
18
Gakuto Mikumo
ILLUSTRATION BY
Manyako
STRIKE THE BLOOD
KINGDOM OF THE VALKYRIES –THE TRUE STORY–

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KINGDOM OF THE VALKYRIES – THE TRUE STORY –



Gakuto Mikumo

Illustration by Manyako


Kojou Akatsuki
The Fourth Primogenitor
The world's mightiest—and laziest—vampire
La Folia Rihavein
Princess of Aldegia
Clever, wise, silver-haired crown princess


Yukina Himeragi
Sword Shaman
The Lion King Agency's
beautiful observer
Sayaka Kirasaka
Shamanic War Dancer
Elegant dancer and marksman
of Der Freischötz


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

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Design / Hirokazu Watanabe (2725, Inc.)

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KINGDOM OF THE VALKYRIES
—THE TRUE STORY—

18

GAKUTO MIKUMO

ILLUSTRATION BY
MANYAKO

YEN ON
NEW YORK

Copyright

STRIKE THE BLOOD, Volume 18

GAKUTO MIKUMO

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Intro

Intro

The man stood brandishing an enormous sword.

The subterranean chamber was broad and dimly lit, surrounded by steel walls on all four sides.

The elliptical stage made out of tightly packed earth and stones was reminiscent of an ancient gladiatorial arena where slaves were made to fight one another. Walking to the center of that stage, the man discarded the cloak he wore, exposing the thick muscles that covered his imposing physique. There were old scars carved into his flesh—too many to count—demonstrating that this man was a resilient weapon honed on the field of battle. In addition to wielding a great sword, he wore dark gray epaulets and gauntlets infused with magical energy.

Facing off against this man was a huge phantom beast enveloped in flames.

The air shimmered, scorched by the blistering flames; white smoke spewed upward from where the soil was fused together. It was a mass of demonic energy so dense it had gained a physical form. It was a Beast Vassal—one of the otherworldly creatures that dwelled in the vampire's own blood.

If one were to put its appearance into words, perhaps it would be described as a ferocious ox clad in thick armor like a crocodile. It was easily twice as tall as the man.

It was said that the Beast Vassals of older, more powerful vampires could destroy a cutting-edge tank with ease, or even burn an entire city to the ground in a single night. There was no doubting that the Beast Vassal before the man's eyes belonged to an Old Guard vampire.

In spite of this, neither fright nor reluctance lingered in the man's eyes. The corners of his thick lips curled upward to carve an impetuous smile upon his face.

Without fanfare, the man raised the great sword he carried and stepped forward.

The fighting spirit emanating from his entire body was so strong that his opponent could feel it, and he slammed it into the Beast Vassal.

Provoked by that fighting spirit, the Beast Vassal ferociously roared. Lowering its posture, it jutted its horns forward and charged toward the man. The creature propelled itself at such a high speed in an abnormally short time, but being a mass of demonic energy, a Beast Vassal was not shackled by the laws of the real world. Its huge, blazing body turned into a torrent of power in an attempt to turn the man into roadkill.

The man, no more than a mere human, would surely be overwhelmed by the heat and mass, helpless against being trampled—everyone watching the fight knew he was seconds away from death, but within the underground chamber, the air itself shifted.

The torrent of demonic energy warped and wavered. The Beast Vassal materialized once more. Its huge body convulsed in pain, letting loose a fearsome howl with an unconcealable reverberation of agony.

The man had swung his sword to block the entity's advance. Even though the Beast Vassal was impervious to any physical attack, somehow this had hurt it.

"Is that all?"

The man let out a disappointed sigh through the gaps of his clenched teeth. Forcing the great sword imbued with a pale light into a downward swing, he rode the momentum for an inverse, upward slash.

With its right shoulder slashed open, the Beast Vassal lost control of its demonic flames, which scattered about like blood from a fresh wound. As the Beast Vassal reeled backward, the man crept under its feet, thrusting his sword deep into the beast's belly.

Demonic energy exploded from the beast in response. Flames and violent gusts raged indiscriminately, mowing down the stage and pushing the defensive barriers to their absolute limits.

Yet, the man stood calmly amid those flames all the same. Striking down with his fist, covered only in a gauntlet, he mercilessly delivered another slash with his radiant great sword. He followed up with a flurry of blows from his fist. A

human being in the flesh, not even a sorcerer, was overwhelming a vampire's Beast Vassal in melee combat. The largely surreal scene left the people surrounding the stage voiceless.

Finally, a blow from the man's sword slashed deeply, close to the Beast Vassal's heart.

Dazzling sparks scattered forth as the Beast Vassal's body swayed and vanished like a mirage. The accumulated damage had exceeded its limit, rendering it unable to maintain physical form.

The throes of combat had destroyed the elliptical stage sufficiently that it could no longer sustain its original shape.

White steam was spewing from between the stones. Sparks were scattering from the barrier due to excess strain. On the other side of that barrier, a Demon wearing a military uniform was heaving ragged breaths. This was the Beast Vassal's vampire host.

"What's wrong? Done already?"

The man was disappointed. However, the vampire remained on his knees and offered no reply. The backlash from damage to his Beast Vassal had exhausted him to the point he could not utter a single word.

Upon closer observation, the sorcerous engineers who had deployed the barrier across the stage wore similar worn-out expressions. Some among them had already lost consciousness.

This by no means meant they deserved criticism for being frail. There were few sorcerous engineers in the world capable of deploying a barrier that could seal a Beast Vassal's demonic energy, brief period of time or no. If anything, it was the combat ability of the man who had dispatched the Beast Vassal that was beyond all common sense.

An individual appearing to be the captain of the sorcerous engineers bowed his head deeply toward the man. "Please be merciful. The soldiers cannot withstand any more."

"I can see that. We're done here. I had heard you demonic mercenaries were skilled, but this does not amount to a warm-up, let alone a demonstration. I

really should have hired two or three extra Beast Vassal users."

The man sheathed his great sword with a deep exhale. To this man, even reckless close-quarter combat with a Beast Vassal was nothing more than a minor test of skill—not a taste of real combat.

"So have you discerned his identity?"

The man posed the question to the sorcerous engineer captain as he descended from the wrecked stage.

"Yes. Though we could not hope for anyone in the royal palace to be complicit, cooperation from foreign intelligence services allowed us to piece together his identity."

The captain took out an ultra-thin digital device from under the robe he wore. Displayed upon it was a photo of an Asian boy. Thanks to the parka hood the boy wore over his eyes, the impression he gave was ominous indeed. Red, gleaming eyes peeked out from the gaps between his pale bangs.

"Are you all right with this, Your Majesty? Even if it means making an enemy out of this man—?"

The man addressed as *Your Majesty* gave the captain's question a brief reply. "This is not making an enemy."

Then the man swiped the digital device from the captain's hands, spitefully glaring at the face of the young man portrayed upon it. The clandestinely taken photo also portrayed a small-statured girl standing right at the side of the young man in the hooded parka. She was a black-haired girl with a guitar case on her back. The man clenched his jaw, and his teeth ground together loud enough to make a sound.

"He is no real enemy of mine—he'll be dead by my hands before long. I shall cleave his skull, rip off his limbs, and burn him to ash in holy fire so that he can never resuscitate again!"

Cracks ran across the screen of the digital device. The man's fingers quaked with anger as they crushed the device with their absurd level of gripping power. Even amid the spectacular cracks, the screen continued to display the face of the young man.

“Yes, this malignant king wrought from the consumption of blood—the Fourth Primogenitor, Kojou Akatsuki!”

The enraged man clenched the digital device, crushing it. This time, the image vanished for good.

It almost felt like the man was dragging his sheathed great sword behind him as he walked off. All the remaining sorcerous engineers could do as he left was stare dumbfounded at his back.



Chapter One
The Letter of Invitation

Chapter One

The Letter of Invitation

1

Narrowing his eyes at the dazzling sunbeams reflected off the asphalt, the Fourth Primogenitor, Kojou Akatsuki, walked to school on a sidewalk along the coast.

The southern nation sunrays were powerful even in the early morning, and the humid air particular to the tropics coiled around his skin. However, Kojou's steps were unusually light.

"Refreshing morning, isn't it? It's nice and bright. Seems like it'll be hot today, too. Days like this sure brighten the mood, huh?"

Kojou had a sunny disposition, gazing at the serene sky enough to dye his own eyes blue.

The upbeat statement, unimaginable coming from him under normal circumstances, caused the two girls walking beside him to halt and gape.

"S-senpai…?"

Yukina Himeragi looked up at the side of Kojou's face with an openly wary expression. From her gaze, she seemed to suspect he was under psychic attack or had been brainwashed by some kind of powerful sorcery.

"'Warm' is putting it mildly," replied Kojou's younger sister, Nagisa, without missing a beat. "Even right now, the atmospheric temperature should be over thirty degrees…"

Kojou had woken up on time that morning for once, so they just happened to be heading to school together.

However, Kojou's expression did not particularly change despite the pair's plainly suspicious reactions.

“Gotta say, waking up early feels good. Really puts you in a fresh mood.”

Yukina’s smiling face twitched. “R-right. Although you did not wake up early enough for me to call it waking up early…” Her posture indicated she was still wary.

He normally arrived at school just barely on time, so this only felt early to him; as a matter of fact, they were going to school at a normal hour.

Nagisa shifted her gaze to her older brother as if he were slightly creepy. “More to the point, what’s with you today, Kojou? What happened? You always look like you’re going to keel over in the morning. You’re like, ‘it’s hoooooot,’ or ‘I’m gonna dieeee’, or ‘I’m gonna turn to aaash’ and stuff.”

“Hey, I can’t help it! How harsh do you think Itogami Island’s direct sunlight is on a vampire? Forget sunburn! It’s more like burning to a crisp,” Kojou snapped, unwittingly back to his normal demeanor.

Direct sunlight wasn’t exactly enough to kill Kojou, the World’s Mightiest Vampire, but it didn’t change the fact that he had a much harder time with it than the average person.

Nagisa let out a hearty sigh in exasperation. “Well, that’s because you don’t put on proper sunblock, Kojou. Even normal humans walking around the island without protection against UV rays would get sunburned so bad they wouldn’t even be able to take a bath at night.”

“I suppose so. It’s Itogami Island, so sunblock even for vampires is sold in normal stores.” Yukina smiled with mild relief when she saw that Kojou had returned to his usual self.

Itogami Island was a Demon Sanctuary—an artificial city with the goal of coexistence between humanity and Demonkind. Many commercial products that were difficult to acquire on the mainland were sold for the sake of the demons living there. Sunblock for vampires, boasting particularly high sun protection factor, was among them.

“Sunblock… But that has a specific scent to it, right? I have a tough time with the smell…”

Kojou grimaced a little as he averted his eyes. Thanks to his five senses having

sharpened after becoming a vampire, he didn't have much fondness for the scent of artificial perfumes of late.

However, Yukina smiled and shook her head as she gave Kojou a considerate look. "Lately, there is scentless, non-perfumed sunblock as well. One cannot use products with a strong scent at school, regardless."

"Oh…so you use something like that, Himeragi?"

Raising his eyebrows, Kojou stared at Yukina. She seemed so indifferent about her own appearance, so her being this mindful about sunburn surprised him a little.

"Well, yes. Er, Sayaka and Master were very insistent about it, so—"

"Huh. Well, you certainly have pretty skin."

"O-oh, I do?"

Yukina's cheeks reddened when Kojou drew his face close to examine her bare skin.

Nagisa yelled, "Close! Too close, Kojou! That's sexual harassment! And Yukina, this is no time for you to be blushing!" She landed a punch to his stomach in a fit of anger. It wasn't a particularly powerful punch, but she must have hit a bad spot based on Kojou's groan and loss of breath.

