smiling in a bewitching fashion. She was blessed with comely looks to begin with, so that smile was frightening enough, reminiscent of some kind of inhuman monster. Shizuri couldn't tell which one of them was the real demon.

"Yes, Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella. I am Kiriha Kisaki of the Bureau of Astrology."

"How do you know my name?"

Shizuri locked eyes with the other party, not lowering her guard in the slightest. She did not recall her name being given when encountering Kiriha at the hospital the day before. She was rather sure Kojou had only spoken his nickname for Shizuri out loud.

"I'm sorry, I looked into your background…or so I would like to say, but it is not such a grandiose tale. You are a celebrity, after all. Is that not so, Miss Last Paladin of Gisella?" Kiriha replied with a sardonic tone.

Sensing the teasing echo in her words, Shizuri drew her eyebrows together, irritated. An angry, demonic energy–infused aura beyond her ability to constrain was wafting up from her entire body.

“If you have come to pick a fight, I am happy to take you up on it.”

“Though that would be quite amusing, I believe you are mistaken in which party is picking the fight.” Kiriha smiled serenely, letting Shizuri’s anger wash over her with ease.

“What do you mean by this?” Shizuri shot back.

“Early this morning, I had a skirmish with the unknown demon beast.” Kiriha raised her left arm, showing it to the girl. Her wrist was wrapped with a fresh, white bandage.

Shizuri’s eyes opened even wider. “The one that attacked Yuno and Rui?”

“Yes, in a sense.”

Kiriha prevaricated, her words vague. Shizuri’s brow formed a sullen crease.

“…In a sense?”

“The opponent I fought was an individual entity, the result of a regenerating, self-propagating tentacle that Rui Miyazumi or Yuno Amase had severed from the unknown demon beast. In other words, a demon beast offshoot.”

“Merely an offshoot?”

Bewilderment floated into Shizuri’s eyes. Even just from speaking to her like this, she could tell that this Attack Mage possessed considerable strength. She was both scornful and deadly serious to a fault—the pair’s personalities might be polar opposites, but the fighting spirit she sensed from Kiriha greatly resembled that of Yukina Himeragi. Their mutual might in combat must have been nearly equal.

And yet, this Kiriha claimed to have been wounded by a demon beast’s offshoot.

“Then, the demon beast’s main body—”

“I suppose it is still lurking somewhere on this island.”

“Wha…?!”

Kiriha’s blunt reply left Shizuri at a loss for words for some time.

“Y-you are saying you let it go…?!”

“I hardly *let* it go. Our staff are fully mobilized, searching for the Unknown this very moment. However, even if they determine its location, that does not mean we can hammer out effective countermeasures against it.”

“…Why not?”

“One reason is the regenerative capability possessed by the Unknown. From demon beast cellular samples we recovered, we have confirmed that it will propagate at explosive speed under particular conditions.”

The term *propagate* made Shizuri grasp the cause of Kiriha’s injury.

There was no mistake. A piece of demon beast flesh Rui and Yuno had cut off had rapidly regenerated and propagated in a brief span before the night was even done, growing to a size sufficient that even Kiriha had a hard time with it.

That said, the opponent was not nearly as off-the-scale as a vampire primogenitor or similar. She didn’t think such regenerative speed could be maintained without any limit.

“What do you mean by ‘particular conditions’?”

“That is the other reason we have not hammered out effective countermeasures. It absorbs magical energy.”

“Wait, it consumes the magical energy…?”

Realizing the true import of the words Kiriha had casually spoken, Shizuri felt sweat course down her back.

No matter what type of spell one employed, a commensurate amount of magical energy was required to make it effective. However, this demon beast fed on magical energy itself. That was a far more troublesome nature than merely nullifying magical energy.

“Correct. Attack spells merely drive the Unknown into a more active state. Physical means of attack are required to do damage to it.”

“However, the demon beast’s regenerative capability means that…”

Kiriha’s expression did not change in any way as she nodded. “That’s right. We cannot send the opponent’s cells flying with gunfire and bladed weapons.”

Her words, spoken as if this were someone else's problem, put Shizuri on the verge of losing it.

"Then how do you intend to eliminate the creature?"

"I believe I told you at the beginning, we have not determined effective countermeasures."

"Ugh…"

Shizuri swallowed her words, unable to rebut the girl, falling into a mortified silence. Kiriha suddenly looked back at her with a grave expression.

"That is why I have come to meet you, Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella. It is said that the Paladins of Gisella passed down a secret armament known as Hauras. And as the last survivor of Gisella, it is only natural that you are the current possessor of Hauras—am I mistaken?"

"You are saying you wish to employ Hauras to cut down the demon beast?"

Shizuri turned her right flank toward Kiriha, subconsciously trying to hide the sword on her hip. That was as good as telling Kiriha that Hauras was right there, but it was too late for regrets.

"I have heard that Hauras is a mystical blade that increases its own power by stealing the opponent's magical energy, yes? If magical energy puts the Unknown's cells into a hyperactive state, I had reasoned that robbing it of its magical energy might nullify that effect…"

"What you say does make some sense."

Giving up on concealing the nature of her mystic blade, Shizuri responded to Kiriha's words with a nod. Considering the disposition of the Unknown, Hauras was the most suitable weapon against it. For that matter, it might well have been the sole means of dealing with the creature. That was no doubt the real reason Kiriha had come to visit Shizuri, an outsider as far as she was concerned.

"The Bureau of Astrology will handle pursuing and encircling the demon beast. We will gain the means of facing the demon beast. You will avenge your friends by your own hand. How about it? Are you willing to cooperate with us?"

Kiriha was requesting Shizuri's assistance. Shizuri felt like she could read her

mind. It was both sweetly seductive and a logical, realistic plan.

Even if placed in the identical situation, Kojou and Yukina would surely never bring Shizuri this kind of deal. The reason was simple. Kiriha's operation would expose Shizuri to physical peril.

Kojou and Yukina absolutely would never accept a way of operating that made others fight in their place. The possibility Shizuri might be injured only added to that. They were soft but also foolish.

However, it was that very softness and foolishness that made Shizuri so fond of them…

That was why, to protect the island upon which they dwelled, she decided to strike down the demon beast with her own two hands.

"I had intended to strike down this Unknown before you even asked. That said—"

"What is it, I wonder?"

Kiriha tilted her head seductively. With the girl still staring at her, Shizuri let out a sigh.

"Somehow, I have come to understand why Kojou and Yukina do not get along well with you."

"Oh, is that right?"

Kiriha tapered her lips ever so slightly, as if the statement had hurt her feelings.

4

“You were knocked out by an impostor—?”

Kojou stared at Yukina as he asked, sipping Kitsune udon broth that had gone lukewarm by then.

Having done one round searching inside the school for the Yukina impostor, they were just having a rather late lunch. Sitting at the same table as Kojou and Yukina were Yaze, Asagi, and Nagisa, too.

According to Yukina, the fake Yukina had suddenly appeared in the girls’ changing room and attacked her from behind.

This meant that by the time Yukina regained consciousness and hastily gave pursuit, Fake Yukina had already fled the scene.

Nagisa had her cheeks stuffed with sandwich bites like some kind of chipmunk as she asked, “So the girl we were talking to before wasn’t Yukina at all?”

Yaze let out a “hmm,” plucking the peppers he disliked away from his Chinese fried rice and resting his chin on his other palm. “I gotta say, the resemblance is uncanny.”

“Yeah. That match is way too close to just be a bunch of makeup…,” Asagi murmured, wiping her mouth after cleaning her third pizza slice off her plate.

“Yeah, I guess.” Kojou had to agree. Even Yukina herself acknowledged that she and her impostor were practically cut from the same cloth. “I didn’t sense illusion magic. It didn’t feel off when I touched her forehead, either.”

“…You touched her? The impostor’s forehead?”

Yukina, still in her gym clothes, stared at Kojou in surprise. *Why were you acting so intimately with a fraud?* the reproachful impression she gave off seemed to say, but Kojou figured he was just imagining that.

“Ah, well, the conversation was weird, so I just…”

Kojou vaguely excused himself, but Yukina’s gaze remained frosty. The pasta salad she’d ordered had remained largely untouched.

Suddenly, from Yukina's side, Nagisa embraced her. It was a strong hug and bewildered Yukina.

"Yukina! I don't want you to die!"

"O-oh? Die, me?"

Nagisa's ominous and foreboding statement left Yukina stiff and unable to react. However, Nagisa was not joking around. She looked at Yukina with an earnest, serious expression.

"I mean, it's often said that people who meet their living ghost or doppelgänger die really soon after…!"

Asagi, her interest piqued, said, "Now that you've mentioned it, I've heard of that, too. I have no idea how they explain it in ritual spell terms, though."

Addressing rumors with little tangible basis as something worth her interest was typical coming from her, having lived in a Demon Sanctuary for many years.

However, Kojou was doubtful.

"You're saying Fake Himeragi from before was a living ghost? For an apparition, she felt pretty darn lively to me."

Yukina calmly pointed out as counterevidence to Nagisa's speculation, "I do not believe she is a spiritual entity. She knocked me out with a physical blow, after all, and she stole the uniform I was changing into…"

Kojou nodded. "Gotcha. She did appear in the girls' changing room completely naked and all…meaning… Fake Yukina is wearing your underwear, too?"

"W-well, yes…but what does that have to do with anything…?!"

Yukina was beet-red, covering herself with her hands as she spoke. If Fake Yukina had stolen her underwear, did that mean she wasn't wearing anything under her clothes at that moment…?

I'd better stop while I can, Kojou thought.

"It's not like I deployed Soundscape in the girls' changing room… Guess that's my mistake?" Yaze murmured thusly, quietly so that others might not overhear.

Meanwhile, Asagi looked sour, wearing the expression of a test-taker faced with a difficult problem. “Himeragi, you don’t have siblings? You don’t have some kind of twin separated from birth or a cousin around the same age?”

“That is… At the very least, so far as I am aware of, I do not,” Yukina replied in a rather awkward-sounding tone. Having lost both her parents at a young age, she had difficulty declaring with absolute certainty that she was without sisters.

Certainly, the twin-sister-separated-at-birth theory came off as much more realistic than a living ghost. Still, simple sisterhood could hardly explain how the impostor knew so much about Yukina’s relationships with the people around her. After all, Fake Yukina knew that Kojou was a vampire.

“How about this?” Yaze offered, oddly confident. “It’s possible that wasn’t a human being, but a robot modeled after li’l Himeragi. Or maybe she’s some kind of clone.”

Asagi shot a scornful look Yaze’s way. “Good grief, Motoki. That’s just stupid. Take this a little more seriously.”

“I’m totally serious! How is that different from a twin separated from birth?!” Yaze replied sullenly, genuinely hurt.

I’m pretty sure that wasn’t a robot, thought Kojou with a quiet exhale.

“Setting Fake Himeragi’s identity aside,” he said, redirecting the conversation back on topic, “what the heck was she after anyway?”

“I didn’t sense any particular malice,” Asagi said. “It’s not like she was actually trying to hurt someone or to ruin Yukina’s reputation, either.”

Nagisa wasn’t convinced. “Oh really…?” Her tone wasn’t pushy, but her opinion was clear; she still held something of a grudge against Fake Yukina for having called her “Auntie.”

“At the very least, she didn’t impersonate Himeragi to do us any harm. That’s what it felt like anyway,” Kojou said, recalling Fake Yukina’s actions. She’d said a fair number of thoughtless things, but she was largely amiable to Kojou and company.

“I wonder, how did she know about us in the first place?” Asagi asked, staring

directly at Kojou.

He shrugged flippantly. “Guess there’s no way to find that out except to nab the girl and ask.”

Asagi sighed quietly. “I suppose. For now, how about we split up and look for her? Ah, Himeragi shouldn’t act on her own as much as possible. She might need an alibi in case something happens.”

“Understood.” Yukina nodded.

“Yeah… It’s possible Fake Himeragi might kick up some kind of incident in an unrelated place…”

Certainly, Fake Yukina was amiable toward Kojou and company, but that didn’t necessarily extend to all human beings. So long as they remained ignorant of their objective, there was no such thing as being overly wary.

“I’ll have Mogwai use the surveillance cameras in the city to search. If we find her, I’ll contact you immediately.”

Asagi was holding her favorite smartphone as she rose to her feet. The chime announcing that lunch break would end soon had started to ring.

With their meals over, Nagisa was cleaning up the plates when she spoke to no one in particular. “But really, who was she? The Yukina from earlier looks just like her…”

Without a word, Asagi stared at the side of Nagisa’s face, almost like she’d suddenly realized something.

“Asagi? Something wrong?”

“Nah.”

Noticing her gaze, Nagisa blinked, seeming rather mystified. “Don’t worry about it,” Asagi insisted, shaking her head.

Then Asagi grimaced, seemingly brushing her own imagination aside. As an afterthought, she murmured to herself alone: “‘Auntie Nagisa’…… There’s no way…right?”

5

In the end, Fake Himeragi did not appear anywhere at school from that point until the end of afternoon classes.

Even Asagi's search using surveillance cameras had not gleaned any information about this person. She had casually vanished, not leaving a single trace behind. One might almost conclude that they had all shared the same daydream.

But, Fake Yukina was obviously no illusion. The very fact she'd walked off with the real Yukina's school uniform was proof of her physical existence.

All the same, that in no way meant Yukina could remain in her gym clothes forever. Fortunately, Yukina possessed a wealth of spare uniforms. Due to her work with the Fourth Primogenitor, her uniforms frequently got dirty and damaged through combat.

For that reason, Yukina had changed into a fresh school uniform by the time she met up with Kojou when it was time to leave school. The fact the uniform's tie was the school regulation string tie was no doubt because she hadn't obtained any spares for the ribbon tie, an article of personal clothing.

Immediately afterward, they received word that Rui, who had been unconscious, could receive visitors.

"Miyazumi, you here?"

When they entered the patient room through the open door, they saw the only occupants were Rui, in bed, and an unfamiliar woman in a business suit. Rui's patient room was large enough for four, but the three other patient beds had curtains drawn over them.

"Akatsuki. And Miss Himeragi, too."

Rui, sitting on the bed, waved when he noticed the pair.

Wearing light blue pajamas, Rui came off as a frail, sickly pretty boy just begging to be taken care of. The pallor of his face wasn't quite healthy yet, but

his physical condition seemed better than Kojou had expected. The IV tubes had already been taken out of him.

The woman in the suit seemed to be about twenty years old, and her long bangs obscured her left eye under her glasses. She was beautiful.

She turned to Rui and said, “Well, then, I shall take my leave.”

“Yes. You have been a great help.”

Nodding to Kojou and Yukina briefly, she left the patient room without a word. From appearances alone, she gave off the impression of a capable businesswoman whose conduct was beyond reproach.

Making sure she was gone, Kojou asked, “Who was that?”

He got the sense she hadn’t been there merely to visit a patient.

“She’s from the civilian Attack Mage agency. I asked her to deal with the formalities about the current job.”

A faintly pained smile came over Rui as he spoke. He and Yuno had been injured on the job and brought to a hospital. Troublesome business work like negotiating with the client and paying expenses no doubt remained.

Feeling like he’d insensitively asked about something he really ought not have, Kojou awkwardly shook his head.

He changed the subject, voicing his thoughts from earlier to try and paper things over. “Pretty, isn’t she?”

As if seeing the melancholy in Kojou’s heart, Rui smiled warmly and nodded. “I suppose she is. I do not believe her age matches her appearance, however.”

“…What, like Natsuki?” Then Kojou murmured a quiet “I see,” as if a mystery had been solved.

If she was some sort of witch or sorceress, he could understand how the capable air about her clashed with her youthful appearance. It figured that people working for a civilian Attack Mage agency wouldn’t be your everyday sorts.

“Is everything all right with work? If there’s anything I can do to help, I’d be

happy to.”

“Thank you. But it’s all right. The construction company only hired us to search for people. Dispatching an unknown demon beast was not part of the contract, of course. They properly paid the fee, and there is no breach of contract penalty, either. The agency’s insurance is covering the hospital expenses, too.”

“Oh, that’s good… Er, well, it’s not good, but the silver lining in the cloud, I suppose?”

Even as he hastily corrected his own slip of the tongue, Kojou was relieved. While officially Kojou was the sovereign ruler of Itogami city-state, he was no more than a broke high schooler. Even if his friend had been short on money, he wouldn’t have been able to offer any tangible help.

“Um, Akatsuki-senpai and I brought some things for you. If you like, please share them with Miss Amase.”

Yukina offered the hospital visit gifts to Rui, which included a bouquet of flowers, a box of sweets, and multiple varieties of board games for killing time.

“Thank you. I was getting rather bored, so this is wonderful.”

Rui gazed happily at the exterior packaging of the board games as he spoke. In truth, Rui was quite the tabletop games fan.

Kojou was surprised to learn Rui was bored. “Cas hasn’t been here to visit today? I thought we might run into her here.”

“The squad leader already left. She said she had business she had to take care of after this…”

“Business?”

Vaguely, Kojou had a bad feeling about this. *I already have a headache with this Fake Yukina thing, so please don’t add to my problems*, thought Kojou. He felt like he was praying.

“Well, fine. If you need anything else, just say the word, ’kay? There’s some stuff it’s hard to ask Kasugaya for— Er, I don’t mean anything weird by that, just, like, normal stuff. Needing underwear and things like that.”

“Weird how?” Yukina asked, mystified as she stared at Kojou.

Fleeing from the purity of that gaze, Kojou hastily changed the subject.

“Incidentally, are you okay?”

“Yes, because unlike Yuno, I was not heavily wounded to begin with.”

Rui pulled up the sleeve of his pajamas to show Kojou abrasions well on their way to healing.

“I heard that your vitality got stolen or something…?”

“I suppose so. My memory of the moment I was attacked is vague, but I believe it is a fact that I was temporarily stripped of all my internal ritual energy. But compared to that, the issue of the demon beast consuming the Spell Thrower spell rounds I pumped into it is graver, I think.”

The gentle smile vanished from Rui’s eyes as his Attack Mage persona came to the fore.

Yukina leaned forward in shock before Kojou could even grasp the meaning of the words. “It consumed spell rounds? You are saying that it absorbed the ritual energy shot into it?”

“Yeah. In other words, it is possible it does not simply nullify spells, but that attacks via magical energy inherently have no effect… Perhaps even from a vampire’s Beast Vassal.”

Kojou finally realized the gravity of the matter. “…A Beast Vassal? But even if they’re called demon beasts, they’re still living creatures, right? Even if they eat magical energy, I wonder if they don’t have a limit to how much they can eat at once…?”

Rui quietly shook his head. “Perhaps that is the case, but we cannot say that for certain, for we do not understand the principles by which it absorbs magical energy.”

“So no letting your guard down, huh?”

It was possible that the unknown demon beast that had appeared on New Itogami Island could absorb even a Beast Vassal’s demonic energy. Until that possibility could be firmly refuted, it wasn’t exactly appropriate to recklessly

slam one of the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor into it… For if the Unknown truly could absorb a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor to the last drop, it would become an uncontrollable monster that not even Kojou could lay a finger on.

“It might be best to get this information to Miss Kisaki,” Yukina suggested, as serious as always.

Kojou concurred. He didn’t expect Kiriha would come right out and express gratitude, but it wasn’t a situation for worrying about something like that.

Rui looked up at Kojou and Yukina from his bed. “By Miss Kisaki, you mean the Attack Mage from the Bureau of Astrology?”

“Miyazumi, you’ve met her?” Kojou asked, surprised.

“She came in right as the squad captain was heading out. Come to think of it, she seemed to have an interest in the squad leader, too.”

“Kisaki was checking Cas out?”

Accustomed to doing so during his Onrai Island days, Rui called Shizuri “squad leader” even now—but that wasn’t the point. The problem was that Kisaki was sniffing around for information on Shizuri. Though he had no particular basis for this, Kojou couldn’t help but get a bad feeling about it.

“I replied to her as harmlessly as possible, though.” Rui seemed slightly constrained as he smiled. No doubt he didn’t completely trust Kiriha, either.

“It may be possible Miss Kisaki…intends to bring Miss Kasugaya with her to quell the demon beast,” Yukina murmured.

Kojou found her hypothesis somewhat surprising. Shizuri was a powerful Attack Mage with a wealth of actual combat experience, but on paper, she was nothing more than a simple middle schooler. Even when you considered that she was an Ogre possessing high combat capabilities, he didn’t think Kiriha would go out of her way to bring Shizuri into the fold.

“Why would she bring Cas along for demon beast quelling…?” Kojou gasped, eyes wide. “…I get it! Hauras…!”

Against an Unknown that absorbed magical energy, they’d slam a weapon

into it of an identical nature—it was absurdly simple, but one might also call it the most effective method with the least risk attached. Furthermore, Shizuri was highly motivated to avenge Rui and Yuno. She'd almost definitely go along with Kiriha's invitation.

However, that also meant Shizuri would bear the full brunt of the battle with the Unknown. It would be close combat against a demon beast of unknown provenance. It was a risky plan indeed.

Yukina noted, "Miss Kasugaya's demon registration bracelet's location information can surely be used to determine her whereabouts. If it was Aiba, then—"

"Got it! Sorry, Miyazumi. I'll be in touch later—"

With a nod to Yukina, Kojou tried to rush out of the patient room. He thought that they had to stop Shizuri before she and Kiriha came into contact with the demon beast.

But his cell phone rang before he even left the room. The name of the caller indicated was Asagi. Forgetting that he was in a hospital, Kojou accepted the call.

"Asagi?! Great timing. There's something I want you to check…"

"This isn't the time to say that!! Aren't you seeing this on TV?!" Asagi shouted angrily from the other end of the line.

"Huh? What's on TV?"

As Kojou was perplexed and overwhelmed by the force of Asagi's words, Rui pressed the switch for a little television that came as part of the patient room.

The first thing the screen displayed was smoke—black smoke, and a lot of it. It overtook the entire screen. Red flames were showing from the gaps between it. Apparently, this was footage from an urban area of Itogami City.

"The heck…? Some accident…? Some kind of fire?"

"It's the demon beast. A large, unknown demon beast emerged in Island North. At the moment, the Island Guard Disaster Countermeasures Team is heading to the scene, but we should— Er, Kojou? Kojou, are you even

listening?!”

At some point, Kojou had stopped listening to Asagi. A familiar girl momentarily cutting through the corner of the screen was the cause. She wore a long white coat and a blue wimple. Beneath her wimple was white hair—

“Senpai!”

Yukina called out to Kojou in a stern voice. Kojou covered his eyes and groaned.

“Demon beast… Dammit, this isn’t funny. Shit!”

Rui pursed his lips with concern as he watched Kojou and Yukina hurriedly race out of the patient room.

6

Island North was a laboratory district, a collection of academic and corporate facilities, where research and development on demonic biology was conducted, making the section the manifestation of the Demon Sanctuary's stated purpose.

It was a multi-stratum city, with a vast underground space under the rows of numerous buildings. The landscape's bare construction materials gave it an inorganic feeling, and it was the area most reflective of the massive-scale construct that was the artificial isle beneath it.

The Unknown had surfaced from a point in the second stratum of the four-stratum district. It was in a water drainage canal located virtually at the center of the gigafloat.

The demon beast advanced toward the center of the district, demolishing every building and facility in its path.

The most troublesome part was that the gas leaking from pipelines destroyed in its wake had ignited, causing a large-scale conflagration. It was a district with no small number of troves of dangerous materials and pharmaceuticals. The Island Guard's main force had been dispatched to evacuate the populace and suppress the fire, splitting up its fighting strength with nothing to spare. As a result, they'd pushed countermeasures against the Unknown down the road, not even taking proper steps to slow it down. It was right in the center of such utter chaos that the Bureau of Astrology Unknown Countermeasures Squad arrived, with Shizuri Kasugaya there to assist them.

Narrowing her eyes at the hovering smoke, Shizuri scolded Kiriha with a twinge of anger. "Was the demon beast not confirmed to be on New Itogami Island?!"

The Bureau of Astrology's search radius for the Unknown had been centered on New Itogami Island Cluster Six, the source of the eyewitness reports. Itogami Island proper was completely outside of their search. Thanks to that, their arrival at the present site had been considerably delayed.

However, Kiriha made that statement without altering her expression. “As the crow flies, it is twenty-two kilometers from Cluster Six to Itogami Island proper. Even human beings could swim such a distance if they truly wished.”

Kiriha and the others were on Island North’s route for incoming supplies. Island Guard Guardsmen were already positioned on an empty lot some two hundred meters away. Not only were there armed guardsmen in augmented combat suits, but armored cars and anti-demon robot tanks were visible as well. Heavy firepower weapons suitable for anti–demon beast combat were few in number, but it was fairly heavy gear, nonetheless.

“Haste or no, our turn only comes after we receive a request for aid from the Island Guard. Let us first see what they are made of. If it can be captured with normal weaponry, it would be the best outcome, after all.”

“That might well be the case…”

“Also, unless someone has a rather miserable time of it first, the common people may not be particularly grateful for our assistance.” Kiriha displayed a quite sardonic smile.

Her words, perhaps to conceal her blush, perhaps her true thoughts, elicited a deep sigh from Shizuri.

“You really do have a terrible personality…”

“Do I now?”

Surely she was well aware of that, but Kiriha seemed to go out of her way to look surprised. Then, with an entirely casual gesture, she turned her eyes toward the long sword on Shizuri’s hip.

“That sword is Hauras, yes?”

“It…is indeed…”

Shizuri politely nodded, deeming that there was no value in hiding it any further.

Kiriha, replying with a silent nod of her own, drew her spear from the case on her back. With a smooth, metallic sound, the spear lengthened, and its tip spread into an odd configuration that resembled a tuning fork. Kiriha gently

touched that spear tip against the sword on Shizuri's hip. *Ting*, went the high-pitched ring that pricked at her ears, yet nothing more occurred.

"As I thought," said Kiriha. She murmured as if she had expected nothing else. "It is just as with Yukina Himeragi's spear, I see. Ricercare cannot copy it."

"Copy?"

"That sword's core employs a holy relic from the Devas as well, I imagine. Current technology cannot reproduce such components, or even decipher the principles by which they operate."

Goodness, Kiriha thought, making a pained smile as her eyes remained set upon Shizuri's sword.

"If possible, I did not wish to rely upon such a suspicious device, but this is no time to be picky, is it? Let us be off, Shizuri Kasugaya. Sami, I entrust command to you."

Kiriha called out to Sami Arashima through the communicator attached to her ear, but Sami's reply, presumably *Roger*, was drowned out by the demon beast's ear-splitting roar.

The Island Guard unit had come into contact with the Unknown surfacing from the water drainage canal.

"*That*…is the Unknown…!"

Shizuri stiffened and audibly gulped down as she set eyes upon the demon beast for the first time.

The demon beast was probably fifteen meters in total length, looking like some kind of bizarre cross between an eel, a lizard, and some ferocious, carnivorous insect. The surface of the demon beast's body was covered neither in scales nor feathers, but in a tough hide resembling that of a rhino. Its carapace, undulating like a pair of bellows, was enveloped by dozens of tentacles.

It was bizarre, but by no means grotesque. She felt as if it still maintained a precarious balance as a living creature. It resembled a frontline weapon and had what she might call a type of artificial beauty.

In any case, Shizuri felt no fear toward this Unknown. She did not sense the immense power disparity she had from the Rose Beast Vassals of Tartarus Lapse, which had destroyed her homeland, the Demon Sanctuary of Iroise.

Even the Island Guard members seemed to feel much like Shizuri did. They did not falter as they commenced their attack on the Unknown that had invaded the empty lot.

“Liquid nitrogen…?!” Shizuri exclaimed in surprise when she saw a colorless liquid spraying from the Island Guard’s armored cars. She realized the nature of that liquid.

Bathed in liquid, the surface of the demon beast’s body was gradually being covered in white frost. Finally, this changed into a thick layer of ice, obstructing the demon beast’s movements. The nitrogen, liquid at an extremely low temperature, was being used to freeze the demon beast’s entire body.

“They intend to freeze the Unknown?”

“That is by the book. Neither tranquilizers nor electric currents are effective—making this the appropriate plan.” Kiriha exhaled in a sign of admiration.

The Island Guard was continuing the liquid nitrogen attack at that very moment. By then, the demon beast’s enormous body was frozen solid, its movements completely halted. There was no place on this stage for Hauras. It had ended with a whimper, leaving Shizuri feeling dejected that she’d shown up at all.

“…Why did the Unknown surface in Island North, I wonder?” Kiriha murmured offhandedly as she gazed at the frozen demon beast. Her breaths froze white, too. The liquid nitrogen had also caused the surrounding temperature to plummet.

“If it was for ease of surfacing, the mesh of canals covering East and South is the part facing Cluster Six. If it was to assault human beings, would not West, with the largest population midday, be more appropriate? North is full of manmade things. I cannot call it a pleasant environment for a living creature.”

“Perhaps it was simply on a whim? It might have rather peculiar taste,” Shizuri said, looking back at Kiriha.

“I suppose so. That would be good, but…”

Kiriha surely disagreed with Shizuri’s words, but if the Unknown could be quelled right there, her question was meaningless either way.

“It seems that we will not get our turn after all.”

Shizuri had by no means lowered her guard, but she sounded defeated, nonetheless. Kiriha shot her a suspicious glance with a reproachful air.

“I wonder about that. Why do you think these creatures are called demon beasts?”

Before she finished speaking, an ear-grating, high-pitched soundwave pierced Shizuri’s and Kiriha’s ears. The Unknown’s enormous frame was enveloped in vast demonic energy, enough to cause the air itself to tremble.

“The Unknown is casting a spell…?!”

Shizuri was aghast at the incredible spectacle before her eyes.

It was not that she was unaware of creatures that manipulated demonic energy. But she hadn’t thought that a demon beast equipped with such a stout physical body and a powerful life force, and even the special ability to absorb magical energy, would be able to employ spells on top of all of the rest.

The layer of ice covering the demon beast shattered. At some point, even the supposedly frozen flesh-and-blood body of the beast had regained its freedom.

The demon beast moved with agility that belied its enormous frame. Countless tentacles audibly snapped out like whips, mowing down the obstructions surrounding it.

“A barricade and—blasting… No, resonant destruction, I wonder… It cannot activate this save through direct contact, but I see… So this ability is how it tunnels underground.”

“Is this the time for leisurely analysis?! With that, it can blow away even an armored car without a trace!” Shizuri yelled at Kiriha.

The Island Guard’s armored cars pulled back, with the robotic tank unit coming to the fore in their stead. They attempted to use the bulldozer blades with which they were equipped to push the demon beast back by force.

However, this was a particularly risky act. In an instant, the Unknown's enormous frame smashed flat the four robot tanks surrounding it, trampling and pulverizing them with ease. The tanks' anti-magic armor was completely powerless before the overwhelming demonic energy from the Unknown.

The one saving grace was that all the robotic tanks in the Island Guard's possession were unmanned, AI-controlled units. Had this not been the case, anyone aboard the tanks would doubtlessly have met a cruel fate.

"Kiriha, the Island Guard has requested support."

From the command post in the rear, Sami was calling Kiriha and company with an emergency message. Judging that it was impossible to quell the Unknown with their current equipment, the Island Guard was ceding on-site command to the Bureau of Astrology.

"I'd hoped to see a little more of the cards in the opponent's hand, but it's come to this," Kiriha said, her tone rather malicious. "Sami, prepare Ritual B."

"Roger. Activating Ritual B at expected point in sixty seconds. All hands, take up position."

Receiving their own orders from Sami, the Bureau of Astrology personnel spread out, seemingly surrounding the demon beast. Each and every one of them had a mechanical sorcerous device in their hands resembling jackhammers used in road construction.