"Guoah… I…was not ready for that one…"

"So besides all that, why are you in such a good mood today anyway?" Nagisa asked her violently coughing brother.

Kojou scratched his head. "It's not that I'm in a particularly good mood, but more that Golden Week is right around the corner."

"Huh? That's the reason? That's it?" Nagisa's eyes widened in astonishment. Yukina seemed at a loss for words as well.

The girls' reactions made Kojou twist his lips like he was pouting.

"Well, that's how important it is to me! It's the break I've wanted for ages, you know. Back during spring break and even at New Year's, I had supplemental lessons, and homework, and the war of the primogenitors wrap-up, and all

kinds of brushes with death.”

“Ahh…”

Gazing at Kojou and his earnest, fervent effort to explain, Nagisa smiled warmly with a pitying look. She no doubt remembered the sight of her older brother being recalled by his homeroom teacher for supplemental lessons and homework.

“Have you made any plans?” Yukina asked with an expression far gentler than the norm. Kojou thought a bit and shook his head.

“Nah, not really. As long as I can stay up late and sleep in the morning without worrying I’m g—”

“A trip! I wanna go on an overseas trip!” Nagisa asserted.

The sudden proposal from his little sister made Kojou let out an exhausted sigh. “Overseas… Where the heck would we get the money?”

“What do you mean? The bank, of course. Gajou’s been giving me an allowance when he comes back from time to time.”

“That shitty dad…! He never even brought me one stupid souvenir…!”

Nagisa’s completely unexpected words left Kojou fiercely indignant. Their father, Gajou Akatsuki, rarely came home due to his archeology fieldwork, but he had apparently made sure his daughter was glad to see him, at least.

“Where would we go on a trip, huh? It’d have to be a really refreshing place. I wanna see snow and ice floes and stuff.”

“Er, I’m saying there’s no money. Besides, there’d be no way to schedule a flight in time.”

An enraptured expression came over Nagisa as Kojou gently sought to persuade her. Being a long distance removed from the Japanese mainland made travel inconvenient all by itself. He didn’t think they’d be lucky enough to pick up airplane tickets on the eve of a string of major holidays.

“Uuu… Ice floe…”

It was plain to the naked eye that Kojou’s realistic assertion left Nagisa

deflated. From that point on, she fell silent as she gazed far into the distance.

Kojou wearily slouched his shoulders in defeat.

“Got it. Wait until summer break for the overseas trip, okay? I’ll work part-time and earn up some money in the meantime.”

“Ah, yeah. That’s fine…but more importantly, I feel like I’ve seen that person somewhere…”

“Oh?”

Nagisa had stopped moving as she stared toward the front gate of Saikai Academy. A single schoolgirl wearing an unfamiliar uniform was mixed in with the students heading into school. She stood out a great deal even at a distance.

She was slender and tall with a very stylish look. Her hair was long and light brown, suiting her elegant visage very nicely. The large instrument case she carried on her back might have accounted for her somehow coming off as a little rich girl from a well-off family…as long as she stood in silence, at least.

“…Kirasaka?”

“Sayaka?”

Kojou and Yukina stopped as they noticed her. Sayaka seemed to spot Kojou and the others at virtually the same moment. She forced herself to cancel midway her reflexive urge to rush right over and ended up walking to Kojou and company, behaving as if it was no big deal at all.

Sayaka’s unnatural movements made Kojou stare at her with a suspicious look. The usual Sayaka would have jumped at Yukina like a puppy excited over her owner returning home.

“G-good morning, Kojou Akatsuki. What a coincidence to bump into you in a place like this.”

“Er, not much of a coincidence, since I go to school here…”

Kojou gave Sayaka’s oddly tense disposition a dubious look as he spoke. Yukina seemed to be wary about being hugged; a slightly disappointed expression came over her face.

“H-heh… Is that so? I hadn’t realized at all.”

Apparently sensing Kojou and Yukina’s skeptical gazes, Sayaka spoke in an effort to gloss things over at all costs, coming off as more unnatural still. Having lost the mental energy to find further fault, Kojou glanced back at her with an unenthused expression.

“Why are you on Itogami Island, Kirasaka? On a bodyguard mission for someone?”

“N-nothing like that at all, actually…” Sayaka averted her eyes. That was suspicious—she wasn’t lying, per se, but wasn’t telling the complete truth, either.

Kojou lowered his voice. “Don’t tell me that a terrorist or something snuck into Itogami Island from somewhere again?”

He was remembering a previous time Sayaka had visited Saikai Academy, when a terrorist group known as the Black Death Emperor Front had been operating on Itogami Island in secret.

“Nah. That stuff’s fine for the time being.”

However, this time, Sayaka gave a crisp denial. Kojou patted his chest in relief.

“Oh. Good. Later, Kirasaka.”

“Wait a…?! Wait up, Kojou Akatsuki! What’s with that attitude when I came all this way to see you?!”

He was slipping past Sayaka’s flank and heading for the school gates when she grabbed hold of him.

Kojou shot Sayaka a look filled with even more suspicion.

“Came to see me? You needed to see me for something?”

“Eh?! Well, that’s… Of course it was to meet Yukina, too, but…”

Sayaka prevaricated in her words as she glanced at Yukina to ascertain her reaction. Apparently, she thought being hugged in a place with so many people watching would be troublesome to Yukina, so she was managing to control herself. All the same, Sayaka ambushing them in front of school had attracted a

great deal of attention to begin with, so Kojou felt it was a little late for that concern.

“That’s why I excused myself before heading off and everything.”

Kojou shook off Sayaka’s hand with an annoyed expression.

“I-it’s not like that! Or rather, I had something to hand over to Kojou Akatsuki today…!”

Sayaka nervously excused herself as she tripped over her words. It was then that Kojou realized Sayaka was clutching something to her breasts like it was important to her. It was an extravagant envelope decorated in blue with gold leaf.

“The heck? A letter…?”

Kojou posed a question back to Sayaka in bewilderment at the unexpected aim of her actions.

However, Sayaka did not immediately reply. It seemed she was unsure as to whether she really ought to hand the letter over to him or not.

Then, in place of the silent and fidgeting Sayaka, it was Nagisa who raised a shrill voice.

“D-don’t tell me that’s a…love letter…?!”

“Eh…?!”

Yukina’s expression froze over as she looked at Sayaka. Sayaka paled, the gaze seemingly rendering her helpless.

“Wha—?! I-it’s not…!”

“Sayaka… Could it be…? You genuinely have feelings for…?”

“You’re wrong, Yukina! It really isn’t that! It’s not that at all, so…!”

Sayaka was still clutching the sealed envelope as she frantically shook her head. However, Yukina’s stiffness did not relent. Her eyes were still open very wide, staring at Sayaka as if she was completely out to sea.

Unable to endure Yukina’s gaze, Sayaka turned back toward Kojou with a sharp look.

“What are you doing, Kojou Akatsuki?! Yukina misunderstood, and it’s your fault, you know?!”

“Isn’t it ’cause you’ve been acting suspicious all this time?! Also, quit putting pressure on my carotid artery, would you?! Are you tryin’ to kill me?!”

Kojou continued to object as Sayaka absentmindedly tightened her grip on his throat. However, Sayaka’s slender fingers were strangling Kojou with unbelievable gripping strength.

“Shut up! Die! Return to ash!”

“As if!”

Perhaps naturally sensing it was dangerous to draw attention so spectacularly, Nagisa forced herself in between Kojou and Sayaka. “H-hey, both of you, calm down! Everybody’s staring! Everybody is seriously staring at us! And, Kojou, this isn’t the time to blush…!”

“I wasn’t blushing… My face is red ’cause I was…suffocating!”

With a pained voice, Kojou conscientiously corrected Nagisa’s words which were apparently due to some misunderstanding.

Yukina continued to murmur to herself, still in shock. “Sayaka… A letter…to senpai…”

“Yukina, don’t stay there in shock! Help me!”

“Anyway, all I need to do is read this letter, right?”

Somehow shaking loose from Sayaka’s right hand, he reached for the sealed letter in her left.

“Wha—?!”

Sayaka thrust Kojou away, nervously clutching the sealed letter to her chest.

“Y-you can’t! Reading this out in the open—what are you thinking, Kojou Akatsuki…?!”

“It’s your fault this is out in the open, sheesh!”



Naturally, even Kojou could not conceal his irritation at the blatant inconsistency between Sayaka's words and actions.

That said, even Sayaka realized she was overreacting. A hesitant expression came over her as she anguished for a brief time.

"After class!"

"Huh?"

Thrusting a finger straight toward Kojou's nose, she demanded, "After school, come to the tea shop in front of the station! The one with the Northern Line sign!"

Then she swiftly turned her back on Kojou and broke into a sprint as she fled the scene.

"H-hey! Kirasaka…!"

Kojou instantly called out for her to stop, but Sayaka was far off in the distance in practically the blink of an eye.

Kojou and company were left behind on the sidewalk as students heading to school surrounded them from a distance, watching them with deep interest.

Yukina remained rooted to the spot with a bewildered expression. During that time, Nagisa took out her smartphone and began inputting messages with incredible vigor. She probably meant to report to Asagi about what had just happened. Sensing even more complaints arising as a result, Kojou let out a frail sigh.

"What is that Kirasaka girl thinking?" Kojou murmured to no one in particular as he tilted his head toward the excessively bright sky.

Naturally, there was no reply to his question.

2

"Sayaka Kirasaka confessed to Kojou…?"

It was time for their lunch break. In the cramped room of the Demon Sanctuary Research Club, Dem-Club for short, Motoki Yaze brought curry bread

to his mouth as a weighty expression came over him. Thanks to the special ability he had dubbed Soundscape, Yaze was always monitoring Saikai Academy for intruders, but apparently even he didn't have a grasp of what had happened out on the sidewalk. With a glaring Asagi sitting on the opposite side of the table, Yaze nervously leaned forward.

"Hey, for real? I hadn't heard anything about it."

"The story wasn't that she confessed but that she acted like she might… What are you so nervous about?" Asagi asked, tense. She had intended this to be simple gossip and to gripe about it, but her longtime friend's excessive reaction bewildered her.

"It's not like it has anything to do with you, Motoki. Or do you like Kirasaka or something?"

"No way! Not a chance, but it's not like it's got nothing to do with me, either!"

Wiping the grease off his fingers with a paper napkin, Yaze audibly gulped down a milk pack.

The Demon Sanctuary Research Club room was on the third floor of the special classroom building. Thanks to having been a vacant, locked-up classroom for so long, it was still a little dusty, and it was stifling without a working air conditioner unit. Even so, it was the optimal place for secret conversations.

At present, only Yaze and Asagi were in the room. Their underclassmen Yukina Himeragi and Shizuri Kasugaya rarely popped their heads in during lunch break, and the supposed club president Kojou was off buying juice after having lost at rock-paper-scissors.

Asagi reached her chopsticks toward the second course of an extravagant three-course bento box meal.

"Okay, if you don't like Kirasaka, but it does have something to do with you… does that mean you like Kojou instead?"

When Asagi checked with a dead-serious look, her words sent Yaze into a coughing fit.

“What kind of logic is that?! That’s not it at all, Miss Oblivious to Romance! She’s a serving Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency. She’s an expert in curses and assassination, right?”

“Wh-who’s oblivious to romance…?!”

A genuinely hurt expression came over Asagi as she snapped the chopsticks in her grip. Remembering she was only halfway through her meal, a momentary look of nervousness came over her, but a salad fork remained, so it seemed she would manage somehow.

“…The gist being, the girl might be approaching Kojou on a mission for the Lion King Agency?”

“The chances are pretty high, right? Even if she’s not going to assassinate him out of the blue, taming Kojou is all upside from their perspective,” Yaze murmured quietly. His face was tense.

Asagi rested a cheek on a palm as she gave Yaze a cold stare.

“…Motoki, do you seriously think that?”

“What do you mean?”

“Logic aside, does she look like the type to worm her way in through the back door like that? Isn’t a staged confession and romance too much for her? What she thinks about Kojou comes right out on her face and in her attitude, you know.”

“R-right… When it’s other people’s feelings, you can actually tell, huh…?”

Asagi’s unexpectedly accurate analysis made Yaze exhale in genuine appreciation. Asagi let out her feelings for Kojou the same way, but she was a long, long way from realizing that.

Perhaps sensing from the air that he was making light of her, Asagi raised an eyebrow in irritation.

“What? Have something you wanna say?”

“Not really.”

“Besides, it’s Himeragi who’s Kojou’s observer, right? Would the Lion King

Agency really undermine her position after all this time?”

“Well, you do have a point. Plus that Big Boob Brigade representative resigned from that scandal not long ago.”

Yaze tilted his head as he spoke, almost like he was asking himself something. The suspicious wording that had slipped from Yaze’s lips made Asagi sharply narrow her eyes.

“Big Boob Brigade?”

“Ahh…er, nothing. But if Sayaka Kirasaka’s conduct isn’t some mission for the Lion King Agency, what the hell is she after?”

Seeing that Yaze was beginning to seriously mull over the issue, Asagi lowered her shoulders in exasperation. “Well, wouldn’t it be, you know, *that*?”

“Whaddaya mean, *that*?”

“She’s doing this of her own will, after all.”

“…You can’t mean an actual awkward confession?” Yaze’s mouth dropped open as he looked at Asagi.

She sullenly frowned. “Unlikely or not, that’s the most natural thing that comes to mind, and I can’t think of any other reason she’d write a letter in this day and age.”

“And you’re fine with that?”

Due to her rather frightening disposition, Yaze asked his question in a roundabout manner. Asagi gave Yaze an unmoved glare.

“Whether I’m fine or not is beside the point. Not like I can get in the way, either.”

“Well, regardless, I need to gather some intel for the time being, huh?” Yaze laughed in a dry voice.

“I suppose so,” Asagi agreed. “The issue goes to maintaining the security of Itogami city-state, doesn’t it?”

From their spy, Nagisa, they’d already learned that Kojou and Sayaka were meeting up at the tea house in front of the station after class. *No matter what*

Sayaka has in mind, we have to observe veeery closely, thought Yaze and Asagi with renewed determination.

3

For once, classes that day ended without any particular trouble.

Even as the eve of a major string of holidays made a somewhat floaty atmosphere course through the school, classes proceeded without becoming stagnant, and so the school day ended same as usual.

There was something a little unexpected, though: The uproar that had taken place at the school gates before classes did not result in even one cold stare toward Kojou. That said, it was not out of any particular consideration for him. Everyone was acutely aware of Asagi's displeasure as she sat right in front of Kojou.

At the moment, she was maintaining a distance of ten meters or so, hiding in the shadows of objects as she followed Kojou and Yukina on their way out of school. Kojou spotted Yaze farther behind Asagi, wearing glasses and a bandana that covered the lower half of his face. Apparently, he'd intended it as a disguise.

"What are those two up to…?"

Kojou grimaced as he glanced back at his friends' blatantly suspicious behavior.

"Well, of course it's bugging them. A Kojou confession scene is rarer than a total solar eclipse. I'm sure they want a good look for future reference."

It was not Yukina, walking at his side, who had replied to Kojou's question, but Nagisa as she walked opposite Yukina. She was taking a break from club practices in the name of monitoring her flesh and blood older brother's activities.

"Reference for what?! In the first place, Kirasaka only said she had a letter to hand to me. How did it become talk of a confession? Right, Himeragi?" He begged Yukina to say something.

The conversation suddenly handed to her, Yukina twitched her shoulders in surprise. She replied in an inorganic, low-intonation voice.

“Y-yes. Um, after all, Sayaka is pretty, she’s very kind, she is surprisingly obliging in domestic matters, and she is a precious person to me, so if Sayaka is serious about this…”

“Hold on a sec! The hell are you talking about?!”

Shocked, Kojou gaped at Yukina as she spewed out barely comprehensible things with hollow-looking eyes.

In contrast, Nagisa spoke with an excited, expectant tone.

“I mean, can you think it’s anything other than a confession?! It’s a letter, you know! A love letter sorta letter!”

“Ehh, love letters and plain old letters are completely different things, aren’t they?” Kojou stared at his sister’s face in exasperation. *What are you even talking about?*

Nagisa tapered her lips a little, apparently dismayed by her brother’s sober demeanor.

“Kojou, how can you be so calm about this? What’ll you do if Miss Kirasaka really does say she likes you?”

“Kirasaka hates my guts, so thinking about that is a waste. Every time we’ve met, she’s chewed me out, tried to stab me to death, tried to slice me apart, tried to slice me apart again, tried to strangle me to death—”

Kojou let out a weary sigh as he recalled past events.

Yukina blinked in surprise, seemingly coming back to her senses. “Sayaka hating you… Do you truly still think that?”

“That’s just how Kojou is… That’s why he’s so composed about this…” Nagisa was not nearly as well versed about the particulars, but she shot Kojou a disappointed look nonetheless.

Having his two juniors gaze at him with reproachful eyes threw Kojou for a loop.

“Uh, well, it’s not like she’s a bad person, and she’s saved my neck more times than I can count,” Kojou said, trying to backtrack a little as he formed his thoughts.

That’s not the point, Yukina and Nagisa seemed to say as they let out dejected breaths.

Weary, Nagisa shook her head and collected herself. “But you know, I’m glad she picked a letter as her way of confessing. It would have felt awkward for you to give her a reply in public this morning. You didn’t even do anything weird out of panic, either.”

“Just what do you think about your own older brother…?” Kojou muttered at his sister, grumbling about her worries missing the mark.

Nagisa turned to Yukina—and then shot a glance at Asagi tailing behind. “Besides, Yukina, you have time to come up with countermeasures, you know?”

“Eh? Me?”

Yukina blinked hard, surprised at the attention directed at her.

Nagisa slumped her shoulders dramatically and muttered, “No self-awareness here, either.” Yukina did not understand the reason.

Kojou averted his eyes as Nagisa grew more restless, perhaps excited by her hopes of witnessing a romance happen.

“Gotta say,” Kojou mumbled, “I’m more worried about it being a threat of murder or a challenge to a duel or something like that—”

The tea house by the monorail station that Sayaka had mentioned was coming into sight. It was a themed shop named Goetia that Kojou and company also visited on occasion.

But when Kojou and company climbed the brick steps and tried to go in, they heard a voice from an alley beside the shop that sounded like someone in distress. It was a familiar voice.

“Um, I am sorry. I would like you to let me…pass.”

The speaker was a small schoolgirl wearing a Saikai Academy uniform. She was an impossibly pretty girl with beautiful silver hair and blue eyes. This was

Kanon Kanase, Nagisa and Yukina's friend. An unfamiliar man was blocking her path.

"It won't take much of your time, so listen to what I have to say a little, 'kay? All you have to do is answer my question from before and I'll go, just like that."

The man wore a cheap, fake-looking smile and a wrinkled white business shirt; his age was difficult to determine. He was gripping an inexpensive notepad and ballpoint pen. A small voice recorder was poking out of his shirt pocket.

"What the heck? Kano's being harassed?" said Nagisa as she knit her brow. When she reflexively tried to rush out to the man to object, Kojou stopped her and said, "Stand back."

He called out to the man from behind. "Hey, you! What are you doin' to Kanase?!"

The stranger turned around with a somewhat annoyed expression. However, a slimy grin came over him when he noticed their school attire.

"Hey, those uniforms… Could it be that you're acquaintances of Miss Kanase?"

"Huh?"

Kojou came to a halt, taken aback at the man's particularly chummy demeanor. The man used the opening to get uncomfortably close.

"Excellent. There's a little something I'd like you to tell me. Ahh, as for me… have you heard of the *Daily Astel*?"

"…A newspaper reporter?" Kojou replied awkwardly as he gazed at the business card thrust toward him.

The man narrowed his eyes and nodded. "I'm a journalist. Or I call myself one, at least."

"So, Mr. Journalist, what do you want with Kanase?" Kojou shot a barbed look his way.

The *Daily Astel* was an international newspaper with its headquarters situated in the North Atlantic Empire, an island nation floating in the North Atlantic

Ocean. Published in over twenty countries across the world with a circulation of nearly three million, even Kojou at least knew of the publication.

He couldn't call it a dignified paper, though; it ran photos of scantily clad women, printed numerous racially discriminatory articles, and focused mainly on scandals involving entertainers, politicians, royals, and so forth.

The man still had a wry smile glued to his face as he sent a glance Kanon's way.

"So you see, I thought I'd confirm the truth behind a little rumor going around. Talk's been bouncing all over the place."

"What rumor?"

"You know the kingdom of Aldegia, right? A small northern country that's world-famous for sorcerous manufacturing. It's also a popular tourism destination. It has trees and lakes, and if you go up north, you can see auroras, too. Its famous foods are reindeer stew, pickled herring, and berry pie."

"Um…and your point was?"

The man's sudden transformation from a journalist to a travel agent made Kojou wince. However, the man grinned back at him.

"Incidentally, it's also said to be a land of beautiful women. In particular, the crown princess—Her Highness La Folia is even said to be the Second Coming of Freya."

As he spoke, the man's gaze slowly shifted. He examined Nagisa and Yukina in turn, finally fixing his gaze onto Kanon.

"Ahh, pardon me. I think these young ladies are very beautiful. In particular, Miss Kanon Kanase—you are the spitting image of Princess La Folia. It's almost as if you're one and the same."

"Why, you…"

Kojou's voice was low and tremulous. He finally realized the reason for the man to be all over Kanase.

"Yes, if the rumors are to be believed, you are related to Princess La Folia. Actually, one plausible explanation is that the princess's grandfather, that is to

say the former king of Aldegia, had a child with a woman who came from abroad. The rumor passes mainly between people involved with the royal palace."

The reporter's grin was dripping with malice. He continued, "If that's true, this would be quite a scandal. As a journalist, I can't just let go of something like this. The truth needs to be exposed to the people of Aldegia, don't you think?"

Kojou glared. "You probably just wanna sell a scoop. Leave other people's family circumstances alone, would you?"

The journalist calmly shook his head as he pressed the switch of his voice recorder. "No, unfortunately, this is a political issue. Incidentally, Miss Kanon Kanase, your mother worked in the royal palace of Aldegia up until sixteen years ago, I believe. I'd certainly like to hear the details about that."

"I know nothing about my mother. Nothing."

Kanon, silent to that point, made the statement with a calm, serene voice.

"Hmm," said the journalist, a hint of surprise creeping onto his face.

"Then what of your father? Your adoptive father, Mr. Kensei Kanase, was Aldegia's former Court Sorcerous Engineer. Last year, he instigated a major criminal incident here on Itogami Island, and rumor has it that the Gigafloat Management Corporation has him incarcerated…"

"Hey, cut it out alr—"

The reporter was trying to back Kanon into a corner when Kojou tried to roughly grab hold of his collar—until Yaze appeared by his side grabbed his friend's arm.

"Let it go, Kojou," Yaze warned.

"His game is provoking people to violence. It's an obvious ploy," added Asagi, having at some point approached the group closely after tailing them for a while. She gave the reporter a frosty glare.