"Ritual B?" Shizuri shot Kiriha a suspicious look; that ritual name was unfamiliar to her.

"A ritual for a highly viscous fluid, the Bureau of Astrology's trump card for sealing a demon beast's movements. Cleaning up after the fact is a real pain, so I had hoped not to use it if at all possible, but—"

As Kiriha finished her explanation, the bureau personnel slammed their devices into the ground's surface. Six of them surrounded the Unknown numbered six. With the creature caught in the center of the formation, an enormous magic symbol appeared on the ground's surface.

Will such a spell really work upon this Unknown? Shizuri wondered, but that doubt immediately melted away. Ritual B was magic targeted not at the demon

beast's body, but at the ground at the demon beast's feet.

The Unknown's enormous frame slowly…sank.

The surface of the ground had softened into something akin to clay. No, not clay—rather, some kind of sticky gum. The gel-like surface of the artificial isle had turned into glue, sealing the demon beast's movements. It was probably a transmutation ritual employing some sort of alchemy.

"Wait, the B in Ritual B stands for *birdlime*…?!" Shizuri exclaimed.

"Oh my, you actually know what birdlime is? Allow me to praise you." Kiriha shot her a teasing smile.

Shizuri puffed out her cheeks. "That does not make me happy at all!"

There was now a swamp of glue dozens of meters in diameter. It might have been effective at capturing the demon beast but cleaning it up afterward would be an ordeal. Small wonder Kiriha had not wanted to use it.

"First, we must neutralize the tentacles. Take care you do not touch Ritual B!" Kiriha instructed.

"I do not need you to tell me that!" Shizuri's words came out in a hurried stream as she drew her sword.

The demon beast's movements might have been sealed, but its many tentacles were still in peak condition. Even if they were "just" tentacles, each individual one possessed the strength and size equal to that of the typical demon beast. They were absolutely not opponents to be underestimated.

It was Kiriha who sent the first tentacle flying. As if she were rending space itself, she severed a tentacle as thick as a log with seemingly zero resistance.

"Hauras—!"

Right at the edge of the swamp of glue, Shizuri thrust Hauras into the severed tentacle. The crimson, undulating blade resembled a glowing flame. The mystic blade had stolen the demonic energy remaining inside the tentacle.

The tentacle convulsed as if it was a living creature in its own right, but it soon wasted away as all activity ceased. This proved Kiriha's theory that Hauras's attacks would be effective upon the Unknown.

Kiriha grinned. “You are more skilled than I thought, Shizuri Kasugaya. Would you care to work for the Bureau of Astrology part-time?”

Shizuri shook her head without hesitation. “I must decline. I appreciate the invitation, but I already have other business.”

The corners of Kiriha’s lips curled. “Oh my. Was it Kojou Akatsuki who invited you?”

“Th-that is none of your business!”

It was nothing to be particularly bothered about, but Shizuri was rather violently thrown off as she retorted. *Tee-hee*, went Kiriha, breaking into laughter and even more visibly delighted.

“You like him?”

“Wh-what are you implying…?! If you toy with me, I shall cut you down!” Shizuri turned her sword toward Kiriha in earnest.

Naturally, even Kiriha abandoned teasing Shizuri at that point, turning her gaze toward the Unknown once more. It was not the time for engaging in silly conversation. Kiriha poised her twin-pronged spear to sever a second tentacle.

It was the moment right after that when they heard the rather nervous-sounding voice of a girl.

“Oh, darn it…! It’s already started?!”

The voice, launched from surprisingly short range, made Shizuri whirl around in shock.

Standing there was a schoolgirl wearing the familiar uniform of Saikai Academy. The girl was lightly clutching her head as she stared at the demon beast stuck in the swamp of glue.

“Yukina Himeragi? Where did you come from…?!”

Shizuri blinked hard, eyes wide at the unexpected timing with which the acquaintance had emerged.

The girl with the same face as Yukina noticed Shizuri staring like that, at which point she went *Geh!* and reeled heavily in apparent fear.

“Oh my gosh! Sh…Shizuri?!”

“Wh-what?! What’s with that reaction?!”

The overly intimate finger from this Yukina unsettled Shizuri.

“Well, fine. Pull back, Shizuri! Everyone, run—now!” Yukina called earnestly, swiftly recovering from her surprise.

Shizuri glared at Yukina. “Huh…? What are you saying? We were finally able to capture the demon beast after so much trouble—”

“Capture? You’re kidding, right?! *The vibrations can travel even through the swamp!*”

Kiriha’s cheeks stiffened at Yukina’s angry shout.

“—Incoming blast attack! Everyone, retreat!” Kiriha ordered.

“R-retreaaat!”

Though Kiriha was quick, the Bureau of Astrology’s staff reactions were nearly instantaneous. In combat against demon beasts, quick, sound judgments were the difference between life and death. The elites Kiriha had brought with her understood that well.

And the demon beast was faster still.

A shockwave resembling an enormous explosion made the artificial isle’s ground quake.

The powerful vibrations released by the Unknown were so quiet that Kiriha and her people had not noticed them slowly but surely encroaching upon them from the swamp of glue, and as those waves overlapped, their power was amplified. At the moment they exceeded a critical juncture, they created another explosive shockwave.

The artificial isle’s crust could not withstand such force. Its stout framework materials snapped; the thick steel plates were wrenched apart. A powerful wave of demonic energy neutralized the magic reinforcing the joints of the crust without a trace. The sorcerous devices maintaining Ritual B were sent flying, and the swamp of glue dissipated.

The surface of the ground had caved in. An enormous hole had opened in the second stratum of Island North.

Having fallen down to the third stratum, the demon beast seemed proud of its victory as it roared.

All that could be seen in its wake was the pulverized ground, the remains of robot tanks, and the wounded and fallen personnel of the Bureau of Astrology.

7

Putting their hands to a nearby wall, Kojou and Yukina felt a ferocious ground tremor that resembled an earthquake. A weighty, explosive sound that seemed to gouge into the ground's innards made the entire underground passage quake.

"The heck was that just now?"

"This demonic energy… Could it be…a magical attack by the demon beast…?!"

The magical aftershock pressing against them seemed to charge the air with electricity. Kojou and Yukina exchanged a glance and then set off running toward the epicenter of the powerful demonic energy.

By chance, the second stratum of North where the demon beast had appeared wasn't particularly far from the hospital Rui and Yuno were in, which meant Kojou and Yukina could rush to the site quickly. Thanks to the suddenness of the demon beast's emergence, the Island Guard's blocking of traffic couldn't exactly be called complete. Using shortcuts only natives would know, Kojou and Yukina reached the field of battle without anyone getting in their way.

"An explosion? The demon beast did this…?"

Noticing the enormous crater left in the ground by the explosion, Kojou could only stand dumbfounded.

It was probably a clear sign the Island Guard and Bureau of Astrology had engaged with the demon beast. The ground of the second stratum had caved in, and an enormous hole had been opened that reached down to the third. The remnants of destroyed steel girders were strewn around the area, enough that you could hardly guess their original shape.

However, there was no scent of gunpowder or any other explosive on-site. It had not been an attack using any conventional weapon. The only assumption to be made based on the destruction was that it was a shockwave generated by magic.

“Miss Kasugaya!”

Yukina raced over to a girl seemingly half-buried in rubble and sat her up. The girl with white hair, holding a long sword, frailly moaned as she opened her eyes. Her entire body was covered in mud and soil, but she didn’t seem to have any major injuries. Apparently, she’d simply been rendered immobile from the shock of being sent flying.

“Cas, you okay? What happened?” Kojou asked.

Shizuri shook her head, sitting up on her own. Her eyes were still a little unfocused. “I am all right…because she shielded me…”

“Miss Kisaki?!” Yukina exclaimed.

Shizuri pointed toward a girl in a black sailor uniform. Just like Shizuri, she wasn’t bleeding, but the shockwave had clearly affected her more than it had Shizuri. In spite of Yukina calling out to her, there was no sign of her regaining consciousness.

“She is breathing. She may have a concussion due to suffering the impact from the shockwave up close.”

“She used the same technique as Kirasaka, huh…?”

Kojou noticed the vestiges of a ritual spell on the ground. As if obstructed by some invisible wall, only the place where Kiriha had fallen had been spared direct destruction from the shockwave. A barrier created via pseudo-spatial severing had blocked the demon beast’s attack.

However, the pseudo-spatial severing ritual lasted for only a single second, and it could be deployed in one direction at a time. In shielding Shizuri, it was Kiriha who had borne the brunt from the blast winds that followed. To have avoided grave physical injury in spite of that… Perhaps that was simply a Priestess of the Six Blades for you.

“Where is the demon beast?” Kojou warily surveyed his surroundings.

Shizuri did not reply to his question. She looked at Yukina with a perplexed expression. “…Yukina Himeragi? What are you doing here?”

“Huh?”

“What do you mean?”

Yukina and Kojou stared at Shizuri, prompting her for more. Shizuri seemed even more perplexed as her eyes flitted back and forth between Yukina and the massive hole hollowed out from the ground.

“I was certain that you descended underground together with the demon beast…”

“Himeragi? With the demon beast…?” As he realized the reason for Shizuri’s confusion, nervousness ran across Kojou’s face. “Don’t tell me this means—”

“It’s her?!” Tense, Yukina pursed her lips. Shizuri had mistaken someone else for Yukina. It was a safe bet she’d seen the same Fake Yukina who had appeared at Saikai Academy.

Kojou’s voice hardened. “Cas, can you stand? Take Kisaki with you and get out of here right now!”

Shizuri’s voice went ragged in the face of the powerful will glimmering in Kojou’s eyes. “What do you intend to do?! It devours demonic energy, you know!”

Her tone was aggressive, but her concern for Kojou was loud and clear. Likely, Beast Vassal attacks would not be effective against the energy-absorbing Unknown. That not only meant Kojou could not defeat the Unknown, but he would not even be able to keep himself safe from it.

“That doesn’t mean we can just leave it alone…”

Kojou got up with a pained, uncertain smile on his face. With the Island Guard and Bureau of Astrology personnel close to being wiped out at present, it left Kojou and Yukina as the only ones able to act. Even if they could not defeat the demon beast, if they could minimize the damage somewhat. Standing and doing nothing was not an option.

“Kojou…?! Please, Kojou, stop!”

Shaking off Shizuri’s efforts to stop him, Kojou headed toward Yukina, who was at the center of the traces of the explosion. Even with the rubble all around, the large hole formed by the demon beast was configured like a gentle

slope. Mindful of the uncertain footing, Kojou and Yukina descended to the third stratum.

"…Which way?"

Thanks to the blackout caused by the demon beast's attack, darkness entirely encased the underground city that was North's third stratum. As a vampire, Kojou's nocturnal vision was keen, but the hovering dust particles and black smoke obscured even his vision. It was all he could do to make out the terrain, let alone confirm where the demon beast might be.

"I see it! Over there!"

Yukina was the one to spot the demon beast first. With a terrain of cables and pipelines strewn over it, the third stratum of North resembled an oil refinery. At the place where those complex paths met, the demon beast with a ferocious external appearance awaited them.

However, contrary to Kojou's expectations, the demon beast was acting docile. He couldn't call the surrounding area unharmed, but the damage to the surrounding buildings was minimal. That did not mean the demon beast's movements had come to a halt, though. With an unhesitant gait, its enormous, grayish-black frame slowly continued to pace.

Standing in front of the demon beast, seemingly guiding it, was the girl who looked exactly like Yukina.

"There, there. Okay, good girl. Yes, this way," she said gently, staring into the demon beast's six eyes. Seemingly seduced by her words, the demon beast changed directions as the girl commanded.

Kojou came to a dead stop, watching the bizarre spectacle. "Is she…talking to it…?"

A small girl had tamed the demon beast all by her lonesome. It was a surreal scene that sounded straight out of a fairy tale.

The girl's eyes, still on the creature, were glowing crimson. Realizing this, Kojou drew in his breath; Yukina's reaction was even more dramatic.

"That power—!!"

“Eh…?! H-hey! Wait up, Himeragi…!”

Kojou hastily tried to stop Yukina as she set off running with her spear at the ready. However, Kojou’s voice did not reach the indignant Yukina’s ears. Slipping past the demon beast’s feet, she stood in front of her red-eyed impostor.

“Do not move! By right of a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, I am placing you under arrest!” she coldly declared to her lookalike.

“…Geh?! No way?! Why are you here…?!”

Fake Yukina had clearly been thrown off. Surely she never expected the real Yukina to appear at the site so quickly.

“That ability is Charm, is it not? The mind control ability that vampires possess —”

“W-well, it is, but… Uh, wait. We can have a nice chat about that later—”

Fake Yukina didn’t deny it. That was basically confirmation that she was a vampire. However, the impostor’s words only served to further fan the flames of Yukina’s wary heart.

“You were the one controlling this demon beast, weren’t you?!”

“Er, um?” she stammered, taken aback.

“Wait a minute. What makes you think that?!” Kojou exclaimed.

Turning her head back and glancing at the destroyed ground of the artificial isle, Yukina made her anger clear. “You hurt Miss Kasugaya and Miss Kisaki… How dare you…!”

“This isn’t funny,” said Fake Yukina, ferociously shaking her head like an unreasonable child. “Just listen to me! You’re always, always like this!”

“Before I do anything, stop that demon beast!”

“That’s what I’m doing, you blockhead! You’re so stupid, Mom!”

“M-Mom…?”

The strange word coming out of the girl’s mouth made Yukina stiffen, the poison seemingly draining from her spirit for a moment.

As if to fill that silence, a flash scattered amid the darkness.

Fire enveloped the back of the previously calm demon beast, which slammed a roar into everyone's ear canals.

Yukina and her impostor shouted simultaneously.

"An attack…?!"

"No way?! Who the hell would…?!"

Someone lurking in the darkness of the urban area had attacked the demon beast with a large-caliber rocket. The impact released it from the power of Fake Yukina's Charm; the demon beast reverted to its violent nature.

Furthermore, the rocket attack did not cease there. However, this time, the demon beast was not the target of the attack. Rather, it was a pipeline stretched across the urban area of the third stratum—and so, that single pipeline was destroyed.

It was not physical matter which gushed out from the pipeline. It was a flickering cloud of pale light—crystallized ritual energy at such a high concentration that it could be seen with the naked eye.

Nervousness hovered over Fake Yukina's expression. "A spiritual reactor is activating?! Why now…?!"

Hearing those words, Yukina felt the same inner turmoil. "A spiritual reactor?!"

Kojou glanced at both of their surprised faces. "Spiritual reactors—you mean the stuff Aldegian airships have onboard?"

"Yes. By calling forth spirits with a mass of pure spiritual energy from the upper dimensions, such devices supply the energy required for magical rituals."

Kojou nodded at her explanation. Naturally, he didn't understand the finer points of the logic, but he did grasp that these spiritual reactor thingies were systems built to supply a vast amount of spiritual energy.

Dread dripped from Fake Yukina's words. "It was never publicly announced, but Itogami Island's North is equipped with a large-scale spiritual reactor for use in experiments. It should have been under emergency shutdown when the

demon beast came close…!”

“Wait, don’t tell me the demon beast is after that spiritual reactor! And you were trying to stop it from…”

The Unknown consumed magical energy. Kojou had just recalled that.

Magical energy and spiritual energy were opposing poles by nature, but that was like the positive or negative of an electric current; the total amount of energy you could draw from either was roughly equal. If the demon beast could absorb magical energy, it wouldn’t be so strange for it to also be able to bring ritual energy inside itself.

“But if that happens, my Charm might not be able to stop it anymore…” Fake Yukina frailly shook her head.

By no means had the girl commanded the demon beast to attack Itogami Island. It was actually the reverse. She was trying to control the demon beast to prevent Itogami Island’s destruction.

Having thrown off Fake Yukina’s control, the demon beast slowly moved its head around. Bathed in the ritual energy from the broken pipeline, the demon beast’s flesh and blood were entering an agitated state. The enormous building its six eyes were glaring at was likely the spiritual reactor proper. With agility that belied its enormous frame, the demon beast approached the building. Its appetite whetted by the trickle of spiritual energy coursing through the pipeline, it aimed its efforts toward the spiritual reactor itself.

Kojou turned toward Fake Yukina and asked, “If it sucks the spiritual reactor’s magical energy dry, what happens?”

“It might be for experimental use, but the reactor’s spiritual energy is off the charts. Feels a little like we won’t be able to lay a hand on it…!” Her usual sunny demeanor remained despondent.

That voice was blotted out by a *ting*, a high-pitched soundwave reverberating, followed a moment later by an enormous explosion. The Unknown’s tentacles thrashed about, smashing into smithereens the annoying buildings blocking its path.

“Kojou, those tentacles—” she started to warn.

“Yeah. I’ve got a really bad feeling about ’em…,” Kojou interrupted, nodding with a bitter expression. Even without knowledge of the resonant destruction magic, it was plain at a glance that those tentacles were dangerous.

The impeding buildings vanished, leaving less than a hundred meters in a straight line between it and the spiritual reactor. For a demon beast with an enormous frame, that distance was practically on the tip of its nose.

“No way except stopping it here and now, huh… Crap. C’mon over, Mesarthim Adamas!”

Kojou summoned a Beast Vassal, a bighorn sheep that was Beast Vassal Number One of the Fourth Primogenitor. Its ability was to create an imperishable defensive bulwark made out of diamond crystals.

No matter how powerful the Unknown’s blasting magic, it was impossible to destroy the diamond crystals wrought from a Beast Vassal’s vast demonic energy. And yet—

“Kojou, don’t!” Fake Yukina exclaimed in a panic, clinging to him.

It was the next moment that the demon beast’s tentacles enveloped the diamond wall one after another. The supposedly indestructible bulwark of Mesarthim Adamas crumbled and vanished, as frail as a sandcastle. The Beast Vassal’s demonic energy maintaining the barrier had been stolen by the Unknown.

“It ate the demonic energy…?! So even defense is no good?!”

Kojou rued his own carelessness. The Unknown’s ability had exceeded his wildest dreams. Not only was he unable to directly attack the main body of the monster, but it could rob the demonic energy of any barrier deployed in the area, too.

“The spiritual reactor…!” Yukina let out a brief yelp.

While Kojou and the others had been rebuffed, the demon beast’s tentacles, bathed in blasting magic, had destroyed the exterior wall of the spiritual reactor.

The reactor itself remained undamaged, but high-density spiritual energy

gushed out on a scale comparable to when the pipeline had been destroyed. Absorbing this, the demon beast became more active still.

“Urk…!”

“Hey, that’s my cell phone…!”

“—*Kikimora*, shut that spiritual reactor down!”

Stealing Kojou’s cell phone, Fake Yukina shouted to a listener of which Kojou was unaware. Her sudden action threw Kojou for a loop. Maybe there was some kind of process to control the spiritual reactor, but surely stopping it was beyond the scope of a single cell phone. And if anything could pull it off, it’d be the AI that served as Asagi’s partner—Mogwai.

But as Kojou suspiciously watched in silence, the building shuddered. The pale radiance leaking out of the reactor ceased, and an intermittent vibration sound rang forth. The spiritual reactor’s vents had been shut.

Just because the spiritual reactor had been stopped didn’t mean that the spiritual energy the demon beast had absorbed had vanished. But the demon beast would no longer be supplied with fresh spiritual energy.

Having been robbed of the food right before its eyes, the demon beast howled, mad with rage.

“Kojou, call Dabih-doo, quick!” Fake Yukina ordered, still gripping the phone,

“Dabih-doo…?” Kojou twisted his neck, mulling the girl’s all-too-vague words. “Ohhh! C’mon over, Dabih Crystallus!”

Kojou summoned a fresh Beast Vassal covered in quicksilver scales. It was a beautiful aquatic dragon with translucent, radiant wings and a spiraling horn. This was the tenth Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor, with the ability of mind control. Dabih Crystallus was the Beast Vassal that symbolized the vampiric ability of Charm.

He didn’t know the reason why Fake Yukina knew about it, but it wasn’t the time or place to question her about that.

Neither attacks nor defenses wrought from magical energy were effective against the Unknown, but it couldn’t be too resistant to mental attacks. Fake

Yukina had proved as much by keeping the opponent in check with a simple Charm power. At present, among the cards in Kojou's hand, the Beast Vassal that controlled the mind was his only means of opposing the Unknown.

However, by then, the Unknown had added both the demonic energy it had stolen from Mesarthim Adamas's crystals and the vast amount of spiritual energy it had absorbed from the reactor. The demon beast demonstrated resistance against even the mind control ability of Kojou's Beast Vassal.

"What the—?!"

Kojou's expression contorted in unease. The next moment, the Unknown swung its tentacles up at him, the one controlling the Demon Beast. Kojou, busy keeping control of his Beast Vassal, didn't have time to respond.

"Kojou!"

Fake Yukina spread both arms out in an attempt to shield the immobile Kojou. The Unknown swung its tentacles to mow down Kojou and Fake Yukina.

It was Yukina who fended off the attack. Leaping forward to shield both of them, she spun around her silver spear, blocking the demon beast's tentacles head-on.

The impact reverberated fiercely, as if a hard boulder had been slammed into metal.

Yukina's spear nullified magical energy. The resonant destruction spell controlled by the Unknown dissipated the instant Yukina blocked it.

However, Snowdrift Wolf could not nullify the physical blow itself from the enormous tentacles. To handle that, Yukina brazenly deflected it by strengthening her body via a ritual spell and the martial arts drilled into her.

"Himeragi…?!"

"Wait a…?! That's crazy…!"

The vampire girl was aghast at Yukina's reckless actions, but she surely understood the fact that Yukina had saved her. Her voice held no echo of reproach toward Yukina.

The Sword Shaman raised her silver spear once more. "Senpai, please

continue your Beast Vassal summons for just a little longer.”

“Wait! What do you plan on doing all by yourself…?!” Fake Yukina cried out.

Yukina looked back, mystified by the expression coming over the impostor, who seemed like a worried child. However, she said nothing in reply, her gaze already returned to the demon beast.

“—I, Maiden of the Lion, Sword Shaman of the High God, beseech thee.”

Yukina quietly wove a chant. Her body was enveloped by pure, divine essence, and her metallic silver spear was enshrouded by a dazzling radiance. It was the radiance of the Divine Oscillation Effect that nullified demonic energy and could dissipate any barrier.

“O purifying light, O divine wolf of the snowdrift, by your steel divine will, strike down the devils before me!”

Slipping through the storm of countless onrushing tentacles, Yukina closed the distance right before the demon beast’s eyes and plunged the spear deeply into the tiny gap afforded by the demon beast’s throat.

For the first time, the demon beast that had displayed no sign of pain bellowed in anguish.

Dazzling wings of light spread forth from Yukina’s back. Pouring all the spiritual energy coursing from higher-dimensional space into Snowdrift Wolf, she transformed the resulting D.O.E. into a blade, slamming it inside the demon beast’s flesh.

“She nullified…that much demonic energy…?” Fake Yukina murmured frailly, completely at a loss.

The vast demonic energy the Unknown had accumulated within its body had vanished. The cutting off of the supply of energy caused the demon beast’s hyperactive cells to weaken. Yukina’s spear, said to be able to destroy even a vampire primogenitor, had stripped away the Unknown’s demonic energy root and branch. The depleted demon beast no longer possessed the power to resist a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor.

Kojou commanded the Unknown to sleep. Using the mind control of Dabih

Crystallus, the demon beast fell into a deep sleep from which it could not awaken.

With a tremor, the demon beast's enormous frame collapsed to the ground. All of its tentacles had already come to a halt.

The menace had not been completely removed, but at the very least, the danger before their eyes had passed.

However, Kojou and the others had no smiles on their faces.

Yukina slowly returned with her back to the prostrate demon beast. Naturally, she looked fatigued, but she had no obvious injuries. Even so, Kojou stared dumbfounded at her right hand.

There, the silver divine armament she was gripping—

"Himeragi…The spear…"

"Yes."

Yukina nodded briefly in response to Kojou. She made a lonely smile.

The long spear she was gripping scattered glowing silver particles here and there. Countless cracks were carved onto the surface of its three-pronged blade—a main blade and two sub-blades to either side. From there, fragments began falling away. Gradually, those cracks spread from the tip of the spear to the very base of the shaft.

Kojou stared, completely at a loss for words. Feeling hopeless, Yukina let out a weak murmur.

"I broke it."

That instant, the spear known as Snowdrift Wolf shattered with a beautiful, serene sound reverberating amid the darkness.





Chapter Three
The Broken Holy Spear

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1

In a lantern-lit room in a building resembling a Shinto temple, three figures sat facing each other.

One was a young woman who hid her face behind a thin silk fabric that resembled a veil. She was wearing a priestess outfit luxuriously decorated with gemstones and gold leaf. This was Koyomi Shizuka, aka Paper Noise. She was one of the Three Saints at the head of the Lion King Agency, said to be feared even by the vampire primogenitors.

Sitting to Koyomi's right was a small-statured girl with pure-white hair. This was Shirona Kuraki, another of the Three Saints. Her attire was that of a monk, colored white and black with an assortment of showy symbols.

"So a Schneewaltzer has been lost, then? This has become rather troublesome."

Shirona spoke with a tone reminiscent of an old woman's. This indicated that she was speaking not as the girl she currently looked like, but as the will of the Kuraki, passed down generation upon generation.

"The situation?" Koyomi asked this of the last of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency, an enormous man in a black ceremonial court robe situated to her left. Munechika Hedate was his name.

Among the humans gathered in that place, he was the eldest, yet he displayed no sign of taking the pair of girls lightly. Koyomi and Shirona not only were born from families that had served the Lion King Agency since antiquity,

but were acknowledged as possessing the intellect and might worthy of the title of Three Saints.

“Apprentice Sword Shaman Yukina Himeragi, together with her target for observation, the Fourth Primogenitor, came into contact with a demon beast. The damage seems to have been incurred during subsequent combat. The circumstances are detailed in this report.”

Koyomi handed a small LCD screen to Shirona and Hedate each. Taking these, the pair mentally read the thoughts inscribed into the liquid crystals via psychometry. The fact everyone present was a high-end psychic made such exchanges possible.

“A demon beast, is it?” Shirona murmured curtly. *Is not combat with a demon beast, an action Yukina Himeragi took on her own personal judgment, removed from the mission of watching the Fourth Primogenitor?* was her implicit message.

Given that engaging in demon beast countermeasures was the Bureau of Astrology’s jurisdiction, Shirona’s criticism was certainly not off the mark. However, Koyomi quietly shook her head.

“The Fourth Primogenitor was already engaged in combat with the demon beast. Yukina Himeragi’s response was within the parameters of her mission. I cannot accept reprimanding her for conduct in violation of her mission, even for the use of the Schneewaltzer.”

“Does this mean you find some fault in the Type Seven’s maintenance?” Hedate inquired. His words represented the opinion of the engineering team leading weapons development for the Lion King Agency. The loss of the Schneewaltzer had come as a particularly heavy blow to them.

But Koyomi weightily dismissed his words. “Her Type Seven underwent a complete overhaul immediately following the Onrai Island incident. I believe a deep deficiency in maintenance in such a brief span of time is highly unlikely.”

“Then does the problem lie in a deficiency in the wielder’s skill?” Shirona probed.

“No. I absolutely would not put it in such terms.”

Koyomi took out a fresh electronic tablet device in reply to Shirona's misgivings. What was displayed upon it was not top-secret information. They were readings from a public utility spiritual energy sensor built on Itogami Island.

However, neither Shirona nor Hedate could conceal their surprise when they saw the readout.

"Are these numbers genuine?" Hedate asked in disbelief.

"Multiple measuring devices placed on Itogami Island gave identical readings," Koyomi replied, calmly stating the facts.

"Hmm." Shirona narrowed her eyes, amused.

"This easily surpasses Type Seven's design limits."

"This is no doubt the cause of the damage. The Type Seven was unable to withstand Yukina Himeragi's amount of spiritual energy, on par with a Faux-Angel."

"Yes, I see."

Shirona nodded, and even Hedate fell into an accepting silence.

When Yukina had used the Schneewaltzer, her amount of spiritual energy had already exceeded human limits. Such a level should have already caused an upper-dimensional shift to occur from the spiritual energy running amok, resulting in her dissipation. Thanks to becoming the Fourth Primogenitor's virtual Blood Vassal, she had escaped dissipation, but the warping caused by such coercive means was surely linked to the damage to the Schneewaltzer.

"Now, then… It is regrettable that our Lion King Agency has lost a precious Schneewaltzer, but there is a more urgent matter to attend to. How should we deal with the Fourth Primogenitor, I wonder?"

Recovering from his surprise, Hedate brought them back to the original matter for discussion, his tone calm and befitting the elder he was.

The Schneewaltzer was the Lion King Agency's secret weapon, a purging spear able to destroy even a vampire primogenitor. The observer they had granted this to was eternally at the Fourth Primogenitor's side, and it was this situation

—having the tip of a lethal blade constantly pressed against the Fourth Primogenitor's throat—that reassured the leaders of the Japanese government about his existence.

However, now that this blade had been lost, the situation would greatly change.

Shirona sighed. "There are two other wielders of Type Seven—but neither can commit to monitoring the Fourth Primogenitor at all times."

The spear dubbed Snowdrift Wolf was not the only Schneewaltzer in the Lion King Agency's possession. However, the other wielders had been dispatched to Oshu and Izumo; the menaces the Lion King Agency had to face head-on were not limited to the Fourth Primogenitor alone.

"However, Type Six and Type Six-Plus aren't strong enough to face a vampire primogenitor," Hedate murmured bitterly as he closed his eyes.

This meant the area suppression weapon Der Freischötz and its mass production models, Freikugel Plus and Rosen Chevalier Plus. Both were divine armaments effective even against high-end vampires but did not have the capability to destroy a primogenitor. At best, they could only neutralize one temporarily, making them markedly inferior to the Schneewaltzer in that regard.

"Excluding the already scrapped Type Zero, the ones potentially capable of dealing with a primogenitor would be Type Nine, and the experimental stage Type Sixteen, but…"

Koyomi gently declined the suggestions. "Type Nine is a divine armament for mass combat. It is unsuitable for a Sword Shaman, premised upon individual action, let alone for the watcher of the Fourth Primogenitor."

Hedate stroked his chin, understanding this full well. "But Type Sixteen is not yet at a level usable in actual combat, is it?"

"Correct."

"Then what shall we do?"

"I believe we should employ Type Thirteen," came Koyomi's emotionless

suggestion.

What made her words difficult to deal with was not the brevity of them but that she had invoked the name of a particularly dangerous prototype divine armament.

Hedate closed his eyes. “I suppose we have no choice. Who will wield it?”

Shirona’s lips curled upward into a sarcastic smile. “Granting Yukina Himeragi the Type Thirteen on top of a Type Seven will no doubt be greeted with dissatisfaction. It will not be amusing for us if people think of Endou’s apprentices as the only excelling ones.”

“This has been coming since the instant they realized the position of the Fourth Primogenitor’s observer was a plum position, I take it?”

Yukari Endou had been the only one in favor of sending a prime prospect pupil of hers to watch over the Fourth Primogenitor, a duty once seen as on par with human sacrifice. However, the Fourth Primogenitor had averted the danger of the war of the primogenitors, and now that he was considered the proper liege of his own Dominion, the value of the title of his watcher had changed dramatically.

That meant Yukari’s and Yukina Himeragi’s influence had increased, and more than a few people had belatedly sensed danger from this shift.

“But what a pity. Yukina Himeragi has built such a good relationship with the Fourth Primogenitor.” Shirona lowered her eyes in regret.