The reporter clicked his tongue in dismay at his ruse being exposed with such ease. However, the slimy smile remained. He took notice of their growing hostility and regarded them without the slightest shred of guilt. Before he could

respond, an aloof voice took everyone by surprise.

“Ohh, Miss Kanon? Is there some kind of dispute here?”

The speaker was an ashen-haired, well-built foreign man around forty years old. He wore a well-tailored brown suit and had expensive-looking shoes on his feet. Judging by his attire, he presented himself as an astute businessman, but the eyes under his glasses seemed somewhat cold.

“And who are *you*?” the reporter asked, annoyed.

The man in the suit bowed in a perfunctory manner, walking in front of Kanon as if to shield her.

“Pardon me. I am Hürth Gardier, attorney. I am a consulting attorney for the kingdom of Aldegia’s Lahtela Incorporated.”

“…Lahtela? That high-tech firm?” The reporter grimaced in surprise.

Lahtela Inc., known for its highly refined digital device designs, was one of Northern Europe’s giant enterprises. Well known as a supplier of high-quality sorcerous products, its marketing also boasted of high-end personal computers and smartphone packages using Lahtela-made parts.

“Wh-what is a consulting attorney for Lahtela doing in a place like this?!” the reporter shouted, though his voice faltered.

His reaction only served to heighten the attorney’s suspicions. “If you must ask—to discuss issues related to inheritance.”

“Inheritance?”

“Yes. In the event that our hospitalized former chairman passes away, five percent of Lahtela Inc.’s stock is to be passed to his granddaughter Miss Kanon, so I am here to attend to the formalities.”

“W-wait a minute. Then Kanon Kanase’s real father is—” Cutting himself off, the reporter stepped closer to the attorney, who solemnly nodded.

“Yes, that would be Siegel Lahtela, younger brother of the current head of the Lahtela family. Unfortunately, a marriage did not come to pass, but I understand that he and Miss Kanon’s mother were deeply in love during her time in the kingdom of Aldegia.”

“D…do you have proof of…? Ah, no. Fine. I get it.”

The reporter stopped himself, thinking better of it. Whether Lahtela’s attorney was speaking the truth or not was no longer the issue.

As an enormous corporation, Lahtela Inc. carried a great deal of influence with reporters and media organizations around the world. If the chairman’s family acknowledged the existence of a granddaughter, there was no way to overturn that decision.

Even an untrustworthy third-rate gossip rag like the *Daily Astel* would blow him off if he defied them and claimed it was an Aldegian royal house scandal instead. Worst case, he’d be sued and would end up in debt for the rest of his lifetime.

Even he lacked the courage to take that kind of risk. The reporter hung his head in dejection and left in the direction of the station. He made a pathetic sight that was the epitome of the term *beaten dog*.

“Whew… Somehow we made it through that.”

The attorney made a long sigh, gesturing as if wiping sweat off his brow.

Suspicion and bewilderment were mixed in the expressions Kojou and company turned toward the attorney.

So far as Kojou knew, the rumor that Kanon was Aldegian royalty was the truth. He hadn’t heard one word to date about her being the granddaughter of the former chairman of Lahtela Inc.

“Mr. Gardier, was it? Was what you said just now true?”

“No, it was a fabrication, of course. To be more accurate, this is a cover story provided by the royal family for the sake of Her Highness the Royal Sister, who is said not to desire to live as a royal.”

The well-built foreign attorney displayed a smile of good cheer as he spoke. The sheer ease with which he disclosed the secret left Kojou and the others all the more perplexed.

“It is I, Sir Fourth Primogenitor.”

The attorney made a pleasant-sounding laugh as he removed his glasses.

That instant, his contours warped. His entire body seemed to sway like a ripple as he transformed into another person entirely.

It was a tall girl with short, military-cropped silver hair. Her face was a prize in itself. Her body was clad in a modified military uniform with a no-slip skirt that had deep slits on both sides.

Thanks to her black tights fashioned out of cut-resistant weave, she resembled a ninja. She might have looked like some sort of silly cosplayer, but the expression on her face was dead serious.

Kojou blinked in amazement as he called out the name of the female knight dispatched to serve as Kanon's bodyguard. "M-Miss Justina?!"

"An illusion… No, a disguise, yes?" Yukina noted.

Justina's ability was probably some kind of ritual for infiltration that temporarily altered one's appearance. Unlike illusions that merely altered the perceptions of eyewitnesses, this surely had the effect of fooling even security cameras and similar photographic devices.

As one might expect of an Interceptor Knight of the kingdom of Aldegia, Yukina thought, nodding with admiration on her face.

"Indeed. Countermeasures against the media are included among my duties as Her Majesty the Royal Sister's escort. Besides, disguise is child's play to a ninja. Nin!"

"Err, it's not a disguise. It's magic, right?" Kojou mumbled. "And in the first place, you're a knight, not a ninja."

Regardless, they were able to dispose of a troublesome, self-declared journalist thanks to Justina's magic. This was no doubt how she carried out her day-to-day mission as Kanon's bodyguard from the shadows.

"Come to think of it, Kano coming to the station is pretty rare, huh? What brings you here?" Nagisa asked cheerfully, free of tension now that the reporter had left.

Kanon tried to reply with her usual gentle, smiling face. A fuming, enraged voice Kojou and the others suddenly heard from behind bellowed over her.

“Kojou Akatsuki! You’re late! You took forever! I’m sick of waiting!”

“K-Kirasaka?”

When he looked over, Sayaka’s shoulders were quaking with rage, but she glared at Kojou with fatigue in her eyes. She’d probably seen Kojou and company arrive in front of the shop from inside the tea house. In spite of that, she’d waited on proverbial pins and needles for them to actually go in before finally rushing out of the store.

However, despite her earlier outrage, Sayaka froze when she noticed the unexpectedly large number of people in the area. *Now I’ve done it*, said the expression frozen on her face, her cheeks reddening in real time.

Kanon politely bowed her head, seemingly in consideration for Sayaka.

“I am sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“Ah…th-thank you for coming, too, Miss Kanase. That makes everyone, doesn’t it?”

Sayaka had a guilty look on her face as she spoke. She turned to her right, entering the tea house from which she had come as if taking refuge.

4

One of Goetia Coffee’s selling points was a feeling of sophisticated comfort, thanks to their choices in furniture and interior design.

Guided to a table for four, Sayaka and Yukina sat down across from Kojou and Kanon. Seated adjacently were Nagisa, as well as Asagi and Yaze, who were no longer attempting to hide the fact that they were tailing Kojou.

At some point, Kanon’s bodyguard Justina had vanished from sight. That said, Kojou had no doubt she was guarding Kanon while hidden somewhere. Kanon herself didn’t seem to realize it, and that was fine with him, but Kojou had the nagging feeling that Justina was acting less like a bodyguard and more like a stalker at that point.

“An official letter from La Folia?” Kojou asked.

The drinks they ordered arrived as Sayaka presented the sealed envelope.

Looking at it up close, Kojou thought the envelope was particularly bombastic. The flap of the envelope was decorated with a seal made out of genuine gold. He recalled from memory that the impression left in the seal was the crest of the Royal Family of Aldegia.

“So it really isn’t a love letter to senpai?” Yukina asked in a voice tinged with surprise and relief.

Sayaka tensed as she drew in her breath in a silent pause before replying forcefully, “Of course not! Why would I give a man like this a love letter anyw…?”

Asagi offhandedly deciphered Sayaka’s expression. “…Your face says, *Oh, that was an option?*”

The assertion seemed to have hit the mark, throwing Sayaka for a loop.

“Y-you’re wrong! For that matter, why are outsiders like this here? Yukina’s your observer from the Lion King Agency, so she’s fine, but Miss Nagisa and Asagi Aiba, and beyond them, that man has nothing to do with this, right?!”

Yaze, fresh from being called “that man,” winked his right eye with a sarcastic laugh. “Well, you don’t have to be so cold. It’s not like this is the first time we’ve met, and exchanging information is convenient for both sides, right?”

Sayaka opened her mouth as if to somehow refute him but eventually exhaled in apparent resignation. “Well, fine. At any rate, I hereby deliver the missive from the princess.”

“To be honest, I don’t really wanna accept.”

Kojou grudgingly took the letter into his hand and cut the seal. Just from the touch of his hand, it was obvious that the stationery upon which the document was written was of fine quality. Kojou immediately grimaced as he spread out the triple-folded stationery.

“…Wait, what is this, English? Hey, Himeragi, what’s written on this?”

“Pardon me. Let me take a look.”

Sitting opposite to him, Yukina brought her face close to Kojou’s as she

peered at the stationery in his hands. Perhaps she herself was unaware, but the result was that they were perfectly shoulder-to-shoulder.

Watching this, Sayaka's mouth was left agape while Kanon was gratified to see Kojou and Yukina getting along so intimately.

"This really does seem to be a letter from Princess La Folia to senpai. 'To our beloved Kojou Akatsuki, king of the Dominion of Itogami city-state and friend of our kingdom of Aldegia.'"

"Y-Yukina…? Any way you slice it, aren't the two of you a little too close…?!"

Gazing nervously as Yukina nestled against Kojou, Sayaka mustered her determination. However, Yukina and Kojou stared at Sayaka with unsure expressions that said *What are you talking about…?*

"Eh? But if I do not translate the missive from the princess…," Yukina started.

"Aren't you the one who brought the letter?" Kojou asked.

"B-but being that close together… Are you really all right with this?!" Sayaka exclaimed, turning to Asagi and Nagisa, indicating the question was directed at them.

Asagi waved a hand dismissively. "Ahh… Well, they don't realize it themselves, so no big deal, right?"

"This is an everyday thing so…," Nagisa added.

"Everyday?! This is really all right?! I'm concerned that they're going to get accustomed to this situation, though…?!" Sayaka said to herself weakly as she stared at Yukina and Kojou with worry.

During this time, Yukina continued translating the missive from La Folia without faltering. As a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, she had apparently drilled not just with knowledge of ritual spells, but with a high school–grade education so as to cope with a wide variety of missions. There was a particular stress on high linguistic ability, so her capability for languages was probably at an even higher level. Though, for all that, she was sometimes short on ordinary knowledge or common sense.

"'The first of the following month, we have scheduled a celebration in our

royal capital, Verterace, to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of our kingdom of Aldegia's peace treaty with the Warlord's Empire. And so, we invite thee to our kingdom for this ceremonial occasion—'"

Kojou interrupted Yukina's translation. "Invite… Wait, she's telling me to head all the way to Aldegia?"

Nagisa, in the middle of licking the whipped cream from her mocha latte, slammed the table and leaped to her feet.

"So you mean an overseas trip…?!"

"Um, I'm sure it's nothing nice like that. It's an invitation from La Folia, after all," Kojou grumbled.

Revered by the masses as a compassionate saint, La Folia Rihavein was actually a cruel schemer. To be honest, Kojou had a pretty hard time dealing with her.

"The time she indicates lines up perfectly with Golden Week, does it not? What will you do, senpai?" Yukina asked seriously.

Kojou's reply came instantly. "I don't even have to stop to think. No way I'm going. Sounds like a pain in the ass."

Shaken by his words, Nagisa cried, "Whaaat?! Why not?! It's Aldegia! It has snow and ice floes and fjords and auroras, you know?!"

"It's not like we'd be going for a relaxing vacation. I bet that scheming princess is up to something…!"

Taking a break from his espresso, Yaze joined in. "I've gotta say, I feel like we should want to deepen ties with one of the few countries friendly to us. It'd mean some complications to our relationship with the Japanese government, though."