Koyomi silently concurred. As a matter of fact, to date, Yukina had produced results beyond their highest expectations. In particular, her adopting the intimate position of his companion so swiftly was, as far as the Lion King Agency was concerned, a most auspicious miscalculation.

Understanding this full well, Hedate solemnly shook his head. “It would seem Representative Oshima is dissatisfied with this.”

“…Does he believe there is a possibility she will betray the Japanese government?” Koyomi’s tone was icy.

Yukina Himeragi had no blood relatives. She knew that, thanks to this, some

were spreading baseless rumors that she might betray the Lion King Agency someday.

Koyomi could only call such reasoning foolish.

History was rife with examples of relatives sharing the same blood coming to despise one another; similarly, it was not rare for strangers to form bonds deeper than that with one's own siblings or parents. Her mentor, Yukari Endou, and the friends who had studied at High God Forest with her—one might say that the Lion King Agency itself was Yukina's blood relative and, as such, were the fetters that bound her. To doubt her loyal spirit was to attempt to shatter those bonds themselves—a foolish action indeed.

Perhaps his view was near to that of Koyomi's, for Hedate shifted his argument ever so slightly as he replied. "Until now, he had not put it in quite these terms, but he harbors doubts toward our power to hold the Fourth Primogenitor in check."

"Meaning, aside from the issue of combat capabilities, then? And so, what of Yuiri Haba? The man is easy to read." Shirona made a small, scornful laugh.

Hedate did not reply to her. Rather, he turned directly toward Koyomi's silk-covered face.

"Lady Shizuka, your thoughts?"

"It may not be necessary to rush to a conclusion. No, if anything, this is an answer that the three of us should come to by ourselves," she replied, doing her best to evade the real point.

"Ah. I see."

"Understood."

Shirona and Hedate nodded, seemingly comprehending all.

Yukina Himeragi was still of use to them. That was Koyomi's message.

2

“Those were deeply intriguing images.”

He gazed down at the beautiful nighttime landscape from the top floor of a skyscraper. Sitting in a leather office chair, the man curled the corners of his lips up in satisfaction.

He was a light-skinned Asian man characterized by gentle eyes and his slight, seemingly ever-present smile. He was Shahryar Ren—president of Magna Ataraxia Research, one of the world’s few international sorcerous corporate conglomerates.

Beneath his eyes spread the streets of the special administrative district of the Five Dynasties, Bauhinia.

Blessed with a fine natural harbor, it was a free trading city with dense construction and an equally dense population. Somehow, the lively air resembled that of the Far East Demon Sanctuary of Itogami Island. It was the richest city in East Asia, and MAR’s global headquarters.

“Temporarily or not, fending off the Fourth Primogenitor’s Beast Vassals displays higher capabilities than anticipated. Causing cells to go hyperactive via absorption of magical energy—it would seem that the validity of your theory has been amply proven.”

Tilting his crystal brandy glass, Ren pleasantly aired his thoughts.

The holographic screen atop the desk was displaying the unknown demon beast that had appeared on Itogami Island.

It had beaten away the Island Guard’s perimeter, broken the Bureau of Astrology’s spell, absorbed the spiritual energy of a spiritual reactor, and given the Fourth Primogenitor a very hard time of it. The video had recorded the incident from start to finish.

Of course, such information had not been released to the public. A video like this was absolutely unobtainable except by someone who was lurking there and recording it at the time.

A man and a woman regarded Ren with politeness that could not conceal their tension and delight.

“We are deeply honored, President.”

“The knowledge we gained concerning *that* project served its purpose well.”

They were probably twin brother and sister. They wore matching white gowns, and their heights and faces greatly resembled each other. They appeared to be around twenty years old. In contrast to their long, simple bangs and their plain outfits, the glimmer in their eyes somehow shined with the ambition that came from engineers alone.

“The Primogenitor of the End… Project: The Blood, is it?” Ren murmured with deep longing, gazing at the moon through the skylight.

MAR’s Itogami Laboratory had obtained a cell sample of a certain *artificial vampire*. The technology from the Devas they had obtained from those cells had been employed in that Unknown.

“However, Mr. President, are you truly all right with this?”

“The surfacing of the experimental subject and the forced halt of the spiritual reactor have caused no small amount of damage to our corporation…”

The twin engineers timidly sought Ren’s confirmation.

Itogami Island’s Island North, the point where the Unknown had surfaced, held more than a few facilities connected to MAR. Though there had not been any casualties, the delays in shipments and the insufficiency of spiritual energy associated with the shutdown of the spiritual reactor were deeply reflected on the business side of the ledger. The loss in share value could not have been slight.

“I do not mind. Chaos and fear are the very reasons Demon Sanctuaries exist. The existence of the experimental subject has surely inflicted quite a jolt to every sorcerous manufacturing corporation. Just how far will this hasten the development of human technology…? Considering this, the smashing of an artificial isle or two is a small price to pay.”

“Y-yes, sir.”

The president of MAR's reply, made in a detached tone, caused the twins to straighten their backs, their adoration evident. The gleam in their eyes grew sharper and more dazzling still. Ren smiled, loving that glimmer, which seemed akin to madness.

"Ah, yes. The Gigafloat Management Corporation has deemed that the experimental subject shall be referred to as IX-4. Subsequently, we shall defer to their decision."

"IX-4…"

"The fourth subject of Grade Nine."

The twins nodded in apparent pride.

Unknown demon beasts were assigned a danger metric graded on a scale from one to ten. Their demon beast had been acknowledged as posing a menace next only to Grade Ten's Leviathan—a living creature created by the gods themselves. Furthermore, IX-4 was in the middle of growing.

"Now then, thanks to the labors of the Fourth Primogenitor, our IX-4 has fallen into a state of sleep. I take it this does not mean all is finished?" Ren teasingly narrowed his eyes, gazing at the twins with an expectant expression.

"Of course not."

"The plan for the experimental subject's…er, IX-4's new evolution is already under way. We are likely to be able to report good news within seventy-two hours."

"I see. I am looking forward to it. I expect much from you."

"Thank you very much."

Bowing with ferocious smiles, the twin engineers left the room. Ren watched them go with an artificially smiling face from which his true emotions could not be read.

Exactly when the twins had completely left, the air behind Ren shimmered. Having completely concealed his presence up to that point, Ren's secretary came into view seemingly out of thin air.

He was a young man wearing a tailcoat more suited to a butler than a

secretary.

“I beg your pardon, President. I come bearing a message from Laboratory Chief Mimori Akatsuki,” said the secretary without any elaborate preamble.

Ren made a thin, pained smile. “Chief Akatsuki? What does she want *now*?”

The secretary nodded, replying with a slight hesitation in his words. “She… says she wishes to make use of the stake.”

“…The stake?” There was genuine surprise in Ren’s voice.

However, he cleared that hesitance away in an instant as he began to understand what Mimori Akatsuki was asking of him, especially at this precise time. His expression shifted to one of amusement.

“So that is what it is. Certainly, we do not wish for the *Empire of the Dawn* to be weakened by this situation.”

“Then—”

“Yes, I permit it. Tell her that she may use her authority as she pleases.”

“As you wish.” The secretary courteously bowed. It was a gesture completely devoid of openings.

“Ahh, that’s right. Incidentally, how is *his* mood?”

Just as the secretary was ready to erase his presence and vanish, Ren called out to him on a whim.

The reply came immediately: “I wouldn’t quite call it superb, but he appears considerably satisfied with the current demon beast incident. It fulfills his desire to drill the Fourth Primogenitor, after all.”

“That is good.”

Ren smiled with a sober expression. The secretary’s presence had vanished, but Ren was tempted to hold him back no longer.

“Now, then. So far, all according to plan. If there is one wildcard, it is this girl’s existence.”

The video on the holographic screen atop the desk was paused, still displaying the Unknown. Looking up at the demon beast from directly in front was a girl

wearing a high school uniform.

The girl glared at the demon beast, seemingly taming it with her eyes, which glowed like a crimson flame.

“This vampire with the same face as Yukina Himeragi…Who is she?” Shahryar Ren murmured to himself, posing the question to no one in particular.

He gazed at the transparent ice in his glass, as if thinking of the artificial isle floating on the Pacific Ocean far, far away.

3

“Kikimora?”

Asagi’s eyes opened wide as she stared at Kojou.

They were on the third floor of the special classroom building. It was an empty classroom that should have been slated for the Demon Sanctuary Research Club.

Thanks to the Dem-Club not having been recognized as a proper school club, it was only the trio of Asagi, Yaze, and Kojou gathered there. Since they couldn’t use the air-conditioning, they were burning up.

Amid the languid glare of afternoon sunrays, Asagi, the collar of her uniform boldly open, drew her face to Kojou’s with an oddly serious expression.

“She really said that? Kikimora?”

“Yeah.” Kojou subtly averted his gaze from Asagi’s collar as he nodded.

That was whom Fake Yukina had stolen Kojou’s cell phone to speak to. Since it had been one brief instant, he suspected the possibility he might have misheard, but Asagi’s strangely serious reaction put that notion to rest.

“You know about it, Asagi?” Yaze stared at her, surprised by how unexpectedly quickly Asagi had bit.

“Well, yeah,” she said, sourly twisting her lips. “Kikimora is a codename for an AI I was developing as a hobby.”

“…AI?”

Kojou and Yaze shared a glance with rather dumbfounded expressions. Rather than Kikimora being the name of an AI, the fact a high school girl had developed something like that *as a hobby* was what took them aback.

However, Asagi paid no heed to their bewilderment as she puffed her chest out with a small measure of pride.

“Yes. Version Seven of the Spriggan Series. Compared to Mogwai’s all-purpose

capabilities, Kikimora was designed to be specialized for hacking and electronic warfare."

"Hacking…," Kojou said, beginning to understand. "I see, that's how Fake Himeragi was able to stop the spiritual reactor, then?"

Asagi pressed her cheek against her palm as her other hand operated her favorite smartphone, checking the activities of the AI.

"Yeah, that's left here in Kikimora's activity log. But this is messed up. There's no way this could happen."

The way Asagi vigorously shook her head made Kojou prompt back in a daze, "Wh-what?"

"Information about Kikimora hasn't been released publicly yet. No one should know about it except me. There's no way she could have even known Kikimora existed. On top of that, she's been assigned administrator rights. I mean, what the hell?!"

"Er, even if you ask me that…"

"There's zero intrusion attempts logged. There's no sign of retaliatory measures. Nothing triggered the firewall or the quantum labyrinth. Don't tell me it was through a security hole left in the module I wrote? To think someone could do that besides me… Really got me good!"

"Wait. For now, just calm down, Asagi."

With Asagi's irritation bare, Kojou felt like he was dealing with a ferocious beast as he earnestly tried to soothe her. Apparently someone helping herself to the AI she'd built in complete secrecy had been a spectacular blow to Asagi's pride. She had none of her usual composure.

"Errr, could you do the same thing Fake Himeragi did?"

"Of course. Who do you think made Kikimora in the first place?" Asagi replied to Kojou's rude question with such force, she practically bit his head off.

"Then what about if you taught someone how to use it?"

"Why or how could I ever teach Himeragi's impostor how to do something like that…?"

“It’s just a hypothetical. Could you?”

With Asagi glaring at him so close to his own face, Kojou was fairly rattled.

Asagi touched a hand to her lip. “Mmm,” she went, sinking into thought. “Well, it’s not impossible. She’d have to have the latest supercomputer architecture and would have to know the custom programming language I used to design it, though.”

“…I don’t really follow, but I gather it’s close to impossible.”

Kojou had a mild headache as he shook his head. Though she showed little appreciation of the fact, Asagi, known as the Priestess of Cain, seemed to be from another dimension compared to normal information technologists—practically a goddess on Earth. At the very least, to break the security of a program she designed required both being an engineer on Asagi’s level *and* knowledge before the fact.

He didn’t think Fake Yukina, appearing on Itogami Island no more than two or three short days prior, was afforded any such opportunity. Still, the fact remained that she’d controlled Kikimora.

However, Asagi sighed as if blowing all those concerns away.

“Oh well. The result is, thanks to her, a huge spread of the damage was prevented, and I’ve taken Kikimora’s administrator rights back.”



Kojou seized his chance to force a change in subject.

“So what happened with the demon beast? This IX-4 thingie…”

“The Island Guard is monitoring it around the clock,” Yaze replied, “but there’s no sign of it waking up at the moment. It’d be great if it just played nice forever, but…”

No doubt this was Gigafloat Management Corporation insider information.

Through the mind control of Kojou’s Beast Vassal, the Unknown that had been dubbed IX-4 continued sleeping like the dead. Even Kojou, host and master of the Beast Vassal employing that mind control, had little idea when it might awaken.

The Gigafloat Management Corporation seemed to be fully mobilizing its researchers inside the Demon Sanctuary in search of a way to completely neutralize the demon beast, but no reports of import had been sent up as of yet.

“I really don’t have to be close to the demon beast?” Kojou asked for confirmation, restless. The prospect of the demon beast running amok without him being nearby was hard on his psyche.

Yaze shook his head with a neutral expression. “Seems that according to what the Bureau of Astrology says—you keeping guard would backfire. After all, the Fourth Primogenitor is the largest source of demonic energy on Itogami Island. Who knows what effect you’d have just from being nearby?”

“That doesn’t mean we can let it sleep smack in the middle of a city forever, right?”

“We’ve gotta wait for the researchers to finish analyzing. Whether we want to ship it off or kill it, the thinking is that it’s reckless to try either without nailing down what the thing’s made of.”

“…Well, ya got a point there.” Kojou slouched his shoulders slightly in a show of understanding.

That he harbored complex feelings about killing it, demon beast or not, was because he considered it a living creature. He resisted the idea that causing

annoyance to human beings was reason enough to arbitrarily kill it. That said, the fact remained the demon beast posed a formidable danger. *Nice if we could find a way to mutually coexist, though*, thought Kojou; such words felt like a prayer.

"Come to think of it, Kensei Kanase said something weird when we handed him that cell sample," Yaze noted.

"Kanase's dad?" Kojou looked wary.

Kensei Kanase, Kanon Kanase's father, was a leading sorcerous engineer, to the point that he'd once served as Court Sorcerous Engineer for the Kingdom of Aldegia. But since he was a sorcerous engineer by trade, biological analysis was outside of his field of expertise. Kojou felt a vague sense of apprehension at the fact this very Kensei had noticed something straightaway.

Yaze lowered his voice. "Apparently, the demon beast's cells resemble that of a vampire's."

For a moment, Kojou stared silently back at Yaze, unable to grasp what had just been said to him. "…Vampire?"

"Of course, not *exactly* a vampire's, but it was kind of, signs of vampire elements having been introduced to them. Apparently, we won't know if it's a natural occurrence or man-made until they run a bunch of tests."

"So you're saying that demon beast might have the same powers as a vampire?"

When Yaze said "man-made," Kojou felt a hazy, unpalatable sensation deep in his chest.

Asagi gloomily breathed out. "That I can totally accept. When you think about it, IX-4's magic energy absorption power, that's basically vampiric activity right there, isn't it?"

Yaze added, "The insane regenerative ability and resistance to magical attacks fit, too…"

Asagi, weary, said, "I can see why the Bureau of Astrology doesn't want Kojou anywhere near the demon beast. If we'd have known it's like a powerful

vampire, we'd never have let Kojou butt heads with it. One false move and it'd be the fight with Mr. Vattler all over again."

"And yesterday, the fact you managed in the end is thanks to li'l Himeragi, ain't it?"

"Yeah." Kojou listlessly nodded in response to Yaze's question.

Risking her life in an act that unnerved even Fake Yukina, she'd ripped the magical energy straight out of the demon beast's belly, reducing it to a weakened state. Had she not done so, Kojou surely could never have put it to sleep, even with his Beast Vassal.

However, it cost Yukina Snowdrift Wolf. It was nothing to celebrate.

Asagi looked toward Yukina's classroom. "Come to think of it, what's up with Himeragi? She didn't seem to be with you this morning…" Yukina's absence had clearly been weighing on her mind the whole time.

"Himeragi's taking the day off," Kojou replied, keeping his emotions out of it.

"Her? Really?"

Asagi's surprise was plain. She'd probably never even considered that Yukina, normally stuck to Kojou like glue, had decided to remain at home.

"Apparently she has a guest."

"A guest?" Asagi remained interested still. Kojou, meanwhile, wore a complex expression. It was a face that indicated he didn't have a solid grasp on his own feelings.

"Can I ask you one thing, Kojou?" Yaze asked seriously, staring at the side of Kojou's face. Then, without waiting for Kojou to reply, Yaze shifted his attention beyond the window. "That girl—who is she?"

Turning in the same direction, Kojou beheld a slender figure standing on the roof of the neighboring campus building, with the school yard separating the two.

She had short hair with long bangs on both sides. The girl's face made her seem strong of spirit. She was wearing an unfamiliar uniform from a high school beyond the city.

Like a huntress taking aim at her prey, she kept a silver bow poised as she glared straight at Kojou.

It was the second Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency that Kojou knew personally—

Shio Hikawa.

4

Yuiri was standing facing Yukina Himeragi in the apartment's living room.

She was Yuiri's junior from the Lion King Agency's Attack Mage Development Facility, known as High God Forest. Like Yuiri, she was an apprentice Sword Shaman, but Yukina had been thrown into actual combat sooner.

Yuiri was by no means a large girl, but Yukina was even more delicate than she was. Her black hair fell down her shoulders without any adornment. She had a fair face and large eyes. Though it was said that many powerful psychics were beautiful, she was in a league of her own. Even Yuiri, of the same gender, felt in danger of falling for her if she lowered her guard even slightly.

Thanks to the two having few opportunities to meet face-to-face previously, both were somewhat tense. That this did not turn into a painful silence was doubtlessly due to the overly serious air Yukina gave off.

Yukina presented Yuiri with a thick stack of notebooks. "These are my observation records concerning the Fourth Primogenitor to date."

When Yuiri took the topmost one into her hand, her eyes went wide at the contents filling the page. Her face twitched.

"Eh? These are all records of Kojou? Yukii, you wrote these? Er, Yukii, you've been observing him for about half a year, haven't you?"

Yukina had employed regular university notebooks, but the number of them filled out here was simply bizarre. Even her estimate put it at over sixty. Furthermore, every page was filled corner to corner with methodically written words that suited Yukina perfectly.

Written in the notebooks were Kojou's daily activities.

From the moment he rose from bed in the morning to when he went to bed at night. His activities that day. His outfit. The details of his meals. Conversations. Naturally, even she cut out certain private elements, but that meant she'd recorded virtually everything else down to the finest details. In particular, she had reproduced Kojou's conversations with other girls to the

point of outright tenacity. Yuiri's own exchanges with him were among them. The way the emotions of the girl voluminously recording all this were not reflected in the text whatsoever was actually a little creepy.

However, Yukina lowered her eyes in apparent embarrassment, as if to say that all of this was woefully insufficient. "Yes. I am sorry for not sending it. What is not recorded in the notebooks is here."

"Th-there's more…?!"

Yuiri meekly peered into the massive tote bag Yukina brought forward.

Within that bag were various items that could not be recorded in notebooks —candy box mascots and crane game rewards that she'd apparently been given by Kojou, stubs for tickets for movies they'd seen together, coupons for restaurants they'd gone to, an album with a wealth of photographs, a false identification document that for some reason treated him and Yukina as husband and wife, all carefully maintained like an insect collector's specimen case.

Furthermore, Yukina presented Yuiri with another notebook. It seemed that she'd gone out of her way to write this one for Yuiri's sake.

"This is a manual on how to deal with the Fourth Primogenitor. This assembles everything you should be careful of when monitoring Akatsuki-senpai in one place."

"R-really. So when Kojou plays rock-paper-scissors, he'll start with scissors fifty percent of the time… His taste in porridge, how thick he likes his Calpis, recommended pizza toppings… It's so…heavy… Love is so heavy, Yukii…"

It was as if something weighty had slammed into Yuiri as she sank to the floor then and there.

The tenacity with which Yukina observed Kojou clearly surpassed the boundaries of zeal for her mission. If Yuiri had to describe this, it was closer to the obsession of a stalker. Frankly, it scared her a little—no, it scared her very much. *Can I really do this in her place?* thought Yuiri, genuinely concerned.

However, Yukina blinked hard, seemingly mystified. "Love? I am merely acting as Akatsuki-senpai's observer…"

But she immediately realized something and corrected herself.

“…No, I am not his observer anymore.”

“I see… Because Snowdrift Wolf broke, huh…”

Yuiri’s heart sank as well. The silver spear dubbed Snowdrift Wolf was a divine armament with which Yuiri had a fair bit of a history. Had she been compatible with it, it may well have been Yuiri and not Yukina who had been assigned to be Kojou Akatsuki’s watcher.

“I am sorry.” Yukina strongly pursed her lips.

Her junior’s back-to-the-wall demeanor made Yuiri nervous instead.

“There’s nothing to apologize for. I heard it wasn’t your fault it broke, Yukii, and the Three Saints haven’t blamed you at all, have they?”

“No. But in the end, I have caused you and Miss Hikawa all this trouble, so…” She lowered her head, crestfallen.

Yuiri hastily flung her hands around meaninglessly. “Nah. This isn’t trouble for me, not one bit! If I told Glenda I was coming to see Kojou, she’d be all jealous, you know. As for Shio, well, of course she’s a little bit worried, but that’s, you know, because she wasn’t the one picked. I think she wanted to brag to Miss Kirasaka.”

Yukina giggled, finally making a tiny smile.

Shio, Yuiri’s friend, was the rival of Sayaka Kirasaka, Yukina’s former roommate. Just thinking of the sight of the two facing off about something or other must have subconsciously alleviated her tension.

At the moment, that very Shio was conducting observation of Kojou in Yuiri’s stead, substituting for the already substitute watcher.

Furthermore, Glenda was holding the fort at Demon Beast Park over at Blue Elysium. Of late, she’d gotten along very well with the feeders working at Demon Beast Park, which had led to her diligently assisting them. It made Yuiri and Shio feel a little left out, but seeing Glenda having fun with the demon beasts she was so fond of, they came to feel that it was simply meant to be.

“But are you really okay with this, Yukii? Me switching places with you—”

“It is what the Lion King Agency has ordered…” Yukina nodded, resigned. That did not quell Yuiri’s concern. “Besides, it is not as if I shall never see Akatsuki-senpai or everyone on Itogami Island again.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

Yuiri strongly agreed with Yukina’s words. It was different from when Yukina’s spiritual energy had gone berserk before, leaving Yukina in danger of fading away. Losing Snowdrift Wolf didn’t mean that Yukina’s life had been exposed to peril.

If she continued in her missions as a Sword Shaman, there would no doubt be chances to visit Itogami Island and reunite with Kojou and the others someday. After all, this was a Demon Sanctuary, and Yukina was an expert in anti-demon combat.

“Actually, the written order to take over responsibilities hasn’t formally arrived yet,” Yuiri said hesitantly. “All I was told is that I’m ordered to support the Fourth Primogenitor observation mission to make up for the loss of combat strength from the damage to the Schneewaltzer.”

Perplexed, Yukina asked, “Miss Yuiri, you’re not going to become Akatsuki-senpai’s watcher?”

Yuiri awkwardly shook her head. “That’s what I meant to do, but I’m a little unsure that I’m up to the task. They are going to hand me a new Fourth Primogenitor Countermeasure divine armament, though…”

She pulled close an instrument case standing against the wall. It was a soft, flat case meant for carrying keyboards.

The sticker for storehouse management purposes was stamped with the characters TYPE-13. Seeing this, Yukina’s eyes widened in vivid surprise.

“Type Thirteen? I had heard it was a failure.”

“Apparently it’s more like it doesn’t officially exist.”

Yuiri removed the case’s lid. Resting inside transparent packing material was a two-handed sword much larger than Rosen Chevalier Plus—beyond the hilt, it was a full meter long.

However, what was odd about the sword was that it had no blade. It was not that the blade was folded; the metal was not in the form of a blade to begin with. Instead, it was a thick, flat, hexagonal length of metal without any tip and with all edges blunted. It was a lead-colored mass of steel that could neither cut nor thrust.

In spite of this, Yukina and Yuiri gazed at the divine armament with grave looks in their eyes.

“So this is Heidenröslein…”

“Yeah, but I’m scared of it, so I really don’t want to use it. Maybe if it’s against a vampire primogenitor, it can’t be helped, but I’m glad they didn’t take my Type Six-Plus away.”

They weren’t empty words; Yuiri was genuinely afraid.

A silver long sword was sheathed in a separate instrument case.

This was Yuiri’s beloved Rosen Chevalier Plus. Based on appearance alone, Type Six-Plus’s polished, razor-sharp blade felt far more frightening. However, when Yuiri looked at her beloved sword, her expression was one of trust, with no unease or dread whatsoever.

This conversely expressed precisely how dangerous the Type Thirteen gear was.

In one sense, it was only natural. Just like Snowdrift Wolf, the bladeless great sword was a secret weapon of the Lion King Agency, able to destroy even a vampire primogenitor.

“Since it’s you, Miss Yuiri, it will surely be all right.”

Yukina strongly smiled in an effort to cheer the worried Yuiri onward.

Having been raised at High God Forest together, she knew Yuiri’s might and exploits well. *No matter how much danger and might lurks within Heidenröslein, if you are the wielder, it shall never be misused.* That was the eloquent message spoken by Yukina’s forthright eyes.

“Thank you.”

Yuiri bashfully lowered her head. Then, the next instant, smiles vanished from

both their faces.

Slightly raising their hips, ready to move at a moment's notice, they shifted sharp gazes, Yukina to the apartment's entryway, Yuiri to beyond the window behind her.

"Miss Yuiri."

"Yeah."

Yuiri responded to Yukina's brief call with a tiny nod. They'd sensed ritual energy concealed in the surrounding area. It was so faint that Yuiri would never have noticed it had she not been there together with Yukina.

This room is surrounded. The instant they were certain of that, Yuiri and Yukina were assaulted by the powerful sense that something was very wrong.

It was the unpleasant feeling that something had forcibly wedged into the world time that had not existed. A grating noise rang in Yuiri's ear, and by the time that noise had vanished, Yuiri and Yukina were surrounded on all sides by figures bereft of thickness as if they were paper dolls. Despite the lack of such thickness, the blades of the katanas they wielded were very real.

"Shikigami…?! When did they…?!"

"This technique, could it be…?!"

Yuiri and Yukina exclaimed simultaneously. Neither Sword Shaman, both possessing Spirit Sight, had been able to detect the sudden attack. That fact slammed home into Yuiri the despairing chasm between her level skill and that of the assailant's.

"I ask that both of you do not move."

There was a quiet, whisper-like voice from behind Yuiri.

When Yuiri turned around, she set eyes upon a girl in a priestess's attire, her face covered with thin silk. In terms of age and stature, she was little different from Yuiri. But the overwhelming sense of awe emanating from the opponent made Yuiri's voice tremble.

"Th… The Three Saints…"

Koyomi Shizuka, head of the so-called Three Saints of the Lion King Agency. Yuiri had encountered her numerous times, but taking the full brunt of her lethal aura was a first. That was all it took for Yuiri's body to freeze up, seemingly bound hand and foot.

"Attack Mage Himeragi. For suspicion of assault, theft, and treason against the Lion King Agency, I hereby place you under arrest."

"Treason? Me…?" Yukina was dumbfounded.

Koyomi had to be sending the same lethal aura Yukina's way, but Yukina was managing to withstand the pressure, if not by much. It was the difference between her and Yuiri's experiences. It was not the first time Yukina and Koyomi had been foes.

Frigidly gazing down at that very Yukina, Koyomi continued. "At eleven hours and seven minutes today, on a road within Itogami City, Lion King Agency staff were assaulted, and robbed of the Schneewaltzer they were transporting."

"The Schneewaltzer they were… Huh?!" Yuiri exclaimed, forgetting her fear.

Koyomi was saying that the fragments of the damaged Snowdrift Wolf had been stolen. And furthermore, that Yukina was the culprit—

"According to the testimony of the assaulted staff and security camera imagery, we have determined that the culprit is you—Yukina Himeragi of the Lion King Agency. Do you have anything to say?"

"H-hold on a second, please!" Yuiri shrilly objected. Her sense of duty to convey the truth won out over her fear toward one of the Three Saints.

"Attack Mage Haba? What is it?"

Koyomi looked at Yuiri with a dubious expression. As her throat trembled, Yuiri audibly gulped and nodded.

"Yukii… Umm, Attack Mage Himeragi cannot be the culprit. I have been with her for the entire morning today. She could not have possibly attacked anyone."

"Are you testifying that she has an alibi?"

"Y-yes…!"

The gaze through the veil shot right through her, but Yuiri nodded firmly even so.

Koyomi seemed hesitant as her motions came to a halt. The silence that followed continued for five seconds at most. However, to Yuiri, it felt like she'd been under questioning over the span of several days.

Koyomi made a slight sigh. The shikigami surrounding Yuiri and Yukina vanished as if they had been nothing but an illusion.

"Very well. I shall temporarily defer Attack Mage Himeragi's arrest. However, until she is cleared of suspicion, the two of you are under arrest and under my supervision. Have I made myself clear?"

"Y-yes!"

Yuiri jolted into a straighter posture as she spoke.

However, Yukina said nothing in reply as she looked up at Koyomi. The expression she wore was not one of defiance. Yukina's eyes felt like they were searching not for Koyomi, but for some other person.

"Concerning what you said earlier, the security cameras were displaying me, I take it?"

"Yes. Quite clearly at that."

Koyomi nodded in reply to Yukina's inquiry.

The reply threw Yuiri into confusion. Koyomi was saying that not only had eyewitness testimony, but even images had confirmed that Yukina was present at the scene. However, that Yukina had been together with Yuiri was an unmistakeable fact.

"Concerning this, does anything come to mind?" Koyomi asked, staring at Yukina, perhaps harboring the same doubts as Yuiri.

"…"

Without a word, Yukina proceeded to firmly nod.

5

MAR's Itogami Laboratory was constructed in the district at the center of Island North, not so far removed from the site of the demon beast uproar. Including the affiliate hospital to which it was connected, it harbored nearly a thousand researchers, making it one of the largest research organizations within the city.

To the sorcerous corporate conglomerate MAR, the results of its Demon Sanctuary research constituted critical information one might even call its corporate lifeline. Analysis of demonic abilities and biology and employing this to develop industrial and medical products—it was said that the horde of products originating from Itogami Island constituted over sixty percent of the massive corporation that MAR had become.

Naturally, entry points into the laboratory's interior came furnished with a security presence rivaling that of a military base.

Security was especially strict for the highly profitable medical department. In addition to armed security pods that kept watch twenty-four/seven, it came with demonic security personnel patrols and even magical fortifications, pretty much the finest anti-intrusion measures anyone could imagine.

In such a secure building, Mimori Akatsuki, chief of the Medical Department, saw that in her lab room an unfamiliar person had arrived without warning. She was a small-statured schoolgirl in uniform, and she resembled the friend of Mimori's daughter.

"Hellooo! Ice cream deliveryyy! ♪"

The girl with the same face as Yukina Himeragi was carrying a refrigerated bag in one hand. Mimori greeted the girl, who hadn't been questioned prior to reaching all the way to the laboratory, with no particular show of surprise.

"Oh my, Yukina? All alone? What's wrong?"

"I came because I wanted to ask you a favor, Gra… Miss."

The girl smiled amiably through the glass, lowering her head in a polite bow.

Mimori, amused, raised an eyebrow as she looked at the girl. No one had accompanied her. Mimori's son, whom she was always with, was probably still at school.

"A secret from Kojou, is it? Mmmm? Hold on a sec, I'll open up."

Mimori operated a remote control on her wrist. The glass-constructed door opened without a sound.

The girl showed no particular wariness as she boldly strode inside.

This was the laboratory that had been granted for Mimori's individual use. It was broad enough that its floor surface could cover an entire basketball court. Usually, some twenty assistants were there with her, but that day, Mimori was the only one in the lab.

Perhaps it was a simple coincidence—or perhaps the girl had been aiming for just that moment. From Mimori's point of view, one guess was as good as the other.

"It's been a while. I come bearing gifts," the girl said as she presented the refrigerated bag.

Mimori took it, raising a little "wow" of admiration. "This is brand new from Lulu's, isn't it? Cherry raspberry and chocolate royal!"

The girl grinned. "Yeah, it went on sale today."

Mimori happily opened the lid of the cup, immediately using the attached spoon to bring the new ice cream flavor to her mouth. The feeling of raspberry ice cream melting in her mouth brought a satisfied smile over Mimori.

"So why did you come to see me, Miss Impostor Yukina?"

"Darn it… There's really no fooling you, huh?" The girl with the same face as Yukina stuck out her tongue without the barest hint of guilt.

Mimori made no move to rebuke her, raising her nose with a proud *ahem*. "Whatever I look like, I am a Demon Sanctuary doctor, after all. I can tell humans and demons apart at the very… Oh my."

Still examining the girl, Mimori was in the middle of proudly rambling when her eyes narrowed, as if noticing something. She brought another spoonful of

ice cream to her mouth as her free right hand touched the girl's hand.

"You're… You couldn't be…… Heh…I see now. My, my, my, my…"

Even as surprise colored her eyes, Mimori made an amused, deeply satisfied smile.

Mimori's demeanor was as if she saw right through everything about the girl. "Hoo boy," the girl muttered with a deep sigh.

Mimori was a Hyper Adapter—a naturally-born psychic.

Her specialty was medical psychometry. From a simple touch, she could extract information from a body of which even the patient was unaware. That made discerning who she was, and how she had come to be born, the sort of thing Mimori could practically do in her sleep.

"You've already realized that much? That's Gra…er, Miss, for you."

"Oh, stop acting like we're strangers. Just go ahead and call me Mimori. Oh, that's right. Since you've come all this way to play, I really need to give you some allowance…"

"Um, Mimori…"

Mimori was working herself up like a little child as the girl timidly called out to her. However, before the girl could state the purpose of her visit, Mimori took a small case out of a desk drawer—a platinum case about as large as a jelly roll.

"Or was this what you were after, I wonder?"

Mimori opened the case's lid. The girl's eyes bulged when she saw what rested inside it.

"Sheesh, there's no beating you, Mimori."

Respectfully accepting the case offered to her, the girl blushed as she lowered her head. Mimori must have realized the purpose of her visit the moment she'd arrived at the lab.

"But is it all right for me to just take this and go…? This is confidential MAR material…," she asked with worry.

"It's fine. I've received permission from the top." Mimori sounded

unconcerned.

This time, the girl was genuinely shocked, gaping at Mimori with amazement.

Mimori said she'd received permission to take out the confidential MAR material. That meant Mimori had a precise understanding of what role that which rested within the box would play.

"Does this mean you meant to hand it to that person from the beginning?"

"Yes, because it'll be inconvenient for me if she's removed from the picture. I wouldn't be able to see my adorable granddaughter's face anymore, you know?"

Mimori, still savoring the ice cream, smiled at the girl, who strained a smile in return and shook her head.

It was dangerous to remain there any longer. If the conversation continued any further, it seemed like she'd carelessly talk about things she couldn't afford to bring up yet.

"Well, then…," the girl began, ready to depart.

Mimori picked up on that melancholy with ease. She made no move to stop her.

Just before leaving the lab, the girl glanced back at Mimori. "Um, when it comes to Kojou and the others, can you keep my identity—?"

"A secret, right? Of course. I won't tell Grandpa, either." She winked.

The girl nodded, then practically fled, racing out of the laboratory.

6

In a lavish living room on the topmost floor of an apartment building, Nina Adelard said with bitterness in her voice, “He is cheating on her…?”

She was a beautiful doll not even reaching thirty centimeters in height. This was what had become of the Great Alchemist of Yore, over two hundred and seventy years of age. Having lost her proper body due to certain circumstances, she had reconstituted her body with the meager amount of liquid-metal remaining and was now a freeloader at the Natsuki Minamiya residence.

“What a completely inexcusable husband. How can you not defend your bride at a time like this? And in contrast, the younger sister-in-law’s behavior is truly praiseworthy. Indeed, it warms my breast.”

Nina continued to lie slovenly on the sofa as she prattled off commentary at the television. The screen was showing a soap opera for housewives.

Reina entered the living room at the exact moment the broadcast switched to a commercial.

Since two days before, she, like Nina, was living at Natsuki’s own home. Or perhaps it was more precise to say that rather than it being her residence, she was using it as a safe house.

“Nina, I’m back—”

“Ohh, ’tis you. Have you obtained that which you sought?”

Nina looked over with a toss of her lustrous hair. Even if Reina had the same face as Yukina, her gaze showed no particular sign she minded. It wasn’t that Reina had given a detailed explanation of the circumstances, but she hadn’t lived over two hundred and seventy years for nothing; it took more than that to shock Nina.

Reina put down the luggage she’d been carrying. Nina knelt beside her.

“Yes, thanks to you… Er, what are you watching?”

“Mm. A rerun of a soap opera drama where a young wife is bullied.”

“Wait… The Great Alchemist of Yore watches soap operas…?”

Reina stared at Nina and shook her head with an exasperated expression as if asking herself, *Can I really trust someone like this?*

However, Nina regarded Reina with a defensive look in her eyes. “It cannot be helped. Kanon, Natsuki, and Astarte all went to school, so I am bored. I have already read enough alchemy magazines to be sick of them.”

“So that’s what those magazines are. And they have idols on the covers…”

Who reads this stuff anyway? thought Reina as she gazed earnestly at one of the magazines placed on top of the table.

While she did so, Nina opened the luggage that Reina had returned with.

It was a hard case used to carry a guitar. Reina had seized it from the Lion King Agency transporter she’d robbed.

The case contained countless broken metal fragments and the shaft of a half-destroyed spear. They were the remains of Snowdrift Wolf.

“Hmm… This is definitely Yukina’s spear.” Nina’s tone turned to one of admiration. “This is quite a spectacular display of destruction yet again.”

Reina peered at the side of the alchemist’s face. “So? Can you fix it?”

“Mmm. I cannot.”

Nina replied instantly and without hesitation. It was Reina who was thrown off instead.

“Wh-why not?! This is just normal metal, right?”

“Certainly, the materials themselves are special yet mundane metals. Steel, carbon, magnesium, molybdenum, vanadium, chrome, silicon, after which, sulphur and phosphorous, is it?”

Nina checked the metal fragment by touch as she spoke. To a master of the alchemical arts such as her, divining the composition of a metal was no more difficult than identifying the components of a salad by sight.

“Then—”

“Even if the materials themselves are normal, the human who forged this

spear was not. To the outermost edge of the crystallization, it is inscribed with an incredible number of curses—nay, prayers. Was this madness, or purity, perhaps? I know not who it was, but his sheer tenacity was sublime. Small wonder none have mastered it beyond Yukina."

For once, Nina spoke in a serious tone of voice; she simply could not repair it. Even she who was called the Great Alchemist of Yore viewed the smith who had forged Snowdrift Wolf as worthy of admiration.

However, Reina glared at Nina with despairing eyes. "In other words, you got beat, Nina?"

"Pardon? I said the issue was tenacity, not victory or defeat. I am merely saying that the technology involved is rather time-inefficient," Nina retorted in a fit of pique, well aware that Reina was poking at her sore spot.

Reina stifled a laugh, making a *pfft* noise. She broke into a cold smile as she theatrically spread both arms wide. "You mean you're not good enough to put it back together, right, Nina? Wow, I'm surprised. Nina Adelard of Parmia isn't all that… Aww, and I had such high hopes, too."

"I never said I could not put it back together…! It is a simple insufficiency of fuel!"

"…Fuel? I thought everything you needed for materials was right here."

Reina suspiciously looked down at the remnants of the spear.

The staff of the Lion King Agency had gathered up all the components of Snowdrift Wolf down to even the smallest fragment. Since it was not necessary to produce new metal, the alchemical materials required for fuel ought to have been minimal.

"In this particular case, the fuel is magical energy, you see. Just as the manufacturing of metals requires heat and electricity, alchemy requires magical energy. I suppose if you offered four or five spiritualists in spry health, it would be sufficient…"

Naturally, Nina's haphazard explanation caused even Reina to frown. "This alchemist is…off her rocker…"

“’Tis true,” Nina coldly asserted. “And besides, what of the Divine Oscillation Effect? That is a ritual inscription even I cannot reproduce. It is an inscription that nullifies magical energy, after all. This has been destroyed so spectacularly that I cannot speculate upon the shape of the original inscription.”

“Ahh, that’s not a problem. I have the original inscription right here.”

Reina smoothly pulled a silver rod out from the cleavage of her uniform.

One end was sharpened to a point, making it into a short stake. Strange symbols were etched into its surface, not even two centimeters in diameter. When Nina noticed the symbols, her eyes wavered with shock.

“This is the…primogenitor-slaying holy spear? Where did you acquire this?”

“Yeah.” When Nina subconsciously closed the distance, staring at it, Reina slowly shook her head. “This is precious… Avrora—she left this. For us…”

“Avrora… I see. This is the spear that slew the previous Fourth Primogenitor, then…”

Nina’s comment made Reina laugh without a word.

The metal stake was inside the case she’d received from Mimori Akatsuki.

Once, the girl called the Fourth Primogenitor had that purging spear thrust into her own body to destroy the entity Root controlling her from within. It had remained in MAR custody even after Avrora had lost her physical body.

The symbols etched into the surface of the stake were the same as the one used for the Divine Oscillation Effect ritual for the Schneewaltzer of the Lion King Agency. To be more precise, the symbols on this stake were of the original ritual; the Schneewaltzer employed nothing more than a mere replica. By embedding the stake into it, the impossible-to-repair Snowdrift Wolf would be resurrected—and in a more complete state than before it had been damaged at that.

“Yes, yes. The construction of the parts where this spear and the inscription come into contact can be refashioned like so, perhaps? This way should increase the ritual energy conversion rate, yes…”

In front of Nina, transfixed upon the stake as if entranced by it, Reina wrote

something on a sheet of memo paper. It looked like meaningless scribbles, yet Nina uttered, “Ooh,” gazing with deep interest.

“Hmm, how intriguing. The principles for efficient spiritual energy conversion circuits utilizing the Bhavagna Theory were only unveiled this year. I believe I heard it would be ten…nay, twenty years until they could be put to practical use.”

“Heh… Really now?”

When Nina knitted her brows and voiced her suspicions, Reina grinned and smiled as she sidestepped the issue. Nina tapered her lips in dismay, but she made no effort to force the issue of where her circuit map had come from.

“In that case, ’twould be better to alter the spear’s materials themselves myself…” Nina composed a complex formula on the blank part of the memo paper.

“Mm, yeah,” said Reina in agreement, pleased as she watched.

“Yeah. Moegi said that, too. Huh. I forgot.”

“…So what of the all-important magical energy?”

A serious expression came over Nina as she posed the question to Reina. Apparently, getting such a precious primogenitor-slaying holy spear into her hands had motivated her sufficiently to repair Snowdrift Wolf.

But even with the materials all in place, she didn’t have the magical energy for making the alchemy happen.

Alchemy was not the magic of producing something from nothing; in the end, it was technology. Producing something high in value required paying something of commensurate worth.

“If you need fuel, it’s right here.”

Reina smiled coyly as she presented her own right hand.

Then, with a fragment of Snowdrift Wolf, she made a deep slash into her own wrist. Fresh blood dripped down, drenching the scattered fragments of the silver spear.

“A maiden’s pure blood—and the blood of a vampire directly descended from a primogenitor—”

Reina’s eyes glowed crimson as she laughed.

Seeing this, Nina, too, made a coy, ferocious grin.

7

Bathed in the tiring rays from the waning sun, Kojou was walking toward the monorail station.

It was his usual route. The route home from school.

If there was one thing different from the norm, it was that Yukina was not beside him. That and the fact Shio Hikawa was right behind him.

Shio, seemingly on guard and ready to draw her weapon at any moment, was keeping watch over the slightest movement of Kojou's hand or foot. It felt like she was a prison guard moving a prisoner, or a stalker with her eyes on her prey.

"Hey, Shio…"

Kojou, naturally fed up with this behavior, called out to her.

"Wh-what?"

Wincing, Shio moved a step away from him. A weary sigh escaped from Kojou's lips.

"I imagine you're trying to be considerate or something by being a few paces behind… But it's kinda…like, there's a lot of people around us staring, and we've been really standing out for a while here…"

"O-oh, is that so? Certainly, attracting attention makes me a failure as your observer… However, if I distance myself from you too much, then I may be too slow in dealing with any emergencies that might arise."

Shio hung her head as she began earnestly thinking things over.

Her overly serious reaction to his words definitely made her feel like Yukina's senior. The furtive behavior smacking of mild androphobia—fear of men—was reminiscent of Sayaka back when they'd first met.

"Er, could we just talk normally while walking around?"

Kojou's inoffensive proposal to resolve the dilemma caused Shio to lift up her

head in apparent surprise.

“It isn’t…prohibited exactly… Did Yukina Himeragi always do that with you?”

“Well, most of the time, yeah.”

Furthermore, Kojou didn’t think of Yukina as an impartial observer. She felt more like a meddlesome little sister following him everywhere he went. Of course, if he said that to the girl concerned, she would without doubt get angry…

“Just what kind of conversations did you have?”

Shio, seemingly drawn in by Kojou’s words, posed that question.

“If you’ve gotta ask, at this time of day, it was pretty much always about what was on the menu for dinner.”

“Dinner…?”

Perhaps Kojou’s answer surprised her, for Shio’s face looked like she’d been bewitched by a fox.

“Oh, right. Shio, sorry but can we take a detour? My little sister asked me to buy ingredients for her… Er, aw crap. I gave the supermarket coupons to Himeragi.”

“Yukina Himeragi went to the supermarket with you?”

Shio blinked, further and further perplexed. Kojou casually nodded.

“Yeah. Since she always eats dinner at our place, we’re pretty much always buying things together.”

“She joins you for dinner…? Wait, that’s basically like living under the same roof…” Shio wobbled, strangely assaulted by dizziness.

Kojou waved a hand, dismissing the claim. “Nope, nope, nope. I mean my little sister’s there with us.”

“Meaning that the entire family is involved…?”

Placing a hand on a road sign like she was drunk, Shio gasped, seeming nervous as she glared at Kojou.

“Do not tell me that if Yuiri becomes your watcher, you intend to develop a similar relationship with her?”

“…Ah, yeah. I hadn’t thought about that.”

Kojou had thought a little bit about how to deal with Yuiri once she became his watcher in Yukina’s place, but he wasn’t doing a good job of picturing it.

“But, well, we can at least eat together today. Shio, you can join, too.”

“M-me?” She hesitated at his sudden proposal. She opened her mouth to reflexively decline, but the words that actually came out of Shio’s mouth were unexpected.

“Don’t tell me Mr. Gajou will be there with us?”

“Dad? He doesn’t come home much at all, so no. If you need him for something, I can call him up right now, but—”

Kojou pulled his cell phone out of his parka pocket.

Lately, Gajou Akatsuki seemed pretty busy running around investigating New Itogami Island. To Gajou, a researcher of ruins of the Cleansing to begin with, Cain’s legacy, the so-called Ark of the Sinful God, was a treasure trove of research material.

Even so, if Kojou told him he could meet a pretty girl like Shio, there was no doubt he’d come running home. Kojou couldn’t help but think that would be a problem in itself, but still…

“N-no, it’s fine. It’s not like I came here to meet him. No, really.” Shio hastily shook her head. Her cheeks were reddened as if she was blushing, but thanks to the evening sun, Kojou did not notice.

Breathing deeply over and over to calm herself, Shio then said, seemingly as an afterthought, “Hey, Kojou Akatsuki.”

“Mm?”

“Are you really all right with this? With Yukina Himeragi about to be relieved from her duties observing you?”

The question brought out a solemn expression from Kojou.

After but a brief silence, he spoke in a blunt, dismissive tone of voice. “For better or worse, it’s not for me to decide…”

“Th-that is certainly true, but you and Yukina Himeragi have overcome battle together any number of times, yes? Even if it was part of her mission, she exposed herself to danger, got wounded, had you drink her blood, nursed you when you were ill, until death do you part—”

“That got a little weird partway through…”

The way the shaken Shio was running her mouth with meaningless things made Kojou smile weakly as his tension was stripped away.

“A-anyway! Are you all right with Yuiri taking Yukina Himeragi’s place just like that? Does it not pain your heart…? I mean certainly Yuiri’s cute, she has a nice personality, she’s not as stylish as Kirasaka, but she still cares about that sort of thing… However…!”

“Like I said, whether or not Yuiri takes Himeragi’s place isn’t up to me to decide…” Kojou’s voice turned ragged, his irritation apparent.

Still, Shio did not falter, closing the distance with Kojou.

“Yukina Himeragi merely feels responsible for the fact Snowdrift Wolf was broken. She has it in her head she cannot fulfill her mission without that spear…”

Shio was about to say more, but her words abruptly trailed off.

There was a faint whiff of bewilderment and surprise in the eyes with which she looked up at Kojou.

“Kojou Akatsuki… Could it be…that you…”

But Shio was unable to voice that flash of insight.

That was because someone was rushing over, her pained voice calling out their names.

“Shio! Kojou!”

“Y-Yuiri?”

Rushing over from the monorail station at incredible speed was Yuiri Haba,

carrying an instrument case on her back. Her face was pale, and her big eyes wavered nervously.

“What’s wrong? Why are you here? Done already?”

Shio asked Yuiri, racing over and out of breath, with an expression of unease. Perhaps her best friend’s nervousness was contagious; Shio’s own voice was faintly shrill.

“Have either of you seen Yukii?”

“…Yukii?”

“What’s up with Himeragi?”

Yuiri’s question made both Shio and Kojou tilt their heads. It was Yuiri herself Yukina should have been with so that her mission of watcher could be handed over.

Yuiri lowered her eyes in anguish. “Sh-she’s gone.”

Shio was still confused as she put an arm around the girl’s shoulders. “Gone?”

“I don’t really get it, but they say Yukii robbed the broken Snowdrift Wolf, but she was with me the whole time, but after hearing that, she said she had to go search for it and—”



“Sorry, Yuiri. I don’t understand a word of what you’re saying…” Shio stared at her best friend in desperation.

Kojou put two and two together. “Himeragi’s impostor stole Snowdrift Wolf? And she left to get it back…?”

Yuiri’s big eyes opened wide, indicating loud and clear that Kojou had precisely expressed her thoughts.

“Yeah, that!”

8

Inside the demon beast observation tent, Kiriha Kisaki elegantly tilted her coffee cup.

Placed in front of her was a rich chocolate cake from a famous, high-rated shop in Itogami City. The thick, bitter, pitch-black cake should have been exactly to Kiriha's liking, but for some reason, on that day alone, it remained upon the table virtually untouched.

Sami, typing out reports on her favorite notebook PC, turned her way and called out with a smile, "Is something wrong, Kiriha?"

The fact that Sami, in her late twenties, used polite speech with Kiriha, who wore a high school uniform, was unnatural if you stopped to think about it rationally, but none of the Bureau of Astrology staff pointed out the peculiarity.

"Of course not. Seeing that demon beast helpless and unable to move a muscle has healed my psyche," Kiriha replied with a listless wave.

It was four hundred meters or so between the sleeping Unknown and the observation tent. From that distance, they could race over immediately if anything went amiss.

Since the perimeter around the Unknown that had been dubbed IX-4 was actually assigned to the Island Guard, the Bureau of Astrology was there in a simple advisory capacity. This was because the numerous wounded among the Bureau of Astrology staff from the last battle had put them in a state where continuing the mission independently would be very difficult.

Though one might try to blame this on a diminishment of Kiriha and the Bureau of Astrology's standing, that actually was not correct; the Island Guard's number of wounded was overwhelmingly greater. Even inside the Bureau of Astrology, opinion had taken hold that since it was against a monster even the Fourth Primogenitor had been unable to kill, a certain degree of damage was to be expected.

Not that this brightened Kiriha's spirits any.

“I suppose you are displeased at remaining in the Lion King Agency’s debt?”

When Sami asked the question, making no effort to conceal her smiling face, Kiriha glared at her in silence. The fact she made no effort to refute Sami’s words was because she was well aware that clumsy excuses would have the opposite of the intended effect.

If it had been Kojou Akatsuki’s exploits alone, even that would have been better. After all, the Fourth Primogenitor was an inhuman monster every bit as much as that demon beast.

However, Yukina Himeragi had played a major role in neutralizing IX-4. Furthermore, the price she paid for it was losing her Schneewaltzer. That left Kiriha deeply in her debt, exactly as Sami had said. Kiriha did not care much for that. In one sense, what she felt was humiliation.

“I have good news for you, Kiriha. A disposal plan for IX-4 has been settled.”

“Disposal?”

Kiriha prompted back. *Kill it here*, was what she meant. Sami nodded.

“Yes… To dispose of the demon beast by killing it here, rather than moving it elsewhere.”

“I do not mind, but how?” Kiriha shot Sami a doubtful stare.

After a brief silence, Sami perused the plan that had only just arrived. “Have you heard that the demon beast’s cells are of a nature similar to vampires?”

“Of course I have. You can’t be serious.” Kiriha curled her lips. “In other words, we employ means meant for destroying a vampire?”

“Precisely. Generally speaking, there are only three means by which to be rid of a vampire with primogenitor-class strength. One is exile into other-dimensional space. It is the means to which the Fourth Primogenitor sentenced the Duke of Ardeal, but we cannot employ that method here.”

Kiriha kept quiet and nodded. If it had been merely a matter of dumping it into some unknown alternate dimension, rather than enclosing it in a Prison Barrier, this method might have been a bit of time and trouble, but the Bureau of Astrology could have pulled it off on its own, without any need to borrow the

Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor or the power of Natsuki Minamiya.

But they could not use such means on IX-4.

Teleportation magic would not trigger against a demon beast that absorbed magical energy, after all.

“Another method is purification through a vast quantity of spiritual energy. Attack Mage Himeragi has proven that this method is effective. However, now that the Schneewaltzer has been lost, we cannot employ that method.”

“I suppose not.” Kiriha sulked.

The only equipment able to employ spiritual attacks on par with a Schneewaltzer was the Völundr System of the Kingdom of Aldegia. That was one more ritual that Kiriha’s Ricercare could not emulate.

“Accordingly, we are putting the third method into effect this time.”

“Cannibalism…”

Kiriha circled ahead of Sami’s words. The surest method to destroy an undying vampire was through vampiric activity, exhaustively consuming the opponent’s very existence.

However, cannibalism was only possible for a vampire of equal or even greater strength. If a weakling tried to consume a higher-ranking opponent, it would be the opponent consuming his or her existence instead.

A vampire stronger than IX-4 did not exist on Itogami Island. Barring the Fourth Primogenitor, the World’s Mightiest Vampire, at least—

“You don’t intend to have Kojou Akatsuki consume it, do you?” Kiriha hastily pressed.

“No. After all, cannibalism runs the risk of the predator being consumed by the prey instead… Naturally we do not wish to take such a risk.”

Kiriha nodded, relieved. “Of course not. That demon beast acquiring the power of the Fourth Primogenitor would be a nightmare.”

“Therefore, we will have IX-4 consume itself.” Sami grinned wide.

“…Through entosis, I gather?”

Entosis was a phenomenon by which cells fed upon other cells. The cells thus fed upon were eventually dismantled and eliminated. It greatly resembled one vampire committing cannibalism against another. Through employing this commonality, they meant to make IX-4 destroy itself on both a physical and a magical level.

“Fortunately, it has been established that IX-4’s resistance to mental attacks is not particularly high,” Sami continued. “We will take advantage of this weakness to infect it with a curse, and thus induce the cells to begin eating one another.”

Kiriha followed up where the tangible means were concerned. “I do not think it is a poor idea, but how do you intend to insert the curse?”

Even if it was in a sleeping, unresisting state, Ricercare could not drive a fatal curse into IX-4. The creature spanned over fifteen meters; it was too large. That said, she didn’t think a normal ritual spell attack could punch through that demon beast’s magical defenses.

Spurred by Kiriha’s misgivings, Sami put on an air of great importance as she continued. “We have received permission to use Flat.”

For a moment, Kiriha went rigid, as if some sore spot had been poked. It was an honest reaction uncharacteristic of her.

“Ah…I see. That…is good. Very good.”

Kiriha giggled, the corners of her lips curling upward.

Flat was a slaughtering weapon in the Bureau of Astrology’s possession—said to be the most powerful cursed armament that could be carried by a single person. It was also said that its might was so immense that it had been used in actual combat only twice in the preceding decade. Such a rare, precious weapon had been approved for use.

Now that the plan against the unknown demon beast had been finalized, Kiriha’s mood finally recovered.

Just then, a large truck she did not recognize approached the demon beast.

“What is that trailer?” Kiriha asked, feeling it tug slightly at her mind.

It was rare for a large eighteen-wheeler to enter the cramped tunnels of Itogami Island's third stratum. The cargo in the trailer was apparently machinery covered in a waterproof tarp.

"Emergency repairs for the damaged spiritual reactor were scheduled. It is a little ahead of the scheduled time, though," Sami replied in a businesslike tone of voice.

"Emergency repairs to the spiritual reactor… Hmm. A laudable thing."

Kiriha exhaled as she gazed indifferently at the exterior wall of the damaged spiritual reactor.

Even if it was an emergency situation, leaving a spiritual reactor that could be reactivated damaged like that was a problem in itself. The decision to conduct minimal emergency repairs while the demon beast was behaving itself made logical sense.

The trailer passed through the Island Guard checkpoint, moving right up beside the demon beast as it continued to sleep.

There was nothing suspicious about its movements whatsoever.

And yet, Kiriha leaped to her feet—not due to some logical reasoning, but purely because of her intuition as a Priestess of the Six Blades.

"Sami! Call back all staff able to move with their combat gear immediately! Warn the Island Guard as well!"

"K-Kiriha…?"

Naturally, Sami was dumbfounded at Kiriha's hostility. However, Sami's hesitation lasted for only a single moment. She instantly switched gears and sent Kiriha's orders flying the bureau staffers' way.

The waterproof tarp over the trailer's cargo was violently torn from the inside out.

What came out of the tarp was not construction equipment like bulldozers, but a three-headed robot tank with dark green anti-ballistic armor. And soldiers were manning its machine gun turrets.

"All Bureau of Astrology members, arm for combat! Our foe has arrived."

Kiriha smirked as she gripped her forked spear.

Those who had created the artificial demon beast and induced it to attack Itogami Island had finally revealed themselves.

Bathed in a hail of gunfire from the assailants, the Island Guard began to engage.

Amid that storm of gunfire and angry shouts, the enormous demon beast continued to slumber.



Chapter Four
The Anger

Chapter Four

The Anger

1

It was evening, on a street.

“An impostor who looks exactly like Yukina Himeragi? And she stole the fragments of Snowdrift Wolf?” Shio tilted her head as she asked the question to Yuiri.

Through no fault of her own, she had trouble believing this. Even Kojou, who’d encountered Fake Yukina in the flesh, felt like he could scarcely believe that the girl really existed.

“Yeah—probably. The fact the real Yukii was right with me meant she wasn’t arrested instantly, but that didn’t mean suspicion was completely lifted so we were under house arrest,” Yuiri explained, her words stumbling together hastily. She was still a little out of breath.

Broken or not, Snowdrift Wolf was a secret weapon of the Lion King Agency. It had been robbed during transport by a perpetrator who resembled Yukina so closely, you couldn’t tell the two apart. So Kojou could kind of understand why the Lion King Agency had responded by putting Yukina under house arrest.

“A-and yet Yukina Himeragi left on her own anyway…! What is the meaning of this, Kojou Akatsuki?!”

Shio, somehow managing to grasp the situation, closed the distance with Kojou as the color of her face changed.

“What are you askin’ me for…?”

“That super-serious Yukina Himeragi would never turn her back on orders from the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency, right?! So the only thing I can think of is that this is somehow your fault! What did you put into that girl’s head?!” Shio grabbed Kojou by the collar and shook him.

“The hell?! You can’t just claim something like that!”

Unable to watch and do nothing, Yuiri wedged herself between the quarreling pair. “Kojou, do you have any idea where Yukii might have gone? We don’t really know this island well yet…”

“Where she might have gone…? Ah, wait…”

“Do you know something?!”

Shio strongly pulled Kojou’s face close. The action overwhelmed him.

“Ah, nah, it’s just, maybe Himeragi realized where the impostor might be?”

“The impostor’s location?!”

“Ah… That’s why Yukii flew out the door. She thought she had to catch up to the impostor before she escaped…,” Yuiri quietly murmured to herself, “I get it now.”

Shio similarly nodded. “So where would the impostor be now?”

“Er, I don’t really know, but I guess Himeragi noticed something. Plus, she probably felt she couldn’t leave the task to anyone else, so does that mean someplace where you can’t go unless you’re Himeragi…?”

“I’m asking you where this ‘someplace’ is…!!”

Shio grabbed Kojou by his collar yet again, trying to cut off the blood flow in his carotid arteries as if it were the natural thing to do, whereas Yuiri hastily tried to stop her. The three of them jostling while pressed against one another looked like a conflict immediately following an outbreak of jealousy in a three-way relationship.

He felt a cold stare focused on him; a Saikai Academy student who happened to be passing by gazed at the sight of Kojou and the girls. Her hair was white like fresh snow.

“Just what are you doing out in the open here, Kojou?”

“…Cas? Why are you here…?”

“I am in the middle of heading to visit Miss Yuno and company, but…,” Shizuri Kasugaya said, her cheek twitching sourly at being called *Cas*.

After that, Shizuri shot Shio, in the middle of wringing Kojou’s neck, an openly suspicious expression.

“More importantly, who are these people? From the looks of it, they are concealing some rather dangerous weapons… If you intend to lay hands upon Kojou further, would you perhaps like to go through me first?”

Shizuri narrowed her blue-tinged eyes. Apparently, she was trying to stand up for Kojou, still getting his neck wrung. Shizuri was giving off enough hostility that a normal person would have broken into shivers, but Yuiri and Shio took it in stride.

“…What is the meaning of this, Kojou? What is your relation to this girl?”

“Huh?”

“That declaration to not lay hands on you just now… I cannot simply let that go. It sounds to me as if she is engaged in formal interactions with you.”

“What? Formal interactions…?!”

Kojou was perplexed as Yuiri and Shio double-teamed him with questions, backing him into a corner. However, Shizuri was shaken far more than he was. She was completely beside herself, face beet-red to the tips of her ears.

“I—I am not! By ‘hands on him,’ I meant in the sense of inflicting harm, not in the sense of forbidding fraternization—er, of course I do not accept any such interactions without my permission!”

“Why do I need your permission to go out with Kojou?” Yuiri prompted back with a blank expression on her face.

Shizuri’s words caught in her throat. “I-if you must know, it is because…of the danger this man presents…”

Shio assumed a dead-serious stance. “Put another way, we can interact with

Kojou Akatsuki if we have your permission…?”