Asagi nodded. "Makes sense. So in the end, Kirasaka was doing this at Princess La Folia's request? So her objective wasn't to make an awkward confession out of some scheme by the Lion King Agency. That explains why I couldn't read her motives."

"A-awkward confession…?! How in the world did you suspect me of that?!"

Sayaka retorted, nervous and flustered.

Yaze flashed a pained smile before abruptly turning to Sayaka, becoming serious. “But why did she ask you to do this? Delivering a missive from a princess isn’t exactly in the Lion King Agency’s jurisdiction.”

“That’s—” Sayaka clenched her jaw. “The Lion King Agency has a reason that compels it to act.”

At that moment, Yukina made an *O* shape with her mouth, raising her eyebrows as she was reading the letter.

“Um, senpai.”

“Yeah?”

“It seems that a letter is not all Princess La Folia sent.”

Peering inside the envelope, Yukina took out a second, smaller envelope within. Inside the second one was not stationery, but a ticket with numbers finely printed upon it.

“This is…an airline ticket? Why is it for three?”

Kojou’s brow formed a crease as he confirmed the contents of the envelope. Yukina met Kojou’s eyes.

“The passengers are senpai, myself…and Kano?”

“So we’re to take Kanase with us…?”

Sayaka stared at the perplexed Kojou and Yukina as she made a brief sigh. Then she turned to Kanon, sitting directly opposite to her. “Miss Kanon Kanase, Princess La Folia’s real objective…is you.”

“Me…?”

Realizing that Kanon’s eyes were wavering in fear for the barest of moments, Sayaka shook her head with great haste.

“Ah, I don’t mean using you politically or anything of the sort. The princess’s intent is to get you to meet with your real father, the former king of Aldegia. Being elderly with public duties of his own, he can’t come to Itogami Island, so…”

“Ah,” went Kanon in a small voice, letting out her breath.

“Oh. So Kanon hasn’t actually met her real dad yet?” Kojou watched the side of Kanon’s face. Her expression was gentle as she listened; he couldn’t read how she really felt from the quiet serenity of her blue eyes.

“Of course, Miss Kanase’s existence cannot be publicly announced without causing an uproar, hence the lack of a public invitation,” Sayaka explained. “But guests and tourists will gather from around the world during the commemorative celebration period, so it’s a fair bit safer while attention is focused in that direction…”

“If anything, it feels like if you let this chance go, there’s no telling when another might come,” Kojou said.

Sayaka agreed. “Yes, that. It’s just that this case has a single issue with it.” She slowly surveyed the faces of all present. “Miss Kanase’s visit to Aldegia would formally be a non-public, personal trip, so she can’t be given a police escort. The only knights the princess can move herself are the Knights of the Second Coming, and they’re assigned to their own mission at the commemorative celebration, so they can’t spare many people.”

“Hmm,” went Yaze’s small sound from his nose. If anything, Yaze’s position as chairman of the Gigafloat Management Corporation made him just the sort of person who would be assigned bodyguards. That alone made him particularly quick on the uptake.

But even Yaze went rigid from Sayaka’s next words.

“Furthermore, we anticipate that there is a very high chance there will be a terrorist attack at this celebration.”

Kojou and Yukina spoke at the same time:

“Huh? You *anticipate* that there’ll be an attack?”

“Are you saying you know whether an attack will occur or not?”

Surprise hovered in Kanon’s eyes, as well.

Sayaka’s expression remained firm as she nodded. “Maybe it doesn’t feel real to people living in a Demon Sanctuary, but there are plenty of people in this

world who don't want coexistence between humankind and demons…from the human and Demon sides both. I don't think they'd let a huge celebration like this go on peacefully."

"So from their point of view, the peace treaty between Aldegia and the Warlord's Empire is just an obstacle?"

Kojou recalled a number of incidents that had occurred on Itogami Island in the past.

From the human side was an Armed Apostle who despised demons as wicked beings. There had been a terrorist group espousing beast people–supremacist ideology. The Holy Ground Treaty extolling coexistence between humans and demons was an impediment to both sides' desire for war.

It was this treaty, proposed by the First Primogenitor—the Lost Warlord—and ratified by numerous nations, that had brought a long era of war between humankind and Demonkind to a close. One might well call the peace treaty between Aldegia and the Warlord's Empire the embodiment of that.

Hence, it was easy to imagine the many groups and organizations that despised the treaty targeting the commemorative celebration. The chance their attacks would involve ordinary people was far from low. Visiting Aldegia at a time like that equally meant leaping right into the middle of that danger.

"In addition, and it pains me to say this, but not all elements within the Aldegian Royal Palace look favorably upon Kanon's existence. Even if she is not part of the line of succession, the fact remains that she is the half sister of His Highness the King, which I suppose makes a number of people anxious that she might be a threat to their own positions."

Sayaka stated this in a dead serious tone of voice. She wasn't trying to scare Kanon, but merely to objectively state the truth.

"So you're saying that worst case, there's a chance of her being assassinated?" Asagi bluntly asked.

Kanon's shoulders trembled.

Sayaka nodded gravely. "I don't think the odds of action that direct are high, but I can't take an optimist's view of it." She sipped her now-watery iced coffee

with a bitter expression.

“So that’s why La Folia asked the Lion King Agency—no, asked you to do this job.” Kojou closed his eyes.

Now I get it, he thought.

The Lion King Agency’s role was to engage in information gathering and strategic sabotage to foil large-scale sorcerous terrorism. Sayaka was a Shamanic War Dancer, a specialist in the protection of very important people and the prevention of assassinations. On top of that, she was personally fond of La Folia and knew Kanon’s circumstances well. One might call her the optimal choice to serve as Kanon’s escort.

“Numerous Japanese government VIPs will be participating in this celebration, so the Lion King Agency was cooperating with the Aldegian government to begin with. That said, we can’t spare many people, and there’s no guarantee I can guard Kanon around the clock.”

Kojou’s eyes opened wide as he glared at the letter. “Wait a sec. So La Folia sending me this airline ticket is for—”

Yukina nodded with a hardened expression as she read the rest of the letter. “It reads, ‘Consequently, Kojou, I wish to entrust the personal protection of my precious family member Kanon to you and Yukina. With love, La Folia Rihavein.’”

“Ngh…”

Kojou was at a loss for words as he stiffened. He realized he’d been completely done in by the web of intrigue La Folia had deployed around him.

As the Fourth Primogenitor, he could refuse neither to attend the peace commemoration ceremony nor to escort Kanon. Even if she did have the powerful spiritual energy characteristic of the Royal Family of Aldegia, Kanon herself was a magical amateur without any combat training whatsoever. Naturally, that left him far too worried to send a girl under threat of terrorism or assassination off to Aldegia on her own.

“…So the gist is that Kojou’s been called to go as Kanon’s chaperone?” Nagisa asked, pounding the final nail into his coffin.

“Suppose so,” said Yaze with an irresponsible nod. “Well, in one sense, he’s the right guy for the job. No one sane would think of attacking someone with the World’s Mightiest Vampire as a bodyguard, plus she can basically work him to the bone for free.”

Asagi’s voice was cold and dismissive. “He’s good as a meat shield, at least. He won’t die even if he takes lethal damage.”

“Why, you…” Kojou growled at his friends. “Well, fine.” He exhaled, resigned to his fate. “But what do you wanna do, Kanon? You plan to go to Aldegia anyway, knowing it’d put your life in danger?”

When Kojou gazed at her with a serious look, Kanon turned a gentle smile toward him, same as always.

“To me, Kanase is my real, and only, father.”

The matter-of-fact way she spoke the words made Kojou and the others gasp.

After a certain incident occurred at the abbey where Kanon was being raised as an orphan, Kensei Kanase took her in as her adoptive father. However, Kensei could not be called her father by any ordinary meaning of the term. He was also the individual to use Kanon as an experimental subject to test the Faux-Angel spell passed down through the Royal Family of Aldegia.



Even so, the fact remained that Kensei had poured his love into Kanon in his own way. That was why Kanon recognized Kensei as her own father even now.

But this also meant that she did not regard the former Aldegian king as her father at all.

As a matter of fact, Kanon had rejected living in Aldegia and had renounced all claims upon her rights and wealth as a royal. She probably didn't feel like acknowledging herself as the daughter of the former liege at this late stage.

Kojou and the others fell silent as they watched, but Kanon smiled pleasantly with a faint whiff of a blush.

"I think I want to meet the person who fell in love with my mother. After all, I don't know anything about her—"

"Kano…!"

Nagisa stood up and embraced Kanon from behind. Kanon wasn't one to bring her own emotions to the fore, so hearing what she really thought seemed to have touched Nagisa deeply.

"Got it. If that's what you want to do, I'll stick with you the whole way to Aldegia."

A reinvigorated expression came over Kojou as he spoke those words to Kanon. He hated that this was doing just as La Folia pleased, but he figured he'd go along with her schemes this one time.

"No, senpai. *We* are going with her."

Staring at Kanon as she stiffened awkwardly, Yukina seemed satisfied as she smiled as well.

Sayaka felt relief at having fulfilled the princess's request. Yaze clutched his head at the troublesome formalities regarding Kojou leaving the country.

Meanwhile, as Asagi rested her cheek on a palm in what somehow seemed a sullen mood, an expression came over her as if she was planning something.

5

Trine Halden, private secretary assigned to the Royal Family of Aldegia, wore an anachronistic corset as she walked down a long corridor in the royal palace. She was searching for the crown princess, who was currently neglecting her duties.

La Folia Rihavein was supremely popular around the world as the elegant princess full of intellect and benevolence, but the impression Trine had from recent contact with the girl differed from that popular impression.

She was even more attractive than her photos suggested, and her manners were by no means poor, but even so, Trine had a certain fear of the girl. Beyond that dignity and charisma was something unfathomable and terrifying.

It was not an issue of La Folia's integrity or wickedness. That made Trine all the more concerned.

She had the benevolence of a goddess and the wit of a devil. This inconsistency, residing within her as if by nature, left the average person completely at a loss as to what she might be thinking.

People surely sensed that on an instinctual level. Even as they were flung around by the girl's whims and wiles, the female officials working at the royal palace never uttered a single foul word about La Folia. Though Trine herself was comparatively new to the palace, she was well versed in just how fearsome that mischievous scheming princess was.

"So this is where you were, Princess La Folia?"

Spotting the silver-haired princess in a dimly lit room, Trine's voice was tinged with relief.

It was a vast study reminiscent of a museum, and also the office employed by Galliard Rihavein, former king and La Folia's grandfather. With Galliard retired, withdrawing from the front lines of public duties, La Folia helped herself to the now-unused room any time she liked. Her target was Galliard's collection of books and other articles stored within.

"Um…Princess La Folia? What are…?" Trine asked when she noticed odd little dusty objects piled atop the table.

La Folia remained leisurely sitting cross-legged on the leather chair as she

picked up one of the little objects. It was a knife sheathed in a golden scabbard.

“These are antique sorcerous devices I found in my grandfather’s study. It seems that they were discarded, so I decided to sort them.”

“Um, perhaps they were sealed away rather than discarded…?” Trine pointed out timidly.

Numerous pieces of tape with words of warning written on them were adhered to the hilt of the knife the princess gripped. No one with a lick of common sense would so much as touch such an object.

However, La Folia calmly drew the knife and smiled.

“A trifling distinction without a difference. There is nothing to be concerned—Oh my…”

Before the princess could finish her words, something flew out from within her hand. With an ominous roar, the door behind Trine was impaled by a silver flash.

“Eeep?!”

Several severed locks of Trine’s hair danced in the air as she made a belated gasp.