Kojou quickly felt a headache coming on as he shook his head. “Hey…you’re all taking this conversation off the rails. More importantly, Cas, have you seen Himeragi anywhere?”

“Himeragi from school…you mean? Well, I saw her just earlier…”

Shio and Yuiri swiftly surrounded Shizuri as they questioned her.

“What?!”

“Really?!”

For once, a look came over Shizuri like she was the one overwhelmed by sheer force. “Wh-what…?!”

Kojou turned to her, far more serious than before. “Where did you see her?”

Shizuri, still a little bewildered, straightened her posture. “I saw her running in the direction of school. Alone.”

“School? Saikai Academy?”

“Er…then, the place you can’t go in unless you’re Yukii, is Yukii’s school?”

Shio and Yuiri exchanged a glance. They surely felt that the robbery of Snowdrift Wolf and her school were not connected in any way.

However, it was true that Saikai Academy fit a place that was hard to enter unless you were Yukina. At the very least, there was no mistaking that Yuiri and Shio would attract a lot of attention if they were wandering around wearing the uniform of a different school.

“At any rate, let us be off. We may still be able to catch up to her,” Shio said.

“I—I suppose so,” Yuiri agreed. “If we’re with Kojou, we shouldn’t have too much trouble getting in.”

“Got it. Thanks, Cas. You saved our butts!”

“Kojou? What in the world is going o—”

Shizuri reflexively tried to stop Kojou and the others as they hastily tried to break out into a run when—

Suddenly, the feet of everyone in that place came to a halt. They'd sensed a powerful presence that charged the air and made it shudder. It was not only Yuiri and the other Attack Mages; it was such a powerful wave of spiritual energy that even Kojou, a complete amateur in affairs of magic, could sense it. He felt like his skin was being burned in the rays of a midsummer's sun.

"What is this spiritual energy…?!"

"It's in the direction of Island North!"

Shio and Yuiri had grave expressions on their faces as they glared toward Itogami Island's north side. Looking toward it from South, where Kojou and the others were presently situated, it was on the opposite side of the island—the farthest Gigafloat away, with Keystone Gate smack dab in the middle. Yet, they had keenly felt the spiritual energy coming from there. That alone made them certain that something highly abnormal was occurring.

"Island North…?!" Kojou exclaimed, uneasy. "Are you saying that demon beast has gone on a rampage?"

The Unknown's surfacing point was right there, giving rise to all kinds of trouble as it was. It could not be a simple coincidence. Even if the cause of this abnormality was something else, it was virtually certain that being bathed in such powerful spiritual energy from so close would awaken the sleeping Unknown.

Clicking his tongue, Kojou turned on a dime. Yukina was very much on his mind, but the abnormality on Island North was higher on the priority list. That said, it wasn't a distance he could simply sprint across, either. *Guess I've gotta grab a taxi*, thought Kojou as he approached the street.

"Huh?!"

What was closing in, filling Kojou's vision, was the front grill of an enormous tractor trailer.

Kojou didn't understand what was going on. What he did understand was the abnormal growling of an engine, and the arc traced by the center pole which had snapped and gone flying.

The huge commercial vehicle leaping across the center divider was charging

straight at Kojou and the others.

The words *traffic accident* were all that rose to the forefront of his mind. He was completely blindsided, like some sort of unrealistic plot twist straight out of a bad action movie.

“Kojou!”

Shizuri’s plaintive cry was drowned out by the sound of metal colliding against metal.

The guard rail sustaining a direct impact from the trailer was sent flying just like that, twisting the crossing signal post in the process.

It was Shio who saved Kojou. Jumping in from the side, she embraced Kojou mid-leap and proceeded to roll with him on the ground, by which Kojou narrowly avoided becoming roadkill.

Having lost sight of its target, the trailer climbed an incline beside the sidewalk and came to a halt.

White steam was hovering over the radiator, broken from excessive pressure; oil and brake fluid were coursing onto the ground. From the trailer, rolled onto its side, a metal container tumbled out onto the street.

Grimacing at the strange scents hovering in the air, Yuiri called out to them. “Kojou! Shio!”

Shio lightly shook her head as she rose to her feet. “We are unharmed! More importantly—”

Shizuri’s rage was palpable as she glared at the driver’s seat. “What in the world is with this trailer…?!”

In spite of the scale of the accident, the trailer’s driver was relatively unharmed. However, the driver showed no sign of revealing his face. There were no tire marks from braking on the road. It was as if he’d been aiming at Kojou and the others on purpose.

Finally grasping the situation, Kojou warily rose to his feet.

Before his eyes, a figure slowly descended before him.

It was a man wearing a thin, white gown. He had a handsome, androgynous face, but thanks to his indifferently lengthened forelocks and the frigid eyes underneath, it was difficult to call his appearance charming.

As Kojou and the others reflexively went on guard, the man slowly surveyed the area in a theatrical gesture. His expression was an extremely amused one. He looked like a researcher just prior to presenting the results of his painstaking research.

“Hello. Pardon my rudeness. It would seem I had a little bit of an accident. However, it is my good fortune to find you together, Fourth Primogenitor and owner of Hauras.”

“What…did you say?”

The man knew their identities— Realizing this, Kojou and the others were taken aback.

A cruel smile was carved upon the man in white’s lips as he operated a remote control. The metal container that had tumbled onto the road vibrated, and its lid blasted off with an explosive roar.

Enveloped by white mist, something inside the container blinked, its eyes darting around.

They were six gleaming, crimson eyes, like fires blazing amid the darkness.

“It would seem I have had a minor cargo spill. I would, of course, appreciate your aid in recovering it—”

The man spoke in a blunt tone as if it was entirely someone else’s problem.

The next instant, six demon beasts crawled out of three separate containers, howling atop the dusky street as one.

2

The battle was at a stalemate.

The mysterious assailants from the large trailer that had barged in were in combat with the Island Guard.

However, the standoff was unlikely to continue for long. It was clear to anyone that the Island Guard was at an increasing disadvantage as combat wore on. This was because the assailants displayed no sign of fatigue, nor the slightest disturbance from their comrades' deaths, nor even any sign of registering the pain of their wounds.

Realizing the nature of the assailants, Kiriha grimaced in displeasure. "Golems?"

They were dolls manipulated through use of a spell. The materials used to create them were likely human corpses. This was the truth underlying the soldiers that felt neither pain nor fear. Unable to engage in flexible decision-making, they did not make the best soldiers, but under limited circumstances such as theirs, they became foes troublesome beyond their specs.

"The robot tank is unmanned as well, isn't it…? Just what is their objective, I wonder?" Sami said.

The robot tank the assailants had brought in made no sign of attempting a breakout through sheer firepower, merely suppressing the Island Guard from start to finish. Such passive actions were one reason the combat was stalemated. It felt as if the other side was prolonging combat on purpose.

"Island Guard reinforcements?" Kiriha asked.

"The request has already gone out. However, their arrival might be delayed."

Kiriha shot a questioning look toward her partner. "Why?"

"We have received reports that small-scale Unknowns have appeared at the fuel stockpile in Island East and the commercial harbor in Island West. I am still in the process of confirming the fine details, but—"

“That…is no mere coincidence, is it?”

“Yes, they are most likely diversions,” Sami stated gravely.

The fact that multiple Unknowns had appeared was not especially surprising. After all, the opponent had such an absurd life force that even its severed tentacles could regenerate. That it might reproduce in a short span of time was not at all strange.

However, merely regarding them as natural phenomena was insufficient to explain their appearance in multiple places simultaneously. It clearly reeked of human sabotage. The likely objective was to divide the Island Guard’s fighting strength to thin out the forces available to defend that place.

“A diversion…” Kiriha turned melancholy. “I wonder, is it proper to hypothesize that the unit attacking here is the main force? In the first place, what is their objective? It does not appear they came to recover the demon beast.”

Sami touched a finger to her cheek as she thought about it a little. “I…suppose you are right. The enemy’s fighting strength does seem rather short-handed for a main push. This district also has the security unit for the spiritual reactor, so if the Island Guard added them to the fray, I do not think the assailants stand a chance—”

“…The spiritual reactor?”

Kiriha lifted her face and looked at Sami.

It was a mere four hundred meters to the spiritual reactor facility from where Unknown IX-4 was still sleeping. Of course, the Island Guard protecting the reactor had to be keeping a close eye on the assailants that had encroached as far as practically a stone’s throw away. That made its watch over the facility interior that much thinner.

“What is the security for the spiritual reactor itself doing?”

“They should be remaining on guard with the bare minimum personnel, but—”

Sami operated her personal tablet to check on things inside the spiritual

reactor facility. However, all that was displayed on the screen was an error message, which meant transmissions had been cut. Transmissions from the security cameras had been severed. Realizing this, Sami's expression froze over.

"They really got us good."

Kiriha made that throwaway comment. Before she'd even finished her murmur, an alarm rang from Sami's hands. It was an emergency transmission from the security unit for the spiritual reactor.

"This is the Bureau of Astrology. Has something happened?"

"D-demon beast! Unknown of the same type as IX-4 is inside the spiritual reactor facility…!"

"…!"

Faced with the worst report she could imagine, Sami was at a loss for words. The situation—that not only had another group of assailants appeared, but a demon beast had invaded the interior of the spiritual reactor facility—was completely beyond her expectations.

Theoretically, the beings known as spirits were the opposite of a vampire's Beast Vassals. If a Beast Vassal was a mass of demonic energy possessing a will of its own, a spirit was a mass of spiritual energy in the same respect. A spiritual reactor was a system that artificially summoned a spirit and employed it as a source of spiritual energy.

At present, the spiritual reactor was in emergency shutdown mode. A barrier had been deployed to sever the supply of spiritual energy from the outside, but the body of upper-planar energy called a "spirit" for the convenience of mankind remained summoned inside the reactor.

If that seal was broken, a vast quantity of spiritual energy would surely gush out from the reactor's interior. Damage on par with a vampiric Beast Vassal running amok would doubtlessly be incurred by the area surrounding the reactor.

The existence of a demon beast of the same type as IX-4 made things all that much worse. There was no longer any way to even imagine what might occur. After all, they devoured magical and spiritual energy alike.

Sami asked in a frail voice. “An Unknown…? But how…?!”

“Someone sent an IX-4 in through teleportation—that’s what it means,” Kiriha murmured, her expression turning blank. “The capsule left behind in Cluster Six is proof of that. I should have realized it sooner.”

The cultivation capsule recovered near the point of IX-4’s first sighting felt to Kiriha like the vestiges of a teleport. Her intuition hadn’t been wrong.

With the golems’ assault pulling the spiritual reactor security unit’s attention away, a demon beast had been directly teleported behind the short-handed unit’s back. That was the assailants’ true objective. Meaning, this raid was a decoy, too.

“The seal is being removed! The spiritual reactor is restarting…!”

Sami’s report caused the Bureau of Astrology staffers around them to waver. One staffer uneasily holding a weapon, seemingly no longer able to bear it, stepped up and questioned Kiriha.

“Should we charge into the spiritual reactor? We could maybe make it in time —”

“Futile. Let things be.”

However, Kiriha punted the bureau staffer’s proposal away.

“B-but…!”

“We cannot misunderstand our place. This is Itogami city-state, not Japan.”

Kiriha’s unexpected words drove the bureau staffers into a seemingly perplexed silence. Kiriha turned a cold smile their way.

“If they cannot overcome a crisis of this scale, they should not deign to be a Dominion. There is no reason for our hearts to mourn for them. Let us leave mundane counterterrorism measures to the so-called experts. We have our own job to do. Is that clear?”

An air of understanding spread across the faces of the Bureau staffers. The mission of the Bureau of Astrology was the quelling of demon beasts. Even if, regrettably, the spiritual reactor’s restart was not prevented, the consequence was that they would destroy the awakened Unknown—that was what Kiriha

was saying.

“Understood, Attack Mage Kisaki.”

The bureau staffers came to attention all at once. Kiriha gave an annoyed wave toward them as she gripped her forked spear.

The vast spiritual energy leaking out from the spiritual reactor charged the air and caused it to tremble.

As the demon beast continued to sleep, its tentacles moved faintly, almost like pulsing veins.

3

In the staff room wing of Saikai Academy's campus building…

For some reason, the office on the top floor, haughtier and grander to the eye than the principal's office, belonged to Natsuki Minamiya.

It had a thick carpet and billowing curtains. The furniture was old-fashioned and antique. It was a room that exuded class, coming off as some kind of palace.

"Ms. Minamiya, are you here?"

Yukina did not wait for a reply to her knock before entering the room.

Sitting in an old-fashioned chair, Natsuki regarded Yukina as if she were a fly that had wandered in. She opened her mouth with an air of tedium.

"Yukina Himeragi, is it? It is well past time to go home from school. Did you forget something?"

"Yes, you could say that."

Yukina slowly nodded. Natsuki did not shift her eyes away during that time.

"Hmph." Natsuki smiled scornfully. "Why make such a scary expression? You'll put that pretty face—one of your few redeeming features—to waste, you know?"

Unsure whether Natsuki's statement was praise or disparagement, Yukina bit her lip with a conflicted look. "Where is she?"

"Where is who?"

"The girl who pretended to be me here at school two mornings ago."

"Hmm, what are you talking about?"

Natsuki played dumb without the slightest change of her expression. *Why, I have no idea what you mean*, said her demeanor.

However, Yukina did not avert her eyes. "She teleported into the girls' changing room. Some further removed place and via different magic might be

another matter, but it is unlikely you would fail to notice signs of teleportation within school grounds."

"More precisely, magic of a nature very similar to teleportation. However…"

Natsuki readily conceded the point. It was not because she thought she could not conceal the truth, Yukina was sure, but merely that she found it too much trouble to do so.

I knew it, Yukina's sigh seemed to say.

"She disappeared shortly after that. Even Asagi was unable to ascertain her whereabouts. That means she left this school without being filmed by the security cameras on the island."

In other words, Fake Yukina had been teleporting around the island.

No matter how high-level the magic user, you couldn't fire off high-level spells like teleportation one after another…save for one, tiny witch, who manipulated space as easily as she breathed.

"I'd intended to drop a number of hints, but it took a surprising amount of time for you to notice. Well, I suppose I would give you a barely passing grade." She added with a shrug of her delicate shoulders, "Goodness."

Yukina gave the diminutive teacher a look of open dismay. "Where is she?"

"If you mean Reina, she is still sleeping. It would seem she is fatigued from demonic energy depletion."

"…Reina? Is that the girl's name?"

Yukina raised a twitching eyebrow. Natsuki's reference to depletion of demonic energy tugged at her, too.

"I have no way of determining whether that is her real name."

Yukina sighed once more. "Please allow me to see her immediately."

"To do what?"

"To take back the Schneewaltzer she stole," Yukina asserted.

Natsuki seemed beside herself as she broke into laughter. "The broken spear? What do you intend to do with it when you retrieve it?"

“Well…”

“Surely that broken staff being stolen en route is no responsibility of yours. What will taking it back change? Is that really want you want?” Natsuki asked, somehow amused.

Yukina sullenly rebutted, “However, I cannot close my eyes to the fact it is my impostor who took the Schneewaltzer.”

“It is not as if the Lion King Agency ordered you to recover the spear, did they? What is your reason for wanting to get the spear’s remnants back on your own? Do you think if you have that spear, you can remain at Kojou Akatsuki’s side as you have until now?”

“That’s not…!”

Yukina’s voice reflexively went ragged, but it rapidly lost its vigor midway. Even she lacked the confidence to say whether Natsuki’s assertion was off the mark.

Natsuki observed Yukina’s reaction with deep interest. “I have no duty to stop you, but I’ll ask you to cease your actions. Do you really intend to fight a second-generation vampire without a weapon?”

“Second-generation…?!”

Yukina’s eyes widened in astonishment.

A second-generation vampire meant the generation after a primogenitor—in other words, a child conceived between a vampire primogenitor and his own Blood Bride. Depending on the individual, it was said that the child had abilities rivaling a primogenitor, and some displayed special abilities inherited from the Blood Bride as well.

If Natsuki’s words were true, that meant one of Fake Yukina’s—one of Reina’s—parents was a primogenitor.

The one that immediately came to mind was the Third Primogenitor—Giada Kukulkin, the Chaos Bride, who possessed transformation powers. Once, she appeared before Yukina and others in the form of Avrora. Naturally, it was no stretch to imagine that a daughter of Giada would be able to turn herself into

Yukina.

However, that did not ring true.

Even if she was a daughter of Giada, she would have no reason to go out of her way to turn herself into Yukina. Her motives for aiding them in dealing with the Unknown and stealing the broken Snowdrift Wolf were a mystery. Besides, it didn't explain the reason she was able to take over Asagi's brand-new AI. The same went for if she was related to the First or the Second Primogenitor, for that matter.

Yukina stepped closer. "What do you mean she is a second-generation—"

For some reason, Natsuki shot an annoyed expression at her student. "Have you really not figured it out yet? She is your—"

"Aaaah…! Natsuki, you can't tell her that!"

Bang! The back door flew open, with Fake Yukina—Reina—leaping forward in a panic.

Yukina gaped in astonishment at the girl with the same face as her. "Y-you are…!"

"Oopsie, my bad. Let me take that back… Uhh, not that I suppose you'll pretend you didn't see that, huh."

"Of course not!"

When Reina hastily tried to return to the storeroom in back, Yukina fixed a strong look at her.

"Please return Snowdrift Wolf. That spear belongs to the Lion King Agency. If you politely return the spear, I will guarantee your safety. If you do not heed my warning, I will take it by any means necessary."

"Ugh… This again?"

Faced with that ultimatum, a perturbed Reina stared intently at Yukina.

The girl's words took Yukina aback. Was she implying that they'd known each other for a long time?

"…Again?"

“You’re always like this. You’re not interested in my side of the story, not even a little.”

Reina spoke with a defiant tone. For some reason, her demeanor, as if resentment piled upon resentment, ready to explode at any moment, gave Yukina a vague sense of guilt.

“Your side? What are you talking about? This is what I believe is best for—”

The rebuttal only enraged Reina further. “Ohh, there it is. That trademark line. You always make decisions on your own without listening to a single word I say! Even though you’re doing it with Kojou at your age!”

“Wh…what are you speaking of…?!”

“Vampiric activities!”

Reina’s overly blunt assertion left Yukina’s words stuck in her throat. Her cheeks became hot and flushed.

“That has nothing to do with you, does it…?!”

“I wonder…” Even as a suggestive look came over her face, Reina gave a dismissive shrug of her shoulders. “Well, not that it really matters right now.”

I must not play her game. Yukina put her breathing in order, all expression vanishing from her face. “Where is Snowdrift Wolf?”

“If you want it back so bad, why not try and take it by force?” Reina grinned at her, utterly defiant.

Though vampires possessed immortal bodies with vast life forces and the menace of their Beast Vassals’ power, vampires themselves were physically frail as Demonkind went. Even without using Snowdrift Wolf, Yukina possessed any number of ways of neutralizing an opponent. All she had to do was destroy the girl’s brain before she could summon a Beast Vassal.

However, just before Yukina launched a preemptive strike, Reina *hmm*’d with a very suggestive smile. “You sure you wanna take me on?”

Yukina concealed her inner turmoil as she probed for more. “Are you implying I shouldn’t?”

Reina turned serious, less aggressive. She looked out the window. “I know you’re really close to me, but can’t you feel it? Kojou seems to be in a bit of a pinch.”

“—!”

Yukina’s action was swift. Without any hesitation, she turned her back to Reina and Natsuki, racing out of the room with incredible force. She was likely employing physical enchantment right up against its outer limits. Reina didn’t even have time to mock her.

“…Hey, wait a… She decides fast…!”

Reina stood stiff, watching Yukina go as she vanished from sight in no time at all. There was surprise hovering in her eyes, yet also an aura that seemed like… satisfaction.

“She’s always honest with herself like this. How cute…,” Reina murmured to herself, trying to bite back the joy in her voice.

Having silently listened to their conversation, Natsuki murmured, “What a troublesome girl.” She sighed. “You sure teased her a lot. You really love her, don’t you?”

No way! Reina almost replied on reflex, but she swallowed down the words as she stuck her tongue out toward Yukina.

She smiled teasingly as she shook her head, seemingly at herself this time.

“Well, I suppose you could say that. I wouldn’t be going through all this trouble if I didn’t, you know?”

4

The six demon beasts were each between four and five meters in length. If you ignored their tails, their torsos alone were probably around the scale of a large crocodile. Compared to Unknown IX-4 sleeping over in North, their tentacles were shorter and fewer in number. However, the demon beasts were plainly of the same type. Perhaps they were upset because they were stuffed into cramped containers; they seemed even more ferocious than IX-4 had.

Yuiri, Shio, and even Shizuri voiced their questions simultaneously.

“Demon beasts…?!”

“What were they doing in the trailer…?!”

“What is the meaning of this?! Who are you?!”

However, the man in the white gown made no reply. In its place came the demon beasts’ roars, resounding loudly enough to make them want to cover their ears.

“Shit…!!”

Kojou grimaced nervously as he stepped to the fore.

Island South was an educational district, with numerous learning facilities like schools and libraries. It was part of a quiet residential neighborhood. Even the main street Kojou and the others were on was lined with several homes. If a horde of demon beasts was left to rampage in a place like that, the number of casualties would no doubt far exceed that in North. Stopping the demon beasts came ahead of determining the white-robed man’s identity.

“C’mon over, Dabih Crystall—”

However, the voice with which Kojou attempted to summon his Beast Vassal was interrupted by a boisterous gunshot. The man in the white gown had taken a submachine gun out from behind his back and shot the Fourth Primogenitor with it.

“Kojou…?!” Yuiri yelped upon seeing him stagger.

He coughed, and blood spilled from his mouth. The man in the white gown had used anti-demon bullets tipped with silver-iridium. These inhibited the special abilities vampires possessed, and a burning pain ran through Kojou's open wounds. He could not attempt to summon his Beast Vassals now.

Satisfied, the man said, "We have already acquired data on your Beast Vassals, so…this time, Fourth Primogenitor, I would like you to contribute to our research in a different way."

Kojou grimaced in anguish. "Data…? …Who the hell are…?"

The man in the white gown backed away from Kojou's glare in silence; the demon beasts pressed forward in his stead. The scent of the vampire's scattering blood had agitated them.

"I won't—"

"—allow that to happen!!"

Shio and Shizuri respectively activated ritual spells. Shio had deployed a barrier to protect against demon beast intrusion. Shizuri had deployed a physical bulwark to defend against gunfire.

Realizing this, the man in the white gown scoffed loudly, "I am grateful that you would employ your magical energy. Thank you."

"What?!"

"Oh n…!"

Shio and Shizuri's expressions contorted. IX-4 consumed magical energy. Barriers and bulwarks were nothing to them save food—the pair had just remembered.

A demon beast trampled the barrier like it was nothing, eating through the physical bulwark. Their spells broken, Shio and Shizuri were left defenseless as countless tentacles bore down toward them.

"Tch…!"

It was Kojou who shielded the immobile duo. Thrusting both aside, he jumped in front of them, blocking the demon beast's attacks with his own body.

“Kojou?!”

Shizuri’s eyes opened wide as she noticed the fresh blood flying in all directions.

Unable to block the demon beast tentacles, they thrust straight through Kojou’s torso. He groaned in agony.

The tentacles ferociously writhed in an attempt to widen the wounds they had made by impaling him. The slimy tentacles pulsed as they became bathed in a dazzling glow. They were draining the demonic energy of the Fourth Primogenitor straight from Kojou’s flesh.

The vast torrent of energy made the demon beasts’ bodies swell in the blink of an eye. What looked like blood vessels bulged all over the demon beasts’ bodies, and their cells turned charcoal-black. As the demon beasts continued to swell, their contours became twisted. Then, pushed beyond their limits, their cells blew apart as if typhoons had spawned from inside their own bodies. The demon beasts’ bodies had been unable to endure the torrent of a primogenitor’s supposedly inexhaustible demonic energy.

“Ha-ha, that’s the Fourth Primogenitor for you! Not even IX-4’s cells can withstand that volume of demonic energy influx…!”

The man in the white gown laughed wildly as his entire body was painted by the fragments of flesh pouring down like rain. It was the broken laughter of a man possessed by excessive inquisitiveness.

The remaining five demon beasts fought over the flying fragments of their kin’s flesh as they devoured every last morsel. By consuming those fragments, they took into their own bodies the vestiges of Kojou’s demonic energy left within.

“Rosen Chevalier Plus, boot up!”

Surprisingly, it was Yuiri who first recovered from her initial fright. Drawing her long sword from the musical case on her back, Yuiri charged straight into the horde of crazed demon beasts.

Severed demon beast tentacles danced in the sky.

Yuiri's silver long sword was inscribed with the ritual for pseudo-spatial severing. What the blade severed was space itself, never coming into direct contact with the actual demon beasts. Naturally, this left the demon beasts unable to absorb its magical energy. Yuiri's Rosen Chevalier Plus was one of the few effective weapons against Unknown IX-4.

However, the area cut by Rosen Chevalier Plus was too narrow to compete with the abnormally high regenerative ability of the demon beasts. The slime-slicked wounds immediately closed and healed. Thanks to that, Yuiri's attacks did not inflict fatal damage. It was all she could do to slice the demon beasts' tentacles down and impede their ability to attack.

"—Verify request! Freikugel Plus Proto Three, unlock!"

Shio raised her silver recurve bow to support Yuiri, who was surrounded by the demon beasts.

She knocked a whistling arrow. These ritual arrows chanted high-density spells impossible for humans to reproduce, turning them into an immensely powerful ritual spell artillery barrage.

Yuiri warned, "Shio, ritual spell barrages against these demon beasts—"

"Understood!"

Shio let her ritual arrow fly.

A roar imbued with ritual energy transformed into a shockwave cannonball that assailed the demon beasts.

A ritual spell barrage would backfire against demon beasts able to absorb magical energy. However, the explosive sound and the shockwave generated by the ritual arrow had destructive power all their own. At the very least, they were sufficient to give a demon beast a good smack.

One of the demon beasts took the shockwave to the head, bowling it over. Using that opening, Yuiri was able to escape from the demon beasts' encirclement.

"If it was going to be like this, I should have been walking around with Hauras!"

For her part, Shizuri aimed at the man in the white gown, who seemed hell-bent on watching from a high vantage point. With one hand, Shizuri picked up the road sign pole broken off when the trailer collided with it, swinging it upward and smashing it toward the man in white like a club. The man's eyes opened wide at the feat of strength from what looked like a delicately built girl.

"That arm strength… Are you an Ogre?!"

"So what if I am?!"

Shizuri swung the pole down with all her might, but it bounced off right before the man's eyes as if it had struck some kind of invisible wall. It was a spellcrafted barrier, the same sort that Shizuri had used just earlier.

Back at you, said the leering grin on the man's face, making Shizuri bare her teeth as it burned her inside. Then, as if sensing something was amiss, Shizuri tossed away the warped pole and retreated.

"Could he be aiming to slow us down…?"

"Slow us…down…?"

Kojou, still down on one knee, wiped his bloody lips. The bizarre surge coming from Island North increased in force anew. Even someone as ill versed in magic as Kojou could distinctly tell what it was: a surge of spiritual energy leaking out from a spiritual reactor.

"The spiritual reactor's gone active…? Then, the Unknown will…"

"I do not think it will sleep through all of this."

Kojou's and Shizuri's expressions both contorted uneasily.

In the previous battle, they had been able to oppose Unknown IX-4 only with Kojou's Beast Vassal, Shizuri's Hauras, and Yukina's Snowdrift Wolf. Now that Snowdrift Wolf was lost, Kojou and Shizuri might be able to slow it down, but it was effectively impossible to neutralize IX-4.

"Then, this is to keep us from being able to go to Island North?" Yuiri speculated, grasping the situation.

Shio understood as well. "More than us, the target being slowed down is Kojou Akatsuki…!"

Even as Kojou and the others dawdled there, North was careening toward the worst possible situation. If combat dragged on, that would be plenty so far as the man in the white gown was concerned.

He was surely well aware of the fact. The man in the white gown displayed confidence to a detestable extent. That was why he did not launch further attacks on the wounded Kojou. *Stop playin' games with me*, thought Kojou, audibly clenching his teeth.

"Shio, can you do one of those people-repelling barriers, so people with nothing to do with this don't get involved?"

She nodded. "Y-yes. I do not think that is a significant problem…"

The barrier had a wide area of effect, but the amount of ritual energy employed was scant. Even if the demon beasts absorbed the magical energy, the effect wouldn't go beyond a rounding error.

"Yuiri, Cas, shut that guy up for a while, would you?"

Both were a little perplexed as they looked back at Kojou.

"Sure, but—"

"What do you intend to do about the demon beasts, Kojou?"

He got to his feet. "Please. I'll deal with 'em somehow."

Shizuri and the others hesitated for only a single moment. If they didn't do something, the situation would only worsen. Worried as they were, they could only trust Kojou—no doubt that was the conclusion they all reached.

"Freikugel Plus!"

Shio released a ritual arrow toward the upper sky. The roar that seemed to split the very air apart was the catalyst for carving a giant magic circle into thin air. It was a powerful person-repelling ward created via ritual artillery barrage. A fair number of onlookers noticing the demon beast ruckus had gathered around, but then fear had sent them running.

Seeing this for himself, Kojou smiled ferociously. Stripping off his blood-drenched jacket, he walked toward the demon beasts.

“All right, Unknowns— Time to show you how a real monster plays!”

As Kojou howled his taunt, the demon beasts bore down upon him. Countless tentacles and thick limbs launched attacks that pressed upon him like billowing waves, yet Kojou charged amid it all.

“Ah, Kojou Akatsuki…?!”

Seeing Kojou act so recklessly—as if he *wanted* to be eaten—made Shio blanch.

Then, amid the roars and tremors of the demon beasts, the vast torrent of demonic energy that came without warning made Shio do another double take. From the very center of the scattering demonic came Kojou’s voice.

“I, Kojou Akatsuki, inheritor of the Kaleid Blood, release thee from thy bonds!”

A demon beast opened its mouth to tear its prey asunder as Kojou thrust his right arm into it.

The pressure of the demonic energy gushing forth left the demon beast unable to close its jaw. Having rendered it defenseless, Kojou summoned his own Beast Vassal at the back of the creature’s throat.

“—C’mon over, Cor-Tauri Succinum!”

A minotaur composed of incandescent magma materialized inside the demon beast.

The demon beast’s body swelled as it attempted to swallow the Beast Vassal’s demonic energy whole, every cell in its body going into a restless state.

But this was for only a single instant. Unable to withstand the vast amount of demonic energy being shoved down its throat, the demon beast’s body burst apart, with countless pieces of flesh sent flying, only to be absorbed by the scalding lava, vaporized without a trace.

“He fed the demon beast demonic energy…? On purpose…?!”

Shio exhaled in a daze when she realized what Kojou’s plan had been.

He’d hurled a mass of demonic energy into the body of the energy-consuming

demon; far more than it could handle. It was a reckless attack that was practically suicide. Caught up in the demon beast's explosion, Kojou's own body suffered grievous wounds. His endurance had to have been depleted to a tremendous extent, yet…

"Overeating isn't good for the body, y'know…? Not for humans, and not for demon beasts!"

Even as he wobbled, Kojou flashed an impetuous smile. There were four demon beasts left. The surviving demon beasts attacked Kojou, showing no sign of fear over their kin being burned away.

"C'mon over, Cor-Tauri Succinum! Natra Cinereus! Regulus Aurum! Sadalmelik Albus—!"

Once more, Kojou summoned Beast Vassals and launched them at the demon beasts.