Upon closer observation, a silver blade had flown but a few scant centimeters from Trine’s neck. Trine had been grazed by a knife blade launched by a springlike mechanism.

“P…Princess…!”

“I see. So this was a ballistic knife activated by magic. The safety’s pin broke, likely after degrading over the years.”

La Folia murmured with apparent admiration as she gazed at the knife-turned-hilt.

It was a throwing knife chiefly employed for assassinations and other surprise attacks. La Folia had taken a great liking to suspicious items like this, which Galliard the former liege had collected as a hobby. *She truly is a princess of unfathomable terror*, Trine felt with renewed acuity.

“Incidentally, Miss Halden…”

“Y-yes!”

“…did you have some kind of business for me?”

Discarding the knife, La Folia inquired as she looked over a new small object.

Trine wiped the sweat from her brow as she regained her composure.

“Th-that is correct. Princess, I have received word from Miss Kirasaka of the Lion King Agency.”

“From Sayaka?”

La Folia’s beautiful eyes seemed to see through everything as they turned toward her. Feeling stress for no reason she could pinpoint, Trine nodded slightly.

“Yes. She states, ‘The King of Dawn and Priestess of the Sword ride Wings together with an Angel.’”

“Is that so? Then all is proceeding accordingly.”

La Folia smiled luxuriantly as she toyed with an old, small pistol for personal protection in the palm of her hand.

“Contact Commander Velnera at Askola Base. Tell him, ‘Implement phase two of the plan.’”

“Yes, at once. However, um—” Trine nodded courteously but hesitated somewhat as she looked at the princess, indecisive and timid as she continued her words. “Um, is it really all right not to inform His Majesty of this matter?”

“Inform Father?”

La Folia looked back at Trine with a hint of surprise on her face. “Hmm,” went the princess, lowering her eyes as she considered the matter with a sigh.

“I suppose we should. It would be a problem if he interfered with our guests before their arrival, so let us leak information just prior so that there is no time to respond.”

“Y-yes.”

Unsure of what expression should come over her face, Trine smiled vaguely.

Trine's feet bounced off the carpet an instant after the gunshot rang out. The pistol La Folia had been toying with had suddenly exploded. "Oh my," said La Folia, tilting her head as if it was someone else's problem before cutely sticking out her tongue. Trine's dorsal muscles virtually flipped as she raced out of the study, running for her life.

"Now then, I suppose I should prepare to greet them."

La Folia listened to the secretary's receding footsteps as she brushed her long silver hair and rose to her feet.

She approached the study's window and opened the thick velvet curtain. Spread outside was the scenery of Verterace, royal capital of Aldegia.

The bay and lake had been formed by the erosion from a glacier. The beautiful skyline was a mix of modern skyscrapers and traditional structures standing side by side. The streets were filled with numerous tourists, and a large stage was being installed in the square at the center of the city. Preparations were underway for the peace commemoration celebration due to open in the near future.

Over the next several days, guests would be arriving one after another from the world over.

"So far, things are going as anticipated. I expect much from you, Kojou."

Looking up at the serene, blue spring sky, La Folia smiled. Residing in those eyes, the same color as that sky, were gloom and sorrow wrought by a princess's heavy responsibilities, and a mischievous glint more appropriate for her age.



Chapter Two
At the Night Palace

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At the Night Palace

1

Itogami Island's total population was less than six hundred thousand individuals, but a surprising number of airplanes landed and departed from it, with over two hundred direct flights weekly to forty cities around the globe.

This was because Itogami Island was one of the world's few Demon Sanctuaries.

Research on demons' cellular makeup, physiques, organs, and so forth, and the new raw materials and pharmaceuticals derived from such lab results, could be obtained nowhere but a Demon Sanctuary. A great many people from around the world visited in search of these before departing once more.

Final preflight checks were underway for one such direct overseas flight—Air Aldegia flight AG413 to Verterace, currently on a runway at Itogami Central Airport.

Its six hundred–odd passengers had already finished boarding and taking their seats.

The fact that it was Golden Week meant the airplane was largely full. Students with their families in tow really stood out. Thanks to that, the number of boisterous passengers was higher compared to usual.

One of those noisy groups was seated in the middle of the economy class section.

"What is this? It's delicious!"

Asagi raised a voice of admiration as she stuffed her cheeks with the sweets she'd only just bought at an airport store. Sitting atop her lap was a large pile of Itogami Island souvenirs, which made for cramped seating.

“These ones from Itogami Sablé taste so good that I really should have bought another box. But I couldn’t pass up buying the Darkness chocolates you can only buy in a Demon Sanctuary and those limited-edition, vampire-style blood orange jellies. Ah, these Fourth Primogenitor cookies are quite the surprise, too.”

Asagi proceeded to unwrap new candies and wolf them down one after another. It was rather hard to imagine based on her comely, extravagant outward appearance, but Asagi was a bit of a glutton. Apparently, her maniacally precise gourmet reports were even highly prized on online boards.

For his part, Yaze was sitting to Asagi’s immediate left, gazing with a particularly serious look at the uniforms of the female cabin attendants as they passed to and fro along the aisle.

“I mean, I’d heard the stories, but all the flight staff for Air Aldegia really are all hot chicks. Plus, those new uniforms are pretty alluring. Those neat and tidy girls have a certain adult sexiness hovering about them. I think we’ve found a new hobby. Right, Kojou?”

“Don’t rope me into this. I mean, yeah, I think those uniforms look good in a sci-fi way, but…”

“Heh, so you like that kind of look, Kojou?”

“I believe it is improper to direct untoward glances at people earnestly doing their work.”

“I just said the uniforms looked good, okay?!”

Kojou was indignant at the cold gazes shifted his way by Asagi and Yukina, both seated next to him.

Nagisa, who was across the aisle near a window, was raising a voice of delight as she tapped the touch screen of the in-flight entertainment system built into the seat.

“This is that movie that hasn’t been released publicly in Japan yet! I’ve been looking forward to seeing it. Such fun… Whoa?! There’s two in-flight meals?! Soft drinks are free, and you can drink all you want? Now I have to think about it. ‘To eat fish, or not to eat fish (and get meat instead)? That is the question.’

So quoteth William Shakespeare.”

“No way in hell Shakespeare said anything like that.”

Kojou inserted an unwittingly serious aside into Nagisa’s monologue as he clutched his head in annoyance. Asagi and Yaze were seated to Kojou’s left, and to the right were Yukina, then Nagisa and Kanon in that order.

“More importantly, what the heck are you all doing here? This is a flight to Aldegia, you know?”

When her older brother glared at her, Nagisa averted her eyes with a pure, innocent look.

“What are you talking about…? We’re just tourists, you know…?”

“Huh…? Tourists?”

“We’re all paying our own travel expenses, and we scheduled the flight and booked the hotel all on our own, you see. I got permission from Mimori, too, so you have no right to complain, Kojou!”

“Grr…”

Unable to refute Nagisa’s logic, Kojou let out a frustrated groan. His little sister had even gotten her guardian’s approval; Kojou no longer had any means to stop her.

“I am…very happy that Nagisa is coming with us.” Kanon timidly interjected, perhaps out of consideration for Kojou and Nagisa as they glared at one another.

Nagisa’s expression brightened, proud of her victory. “Really?! I’m so glad! Hey, Kojou, have you heard? Have you? This is basically Kanon’s first time flying on an airplane.”

“Yes. I was only a baby the last time I was on one.”

“Oh-ho-ho. If there’s something you don’t understand, ask me anything. Er, actually, I haven’t been on an international flight since elementary school myself.”

Kojou let out a weak sigh, gazing at the side of his little sister’s face as she

proudly puffed up her chest.

Then he turned to Yaze. In spite of there being scant time before the start of Golden Week, Nagisa had obtained a new passport and tourist visa. Also, Nagisa and the others were on the very same flight as Kojou and company, seated right with them, in fact. It was far too convenient to be mere coincidence. He could only think that someone had purposefully pulled strings from behind the scenes.

“Hey, Yaze. Are you the one who set up all this?”

“Wait, calm down. Asagi’s the one who brought it up first. I tried to stop her, okay?”

Yaze’s smiling face twitched as he shook his head. For her part, Asagi feigned ignorance as she brought another piece of candy to her lips.

“Well, you still went along in the end, didn’t you?! More importantly, why’d you bring Nagisa?!”

“No, no, it’s the other way around. Asagi and Nagisa actually planned to go to Aldegia a day early to surprise you. Somehow, I talked them into going aboard the same airplane. You’re a lot more relieved to have them where you can see them, am I right?”

“If you were gonna try to make them be reasonable, talk them out of a trip to Aldegia in the first place!”

“Sorry. I couldn’t. I was planning to go to Aldegia myself anyway…”

“So you really were the trigger for all this!”

“Oh, stop fussing about the little things. Hey, I’ll give you one of these Fourth Primogenitor cookies, so cheer up, ’kay?”

“I’m not in a bad mood ’cause of an empty stomach!”

Assaulted by a ferocious sense of weariness, Kojou slumped back, sinking his body into his seat.

All that said, Kojou didn’t complain all that forcefully, because he knew Yaze and Asagi hadn’t come for fun and games. Their real objective was to support Kojou, ruler of their Dominion, on his first visit to Aldegia.

Nagisa had no doubt come out of concern for her friend, a very Nagisa-like reason. She might be insisting it was a simple overseas trip, but this was an excuse to avoid putting pressure on Kanon, who no doubt realized as much, which was why she said she was happy they were going together. Since he realized how the various girls felt, he couldn't flatly send the interlopers packing, either.

"So what about Kirasaka? Wasn't she going with you and Yukina?" Yaze asked as he surveyed the area with a mystified look. For some reason, there was no sign inside the plane of Sayaka, the very one who'd brought the invitation from Aldegia.

"Kirasaka said she had to get on site ahead of us and prepare, or something… Inspect where we'll stay for the night and check movement routes and stuff."

"That's an Attack Mage of the Lion King Agency for you. How responsible where procedures are concerned." Yaze let out a hum in admiration.

"I guess so."

Sayaka seemed easily flustered as she doted on Yukina, but appearances aside, she was apparently one of the elites of the Lion King Agency. Knowledge of ritual magic and assassination went without saying, but she was also highly skilled in combat and was fluent in foreign languages. She'd been trained in the manners required to navigate high society. Kojou acknowledged the excellence that constituted why La Folia entrusted her with the missive.

Asagi wiped off some cream from her lips with a finger as she asked, "But is the Lion King Agency's other Attack Mage all right?"

Kojou grimaced, turning his eyes toward the oddly quiet Yukina.

"Himeragi, are you all right? The color of your face looks like an astronaut who's been put in cryo—"

"All right. I am all right. There is no problem at all." Yukina appeared strained, replying in a mechanical tone with little intonation. "It is not as if I am frightened to fly. That is not the case whatsoever. I have a firm understanding of the principles by which a mass of machinery flies through the sky: the Kutta-Joukowski theorem on the circulation of fluids, the Magnus effect, and

Bernoulli’s equation, so…”

“R-right…”

Kojou continued to grimace in concern as Yukina began speaking words of unclear meaning as if she was invoking a spell. She obstinately refused to admit it to others, but flying had made Yukina uneasy since she was much younger. Apparently, she felt some kind of instinctive unease about riding a machine that flew through the sky. Her weird bluffing and pretense of calm was a quite a pain. Intending to reassure Yukina even so, Kojou dutifully made an easygoing smile.

“Well, even if it is a direct flight, it’s gonna take close to twelve hours. Long way, huh?”

“T…twelve hours…”

Blood drained from Yukina’s face as she went rigid.