He called forth Vassal after Vassal and plunged them directly into the demon beasts' bodies. Unable to withstand the surplus of concentrated demonic energy, the creatures burst apart again and again. It was a spectacle that might well be called "demonic energy bombs."

Burned to a crisp, the demon beasts' huge bodies were reduced to ash, leaving dense demonic energy whipping about, warping the air like a mirage. A normal, untrained human being might well have lost consciousness just from being in the area. That was how malevolent and savage the energy was.

"So this is the Fourth Primogenitor's true power…!"

"You overdid it, Kojou, you idiot!"

Yuiri's and Shizuri's voices painfully trembled. Struck by Kojou's demonic energy, neither could properly breathe. The fact they could continue to move even so was proof of both being excellent Attack Mages.

"Who would have ever thought you would neutralize the IX-4s by such absurd means… Ah-ha-ha-ha, that is the Fourth Primogenitor for you. Thanks to this, I have obtained some very interesting data!" the man in the white gown exclaimed as his eyes gleamed with delight. His right hand was holding a tiny measuring device. He'd no doubt remained in that place so that he could collect

combat data from Kojou.

“Stop fooling around!”

“Do you truly think you can take that data and leave in one piece?!”

Yuiri and Shizuri moved into a pincer formation, attacking the man from left and right. Yuiri’s long sword powerfully cleaved apart the physical bulwark, leaving Shizuri to leap through the tear in the wall. It was splendid coordination that did not look like the work of an impromptu duo. Shizuri grabbed hold of the man’s throat and proceeded to slam him back-first onto the ground.

“But of course.”

The blow was sufficient to make someone lose consciousness instantly, but the man was calmly chuckling. The bizarre lack of resistance made Shizuri’s expression freeze over. The man’s skin cracked like some kind of clay pot, and the scent of volatile gases wafted into the air. It was a golem under precision remote control. It had a self-destruct mechanism. There was a sound like a *click*.

“Why, you little…!”

Shizuri’s voice was engulfed by the blast winds.

Flames and flashes of light exploded all around her. All Kojou and the others could do was watch, helpless.

5

“Caaaaasss—!”

Forgetting his own wounds, Kojou tried to leap toward the center of the smoke.

However, before he had advanced several paces, his legs came to a stop, for he noticed the silhouette of a girl standing at the center of the explosion site wearing an expression of disappointment. *Koff, koff*, went the sound he heard that bore not a single hint of tension.

“C… Cas?”

“Goodness… What a terrible thing to undergo.”

As Kojou and the others watched dumbfounded, Shizuri pressed down upon her disheveled forelocks and sighed.

It most certainly was not a half-hearted explosion. That was plain from a single glance at Shizuri’s scorched, rent, and tattered clothes. Not even a trace remained of the golem that had been the source of the explosion.

However, Shizuri herself was virtually unharmed. At most, her face and limbs were grimy from soot.

“Did that explosion not hurt her at all…?”

“Because…she’s an Ogre?”

Shio and Yuiri were perplexed, unable to conceal their surprise. Shizuri gave her own version.

“’Tis the blessing of a Paladin.”

Shizuri calmly asserted this with a proud puffing of her chest. It was then that the buttons of her blouse—reduced to ash—crumbled and fell off. *Rustle*, went her shirt as it parted right and left, exposing her pure undergarment which bore a cute design.

“—Wait, you saw, didn’t you?!”

“In this situation, how could anyone not see?!”

With a yelp, Shizuri covered her breasts as Kojou hastily averted his eyes.

At any rate, based on that, Shizuri truly seemed to be safe and sound. Kojou wasn’t sure if it was her lineage or because she was a Paladin, but surprise slammed into him either way.

In the first place, it was this hard-as-nails Shizuri that Yukina had beaten senseless with her bare hands. Belatedly, Kojou keenly understood the reason Shizuri regarded Yukina with such fear.

“More importantly, are you all right, Kojou?”

Shizuri borrowed the outer garment of Yuiri’s uniform, putting it on as she posed that question.

“Yeah,” he said, but the instant he tried to nod, his knees buckled. He slumped against a broken roadside streetlight, then proceeded to slide until he was sitting on the ground.

“Kojou…?!”

“It’s all right. I’ll heal after I get some rest.”

It was Kojou’s shaky smile that stopped Shizuri from rushing right over. The wounds over his entire body plus the depletion of his demonic energy left him unable to put strength into his legs.

“I’m fine, Cas, so please, go to Island North and help Kisaki. At this rate, Miyazumi and Amase’s hospital’ll be in danger, too.”



Shizuri’s expression went taut as she nodded. “I—I understand that!”

Unknown IX-4 would doubtlessly awaken due to the effects of the restarted spiritual reactor. And Shizuri’s Hauras was the only weapon able to inflict damage on IX-4 with no risk. That was why the man in the white gown was trying to slow Shizuri down as much as Kojou.

“Shio, we should go, too.”

“I—I suppose. If this demon beast incident is a creature made for terrorism, it’s under the Lion King Agency’s jurisdiction. We have to at least confirm the situation.”

Shio agreed with Yuiri’s suggestion without hesitation, but then she came to a halt as she worriedly stared at the wounded Kojou.

“But what about him? Unless someone stays here to watch him…”

“I see… I suppose that’s still important. What to do…”

Yuiri murmured with a conflicted look as she and Shio traded glances. They couldn’t leave Kojou unattended, but splitting their fighting strength up was not a good plan—they had no answer to that dilemma.

“In other words, we merely need to keep this man from doing anything reckless like just earlier, I take it?”

In place of the anguished Yuiri and Shio, it was Shizuri who approached Kojou.

The girl was audibly dragging along a metallic cable more than sufficient to wrap up a single person. Apparently, she’d picked up the cable, sufficient for towing a rather large commercial vehicle, from the remains of the tractor trailer.

“Hey, wait. Cas? What are you doing with that cable…?!”

“Stop with Cas this and Cas that! Do you wish these people to mistake that for my real name?!”

Shizuri levied her belated objection as she tied the wounded Kojou to the pole of the streetlight. She resorted to brute strength to tightly tie the cable—nearly two centimeters in diameter—making sure that Kojou could not move.

“There—all better.”

“What’s good about this?! Isn’t this unlawful confinement?! For that matter, you tryin’ to leave a prisoner to fry in the desert sun?!”

“If you recover enough to summon a Beast Vassal, you can surely escape from this with your own strength. Until then, I want you to behave yourself.”

Satisfied with her solution, Shizuri no longer paid Kojou even a glance as she raced down the main street. Yuiri and Shio were still a tiny bit hesitant.

“W-well, if that’s how it’s going to be…”

“I’ll leave a *shikigami* to observe him just to be safe.”

Yuiri and Shio nodded to each other in a forced acceptance of the situation.

Shio pulled a spell tablet out of a pocket of her uniform, chanted a brief spell, and transformed it into a bird. It was a bird of prey about sixty centimeters long covered in silver feathers.

“Why a vulture?! That’s too scary, geez!”

Kojou let out a fervent yelp when he saw the wicked bird, the same as was said in mythology to have devoured the liver of Prometheus when he was confined by chains.

However, Shio smiled at him. “Relax. The ward from earlier is still in effect. There is little chance of ordinary citizens seeing you like this.”

“Sorry, Kojou. We’re off.”

Yuiri placed her hands together toward the incredulous Kojou in apology, and then the two of them raced off after Shizuri.

Left behind inside the people-repelling barrier, Kojou wilted and hung his head. The instant he did, he was assailed by dizziness strong enough to make his consciousness feel distant.

“Guess I really did bleed out too much… Shit…”

It’d probably be easier if he just drifted off to sleep, but it wasn’t the time to lose consciousness. He could still feel a powerful spiritual essence coming from the north side of Itogami Island. He was pretty certain that Shizuri and

company's battle against Unknown IX-4 would be a difficult one.

He'd have liked to go off to help them that very moment, but he couldn't do a thing while firmly tied up by the cable. At present, Kojou couldn't even move, let alone go off to save someone else.

Kojou tried to shake his body enough that he could somehow slip out from it, but that wasn't enough to make the cable Shizuri had so powerfully tied even twitch. All it accomplished was getting the cable to bite deeper into his flesh.

He continued his futile struggling for a time before exhausting his strength and coming to a halt. He really was at the limit of his endurance. Thanks to pushing himself too far, he was out of breath, and his entire body pleaded in agony.

"What are you doing, senpai?"

From overhead, he heard a clear-yet-perplexed voice.

"Hime…ragi…?"

Kojou seemed to be staring into the distance when he looked up at the girl who had appeared before his eyes. Even though they had been apart for only half a day, it felt like it had been a long time since last they had met.

Yukina sullenly glared at Kojou, as if reproaching him for being wounded all over. *I take my eyes off you for one second and look what happens*, her expression said, a mixture of anger and exasperation.

"Himeragi, what are you doing here? Didn't you go after the impostor?"

"We will speak about that later… More importantly, what happened? This shikigami… This belongs to Hikawa, yes? Why has she done such a thing?"

Yukina asked as she stared at the vulture perched on Kojou's shoulder. Perhaps Shio felt some responsibility for Kojou's wounds; even her shikigami somehow seemed to be uncomfortably averting its eyes.

"Shio and the others went to Island North ahead of me."

"Island North…"

Immediately, Yukina grasped the outline of the circumstances. After all, she

had of course sensed the spiritual reactor restarting as well, so there was no reason for Kojou and the others to come under attack with timing like that save for the sake of slowing them down.

Kojou thrashed his body around as he pleaded, “Himeragi, please, do something about this cable. Kisaki and the others are in trouble.”

Yukina stared at the cable keeping Kojou tied down. For whatever reason, she seemed to be treating it with admiration.

“Could it be, this was for the sake of not letting senpai push himself while wounded…?”

“I’m begging you. Can you stop with the ‘What a great idea!’ face already?!”

Yukina giggled, a faint smile coming over her as she crouched before Kojou. This put them at just the right height to face him eye to eye.

“Someone rebooted the spiritual reactor, yes?” she asked, serious now.

Kojou nodded.

“Senpai, do you remember the words you once said to me? From before when you gave me this ring, when it seemed like I might disappear—”

Yukina lifted up her own left hand.

The silver ring she wore on her ring finger was a sorcerous device creating a spiritual pathway between them. This made her a Blood Bride, granting her a balance between spiritual and demonic energy—thus, Yukina was able to control a vast quantity of spiritual energy beyond what any normal person could withstand. If not for that sorcerous device, Yukina would surely have long since turned into a Faux-Angel and dissipated.

“You said just being on this island is fine, didn’t you? Even if I wasn’t a Sword Shaman and I wasn’t senpai’s watcher.”

Kojou nodded without a word. When Yukina asserted she was fine with vanishing, Kojou had told her, *“Don’t vanish!”* Even if it meant her losing the strength to fight—

“But I was right; that will not do. Senpai, if there is no one keeping watch at your side, you’ll end up hurt all over like this, won’t you? Without Snowdrift

Wolf, I cannot protect you. I…do not want that. If Yuiri could protect senpai in my place—”

Yukina pleaded with him with a desperate look in her eyes as Kojou gazed at her, finally understanding her. Now he comprehended the reason Yukina had so easily accepted the possibility of being removed from her duty as his observer once she had lost Snowdrift Wolf. She wasn’t afraid of being unable to stay on Itogami Island so much as of Kojou getting hurt.

Kojou made a soft, wry smile as he exhaled, speaking to Himeragi in a subdued tone. “…Sorry, Himeragi. Could you take one step closer?”

“Yes? Like…this?”

Dubious as she was, Yukina did as she was told and came closer. Their noses were likely to touch at any moment.

Kojou strongly pursed his lips, closing his eyes.

Then he smacked Yukina’s forehead with his own.

Bonk, went the dull sound that reverberated as he was struck by an unexpectedly powerful recoil. It had not been a serious headbutt, yet it was quite painful, nonetheless.

Apparently, despite her foresight ability, due to being a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, even she hadn’t seen the surprise attack coming. Yukina wobbled, backing off with tears in her eyes.

“…Oww…senpai?! What do you think you’re doing?!”

“I’ve been angry with you this whole time…!”

“Wh-what did I ever do to you?!”

“Getting all bent out of shape over a spear being broken, talk about leaving the island, can’t protect me—that isn’t for you to decide all alone! Think about the feelings of the people around you, dammit!”

“…Huh?”

When, for once, Kojou slapped her right in the face with his anger, Yukina blinked several times and stared at him.

The surprise in her eyes was palpable.

“Does that mean you do not like the idea of me being gone?” she asked delicately.

“That’s obvious, and not in a funny way, dammit. And Nagisa and the others’ll miss you for sure.”

Yukina’s eyes went wide as she stared straight at Kojou.

“You would miss me, too, senpai?”

“…Well, yeah.” Kojou acknowledged as much, his gaze wandering all about as if making a blush.

The expression that then came over Yukina was a mysterious one. It wasn’t explicit worry or joy. With both hands, she briskly wiped away the tears still in the corners of her eyes.

“Himeragi?”

“I apologize. Do not be concerned.”

Yukina pressed a hand to her reddened forehead as she shook her head a little. It was as if she was suppressing a broad smile threatening to come over her lips with all her might. Even so, her expression was amused to a rare extent, and her narrow-eyed, teasing look reminded Kojou of Fake Yukina.

After deep, repeated breaths to somehow calm her emotions, as she touched Shio’s shikigami, Yukina said, “I am sorry, Hikawa.”

The metallic vulture changed back into the ritual tablet. Yukina had broken Shio’s spell. It was as if she was declaring *she* was Kojou’s watcher.

Then, Yukina strongly concentrated upon the spell tablet, swinging it down toward Kojou’s chest without warning. The steel cable binding Kojou made a creaky sound as it was severed.

Having regained his freedom of movement, Kojou pushed his way out of the remaining cable. “You’re sure about this?”

He meant if she was fine letting him go to quell the demon beast.

“If you must, then you must,” said Yukina, making a sigh of resignation as she

surveyed Kojou's wounded form. "Do you intend to battle the Unknown in that state?"

"I'll manage somehow, right?"

Kojou spoke those words as he forced himself onto his feet. Maybe it was the silver-iridium-tipped bullets shot into him, maybe it was the depletion of demonic energy, but his wounds were healing slower than usual. Even moving his body slightly caused ferocious pain to run through him, as if knives were piercing his entire body.

Yukina gazed with apparent exasperation as Kojou let out an anguished groan and went down on one knee. Then, raising her right hand high, she gave Kojou's forehead a merciless bonk.

"Ow…!"

Kojou bent back without the slightest resistance, proceeding to pathetically land on his butt. The intense pain of the recoil from the blow made him let out an incoherent yelp.

"Th-the hell?!" he objected, teary-eyed.

"Payback for earlier."

Yukina looked so serene.

"…Huh?"

"I am also angry. Surely you understand exactly what it is you need to do right now to protect everyone on this island, senpai?"

Yukina's smile vanished. She gazed straight at Kojou as she asked him that.

Chewing on her words, Kojou exhaled, drained of strength.

"You do have a point."

When Kojou strained a grin, conceding defeat, Yukina gently nestled against him. Her slender clavicle was visible through the gap of her uniform. She brushed her hair upward, exposing her small, shapely ear and the nape of her slender neck. Through her skin, white like virgin snow, her narrow blood vessels floated into view.

“Let me drink your blood, Himeragi,” Kojou whispered into her ear. It seemed to tickle her a little, making Yukina squirm defenselessly as she closed her eyes. Her cherry-colored lips quivered slightly, seeming tense.

“Yes, senpai.”

Kojou embraced Yukina’s delicate body. The softness and the sweetness of her scent soothed his pain. Kojou’s lips brushed against Yukina’s skin. She let out a tiny gasp.

The hearts in their respective chests beat as one. It felt like they were melting together.

Then, his entire body savoring those pleasant sensations, Kojou buried his fangs in her flesh.

6

Clouds illuminated by the rays of twilight slowly coursed above the sea.

A gentle sea breeze made Yukina's hair sway.

Leaving the weight of her body against Kojou's chest, Yukina had her eyes closed with a satisfied expression on her face. She had long eyelashes and cherry-colored lips. Kojou felt a soft throbbing at the core of his head as he gazed absentmindedly at the side of Yukina's comely face.

Their vampiric activities were already at an end. The wounds all over his body had healed during their course. The blood of Yukina, an excellent spirit medium, became the priming water that caused a vortex of dense demonic energy to course through his body like lava once more.

Yukina wasn't opening her eyes, but it seemed that she had not lost consciousness in any way. When Kojou attempted to rouse her, he belatedly realized that his own right hand was snugly grasping her left breast. Restrained as they were, an indescribably sweet sensation was conveyed to him through her uniform.

Sweat drenched Kojou's back. Even if these were exigent circumstances, they would have no doubt brought an outburst of anger from the normal Yukina. However, that day, her reaction was somewhat different.

With a sigh of resignation, she asked her question.

"Come to think of it, senpai, you really do prefer girls with big breasts, don't you?"

"Whaddaya mean by that?"

Having Yukina stare at him from point-blank range made Kojou nervous for no tangible reason.

Yukina pouted and looked away. "It is something I somehow sensed on my own. I am sorry that I do not secretly have huge breasts like Miss Yuiri does."

"It's not like you need to apologi… Wait, Yuiri has big boobs?"

Yukina gave him a reproachful glare. “So you *do* prefer them…!”

“No, this is something that’d be on anyone’s mind! If you just say something like that out of the blue…!”

“It is fine. I knew long ago that this is the kind of person you are, senpai.”

“That’s some messed-up logic…!”

Kojou desperately tried to excuse himself as Yukina distanced herself, disappointed.

Watching as she put her disheveled clothes back in order, Kojou shook his head. *Well, fine*, he thought.

When Yukina had finished grooming herself, the look in her eyes suddenly sharpened. “Please go, senpai.”

It came off as an aggressive gaze, but the hostility in it was not trained toward Kojou whatsoever.

“Himeragi?”

“I will catch up in short order.”

“…Got it.”

When he locked eyes with Yukina, Kojou gave up on searching for any additional explanation. He understood that she had good reason to stay behind.

Kojou kicked off from the ground into the air. This was not a physical enchantment; he was drawing on a portion of his Beast Vassals’ demonic energy to force himself to accelerate. The burden was heavy, and the means violent, but it was fast. He vanished from sight in the blink of an eye.

After watching Kojou go, Yukina directed a question behind her.

“How long have you been there?”

With a conflicted look, a small-statured girl poked her head out from the shadow of the trailer rolled onto its side. The girl with the same face as Yukina still had red cheeks, keeping a hand pressed to her mouth as she held back a laugh.

“I juuust got here! I didn’t see aaanythiiing.”

“Why tell such obvious lies?!” Yukina snapped as the girl tried to play dumb.

Reina nervously backed down at the severity of Yukina’s response. “Wait a… Hold on a sec! This isn’t the time to pick a fight with me, okay?!”

“Ugh…!”

Yukina was genuinely on the verge of pouncing on the girl when Reina’s assertion forced her to keep still. Reina’s claim certainly was correct. It was not Reina whom she needed to deal with first, but the Unknown.

“Er, where do you think you’re going?” the girl asked, amused, as Yukina seemed set to ignore her.

“To defeat the Unknown.”

Yukina regarded her coldly. Reina shrugged.

“Even though you’re unarmed?” Reina teased.

But Yukina smiled. “I am the watcher of the Fourth Primogenitor.”

Her reaction blew Reina away, who fell silent for a moment, enraptured.

“Stubborn as usual. Well, fine. You did show me something really nice after all…”

She then let out an impetuous laugh as she seemed to remember something, earning a sharp glare from Yukina.

“Wh-why you—”

“You need this, don’t you?”

Just as Yukina was on the verge of an angry shout, Reina headed her off by picking up something from behind.

It was a mass of metal about a meter long, give or take, in a form that strongly resembled a bass guitar—a divine armament in sheathed form.

“…Snowdrift Wolf… But how?!”

When the silver spear was presented to her without fanfare, Yukina reflexively accepted it. Recognizing its wielder’s spiritual energy, the Schneewaltzer in resting form activated.

The extending shaft slid forward, and with a metallic sound, the main central blade deployed together with the shorter blades to the left and the right. It had changed into a long, beautiful metal spear. The motion was even smoother than before it had been broken. Its movements were lighter, too. This was not a function of its mass; its reactions to Yukina's spiritual energy were swifter. She could tell that it was converting the spiritual energy coursing from Yukina into the Divine Oscillation Effect without any resistance. Its capabilities were clearly above what it had been prior to being damaged.

"If you must know, it was Miss Nina who repaired this. You should thank her later," Reina noted, pleased.

"Miss Nina did this…?"

It all made sense to Yukina then. Nina Adelard, the Great Alchemist of Yore—she, able to freely manipulate metal on an atomic level, was surely capable of restoring the destroyed Snowdrift Wolf to its original form.

But that alone was no explanation for the upgrade in Snowdrift Wolf's capabilities. She had little doubt that Reina had been involved somehow, but that wasn't the issue at hand. The only important thing was the fact that Yukina had once more obtained the power with which to oppose the Unknown.

"You…stole the broken Snowdrift Wolf so that…you could get Miss Nina to repair it?" Yukina asked as she returned the spear to its sheathed form once more.

Reina seemed conflicted. She gazed far into the distance.

"If you're gone from this island, it puts me in a bind, too. You might even call it an issue of life and death for me. I'd be really happy if you didn't ask me any more about that, though."

"…Understood."

After some minor hesitation, Yukina decided to accept Reina's wish. She couldn't exactly interrogate Reina about it either way. If she wasn't willing to speak of it, Yukina was left without other options.

Besides, she didn't think Nina would help someone with ill intentions. Even if she was somewhat flighty and aloof, Nina was not anyone's fool. If anything,

her long lifespan had made her very sensitive to lies from others. That Nina had cooperated with her was proof enough for Yukina that Reina was not her enemy.

Perhaps sensing that Yukina had lowered her guard, Reina closed the distance in a very chummy fashion. She wrapped her own arm around Yukina's. "Let's go."

"Go? Go where?"

The strangely comfortable feeling of the girl being so close threw Yukina off a little.

Well, that's obvious, Reina's cheerful smile said loud and clear.

"To go save Kojou, of course."

7

The spiritual reactor for magical experimentation was a sphere not even three meters in diameter. It was a silver-palladium alloy with special magical processing, the entirety of its interior surface etched with a magic circle.

The spirit summoned into the reactor's interior slowly collapsed with the waxing and waning of the moon, emitting vast spiritual energy in the process. The complexity of the technology involved and the cost of construction meant that mass production was impossible, but a spiritual reactor was an incredibly high-efficiency power source that did not leave waste, heat, or pollutants behind.

However, given that it employed a spirit, or rather, a body of unknown upper-dimensional energy, it was difficult to state that safety was wholly assured. If a spiritual reactor really were to run amok, no one knew what kind of damage would occur to the surrounding area. For this reason, Itogami Island's spiritual reactor site was covered by four thick magical bulwarks, in addition to the four-meter-thick protective concrete barrier that covered them. The safety measures constituted an iron wall that could withstand even strategic-level magical attacks.

Even so, this resilient protective wall had begun crumbling from within; not from the spiritual reactor running amok, but from but a scant few unknown demon beasts…

"Sami, get the Island Guard to withdraw. At this rate they'll only exhaust their fighting strength. They need to retreat temporarily and regroup," Kiriha ordered via her microphone.

It was pretty much a worst-case scenario. Because the spiritual reactor had restarted, the slumbering Unknown IX-4 had awakened, charging the Island Guard encampment seemingly out of pique that its sleep had been disturbed. The chain of command had been severed, and they'd lost many of their heavy weapons, armored cars, and so forth.

The one saving grace was that IX-4's attacks had not been levied against the

Island Guard alone. The demon beast was mercilessly trampling the puppet soldier assailants and their robotic tank.

“Roger that! Bureau of Astrology personnel, assist the Island Guard’s withdra__”

Sami tried to convey Kiriha’s orders to her subordinates, but she swallowed down her words suddenly. An abnormality even more urgent than Kiriha’s command was happening right before her eyes.

“Kiriha, the spiritual reactor’s protective wall is collapsing! Large-scale Unknown confirmed from inside the facility!”

“What did you say…?!”

Kiriha swung around toward the spiritual reactor facility behind her. From the outside, the battened-down spiritual reactor facility’s concrete wall looked like a dam. That thick wall was being sent flying by some kind of explosion from within.

Crawling out from the rupture in the wall was a new Unknown even larger than Unknown IX-4—taking its place as IX-5.

Kiriha’s expression contorted into shock. “Did the demon beast absorb the reactor core into itself…?!”

IX-5’s body was likely over twenty-five meters long. No matter how skilled the magic user, no one could teleport something of that size into the spiritual reactor facility.

This, therefore, left a single possibility Kiriha could think of: IX-5 had grown while inside the spiritual reactor. Having internalized the reactor core itself, the new demon beast was consuming energy straight from the core, even at that very moment.

As Kiriha stood still, IX-4 bellowed right before her eyes.

It was probably angry at its territory having been violated. Without the slightest sign of faltering, it attacked its even larger kin with a thunderous roar.

But having absorbed the spiritual reactor’s energy, IX-5’s power against IX-4, having only just awakened from its slumber, was overwhelming.

Its tentacles, bearing the power of resonant destruction, were pulverized by even more destructive resonance; a giant maw clamped down on IX-4's throat. As IX-4 moaned in agony, IX-5 entwined its body with countless tentacles and proceeded to consume it then and there. It was internecine struggle—no, this was cannibalism.

"Great, now things are even worse."

The carefree voice, audible from right beside her, snapped Kiriha back to her senses.

A black-painted robotic tank had come to a stop right beside her. Descending from the tank was a short-haired high school boy with headphones hanging from his neck. The individual was clearly out of place, yet mysteriously, no ill feeling was sensed by those who beheld him. Perhaps he'd received training in how to erase his aura.

"Well, it is a demon beast made from vampire cells. No great surprise it inherited the cannibal trait, huh?"

The youth spoke with the air of a soliloquy.

These words were plenty to prove that this was no ordinary schoolboy. Few were those who knew the true nature of IX-4's cells. Still, he possessed the right to know such top-secret information.

"And you are?"

"An errand runner for the Gigafloat Management Corporation. Call me Heimdall. You're a Bureau of Astrology Priestess of the Six Blades, right?"

"Yes, indeed I am, Motoki Yaze."

"I told you to call me Heimdall, dammit!"

Kiriha's malicious reply made the young man's voice go shrill. It seemed she'd realized his true identity from the start.

"Anyway, listen to me. Right now, the Corporation is working on cutting Island North Block B7 away from the main Gigafloat."

"Do you intend to cast IX-4 and this entire area out to sea?"

The words from Yaze—self-styled “Heimdall”—brought an expression of admiration over Kiriha. She was surprised at how swiftly Itogami city-state had come to such a decision. Indeed, there was probably no other means to contain the damage from the new Unknown to a minimum.

“Fortunately, the surrounding area’s pretty empty…and it’s not like we can let a monster like that reach built-up areas. If it’s above the ocean, we can use weapons of mass destruction to burn it down so that there isn’t a single cell left.”

“Do you think that demon beast will politely cooperate until then?”

Yaze’s buoyant tone earned him a frosty look from Kiriha.

The surrounding area being empty lots equally meant that there were no obstacles blocking the Unknown from invading. Kiriha thought that it was unlikely the demon beast, in a spry state from incorporating the spiritual reactor, would behave itself in a place like that.

However, *I know*, Yaze’s nod indicated. “So this is our request to the Bureau of Astrology. Please keep that monster pinned down so that it doesn’t go beyond the canal at the edge of this block. There are a lot of hospitals across that canal with intensive-care patients who can’t be moved.”

“You make it sound so simple. The opponent is a monster continuing to propagate after swallowing a spiritual reactor, you know?” Kiriha, weary, shot back at Yaze.

The Island Guard had already lost the lion’s share of its combat capability. The only fighting strength left rested with Kiriha and the Bureau of Astrology. On top of that, they had no sorcery effective on IX-4 types. The dangerous mission of pinning the demon beast in place was too great a burden for Kiriha and her people at present.

“It’s not like I was gonna pin all the responsibility on just you. I did bring some reinforcements.”

“Reinforcements?”

Yaze grinned, mischief beneath the expression. “Well, don’t tell everybody!”

Kiriha dubiously drew her brows close.

A moment later, two high school girls, looking terribly out of place, entered Kiriha's vision.

"Shio! That person!"

"Kiriha Kisaki! The Bureau of Astrology, huh?!"

Kiriha stared at the pair, murmuring with surprise, "The Lion King Agency…"

She'd seen their faces in files at the Bureau of Astrology. They were Yuiri Haba and Shio Hikawa. The silver weapons they carried were Type Six demon-slaying armaments, according to the Lion King Agency's classification system. It was surely safe to view the pair's combat capabilities put together as on par with Yukina Himeragi. They were, in other words, *usable*.

"Well, it's better than nothing." Kiriha bitterly shrugged her shoulders.

"Of course, I don't mind if you can actually take out the demon beast here. I'll leave that call to you," Yaze said, trying to provoke her.

Kiriha blatantly ignored Yaze as she turned to face Yuiri and Shio. "It is as you just heard. Are you prepared to lend a hand? Nothing beyond that."

"What should we do?" Yuiri asked, not missing a beat. The way she got straight down to business made Kiriha quietly take a liking to them. They were well aware of exactly what kind of situation they found themselves in.

"We will delay the demon beast here. You two will serve as decoys and lead it to the center of this block. Is that clear?"

"Decoys?" Shio groaned as she took in the enormity of the Unknown's frame. "Doesn't look like half-hearted attacks are going to attract its attention, either."

Having completely consumed IX-4, the new model had grown further in that brief span of time. Its senses would surely have dulled proportionately. Cutting it with a sword likely wasn't enough to make it feel pain.

Yuiri stared at the side of her partner's face. "Shio, use *it*."

Shio pursed her lips and lowered her eyes before meeting Yuiri's gaze. "Got it, Yuiri."

“Motoki Yaze—or rather, Heimdall. I am sorry, could I have you transport these girls as far as the other side?” Kiriha ordered, pointing to the girls.

“Huh? Even I have to help out…?” He dramatically faced the sky in a show of flaky behavior before grumbling, “Seriously?”

He climbed into the black robotic tank. Circling around the back of the demon beast’s enormous body was necessary in order to pin it down in that block.

“And what will you do?” he asked.

“I shall employ a device that requires a little time to prepare. Buy me fifteen minutes.”

“Roger that.”

Nodding to Kiriha’s words, Yaze closed the robot tank’s hatch. Yuiri and Shio wore apprehensive expressions as they climbed onto the tortoise-like tank’s carapace.

“Hold on tight, ladies. We’re gonna fly!”

“Kyaa…?!”

“U-uwah!!”

The growl of one motor and the yelps of two girls echoed as the robot tank leapt toward the field of battle.

Watching them go without a word, Kiriha thrust her beloved forked spear into the ground, seemingly casting it aside.

8

Kojou, arriving at the futuristic underground city of Island North, felt a chill up his spine when he keenly sensed the demon beast in the rubble.

“What the hell is *that*?”

Kojou groaned from deep in his throat. The Unknown already towered over the surrounding buildings. Compared to when he’d encountered it a scant few hours prior, it now weighed nearly ten times what it had then.

Of course, no normal creature’s skeleton could withstand such mass. What it lacked in skeletal strength, it made up in demonic energy. With its skeleton as well as its musculature fortified, it could shrug off even cannon rounds. Attacks via magic were already ineffective. It was a monster truly deserving of the label of DEMON BEAST.