Seeing that Yukina’s fingertips were twitching and trembling, Kojou gently put a hand atop hers. He was a little shocked when he realized how cold Yukina’s hand felt. Yukina looked back at Kojou in apparent surprise.



“S-senpai?”

“If you’re scared, don’t force yourself to put on a brave face. I’ll be right here with you till we land.”

I did something like this before, didn’t I? thought Kojou with a soft smile, perhaps even blushing slightly. Yukina gripped Kojou’s hand back with unexpected strength, shifting her gaze toward Kojou as if clinging to him.

“Absolutely do not let go until we disembark from the airplane. Promise me.”

“Until we get off—uh—that’s twelve hours…”

Faced with the earnest, backed-into-a-corner look in Yukina’s eyes, Kojou winced as he tried to excuse himself, but Yukina put even more strength into her fingers.

“It’s a promise! Not that I am scared! I am not scared whatsoever!”

2

The time difference between Itogami Island and the Aldegian royal capital, Verterace, was seven hours. Itogami Island’s time zone was ahead. Thanks to that, even though the airplane had departed Itogami Island in the morning and had flown for twelve hours, it was landing in Aldegia around noon, a rather strange and mysterious thing.

It was said that long flights toward the west during daytime only resulted in minor jet lag, but as a vampire, Kojou found the prolonged time continually under the midday sun unexpectedly difficult.

Perhaps exhausted from fear and stress, Yukina had fallen asleep, firmly holding Kojou’s hand all the while, whereas Asagi, exhausted from eating, was audibly asleep with her head against Kojou’s shoulder.

Sandwiched between the pair and unable to move, Kojou had dozed off from excess tedium, but Nagisa’s delighted voice woke him up.

“Wow, snow! It’s snow, Kano!”

“Yes, it is very pretty.”

Bringing their faces close to the aircraft's window, Nagisa and Kanon were as excited as little girls. To those two, raised on Itogami Island in the tropics, a land covered in snow and ice was incredibly precious scenery. The temperatures in Aldegia were relatively low at that time of year; the comparatively warm royal capital, Verterace, was between 0 and 4 degrees Celsius. If one went to the higher elevations in the interior, days of blowing snow were apparently still common.

Yaze took off his favorite over-ear headphones. "So we've arrived? That didn't seem to take too long."

"Mm…because of the time difference? And I was sleeping so nicely…"

Asagi stretched her back as she woke up. With his left arm finally able to move freely, Kojou shifted his gaze to Yukina on his right.

"Himeragi, we'll be landing soon. What a relief, huh?"

"No, senpai. Please remain calm. It is not over yet. People speak of the critical eleven minutes, meaning that major airplane incidents are concentrated in the three minutes immediately after takeoff and the eight minutes immediately prior to landing. In other words, we are about to enter the most dangerous phase. According to airplane manufacturer investigations, the odds of an accident triple at the time of landing, particularly when under the influence of adverse weather conditions like snow and sudden gusts of wind such as th—"

"Wait a… Hey, cut it out. You can't say ominous stuff like that in the middle of a flight…!"

"Ah…"

When Kojou covered her mouth, Yukina gasped and came to her senses. She belatedly noticed that passengers all around them were glaring at Kojou and Yukina as expressions of concern came over each and every one of them.

"…I am sorry. That was rude of me."

Yukina slouched as she somehow managed to regain her composure.

Asagi gazed at Yukina's rare slip-up with deep interest before shrugging. "Well, you know, as far as the world's concerned, the Fourth Primogenitor is a

lot scarier than any airplane accident. There'd be a huge panic if Kojou's identity spilled out in a place like this."

"I'm begging you, please stop making this worse." Kojou grimaced as he chided Asagi.

The image of the Fourth Primogenitor believed by the general public was that of a person who governed slaughter and destruction—calamity incarnate, a cruel, callous vampire completely beyond the doctrines of the world, with nothing good said about him whatsoever. Nor was this completely off the mark, for there was a dangerous side to him. If Kojou carelessly let his own Beast Vassals run amok, a civilian plane like this one would be blown to smithereens in the blink of an eye.

"Any way you slice it, vampire primogenitors are categorized as weapons of mass destruction or natural disasters or something. Even for an Aldegian princess, she's gotta have nerves of steel or no small amount of bravery to calmly invite someone like that into her own country." Yaze spoke with a tone of voice that might have been admiration or exasperation—it wasn't clear.

"Yeah, I suppose," Asagi casually said. "Come to think of it, are we all right for customs? To people who know what to look for, it'll be obvious pretty quick that you're not human."

"Not sure, but you'd think La Folia twisted some arms for that? She's the one who sent the ticket in the first place."

"Good. If she has…," Asagi murmured, clearly distrustful. Kojou figured she was probably wary of La Folia after she coerced him into going all the way to Aldegia.

It'd been three months since the two girls had met, facing off as sort of enemies during the war of the primogenitors. In one sense, it was an entirely natural reaction for Asagi to be fearful of La Folia after that.

The airplane Kojou and the others were aboard had begun to gently lower its altitude. The sign to put on their seat belts flashed, and an onboard monitor displayed the state of things on the ground.

"Huh?"

Yaze furrowed his brow as he watched the image on the monitor. Yukina, still gripping Kojou's right hand, twitched and trembled.

Kojou gazed skeptically at the friend who had let out a worrying voice. "What is it, Yaze?"

"Er, aren't we a bit far from the destination? I feel like we've gone past Verterace Airport."

Yaze made a looking-behind-him gesture, but of course there was no way he could see the scenery behind them from inside the plane.

"Maybe they changed the runway? Something to do with wind direction, maybe?" Asagi suggested. She was calm, at least. An airport with multiple runways using them according to wind direction was normal procedure.

However, a grave look came over Yaze as he shook his head. "Nah, we'd be prepped for landing already if it was that."

The very next moment, Kojou felt a shake along with a dull thud. It was the sound of retracted landing gear being lowered from the airplane's fuselage. Yukina's shoulders twitched and shuddered in an excessive reaction to the noise.

"This direction is toward…Askola Air Force Base?"

Asagi was spreading open an onboard map booklet to check.

This was a base of the Aldegian Air Force some twenty kilometers' direct flight distance from the royal capital, Verterace. The aircraft Kojou and the others were aboard was heading there for some reason.

"An air base… Why are we heading there…?"

Kojou tilted his head as he asked. Of course an airbase would have runways they could land on with permission, but he didn't think they'd let a civilian airplane land there without a special reason for it.

Now Asagi was less calm. She gave a foreboding guess: "Maybe there's some kind of trouble at Verterace Airport?"

However, there was no sign of an announcement from the captain to explain the situation. Yukina was so completely terrified by this point that fear kept her

from even raising her voice.

“Look, Kojou! A fighter jet!”

Nagisa’s voice innocently rang out as she peered through the airplane window. Kojou only caught sight of it for a mere instant, but it definitely had the pretty silhouette of a fighter jet flying right beside them.

It was no mere fly-by, either. From its manner of flight, the fighter was clearly escorting the civilian airplane—or perhaps observing it.

“An escort plane from Aldegia? That wouldn’t be strange when greeting a foreign dignitary, but…”

Yaze began mulling this over with a look of rare seriousness. That said, Kojou and the others were mere passengers; there was nothing they could do about it, no matter what they might think. Regardless of their concerns, the airplane descended toward a runway at the air force base.

“Looks like we’re landing normally, at least,” Asagi said, relieved.

The airplane made contact with the runway with a fairly minor jolt. The craft rapidly decelerated with a roar of thrust reversers and a spewing of heated gas. Yukina was faintly teary-eyed, perhaps due to her relief at having landed. She continued firmly holding Kojou’s right hand as she quietly let out a frail sigh.

Now that it had finished landing, Kojou was sure the airplane would follow a taxiway to a parking spot. However, for some reason, the craft continued to decelerate, finally coming to a stop smack in the middle of the runway.

Having come this far, the other passengers also seemed to keenly sense that something was off. Various voices within the cabin turned into an uproar, and even the expressions of the flight staff were tinged with unease. However, even at this late stage, there was no explanation from the captain whatsoever. Several short-tempered passengers got up and tried to approach the nearest attendants.

At that very instant, the craft’s emergency exit opened with an impact resembling an explosion.

“Th-the heck?!”

The unexpected development left Kojou and the others frozen, completely unable to move.

A group clad in black combat outfits poured in through the opened emergency exit like an avalanche. They were wielding short-barreled submachine guns intended for indoor combat. They spread out with organized, well-drilled movements, taking over the craft in mere moments.

“Who the heck are these guys…?!”

Finally recovering from surprise, Kojou glared warily at the group in black.

A man who seemed to be the leader of the group gave the passengers a warning in English. At the very least, he seemed to have no intention of inflicting harm upon the passengers.

“They look like Aldegian special forces,” Yukina whispered into Kojou’s ear in a very quiet voice.

“Military special forces?” he asked, surprised.

“He said, ‘Everyone put your heads down and do not move. There appear to be terrorists aboard the plane.’”

“Terrorists… Wait, what?!”

Kojou’s eyes bulged as he surveyed the area. The fact that they’d been flying with terrorists gave him a belated jolt. If there was a threat of air terrorism, small wonder the airplane had been diverted to a military base.

However, the fact that the cabin had been taken over by special forces surely meant the worst case of a hijacking situation had been averted beforehand. All they had to do now was wait for them to find and apprehend the suspects.

The soldiers, equipped with black face guards, were moving in Kojou and the others’ direction. They were apparently checking passengers one by one.

Finding the sight reassuring, Kojou was watching them when one among them met his eyes by chance. That instant, the soldier abruptly shouted in a loud voice:

“Tango!”

“Eh…?”

Kojou had a dumbstruck, openmouthed expression as he stared at the submachine gun barrel thrust before his eyes. Even Yukina, supposedly able to peer into the future, was taken completely by surprise and unable to respond.

“Wait a—?! What do you think you’re—?”

Asagi began to rise from her seat as she reflexively tried to complain, but she hastily put both hands up when she, too, found soldiers’ guns trained upon her. From there, Kojou and the others were completely surrounded by special forces in the span of a few short seconds.

“Target apprehended!”

“S-senpai…?”

“K-Kojou?!”

“Hold on, it’s not as if I’m some kind of hijack—oww!”

Kojou was desperately trying to plead his innocence, but yelped as a soldier beside him used some kind of joint hold on him.

“Six terrorists from Asia apprehended in accordance with the intel. Removing from the aircraft.”

The special forces leader began reporting the situation with a radio. The aircraft was probably completely surrounded by a large military force.

“Six—that means us, too?!”

Nagisa stared at Kanon with a look of apprehension. *I do not know*, Kanon’s shake of her head indicated.

“Hold on, this is some kind of mista*ghnfff*!”

Even with his joints restrained, Kojou attempted to object, but someone suddenly sealed his mouth. One of the special forces soldiers was pressing a black, cut-resistant sack over Kojou’s lips. The female soldier had a more slender build compared with the other troops.

“Oh no you don’t, Kojou. Be a good boy and behave for a little while.”

The female soldier flipped up her masklike face guard, whereupon blue eyes

reminiscent of glaciers and a radiant, beautiful face appeared. Kojou drew in his breath when he realized who the female soldier was.

“You…!”

“Welcome to Aldegia, Kojou. Do enjoy your stay.”

The beautiful crown princess of Aldegia whispered into Kojou’s ear with an invigorated tone, adding a *tee-hee* and a mischievous smile.

3

“What do you think of Aldegia on your first visit?” La Folia asked, grinning. She was in high spirits.

She had already stripped off her combat suit and changed into her personal outfit: a blazer in the style of military ceremonial dress, a miniskirt, and lace-up boots. The outfit gave off a sense of majesty and refinement befitting a princess.