He saw a single robotic tank slip past that monster’s attacks and circle around its back. Shio and Yuiri were riding on the tank’s back. The two of them were trying to challenge a demon beast that had sent even the Island Guard packing.

“Dammit!”

Feeling uneasy about his late arrival, Kojou tried to break into a sprint toward the demon beast.

Suddenly, he realized the presence of a male and female pair close at hand. They were watching the demon beast from the cliff made where the floor of North’s second stratum had been destroyed. They did not feel like mere sightseers to him. The warped smiles on their faces were the expressions of those delighting in the destruction and chaos they had perpetrated.

“You’re—!!”

Kojou snarled as he stared daggers at one of the people—a man in a white gown. He had the same face as that of the golem Kojou and the others had fought on the main street; this was probably the original.

Calmly glancing back at the heated Kojou, the man smiled with amusement.

“Oh my, welcome, Fourth Primogenitor. How fortuitous that you’ve arrived just in time for the climax.”

Kojou instinctively knew he was the one really controlling Unknown IX-4.

“Hold on, do you really intend to attack an unarmed civilian? You, the sovereign ruler of this Dominion?”

Kojou was set to reflexively beat the man in the white gown down when the latter scornfully put a stop to him. Kojou aggressively clenched his jaw.

“A civilian…? You?!”

“Yes, that’s right.”

The man grinned and laughed. He spread both arms wide, as if to emphasize the fact that he really was unarmed.

Though Kojou was annoyed, all he could do was ruefully shake his fist. He couldn’t punch a defenseless human out of disgust or anger. The man before him was right.

“More importantly, behold!” he bellowed theatrically. He fixed the melancholic Kojou with a stare. “That incredible vitality, and its limitless hunger to continue consuming magical energy. Soon, that monster’s threat level will exceed IX, and it will take its rightful place beside Leviathan, Weapon of the Gods!”

The woman in the white gown then spoke. “Just how great a monster shall be wrought by human hands? Do you not think a Demon Sanctuary or two is a small price to pay…?”

The two were twins—probably. The glimmering light residing in the woman’s eyes greatly resembled that of the man in white.

Kojou forgot his anger as he gazed at the pair. They’d created an artificial demon beast to exceed a threat of Grade IX—to them this was merely an experiment. They didn’t particularly desire the city’s destruction. They only cared about their data. The lives of the people sacrificed by their excess didn’t exist so far as they were concerned. They had guileless faith in their own righteousness. Kojou found the extent of their foolishness…pitiable.

“A monster created by human hands…? What a coincidence. I know someone made for a reason a lot like that… They say he’s the World’s Mightiest God-Killing Weapon.”

“…?!!”

The twins in the white gowns did not exclaim, *So what?!* Kojou’s anger had cowed them into silence, making them subconsciously back away several steps. Perhaps neither could understand him, but they had realized one thing—they had earned Kojou’s wrath.

“He destroyed the Devas that made him, too—burned to ashes by the anger of their own God-Killing Weapon!”

Kojou took a single step forward.

The demonic energy gushing from him slowly spread out of his back like a pair of wings. The twins gasped as air leaked out from their throats. In awe of Kojou, they were unable even to properly breathe.

“We’re gonna *save* that demon beast. When this is all over, we’ll crush you. Mark my words. You’ll regret laying your hands on this island.”

“Ngh…ghk…”

The woman in the white gown activated a spell she’d had standing by. It was a spatial control ritual. Even with Kojou’s demonic energy interfering, a magic circle floated up under the twins’ feet, opening a teleportation gate.

Geez. Kojou exhaled as he watched the twins vanish from sight.

Chasing them off would have no effect on the raging Unknown. Nothing had been resolved yet.

“Spatial manipulation… Rather high-end sorcerous engineers, it would seem.”

As Kojou languidly stood still, he heard an overly serious voice come from behind.

Turning around, he saw Yukina standing there. For some reason, Fake Yukina was with her.

Yukina drew a spell tablet from the breast of her uniform; this transformed

into the shape of a vulture. It then proceeded to take off toward the sky.

Kojou grimaced in the face of Yukina's mysterious action. What he noticed more than that was the silver weapon she gripped in her right hand—she was holding the supposedly damaged Snowdrift Wolf.

"Himeragi, that spear…"

Kojou was perplexed.

Yukina did not reply to his question. Instead, she met the eyes of her impostor, standing off to her side. The two simultaneously broke into mischievous laughter. The girls' oddly harmonious gesture left Kojou more perplexed still.

"Let us go, senpai."

Yukina glared at the demon beast beneath their eyes.

Feeling exhausted somehow, Kojou exhaled, his attention falling to the lone, rampaging Unknown.

9

Yuiri and Shio gazed up at the back of the growing demon beast.

IX-5 had already largely finished digesting IX-4. The two fused demon beasts had resulted in a near-doubling of body mass in that scant amount of time.

Even at that very moment, the spiritual reactor the demon beast had taken into its body continued supplying it with energy. If IX-5 continued growing, it would become a writhing natural disaster beyond humanity's reach.

They had to defeat the demon beast then and there. That's what Yuiri's and Shio's premonitions as spirit mediums told them.

Shio's face was hard and tense as she called out to her best friend, "Yuiri, your sword."

"Yeah." Yuiri nodded with a hard expression of her own.

Similar to how Sayaka Kirasaka's Der Freischötz had a hidden trump card, namely an ultra-long-range ritual spell artillery attack, Yuiri's and Shio's Type Six-Plus weapons came equipped with a hidden function.

However, among the attack mages of the Lion King Agency, none had ever employed it in actual combat.

Of course, this was a first experience for both Yuiri and Shio. Furthermore, this was their independent judgment without obtaining permission from up the chain of command. They couldn't help but be tense.

Even so, there was no other way to stop the demon beast—

"Rosen Chevalier Plus—disarm!"

Responding to the spiritual energy coursing from Yuiri, her long sword changed shape.

Its edge separated, leaving only the length of the blade. The cross of the hilt also cocked at a forty-five-degree angle, changing to a form adequate for using it as a pistol grip. It looked a lot like a rifle without a barrel.

When Yuiri handed off her sword, Shio attached it to her own bow. A metallic sound echoed as they snapped together in various places, changing the recurve bow's shape in turn. Sword and bow became one as it transformed into a cross-shaped shooting weapon. The weapons had combined together to form a new weapon—a giant crossbow.

"Certify request! Freikugel Plus, arbalest mode—unlock!"

"Registered shooter Shio Hikawa, registered pointer Yuiri Haba—recognized. Freikugel Plus arbalest mode, active."

When Shio chanted the activation code, the crossbow responded with a synthesized voice. Sword and bow—the ritual spell mechanisms within both were active simultaneously, weaving together a formula of incredible breadth.

Shio lowered her center of gravity and poised the crossbow. She aimed at the back of the demon beast trying to cross the canal, squeezing the trigger—

"…!"

Something struck Shio's right shoulder.

In an instant, the beam of light spat out by the crossbow pierced the demon beast without a sound. It was a spear of light that reached hundreds of meters in length.

By the time that spear of light vanished, there was a yawning cavity some two meters in diameter that had been opened in the demon beast. It was a perfect void, leaving not blood, nor flesh, nor even a speck of dust behind. After a moment's delay, the cavity was filled with fresh, gushing blood, and the demon beast let out a roar of agony.

"Pseudo-spatial severing… They stripped away space itself, huh…!"

Yaze, poking his head out from the robot tank, had a twitch on his face as he made a low groan.

The attack from Freikugel Plus in arbalest mode tore out any and all matter existing along its firing line along with space itself. It was truly the most powerful ritual spell gunnery attack of all.

Theoretically, there was nothing physical that could withstand such an attack.

It was virtually impossible to fend it off with magical defenses. Likely the only things that could defend against such an attack were the spatial-severing powers of a vampire primogenitor's own Beast Vassal or the magical-energy-nullifying Divine Oscillation Effect of a Schneewaltzer.

It was because of the excessive might of this attack that the Type Six weapons were split between sword and bow, assigned to two separate Attack Mages. Yuiri and Shio always operated together in case they needed to use it. The principles might differ from a Schneewaltzer, but the Type Six-Plus was a weapon capable of destroying a vampire primogenitor in its own right.

"Shio…?!"

Yuiri swiftly raced over as the recoil from firing drove Shio to her knees.

Shio forced herself to smile to put Yuiri at ease. "I'm all right, but this really does take a lot out of me."

To begin with, the recoil from the arbalest mode was as intense as its might. Even with physical reinforcement by way of a ritual spell, it was impossible to completely check the impact. On top of that, the amount of spiritual energy depletion was also heavy. At best, she could manage only one or two more shots at full power.

"But it sure packed a punch," Yaze cheered on the nervous Shio.

The Unknown, who'd paid no heed to a single attack from a human being, whirled around, glaring at Shio and the others with a rage-filled look. Even with its enormous body, Shio's single blow represented a menace it could not ignore. At the very least, they'd succeeded in their minimum objective of slowing the beast down.

"Not good. We're getting out of here!"

The demon beast headed toward Shio with agility that was unfathomable given its enormous frame. Realizing this, Yaze shouted. The robot tank's running wheels crudely kicked the ground, backing away with Shio and Yuiri aboard.

"So fast…!"

Yaze froze with fright. The demon beast's acceleration exceeded the robot

tank's maneuverability. At that rate, they wouldn't last ten seconds before the demon beast trampled them—

It was Yuiri who, making that instantaneous judgment, leaped down from the tank.

She drew a two-handed sword from her back with a blade spanning over a meter in breadth.

"Heidenröslein, boot up!"

Right around when the demon beast was thirty meters away, Yuiri held the two-handed sword above her head.

Even a great sword's attack could not reach at that distance. However, heedless of this, Yuiri unflinchingly swung the sword at a downward angle.

That instant, the great sword's blade elongated and distorted. This was not from centrifugal force or air resistance. The lead-colored great sword's blade was changing shape in response to Yuiri's will.

The spectacle resembled a beautiful fountain of metal.

The blade, not even a single meter in length, transformed into an elongated whip dozens of meters long. It was less than a millimeter thick. It had become a whip with a polished blade.

The whip entwined around the demon beast's four legs, whereupon it transformed a second time.

It transformed into countless needles reminiscent of fish spines—

"Wiseman's Blood… No, a ritual spell reactive alloy…!" Yaze exclaimed with a whistle at the end.

The great sword in Yuiri's possession was actually an extremely dense liquid-metal weapon that changed shape in accordance with the wielder's intent. If thinned and drawn out, the blade could reach hundreds of meters; if thickened, its durability would rival steel plate. However, the metal's true fearsomeness rested in its ability to seep into the body of any opponent it sliced, destroying its target from within.

"Heidenröslein was built to seal a vampire primogenitor. It is another one of

the Lion King Agency's secret weapons. The minute grains of metal from which that sword's blade is comprised are divine armaments in and of themselves, able to immobilize their target and obstruct regenerative abilities—"

Now that it's been seen, it can't be helped, Shio's explanation implied. It wasn't that she was telling him out of special kindness. Its might being known far and wide, serving as a check on criminals, was part of the weapon's role.

"The same logic Chairman Aradahl of the Warlord's Empire used to back Kojou to the wall, huh?" Yaze smirked, the right side of his mouth curling up.

Velesh Aradahl had sealed Kojou's physical movement by thrusting countless blades into his opponent's body. Yuiri's Heidenröslein could achieve an identical feat all on its own.

"Yes. Until now, it was kept stored away due to being inhumane, but such is the opponent we currently face. However…"

Staring at Yuiri's back as she wielded the unfamiliar sword, Shio gripped her crossbow with unease.

Gloom rose over Yaze's expression, too. "This opponent is simply too large, I guess?"

Yuiri was employing the Heidenröslein well. Yuiri's personality, more oriented toward defense than offense, was appropriate for the Type Thirteen, meant to seal an enemy's movements.

For the objective of pinning the demon beast down, the weapon was fairly well suited.

But the demon beast was simply too enormous for its movements to be completely contained.

The demon beast, its four legs immobile and seemingly sewn to the ground, used the countless tentacles protruding from its back to attack.

Yuiri, using Heidenröslein to pin the foe in place, had no means of defending herself.

"Yuiri—!!" Shio shrieked.

"Eh?!"

Yuiri froze as she saw the tentacles crashing down toward her from overhead.

But they did not assail Yuiri. What was displayed in Yuiri's eyes, wide open in despair, were severed tentacles dancing in the sky, and the back of a white-haired girl swinging down with a crimson undulating sword.

"Hauras!"

Shizuri thrust her sword into a severed tentacle that was still writhing on the ground. The magic blade that consumed magical energy robbed it of its strength, and this time, the tentacle stopped moving altogether.

Shizuri was wearing a long, white coat in place of her scorched uniform. "Oh-ho-ho-ho!" went the girl's high-pitched laughter. "That was a close one, yes? I was right to entrust Hauras to Yuno at the hospital not far off. Be at ease. Now that I, Paladin of Gisella, have arrived—"

"Cas?!"

"…C-Cas…?" Shizuri had a pathetic look as she wobbled as if punched in the side of the face.

Though she wanted to complain, Shizuri understood Yuiri didn't know her real name to begin with. Shizuri, unable to complain, sliced into the demon beast tentacles one after another, seemingly to vent her rage upon them.

Heidenröslein pinned the demon beast in place while Hauras provided defense—this gave Shio and Yaze a momentary hope that the combination could hold the creature at bay.

As if to dash their hopes, the demon beast's entire body was enveloped by a phosphorescent light. It was the glow of the essence gushing from the spiritual reactor.

"It's still growing…?!" Yaze blurted out.

The demon beast's entire body audibly creaked as its contours swelled.

Yuiri let out an anguished voice as she gripped the hilt of her sword. "No… I can't hold it anymore…!"

The very next moment, the blade of Heidenröslein twined around the demon beast's four legs cracked all over. The divine armament had not been able to

withstand the sudden growth of the demon beast.

Shizuri let out a cry of her own. “No matter how much I cut, it avails nothing!”

Certainly, Hauras was capable of cutting the Unknown, but it was being wielded by Shizuri herself in the flesh. No matter how resilient her Ogre body, one solid hit from the demon beast and she wouldn’t last another second. And yet, the demon beast’s unbelievable speed of propagation added even more of the tentacles she was purportedly slicing away.

“—Nyaah!”

Finally exceeding her limits, Shizuri made an unsteady yelp as she was blown backward into the air. Though she’d just managed to fend off a direct blow, pieces of concrete rained down on her, blasted apart by the creature.

“Cas?!” Yuiri exclaimed.

However, the demon beast’s attack was faster than Shizuri could wobble her way up to her feet. Shizuri’s eyes were glazed as they watched the giant tentacle pressing close to slam her from the side.

Then, a dazzling silver flash raced across Shizuri’s vision.

The severed tentacle’s own centrifugal force sent it flying far off into the distance.

In front of Shizuri, gasping while still on one knee, a small-statured girl landed with a tiny flutter. She was gripping a silver spear enveloped with the glow of the Divine Oscillation Effect.

“Yukii?”

“Yukina Himeragi?! That spear…?!”

Yuiri and Shio both exclaimed in astonishment. They never expected to see Yukina wielding the assuredly broken Snowdrift Wolf.

However, Yukina merely looked back at the surprised Yuiri and Shio for one moment, seeming slightly conflicted.

“It was fixed.”

“Eh?! Wait a…”

“What do you mean, fixed…?”

That’s easier said than done, implied Yuiri and Shio, left completely at a loss.

However, it took only a second for the pair’s astonishment to redouble, for emerging from within the dust cloud stirred up by the demon beast’s attack were Kojou and the girl who could pass as Yukina’s twin.

Of course, she was wearing the same uniform; in terms of face and physique, they looked so alike that you could hardly tell them apart side by side. The one difference might have been the mischievous glint residing in the impostor’s eyes.

Though, when the girl stared at Yuiri and Shio, she cried, “So young…!” as if she was more surprised than they were.

Yaze called out to Kojou from the back of the robot tank—his voice casual, as if they had bumped into each other on the way back from school. “You’re late, Kojou.”

“Sorry I made you wait,” Kojou calmly replied in kind as he turned to face the Unknown continuing to grow. “The situation?”

“It’s not good,” Yaze said in a pained tone. “The demon beast’s cellular propagation is too fast for us to deal with. No choice but to stop the spiritual reactor it’s taken into itself, but—”

Kojou grasped the gist of the situation from that explanation.

The Unknown taking the spiritual reactor into its own body made it grow rapidly, hyperactive to an absurd degree. Meaning, as long as they didn’t do something about the spiritual reactor, still gushing a vast amount of spiritual energy, it was impossible to make the demon beast behave, let alone defeat it.

“If it’s just the spiritual reactor, my Freikugel Plus can annihilate it,” Shio said, “but its body is so huge, I don’t know the reactor’s location.”

Kojou nodded. “The gist is, all I gotta do is rip that reactor right out of it?”

He got the general idea, but either way, it wasn’t a situation where they could hash out a detailed plan. If he knew what he had to do, that was plenty.

“Suicide attacks like you pulled earlier won’t work this time!” Shio warned,

clearly worried about him.

“Yeah, I get it.” Kojou made a pained smile as he looked back at her.

Now that the demon beast had grown that much, of course he couldn’t beat it just by pounding a little demonic energy inside its body. There was even a valid concern that, worst case, it might absorb a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor in its entirety.

All that said, he couldn’t think of any other effective plans. *What to do?* Thought Kojou, mulling it in his head when Shizuri, remembering something, posed a question.

“More importantly, Kojou. Is your body healed already?”

“Huh? Um, well, yeah, pretty much.”

So soon? Thought Shizuri, skeptical. Kojou forgot to gloss things over, blithely replying in complete seriousness.

“Kojou…you didn’t…,” Yuiri murmured with a suspicious expression. She watched Yukina’s back as the latter continued combat, then returned her gaze to Kojou, who put a hand over his mouth and averted his eyes.

The girl with the face just like Yukina’s suppressed her giggling voice as she smiled.

10

The demon beast that had once been called Unknown IX-4 was in pain.

The programming assigned to it was twofold. One, to continue consuming demonic energy. Two, to continue to grow. That was all.

And it had faithfully executed that programming to the letter. Having surfaced on Itogami Island in search of more powerful magical energy, it had taken a spiritual reactor into its body. It had consumed its comrade, and had been consumed in turn, with the two fusing together to arrive at new growth still.

It knew, at present, it was the mightiest life-form on that island, yet its programming demanded that it become even stronger.

Of course, it did not understand what would become of it if it continued growing without limit.

Why did it exist? Who had created it, and how? For what purpose did it need to continue growing? It understood nothing. So far as its programming was concerned, these were worthless questions. And yet, its flesh felt annoyance at there being no answers to its questions. Its own life held no value. It felt anguish over this fact.

The Unknown roared.

The precipitous, massive growth in its body from the spiritual reactor's energy had engendered distortions within it.

Its flesh and blood were so great that it could no longer defy the pull of gravity without magical energy. Just squirming around made its entire body plead in agony. The precipitous growth had caused its cells to rapidly age, yet its excessive regenerative ability did not permit the cells to die. The Unknown was at once Itogami Island's mightiest living creature, yet at the same time, the most fragile.

The agony of its flesh and the emptiness in its mind—these two things tormented the Unknown.

That was why it had decided to destroy everything its eyes surveyed.

It would trample the smaller creatures and consume everything to the last. If its own life was worthless, all it needed to do was make everything else in the world worthless, too—

It was upon the head of the demon beast that had resolved these things that a strange *something* appeared.

Then, realizing that it was a source of powerful demonic energy unknown to it, the Unknown was filled with the will to fight.

Just as its cells had been programmed.

“C’mon over, Kiffa Ater!”

Kojou howled at the giant hole bored into the underground city’s ceiling, turning his face toward the twilight sky.

The demonic energy scattered about contorted the air, and finally, an enormous sword was borne from the void.

Even at an altitude of several thousand meters, its form was distinctly visible to the naked eye. It was a stupidly huge great sword with a blade well over a hundred meters in breadth. Its shape was properly described as an ancient armament known as a Vajra sword. These were said to be demon-felling swords employed by the gods themselves.

It was the seventh Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor, an Intelligent Weapon—the Sword of Judgment.

Shio hastily tried to stop him. “No, Kojou Akatsuki! Even an Intelligent Weapon is a mass of materialized demonic energy. If you cast a Beast Vassal into the Unknown, it will only get absorbed!”

The sword Beast Vassal that Kojou had summoned possessed the ability to control gravity. Added to its enormous body, it could precisely control the acceleration with which it dropped. The shockwave generated by its mass and acceleration half destroyed a Gigafloat of Itogami Island once upon a time. Even with that much destructive power, its odds of defeating the Unknown were low.

“I suppose you’re right…if it were nothing but an Intelligent Weapon, that is.”

Kojou made a suggestive smirk.

"What…?!"

This time the additional demonic energy gushing out from Kojou's entire body left Shio aghast. The Unknown had already obtained a spiritual reactor. If it took into itself even a fresh Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor on top of that, she couldn't even conceive of what kind of monster would be spawned as a result. If it was not one but two Beast Vassals, the level of danger would multiply by leaps and bounds.

Say something, will you? Pleaded the eyes Shio turned toward Yukina, but all Yukina did was smile serenely. Surely Kojou had not told her beforehand just what he was attempting to do. She clearly trusted his decision.

When she glanced over, Yuiri and Shizuri looked much like Yukina, with expressions over them that might have been resignation or trust… Shio couldn't tell the difference. *What the heck is going on here?* She thought, perplexed. *Could it be that I'm the one who's wrong…?*

"C'mon over, Shaula Viola!"

The second Beast Vassal that Kojou summoned was a manticore enveloped in purple flames. Its tail was that of a scorpion, and it had wings on its back. Shio was seeing this Beast Vassal for the first time.

However, Kojou made no effort to launch the manticore at the Unknown. Instead, he commanded it to ascend toward the sky. The path of the sword Beast Vassal's gentle descent crossed that of the manticore.

The contours of both Beast Vassals distorted.

Purple flames wrapped around the pitch-black sword. The enormous blade seemed to have a scorpion's tail etched into it like an embossed carving. The two types of demonic energy entwined with each other, mixed together, and transformed into a new Beast Vassal.

"This is the Duke of Ardeal's technique…!"

"He fused two Demon Beasts together…?!"

Yuiri and Shio shouted simultaneously. Fusing two Beast Vassals together to

create a new, more powerful Beast Vassal—this was a skill said to be used by Dimitrie Vattler, aristocrat of the Warlord's Empire, alone. Vattler had once used that ability to push Kojou to the very edge of annihilation.

"This is the first time I've smashed two together, but it went pretty well, huh. You showed this off in front of me so many times, Vattler, even I could learn how to do it!"

Even as the backlash from the powerful fusion left his brow drenched with sweat, Kojou bared his fangs and grinned.

The great sword accelerated. However, by the standards of the sword Beast Vassal's proper capabilities, one might even call the acceleration gentle. Even if it was a demon beast, the opponent was a living creature. There was no need for force enough to destroy the Gigafloat, but the acceleration posed menace enough, and the great sword shooting toward the ground's surface rent the Unknown's giant body with ease.

Shizuri let out a murmur of joy. "We did it…"

The manticore wreathed in purple flames—Shaula Viola—was a Beast Vassal that used poison to steal demonic energy. Kojou had fused the pitch-black great sword with the manticore to grant it that ability.

The Unknown could not steal demonic energy from this Beast Vassal which possessed the very same ability. Its torso was run through, and it was pinned to the ground. The venom created by the manticore coursed through its entire body. The Unknown tore its own flesh as it tried to shake free from the great sword, seemingly to flee from the agony.

Its skin ripped open. Its muscles tore, and part of its innards were exposed to view.

For one, brief moment, the spiritual reactor embedded within became visible.

"I see it!"

Shio poised her crossbow, loaded with spiritual energy.

The space-erasing ritual spell artillery attack of Type Six-Plus could safely destroy the spiritual reactor. However, the absolute condition for this was a

direct hit on the center of the reactor. Half-hearted damage to the reactor core might cause the spiritual energy leaking from the spirit to come out in a single, explosive burst.

“No. It’s regenerating too fast!”

As Shio tried to launch her attack, Yaze stopped her from the robotic tank. The torn flesh of the Unknown was regenerating with incredible force, covering the spiritual reactor once more.

Shio made a small, rueful groan.

Because he was not yet accustomed to fusing Beast Vassals together, performing the technique had run Kojou ragged. Shio didn’t think he could launch another attack of equal force. If the Unknown finished regenerating completely, their opportunity to defeat that demon beast would be well and truly gone forever.

Shio tried to force down her fear, but beside her, Kojou Akatsuki smirked.

“—I, Maiden of the Lion, Sword Shaman of the High God, beseech thee.”

As if singing a song, a clear voice wove a beautiful chant. In one brief instant, the aura of the Divine Oscillation Effect, vivid like never before, made Shio forget her nervousness.

“Yukina…Himeragi…”

Yukina danced like a priestess heralding victory. An elaborate magic circle traced by the tip of her spear floated up, emitting a beautiful light. It was a phenomenon Snowdrift Wolf had never displayed prior to being damaged. And then, the purging light emitted by the spear in that state was far more dazzling and serene than it had ever been.

“O purifying light, O divine wolf of the snowdrift, by your steel divine will, strike down the devils before me!”

Yukina’s body danced in the sky. Racing up the Unknown’s enormous body, she drove the silver spear deep from the blind spot behind its head. The unexpected blow wrought by the hands of a puny human made the Unknown’s gargantuan frame writhe.

“I see, she’s nullifying its demonic energy to hinder regeneration…,” Yaze commented, his voice light.

The demon beast’s regenerative ability, impossible for any normal living creature, was due to the demonic energy stored within its cells. However, that demonic energy had been annihilated. As a result, the regeneration speed of the demon beast’s wounds had markedly diminished.

“No, that’s not all!” Shio shouted as she glared at the wound site the sword Beast Vassal had slashed open.

The Unknown’s skeleton was audibly creaking, and its skin and musculature had begun tearing away. With its supply of the demonic energy cut off, the Unknown’s gargantuan body was no longer able to defy the power of gravity. At that rate, the Unknown would destroy itself, crushed by its very own mass.

Unable to bear the agony of being robbed of its demonic energy, the demon beast ferociously bellowed. Its tentacles attempted to strike at Yukina, still plunging the spear into its back.

“I won’t let you!”

“Thou shalt not interfere!”

A liquid metal blade moving like a whip, and a crimson blade undulating like a flame, glimmered at Yukina’s back.

It was the supposedly wounded and exhausted Yuiri and Shio who saved the immobile Yukina. The more they swung their swords, the more demon beast tentacles assaulting them in waves were severed, flying off into midair.

With Yuiri and Shio providing rear support, Yukina increased the spiritual energy she sent coursing through the spear. The demon beast’s blood vessels went white from the Divine Oscillation Effect flowing through them, and the cracking spread to all over the demon beast’s body.

The sword Beast Vassal absorbed demonic energy as the silver spear nullified more. With the great sword impaling the center of its body, its engorged flesh creaked under the force of gravity.

Still, the demon beast did not fall.

“After all this, it’s still not enough…!” Kojou’s voice was filled not so much with surprise as with admiration.

Relying on the energy supplied by the spiritual reactor, the demon beast was slowly but surely continuing to regenerate. Its vitality and resilience bordered on the unbelievable. That moment, he could sympathize with the feelings of pride held by the twins in the white gowns.

However, it wasn’t a situation for polite admiration.

One step more and they could neutralize the Unknown. But that one step was beyond their reach. The depletion of Kojou’s own endurance was pushing him to his limits.

“Ohh, everyone’s really putting on a show,” Fake Yukina said. She sounded carefree, perhaps knowing nothing of what rested in Kojou’s thoughts.

“You…!”

What, you’re still here? said the angry glare Kojou leveled at the girl. However, Fake Yukina looked back at Kojou’s resentful eyes with even greater amusement.

“I’ve already done what I came here to do, but maybe I should pitch in a bit… Let’s call it a freebie.”

“What…?”

As Kojou watched her in astonishment, Fake Yukina approached the demon beast with the agile gait of a dancer. She was still like that when dense demonic energy suddenly swirled around her right arm.

“I, Reina Akatsuki, inheritor of the Kaleid Blood, release thee from thy bonds —!”

The blast winds from the raging demonic energy erased Fake Yukina’s murmur so that it never reached the other’s ears. However, it was plain to anyone’s eyes just what she was trying to do.

She was a vampire—Kojou recalled that fact.

“C’mon over, Hasta Aurum!”

Raising her hand above her, a Beast Vassal appeared in Fake Yukina's hand.

This was a single spear with a gold radiance. A Beast Vassal in the form of a golden spear.

"Another Intelligent Weapon…!"

"That's riiight!"

With a smile, Fake Yukina leaped forward. She went in the direction opposite that Yukina did—plunging her golden spear right into the ferocious demon beast's throat. The golden glow increased still, and the demonic energy within the Unknown's body vanished as if it was swallowed by that radiance.

The spear Beast Vassal's ability was to nullify demonic energy—the same ability as Snowdrift Wolf's.

"The spiritual reactor!" Shizuri shouted from the Unknown's back.

The wound Kojou's Beast Vassal had torn into the demon beast's back was opening. The loss of such a vast quantity of demonic energy finally left its pace of healing unable to keep up with that injury.

From a slender crack in its rent flesh, the spiritual reactor inside its rib cage came clearly into view.

"Shio!" Yuiri called out the name of her best friend.

Shio nodded, pouring all of her remaining spiritual energy into the crossbow. "I, Dancer of the Lion, Archer of the High God, beseech thee!"

Shio sprinted as she chanted.

She sprinted to a place where she could shoot through the spiritual reactor for certain—namely, under the belly of the beast.

She turned the crossbow loaded with all the spiritual energy she could muster toward the exposed spiritual reactor. Shio put strength into the finger on the trigger. The divine armaments' two sets of ritual spell circuits activated, and its gunbarrel spewed out light.

"Let there be light—!"

The bolt of light extended without a sound, precisely impaling the core of the

spiritual reactor.

There was no explosion. All that remained was the sphere-shaped exterior of the core. The spiritual reactor, along with the upper-dimensional energy surrounded by that core, had vanished.

The Unknown roared in anguish as it fell onto its side. This time, Shio and the others' attacks had been effective.

Shio was in danger of being squished under the falling demon beast, but Yaze shielded her with the tank. Unable to withstand the demon beast's mass, the walking tank was crushed. But the scant single second before the robot tank was crushed gave Yaze and Shio just enough time to successfully escape.

Kojou released his summons of his Beast Vassal. His control of the fused Beast Vassal was already at its limit.

Yukina landed at Kojou's side. She'd pushed her own limits of her spiritual energy; even her breath was labored. Of course, Shio had also exhausted her energy, and Shizuri and Yuiri were at the limits of their endurance.

For its part, having lost the spiritual reactor, the Unknown did not simply remain silent.

Seemingly stripping off the wounded, weakened cells like shed skin, an undamaged Unknown crawled out from inside the Unknown's body. This was Unknown IX-4, supposedly consumed by its brethren. It was less than half the length the larger Unknown had been, but it seemed all the more ferocious for it. The severed tentacles were reviving, too.

"So even without the spiritual reactor, the Unknown itself is still in fine shape? I suppose that figures."

Kojou clicked his tongue with clear annoyance. Yukina poised her spear, but it was clear as day that she was in no condition to fight. That went for Shizuri and the others, too.

That didn't mean they could let the demon beast reach the surface. The Island Guard's fighting strength was just as depleted as theirs.

There's no other way, Kojou thought as he extended his right arm. He was

trying to summon a new Beast Vassal. Without warning, Fake Yukina grabbed that arm from the side. She shook her head, seemingly reading Kojou's mind.

"No, Kojou. If you swallow something that huge with Mercuriri, the dimensional hole it'll make will be no joke! One wrong move and it'll affect the whole world!"

Kojou had no response. She'd accurately discerned the identity of the Beast Vassal that Kojou was attempting to summon.

The Third Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor, Al-Meissa Mercury, possessed the same ability as Type Six-Plus: to shear away space itself. More precisely, Kojou's Beast Vassal's attacks were effective not only upon space per se, but applied to any and all dimensions in existence.

No matter how powerful the Unknown's regenerative ability, so long as the demon beast's body was comprised of physical cells, Kojou's Beast Vassal was surely capable of slaughtering the opponent.

However, Kojou's Beast Vassal was so overpowered that its effects upon its surroundings were equally pronounced. He couldn't even conceive of the backlash created by the dimensional hole gouged by completely swallowing a body that enormous.

If a distortion of space were to affect the Earth's crust and even the power of gravity, it would inevitably cause calamity on a global scale just as Fake Yukina had pointed out. That was why Kojou did not attack the Unknown with his dimension-eating Beast Vassal.

"But is there another way to beat the thing?" he grimaced.

She grinned, her expression devoid of all tension. "I wonder, maybe it's best to leave rice cake to the rice cake bakers?"

"Rice cake bakers?" He looked at her in confusion. *The heck?*

Fake Yukina silently raised her right hand. Ahead of where she pointed, Kojou saw a black-haired girl wearing a black sailor suit. It was a Priestess of the Six Blades of the Bureau of Astrology—an expert in quelling demon beasts.

"Kisaki!"

Kojou was perplexed as he watched Kiriha advance toward the demon beast from the front. She wasn't gripping the usual forked spear in her hand. Instead, she was carrying an enormous lance with a steel tip. The lance's total length was over twice Kiriha's height, and its diameter was about fifty centimeters at its widest point. It had to weigh over a hundred kilograms.

He didn't think that even Kiriha could wave that thing around indefinitely. However, with the Unknown's enormous body before them, the lance's very weight and thickness made it feel oddly dependable.

"You have my thanks, Kojou Akatsuki. The same goes to the Lion King Agency."

The fact that Kiriha of all people had expressed gratitude toward them felt like a jolt to Kojou like few before it.

However, she only demonstrated such a laudable attitude for one, brief moment, as if it had only been a mirage.

Bloodlust welled in her enchanting eyes, and Kiriha's beautiful lips curled up into a smile.

"Thanks to you, I get to slaughter the beast! *Flat!*"

"Wha…?!"

Whipped around by blast winds that felt like a punch to the face, Kojou wobbled backward.

This was an explosive shockwave generated by a supersonic cannonball. The lance wielded by Kiriha had fired it, accompanied by a beam of light. It was all in a split second, so much that Kojou's demonic vision could not keep up.

"An electromagnetic railgun, huh…?" Yaze exclaimed, intrigued.

This was a shooting weapon that fired a bullet via electromagnetic guidance rather than explosives. The Bureau of Astrology's Flat had likely taken the electromagnetic railguns developed for military warships and miniaturized them for anti–demon beast purposes.

In one sense, penetrating resilient flesh augmented by demonic energy with an overwhelmingly fast bullet was a simple concept. Accordingly, the weapon

was highly effective.

“The curse contained within Flat’s rounds employs the target’s demonic energy to activate and fragment it—in other words, it is by IX-4’s own demonic energy that it shall perish.”

Now that its duty was complete, Kiriha violently discarded the lance’s shaft—the launching mechanism—and nonchalantly flipped her hair.

“Naturally, I could not employ it while it was being supplied with inexhaustible demonic energy due to the spiritual reactor… That would cancel out the curse. But now—”

Before Kiriha could finish her words, there was a dull shaking of the ground. The Unknown, seemingly having lost the power to remain standing, had fallen.

The demon beast attempted to roar, but no sound came from its throat save a frail, plaintive wheezing.

Its cells had lost all color, falling away like sand. Thanks to its heightened ability to propagate, the curse that had begun to circulate throughout its entire body made its cellular destruction all the swifter.

The demon beast weakly closed its eyes, almost as if falling into a deep sleep, and didn’t move again.

The tips of its tentacles convulsed a few final times, and then, it went stone silent.

“Is it over…?”

Shizuri slumped to the ground with a *plop*.

“In the end, it feels like she just waited for the ripest moment to act, huh?” Yaze teased her resentfully. Certainly, he’d been asked to buy time, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d been deftly used.

However, Kiriha smiled without the slightest hint of guilt.

“Quelling demon beasts is the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Astrology. You have your own jobs awaiting, yes?”

Kojou turned to her with a tired but relieved expression.

Yes. Kojou still had opponents remaining with which he had a score to settle… Both as the sovereign ruler of a Dominion, and as kinsman to the poor demon beast that had been created as a weapon.

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right. From here on, this is my fight.”

There was a fire burning in Kojou’s eyes.

Yukina stood at his side, smiling as she nestled close to him. When she stretched her left arm out, a single bird fluttered down to it—a vulture made of metal.

“No, senpai. This is *our* fight.”

She stroked the shikigami bird of prey.

For some reason, the girl with the same face as Yukina gazed at them acting in sync with an amused grin on her face.



Outro

Outro

It was a ubiquitous corner of Island East. They were in a tiny warehouse built on the bank of a canal. They were Kyle and Keeley, the twin sorcerous engineers wearing white gowns.

The warehouse's interior, just large enough to park a pair of buses within, was packed full of equipment for cultivating demon beasts, as well as analytical devices. There were dozens of monitors meticulously hanging from the back wall showing video feeds from security cameras and unmanned video drones set up all across the island. The monitors on the measuring equipment were displaying information from sensors embedded into Unknown IX-4.

But about one hour earlier, the transmissions from those sensors had been completely cut. Heart rate and blood pressure were both zero. This indicated that Unknown IX-4 had been completely dispatched.

"Impossible… What method did the Bureau of Astrology use?! To think they could annihilate IX-4 without so much as a single cell remaining…!"

The man in the white gown, Kyle, punched the still-silent measuring equipment.

A scant few Attack Mages and a single mere vampire had destroyed the Grade IX demon beast they had created. That fact, one he had never anticipated, left him fiercely irritated.

"No, the more important issue is the Fourth Primogenitor. Thanks to him, we were forced to interrupt our observation of IX-4. If only, rather than watching these images, we were there to see IX-4's final moments… Shit!"

Kyle's expression twisted in humiliation. In truth, the Fourth Primogenitor hadn't done a thing to him. He'd merely become afraid due to Kojou Akatsuki's intimidation. Those feelings of fear remained in the core of his body even then, a slight to his pride as a sorcerous engineer.

He remained like that as the woman in the white gown, Keeley, gloomily

looked down at him. “Calm down, Kyle. The experiment was a success. At the very least, we’ve obtained data on the Bureau of Astrology and the Lion King Agency’s secret weapons. I’m sure the President will be delighted.”

Kyle nodded as if trying to force himself to accept that.

IX-4 had been defeated, but the wealth of data gleaned from its development remained. They’d obtained precious combat data regarding Hauras and the Schneewaltzers. If they used that data to make further improvements, it would be possible for them to finally create something beyond Grade IX, a Grade X—equal to a living weapon created by the gods themselves. They could achieve revenge against the Fourth Primogenitor and Itogami city-state going forward.

It was with such thoughts in mind that Kyle attempted to transfer the combat data to portable storage. However, the equipment did not respond to his input. *What’s going on?* the twins’ simultaneous furl of their brows seemed to say when, seemingly waiting for that very moment, the speaker for the experiment’s equipment activated.

“I don’t think getting praise from your boss will be easy when he’s already fled the island.”

What they heard was the rather frigid voice of a girl they did not recognize.

“—Who is this?!” Keeley snapped back in fear. However, the voice ignored her as it continued at its own pace.

“First of all, our employer—MAR Bionics Inc.—has filed lawsuits against the two of you for breach of contract and compensation for damages. The reason being that the data you sent over contained one hell of a nasty computer virus.”

“A virus…?” Keeley’s voice trembled.

Kyle reflexively turned back toward the desk, eyes glued to the equipment as he operated it through and through. However, the equipment did not respond even once. The only thing shown on the display was the image of a badly sewn teddy bear.

The combat data they’d obtained had all been overwritten with meaningless information. The same phenomenon had probably occurred at MAR Bionics proper, thanks to the virus that *someone* had inflicted upon them…

“MAR Bionics’s losses are estimated at several trillion yen. Their stocks are worth about as much as scrap paper. Hmm, it’s pretty obvious that if they make one false move, they’ll go bankrupt. You two should resign yourselves to a police investigation, too. You made a lot of money short-selling Itogami city-state stocks, didn’t you? Enough so you can afford restitution for the damages the demon beast caused, even.”

The girl laughed. Those words made the twins realize just who she really was.

When they thought about it rationally, it made perfect sense. It was someone who could hijack top-secret MAR lines of communication, which boasted security that met the world’s highest standards. There was only one monster like that.

“It can’t be… It can’t be—*you* swapped the contents of the data? Cyber Empress!”

“Plus, the two of you aren’t getting off this island anyway,” Asagi Aiba firmly declared, letting Kyle’s enraged words glide past.

The building where the twins were located shuddered with a roar.

The walls and ceiling of the warehouse were pulverized and sent flying as if the hoof of some enormous beast had torn them apart.

A scarlet bicorn, its entire body enveloped by blast winds, gazed haughtily down at the twins with the night sky at its back.

“A Beast Vassal of the…Fourth Primogenitor…!” Keeley shrieked.

Even though they understood the simple menace it posed, the awe inspired by seeing such a Beast Vassal up close was off the charts.

A Beast Vassal of a primogenitor could annihilate the twins any moment it pleased. Resistance was meaningless, and there was nowhere to run. Kojou Akatsuki had purposefully used his Beast Vassal to destroy the warehouse to drive that knowledge into them.

“This is absurd… What are those damned puppets doing…?!”

Kyle searched for the golems left to stand watch. He thought to use them to slow the Fourth Primogenitor down and escape in the meantime.

However, when Kyle looked over his shoulder, all he saw were golem remains piled up without fanfare at the warehouse's entrance.

"Doesn't really feel like enough. I had a lot of stress accumulated from all that hospital life."

A beast person girl wearing metal gloves was cracking her fingers as she gazed down at the golems' remains. Golems only able to obey simple commands were extremely weak in hand-to-hand combat, which demanded snap decision-making. If you destroyed their joints, their ability to take a punch was rendered meaningless. A beast person expert in hand-to-hand combat might well be called puppet soldiers' mortal enemy.

"Don't overdo it, Yuno. You're still in the middle of recovery."

A small-statured teenage boy gunner supported the beast person girl with a flurry of shots from pistol-form Spell Throwers. The spell rounds he shot out without warning accurately destroyed each and every anti-intruder trap Keeley had set inside the warehouse. It was a feat impossible save for someone with excellent technique, knowledge of spellcraft, and a great deal of experience.

The twins knew their identities. They were the civilian Attack Mages that had encountered IX-4 during its growth phase. They'd thought the pair was insignificant opposition, simple pieces of data for evaluating the demon beast's combat capabilities.

But these civilian Attack Mages, supposedly mere pieces of data, levied an aggressive hostility at the twins as helpers of the Gigafloat Management Corporation. The twins understood that they were no longer observers from a position of absolute safety; they were now the hunted.

Asagi Aiba's cheerful voice instilled bottomless terror into the twins. *"Did you really think you could pick a fight with a Dominion and get away with it?"*

They'd heard that Itogami city-state, having only just achieved independence, had no great combat strength to its name. And yet, in that sparse amount of time since the end of the fight with the Unknown, the Gigafloat Management Corporation had managed to easily send Attack Mages of such caliber into the fray, as if to demonstrate that the Dominion had strength to spare.

What they should have truly been wary of where Itogami Island was concerned was not the Fourth Primogenitor, but the numerous persons of talent gathered around him.

“Kyle and Keeley Matsunaga—for suspicion of assault, destruction of property, and violations of the Special District Public Order Maintenance Act—I hereby place you under arrest. Please raise both hands and slowly get down on your knees.”

As the twins stood still, they heard a voice from directly behind them.

When they turned, there stood a small-statured girl gripping a silver spear.

It was Yukina Himeragi, Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency. The twins might have been excellent sorcerous engineers, but they had no chance of winning in a fight against her, an expert in anti-demon combat.

“Urk…!”

Keeley attempted to activate her teleportation ritual. It was virtually impossible for her to flee together with Kyle. But if she was alone, she believed she had a real shot at escape.

“That is futile.”

However, as if anticipating Keeley’s action, Yukina thrust her spear out.

The magical energy-nullifying silver spear erased the magic circle at Keeley’s feet with ease. Then, still with no idea what had just happened, she tumbled onto the floor as Yukina subdued her.

“Ugh…!”

Abandoning his captive sister, Kyle began to run. He was heading for the warehouse’s back door. But noticing the figure emerging from it, he yelped.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. I’m here to crush you as promised.”

Surrounded by a powerful, malevolent aura, Kojou Akatsuki bared his white fangs with a vicious sneer.

“Uu…aa…!”

“It’s over, old man!”

Kojou put his weight into it as he fervently punched the side of Kyle’s face.

Speechless, the man in the white gown danced in the sky, making a half turn before falling face-first to the floor.

Kojou watched as the unconscious man’s body twitched.



That was how the demon beast incident that shook Itogami city-state came to an end.



“Kojou fused Beast Vassals?”

La Folia Rihavein, crown princess of the Kingdom of Aldegia, was listening with deep interest to the classical-looking phone brought in resting upon a silver tray.

She was in a villa belonging to the Aldegian royal family. It was a small but beautiful building surrounded by forest and snowy plains.

“…He is growing *far* too quickly… I see, so that is *his* aim…,” La Folia murmured to herself as she stared at the blue glacier visible through the window. “Do continue your surveillance,” she added, gently putting the phone receiver down.

“Princess La Folia… That call just now…?”

The question came from Sayaka Kirasaka, Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency.

This time, Sayaka was acting not as the princess’s bodyguard, but as an emissary to the Kingdom of Aldegia from the Japanese government. Of course, the contents of the message Sayaka had brought concerned Kojou Akatsuki.

It was because that very Kojou Akatsuki was the subject at hand that she could not let the matter pass without comment.

“The demon beast uproar on Itogami Island seems to have come to an end.”

Dismissing the female attendant in male clothing who had brought the phone in, La Folia slowly leaned back in her tall chair.

Perhaps thanks to not being in public, she was wearing personal clothing rather than her usual ceremonial outfit. Her simple nightgown had a plunging neckline, exposing both her cleavage and her back. The way her silver hair was tied up left her neck exposed and engendered an atmosphere like it was some masterpiece by a famous painter. She wasn’t called the Second Coming of Freya

for nothing.

“A demon beast that had taken a spiritual reactor inside of it—such a shame I was not able to see it with my own eyes.”

“Princess…!”

Just when the report that the incident was at a close gave her a moment’s relief, La Folia’s indiscreet words made Sayaka grimace without thinking.

“MAR Bionics Inc. has denied all connection to the crime,” La Folia continued. “However, all employees have been dismissed, and the enterprise is being dismantled. Kojou and the others have done well.”

She was content. They had demonstrated to the entire world the sorry fate that awaited any who might seek to bring harm to Itogami city-state.

To a corporate conglomerate the size of MAR, the smashing of one or two associated companies would surely be no great loss to it, but at the very least, the demonstration’s effect sufficed.

“Things should calm down on that island for a little while. This is most fortuitous for us as well.”

“Um…Princess. Are you serious about this?”

Sayaka meekly gazed at La Folia with upturned eyes.

With a conflicted expression, Sayaka was peering at a set of papers resting in her own hands. They were tickets for a flight to Aldegia, issued in the name of the royal family.

“Yes, of course.”

La Folia nodded with an earnest look on her face. Sayaka had known it was pointless to prod from the start. This princess’s words were always serious—no matter how much they might sound like a very bad joke.

“I expect a positive reply, Sayaka.”

The princess met Sayaka’s gaze with a grinning smile.

A thoroughly lost expression came over Sayaka as she clenched the invitations addressed to Kojou Akatsuki.



The girl stood alone in the otherwise empty early-morning classroom.

She was holding a little paper bag against her chest. Looking at the seating arrangement map, she confirmed the location of Kojou Akatsuki's desk; she gently tried to push the paper bag into the desk.

However, the girl stopped when she noticed that the classroom door had quietly opened and someone had come in.

"Finally found ya. What are you trying to do this time?"

Kojou called out to the girl with the face just like Yukina's—to Reina.

Reina's eyes bulged in apparent surprise as she turned back to Kojou.

"You sure figured out I was here, huh, Kojou?"

"That's 'cause Yaze gave me a call. I rushed over." Kojou sighed, showing off his own cell phone.

When Reina had vanished without a trace immediately following the fight with the Unknown, Kojou and others had spent the whole night looking for her. Thanks to that, he was criminally short on sleep.

"Oh yeah, Yazecchi's Soundscape… It's not a spell, which is a real pain…" Reina teasingly stuck out her tongue. "Well, fine… I meant to give you a present before heading back anyway, Kojou."

"A present?"

"Yeah. I figured, giving this to you is the best way to return it."

Speaking those words, Reina held out the paper bag. It was barely big enough to put baked sweets inside.

Kojou had his guard up as he warily accepted it, though it wasn't particularly heavy. He was slightly relieved that it didn't feel like something dangerous.

"Going back? Where'd you come here from anyway?" Kojou asked, abruptly recalling what she'd just said. When he thought about it, he didn't know a single thing about her identity, why she looked so much like Yukina, and why she'd

assisted them in dispatching the demon beast.

However, Reina seemed a little conflicted as she turned her eyes beyond the window.

“If you ask me where, that’s a little tough to answer. Well, it’s a bit far away from here. At the speed of light, separated by, oh, twenty light-years or so?”

“What are you…? Some kind of space alien?!”

“Well, maybe it’s best we leave it at that.” She giggled at his surprise. “Come to think of it, Mo…Yukina isn’t with you?”

“She’ll be here shortly. She came in from the back, you see.”

“Wow, she wanted to pincer-attack me? Figures she’d try something underhanded like that…!” Reina knit her brow.

It was at that exact moment that Yukina entered the classroom.

“What do you mean, it figures?” said Yukina as she suddenly drew her silver spear. From the start, she was ready to fight.

Reina hid in Kojou’s shadow, fearful. “Er, well… Yeah, Snowdrift Wolf looks like it’s in good shape. You’re continuing as his watcher for sure, right?”

“Well, yes.”

Yukina grudgingly nodded. She understood that Reina was trying to change the subject, but unsurprisingly, she was unable to ignore the matter of Snowdrift Wolf being repaired.

The formal order for her to continue her duties arrived from the Lion King Agency late the night before.

Just recently, a scandal had broken out concerning a certain politician on mainland Japan. He was a major figure in the governing coalition, enough that he was called the lynchpin of the political world, but a report had come out that he had a circle of young lovers around him.

Though it became known that this politician was peerless in the political world for his love of huge breasts, it would not become known that this was the same politician who’d strongly asserted that the observer of the Fourth

Primogenitor needed to be changed.

For the sake of Yukina's dignity, perhaps it was best that his wish—for the watcher to employ her female charms to seduce the Fourth Primogenitor—had been consigned to the darkness.

"All's well that ends well. Maybe I can rest easier now, too?" Reina breathed a sigh of relief.

Yukina regarded her with suspicious eyes. "What relationship does my mission have to you?"

"The heck? You don't need to be so hostile and stuff. And I thought we'd part ways on good terms and everything—"

The naked hostility in Yukina's demeanor left Reina tapering her lips in a pout. However, before Reina could complete her objections, Yukina launched her attack.

"I will not let you go! This time I will make you speak about everything!"

Reina fended off the merciless blunt attack that Yukina launched her way. "Wait a… Are you still holding a grudge about the beating I gave you when I first…?!"

It was a practiced movement, as if she knew Yukina's attack patterns through and through. Realizing this, Yukina's eyes grew sharper still. Now she was completely serious.

"W-wait, Himeragi. Any way you slice it, that's—"

Seeing Yukina poise her silver spear, even Kojou was shaken.

Up until that point, Reina's misdeeds amounted to some minor acts of violence, but she hadn't substantively hurt anyone. No matter how he looked at it, he thought suddenly thrusting a spear at her was overkill, let alone a holy spear able to slay even a vampire primogenitor.

"Geh?! Wait, Snowdrift Wolf?! Hang on a sec! Anything but that! That's the one thing you absolutely cannot use!"

"Then stop resisting!"

Thanks to having undergone the terrible ordeal of having her uniform stolen, there was no hesitation in Yukina's actions.

Reina instantly backed up to evade the silver blade as it thrust forward, rending the air. However, Yukina had read her move. An expert in anti-demon combat to begin with, Yukina employed Spirit Sight to peer an instant into the future. A few strands of Reina's hair were severed, gently falling away.

It was the very next moment that the abnormality occurred.

The vampire girl's entire body was enveloped by pale sparks. Her form grew hazy, swaying like a mirage.

The girl had been substantial in their world without ever truly being there. It was through abusing demonic energy rivaling that of a vampire primogenitor that she had forced her body to remain.

However, Yukina's spear had destroyed the spell barrier deployed over her.

Reina's visible form rapidly thinned as it became insubstantial. It was as if she was being forced back to the place where her body of flesh and blood belonged…

"Grr… You really don't listen to what anyone says!! You're so stupid, Mom!! You dummy!!" Reina shouted like a spoiled child at the glaring Yukina.

Those were the last words she spoke.

The dazzling glow of lightning was all that was left behind as Reina completely vanished.

Kojou and Yukina stared, dumbfounded by the sight. The aura of the girl greatly resembling Yukina had completely vanished without a trace. There was no longer any way to find out who she was.

The only clue left was from the last words she had spoken—

Kojou turned to Yukina. "…Mom?"

The vampire girl greatly resembling her had clearly spoken that word in Yukina's direction—a stupid mom, at that.

Yukina swiftly shook her head.

Of course, she had no idea what that was all about; she most certainly had no children, let alone a daughter as big as that.

Yes. For the time being, at least…



Enveloped by a pale light, a naked girl appeared.

She was the vampire daughter bearing the same face as the girl once known as Yukina Himeragi.

The room was akin to a corporate laboratory.

As the girl rested on one knee, there were countless metallic sorcerous devices and complex magic circles constructed all around her. The cables extending from the sorcerous devices were meticulously bundled together, connected to a terminal on top of a table.

Sitting in front of that terminal was another girl. She wore a white gown on top of her school uniform.

She was a high school student with a comely face and an extravagant hairstyle. It was no exaggeration to say that she was beautiful, but the sarcastic smile on her lips didn't feel particularly sexy.

"—Welcome back, Reina. You returned a bit sooner than I expected."

That high school girl with the extravagant hairstyle was sipping on some tomato juice as she called out to the naked girl. The girl had a straw in her mouth as a tiny, white fang poked out of the corner of her lips.

"Moegi, I'm baaaack. Oh, where's the doctor?"

Reina stretched her back slightly as she stood up, surveying the lab interior. The two girls were the only people therein. The desk at the back of the lab, surrounded by countless monitors and keyboards, was vacant.

"My mother left earlier. Some sort of trouble at the Imperial Parliament, she said."

The girl in the white gown called Moegi handed Reina clothes fresh from the laundry. They included a pair of underwear and strapped high socks—the

school uniform of Saikai Academy's middle school, remodeled only recently.

"Is that so? I guess the Empire's greatest technological advisor has it tough, too," Reina said nonchalantly as she got dressed in the underwear handed to her. Moegi waited for when she'd finished putting on her shoes to present some cold tomato juice to her.

"That goes for your mom, too, doesn't it, Reina? Want a drink?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

Reina wolfed down the tomato juice she'd accepted. *Whew*, came her sigh.

"How are you feeling physically? Any side effects from the transfer ritual?"

"I was better off than I thought I'd be. I wasn't sure what'd happen when I got cut by Snowdrift Wolf, though."

"Cut?"

Moegi looked back at Reina, astonished.

"Don't tell me they realized you were using a temporal transfer ritual?"

Reina's shoulders sank as she replied to her concerned older half-sister's question, "Mm. It's probably all right. Seems like Natsuki picked up on it at some point, though."

Natsuki was a powerful witch who specialized in spatial control. There was no question that all it took was a single instant of touching Reina's body to realize the nature of the barrier deployed over her.

"Oh well," said Moegi, letting out a murmur of apparent praise. "So you managed to repair Snowdrift Wolf, then?"

"Of course."

"I see. It would be good if The Blood gave up on interfering, but…"

"I suppose so."

Moegi's melancholic-sounding murmur made Reina's expression tighten for a single moment. When she was serious, the side of her face looked even more like Yukina's than usual.

Moegi immediately returned to her normal tone of voice as she asked, “So how was that world?”

“It was fun. I met all sorts of people, and I got to talk to Kojou when he was in good health before he, y’know, died and stuff,” she murmured with a forlorn smile, staring into space.

For a moment, Moegi fell silent, her breath having seemingly caught.

The two girls gazed into each other’s eyes in silence for a little while longer, and then…

“No, no, no, he’s not dead. And it’s not like he’d stay dead if you killed him anyway…!”

It was Moegi who broke the silence with a joke first.

I’m kidding, Reina seemed to say with her tongue stuck out. Then, having finished dressing in her school uniform, she approached the laboratory’s windowsill, strongly pulling up the blinds covering the window.

Spreading beyond the window was a vast cityscape glowing in the morn as far as her eyes could see.

There stood the land once known as Itogami Island. It was a Demon Sanctuary wrought from metal, resin, and magic. It was the fourth Dominion in the world.

Looking down at the long shadows cast over the giant imperial capital by the morning sun, Reina murmured, seemingly nostalgic.

“Empire of the Dawn, I’m home.”



The only thing left fallen in the place from which the vampire girl vanished was her uniform, stripped off and abandoned.

The pale sparks that had scattered about and the vestiges of magical energy had already vanished.

“She’s really gone…?”

Kojou asked as he surveyed the classroom’s interior. Yukina made a hesitant

shake of her head. “I don’t know. It did not feel as if she fled via teleportation, however…”

“Figures.” He nodded.

Reina had not fled of her own will. It felt more like some spell tethering her to that world had been broken, and the recoil had returned her to the world from which she came.

“This school uniform is…?”

Kojou warily touched the school uniform left lying in the classroom. The only evidence that demonstrated Fake Yukina had really existed was the faint, vanishing warmth remaining in that uniform.

“It’s mine. As I mentioned, she stole it from me when she attacked me while dressing in the changing room,” Yukina replied with an indignant tone as she gathered up the scattered pieces of the school uniform. She seemed to have been genuinely sore about being taken by surprise and rendered helpless.

“I’ve gotta say, though, she really did look like you. Enough you’d think you were her actual mother. She called you Mom and everything,” Kojou murmured with no real thought behind his words, remembering Reina’s appearance.

Yukina made no move to deny that part. However, she knit her brows, seeming slightly perplexed. “But she was a vampire…wasn’t she?”

“Huh?” Kojou stiffened.

Natsuki had apparently said that Reina was a second-generation vampire. If she really was Yukina’s daughter, it meant her father had to be a vampire primogenitor.

Furthermore, Reina seemed to know Yaze and Asagi, and on top of that, she’d called Nagisa *Auntie*…

Amid that stifling silence, Kojou and Yukina met each other’s eyes.

“No way, right?”

“I—I suppose not.”

The pair hastily averted their eyes and laughed with dry voices. Yukina’s face

was red to the tips of her ears.

An uncomfortable silence fell once more, making Kojou sigh, exhausted.

Reina had really given them the runaround, but strangely, he couldn't hate the girl at all. He thought he'd have liked to talk to her a little more. Even so, he didn't have much of a desolate feeling. Somehow, he sensed that he'd be able to reunite with her someday. He sensed that he'd definitely be meeting her again.

"Come to think of it, what the heck was this…?"

Remembering that Reina had handed him a so-called present, Kojou opened the paper bag he was carrying.

Wafting up from the paper bag was a whiff of perfume from small articles of clothing.

Without any thought, Kojou pulled these out, unwittingly spreading them before his eyes.

He'd completely thought they were handkerchiefs, but they were actually a small pair of underwear. A freshly washed bra and panties—these comprised Reina's present.

Reina had said she was *returning* them. In other words, she was returning them to their proper owner, just like the school uniform she had worn. He didn't even have to think about it; it was obvious who that was.

"…Senpai…!"

Yukina's deeply resentful voice left Kojou blue in the face.



Having gone rigid, still clenching the panties in his hands, Kojou weakly shook his head.

“W-wait…I can explain, so put the spear away…!”

“Just how long are you going to look at them spread out like that, stupid senpai—!!”

In that early-morning classroom, Yukina’s enraged shouts echoed along with the shrieks of the World’s Mightiest Vampire.

Amid the chaos of history, they still had great travails before them.

Their faint glimpse into the future had vanished like a midsummer night’s illusion, illuminating nothing to them about where their future might lead. Even so, that day, too, the Demon Sanctuary of Itogami Island continued quietly floating on the surface of the sea.

The morning sun made the water’s horizon shine white.

A new day had begun, bringing the future just a tiny bit closer.

Afterword

When interpreting dreams, monsters and monstrous beasts are often said to be symbols of fear and anxiety. The bigger the subconscious anxiety and fear, the bigger and stronger the monster in the dream, they say. It's not that I really believe in dream analysis, but it did make an impression that made me go, *Hmm, yeah.* That's why I thought it would be exhilarating for readers harboring such anxieties and fears to see the main character standing and facing a powerful monster. I thought, is that not the role for fiction to play?

So there you have it, *Strike the Blood*, Volume 17, has finally hit store shelves.

In last volume's afterword, I feel like I pegged the next one as finally being the start of a new series in earnest, but this time things turned out to be a rather unorthodox episode. That said, Kojou and the others were greeted by a new school term, and Itogami Island has begun shifting little by little into a new order. I felt like Kojou and Yukina's relationship was subtly progressing, but not too quickly. I was pleased to be able to continue watching their daily lives.

I believe many of you have noticed, but this episode is based on the "Yukina √Before/After" story outside the main *Strike the Blood* series that appeared in *Dengeki Bunko 20th Anniversary Launch Commemorative Official Bootleg Book: 20 de 20!!* Since this noncanonical story unexpectedly came to be taken as canon, I left everything in it, particularly the scene where Reina arrives onstage, as much like the original as possible. Being a seven-page noncanonical short story to begin with, as a practical matter, this work is an almost completely separate thing.

Since it was, in the end, a noncanonical story, it was quite fun with a certain parallel world feel to it…

Now, then, just before this volume goes to print, I think all eight episodes of the second season of the *Strike the Blood* OAV will have (probably) made it to

stores safe and sound. Truly, truly, thank you very much to all the anime version staff and members of the cast over this long period of time. You should be seeing the exploits of Kiriha, Yuiri, and Shio at work in the current batch of episodes. It's going to be fun.

Personally, since my anime work slowed down a bit, I was, like, it'd be nice if I could bump that publication pace up a bit. I ask for your best regards going forward.

To Manyako, the illustrator for this work, you were a huge help once again.

And to everyone involved in the creation and distribution of this book, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Of course, all of you who have read this book have all the gratitude I can muster.

Now then, I hope to see you again next volume.

Gakuto Mikumo

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