“What do I think? Did you think I’d be overjoyed at being tossed into a paddy wagon as soon as I arrived?! The hell’s going on?!”

Kojou was still sitting on a bench in the paddy wagon as he glared at La Folia.

Kojou and the others had been arrested as terrorists and had been taken off the airplane handcuffed and blindfolded less than thirty minutes prior. From there, the police van they were aboard departed from the air force base before moving onto a highway, destination unknown.

A paddy wagon was made for durability, so even being generous, Kojou would rate the comfort of the ride as rock-bottom. The windows were narrow and covered with metal mesh and iron bars, so they couldn’t gaze at the scenery outside even with their blindfolds removed.

However, La Folia did not display a single iota of guilt as she shook her head.

“It was an unavoidable measure to pull the wool over the eyes of the mass media and foreign intelligence services waiting at the airport. You are the World’s Mightiest Vampire, so I cannot simply bring you into the country using normal procedures.”

“I get that, but you had to have some other way without treating people as terrorists, right?!”

“Creating such a spectacular incident was our meticulously crafted plan to divert prying eyes from the Fourth Primogenitor smuggling himself into the country.”

“It’s not like I meant to smuggle myself in, you know…”

Kojou rested his cheek on his palm with a sulky expression.

“Oh my,” went La Folia as she tilted her head. She took out some fine powder packed into a vinyl bag.

“Would you have preferred my original scenario of sneaking this white powder into your luggage and having you arrested on suspicion of narcotics smuggling?”

A cold chill shot down Kojou’s spine. “Like hell! You were gonna treat me as a criminal either way! There are lots of gentler ways to do it, aren’t there?!”

Hearing it straight from that cruel, scheming princess’s mouth, it didn’t sound like much of a joke. The only difference between the two was surely a casual impulse that said charging military special forces onto an aircraft seemed more fun.

Are you guys really all right having someone this dangerous as the crown princess? thought Kojou with detached concern for Aldegia’s future prospects.

“In any case, I am grateful that you accepted my invitation. Thank you, Kojou.”

La Folia’s return to Graceful Cat Mode made Kojou shake his head with a pained smile.

“If you’re gonna thank someone, thank Kanase. Himeragi and I only came to be Kanase’s bodyguards.”

Nodding to Kojou’s words, La Folia turned toward her even-younger aunt. “I suppose so. It is good that you have come, Kanon.”

“Thank you very much for inviting me, Your Highness.”

“Incorrect.”

“Eh?”

“Please. Call me La Folia, Kanon.”

For some reason, La Folia was staring intently at Kanon with a pouty tapering of her lips.

Kanon blinked in bewilderment.

“…?”

“I am your niece by blood, so you must address me in an appropriate fashion.” La Folia put her hands on her hips. She was dead serious.

Kanon was still bewildered as she nodded. “…La Folia?”

“Well done.”

The beautiful princess made an equally beautiful smile.

La Folia had overwhelming majesty that enchanted the masses, whereas Kanon gave a gentle, fleeting impression. The vibes were polar opposites, but when Kojou looked at them together up close, their faces really were a great deal alike.

Sitting beside Kanon, Nagisa timidly raised a hand. “Um, was it all right for us to come, too?”

The princess grinned as she nodded. “But of course. After all, being Kojou’s little sister means that you will be my little sister-in-law in the near future.”

“R-right…”

La Folia’s blunt assertion left Nagisa nodding almost like she’d been gradually worn down.

“Hey, hold on a sec,” Kojou hastily interjected. “No, that ain’t something I can accept just like that. This is just weird. Don’t decide that on your own.”

“There is no need for concern about Yukina. According to what I have heard, polygamy is an accepted practice in the Fallen Dynasty, Dominion of the Second Primogenitor. If you wish to follow suit, I have no objections whatsoever. Yukina, you are fine with this, yes?”

“Eh?! M-me…?!” Yukina struggled to reply.

“That’s not the problem here!! It sounds me marrying you has already been decided!”

La Folia gracefully let Kojou’s rebuttal slide past her as she addressed Yaze and Asagi. “I welcome you two as well, Motoki Yaze, chairman of the board of directors of Itogami Island’s Gigafloat Management Corporation, and Asagi Aiba, the Priestess of Cain. So we meet again.”

“Hello. I’m in your debt from back during the war of the primogenitors,” Asagi greeted, an awkward, amiable smile on her face.

Yaze took presents out from somewhere or other and presented them to the princess. One was a folder for construction foremen containing blueprints, and the other was a thick booklet with elaborate binding.

“They may not be much, but these are gifts for Your Highness from Itogami city-state.”

La Folia opened the folder and narrowed her eyes as she gazed at the blueprint. “This is…the deployment ritual for the Völundr System developed by Kensei Kanase, is it not?”

The Völundr System was a powerful anti-demon system that was the pride of Aldegia’s Knights of the Second Coming. Kanon’s adoptive father, Kensei Kanase, once the Court Sorcerous Engineer of the Aldegian Royal Palace, was apparently entrusting to the princess a plan he had devised to further strengthen that system.

“I hereby accept this sign of friendship from Itogami city-state. If we put this ritual into action, our nation shall surely reap incalculable benefit as a result. I shall have the Court Sorcerous Engineers analyze it at once. Now then, this is…?”

She widened her eyes in surprise as she opened the book constituting Yaze’s other gift. It was rare for her, always so calm and composed, to display such open emotion on her face.

Kojou lobbed Yaze a question. “The heck is that?”

“Ahh, that’s an album with a photo collection of you back in your middle school days, actually…”

For some reason, Yaze sounded proud of himself. Kojou looked back in shock.

One showed Kojou yawning during class. Another showed Kojou during club. There was a shower scene and a sleeping scene. And one showed Kojou getting along intimately with the Twelfth, Avrora… La Folia’s eyes glimmered like that of a little child as they devoured the images.

“Hey!! What’s with givin’ away pictures of other people without their consent?! And why do you have enough pictures of me to make an album anyway?! Where’d you get them all?!”

“Mm, these were candids that Asagi asked me to take, actually…”

While Kojou grabbed him by his collar, Asagi punched Yaze in the solar plexus, making him go “guoah” as his breath caught.

La Folia held the album she’d accepted against her chest, treating it like something precious.

“You have my thanks, Motoki. To me, there could be no greater present than this. You are a dependable person.”

“Thanks for your kind words.”

Yaze was still bent over with an agonized expression as he somehow managed to respond to the princess’s praise.

“Sheesh,” grumbled Kojou as he leaned his back against the police van’s wall. “So where are we headin’ to?”

La Folia readily stated with a surprising lack of drama, “A country house outside of the capital region. It is the current residence of my grandfather—former king of Aldegia, Galliard Rihavein.”

Nagisa gasped and lifted her face as if realizing something. “The former king? Does that mean he’s Kano’s father?”

“Yes. I have invited Kanon to Aldegia so that she might meet him, you see.” The silver-haired princess smiled as she nodded, turning a gentle gaze to the silent Kanon.

One of the knights on standby inside the police van rose up without a sound and approached La Folia. The expression on her face somehow seemed tense as she gave the princess a report in a small, whisper-like voice.

“Pardon me, Your Highness. Urgent message from Her Highness Musette, the Queen Mother.”

“…From Grandmother?” La Folia raised an eyebrow with a twinge of surprise.

Queen Mother meant the queen of the previous king. To La Folia, that meant her grandmother.

In contrast, to the queen mother, Kanon was the child conceived through the adultery of her very own husband. Naturally, it was unlikely the queen mother harbored goodwill where Kanon was concerned.

Perhaps it was because she sensed such circumstances that the knight seemed worried as she continued her report.

“She wishes to change Her Highness the Royal Sister’s destination to Tenotia House.”

“To Tenotia?”

“Yes. Also, she states that Your Highness is to urgently return to the royal palace.”

“So she intends to separate Kanon and me…and to Tenotia of all places.”

La Folia cast down her melancholic eyes as her expression hardened. Her usual aura of composure was lacking in her reaction. It was not like her at all.

“There some kind of problem with that place?” Kojou asked out of consideration for La Folia.

The silver-haired princess made a fleeting smile as if anguished by the thought.

“It is the villa where, when Grandmother was queen, she incarcerated the women who were her rivals in love—Grandfather’s lovers. They were not permitted to leave the villa until death.”

“Incarcerated? And she said to take Kanon there?”

Tension ran across Kojou and company's expressions all at once.

This was a deeply jealous queen mother known to have locked away her husband's partners in adultery. This woman was designating the villa that was the stage for her revenge as the place her husband was to meet the daughter of his lover. Of course they expected nothing good to come of it.

"I am concerned, but I cannot defy Grandmother's commands. She is cunning to a truly frightening degree, you see."

La Folia weakly shook her head in a gesture tinged with resignation and a sense of powerlessness.

Kojou felt a pang of anxiety within his chest. If a person harboring malice toward Kanon was someone even a strategist like La Folia feared, he could not help feeling worried.

"It is as you have heard, Kanon. I am unable to accompany you from this point forward. Do be careful."

La Folia squeezed Kanon's hand, speaking those words with a tone akin to a prayer.

Kanon quietly nodded as a soft smile came over her, as if meaning to reassure all those watching.

"It will be all right. Thank you very much, La Folia."

4

It was near dusk when the police van carrying Kojou and the others arrived at Tenotia House.

Surrounded by forest and hills, it was not so much quiet as a place in the middle of nowhere. In contrast to the image given by the word *villa*, the structure was small, looking like little more than a fancy country house at best.

"This is the villa where she locked up the last king's lovers? What was the name? Sounded like Henoheno or something…," Kojou murmured.

"Tenotia. It would appear to be the name of a lake near the royal capital of

Aldegia," Yukina clarified. She'd been dragged down by exhaustion for a while after getting off the plane, but she seemed to have finally returned to her normal state.

"I wonder if it's that lake?" Nagisa stretched up and pointed. The forest concealing it made it difficult to see, but the villa apparently stood behind a lake.

So they had a very quiet mansion, a gloomy forest covered in the vestiges of snow, and a lake with no sign of human presence. Kojou wouldn't have quite called it creepy, but he couldn't shake the chilliness of the impression. The rumor that rivals in love had been imprisoned there somehow had the ring of truth.

Around the time they arrived at the mansion's entrance, Yaze off-handedly touched upon a subject no one seemed to want to broach. "For a royal villa, it's pretty compact, or maybe just thickly built. The building feels kinda plain."

He heard a hollow, gloomy voice coming from behind him.

"I apologize that it is so plain."

"Whoa?!"

Yaze reeled and turned around. He caught sight of an elderly woman standing in a servant's attire without giving off any aura whatsoever. She looked to be about sixty years old. From her appearance, she came off as a capable sort, but also gave the impression of a moody, unapproachable person. She seemed to be the housekeeper of the mansion.

"Nah, I don't mean plain in a bad sense at all. If anything, it calms me down, like it has that whole Japanese *wabisabi* feeling I personally hold in pretty high esteem."

Yaze had begun hastily making excuses when Asagi slapped the back of his head to make him actually apologize. "What kind of rude things are you saying?! Don't you have common sense?!"

"I was trying to say I was praising it!"

Yaze justified himself in a pathetic voice as he deeply bowed his head. The

housekeeper bowed without emotion, then opened the weighty-seeming wooden doors and led Kojou and the others into the mansion.

Just as they'd expected from the exterior appearance, the interior of the mansion was by no means vast or particularly grandiose. Even so, the structure was constructed spaciously enough to justify being called a royal villa.

The marble floor gave off a glossy sparkle from being assiduously polished, and the wooden materials had changed to a beautiful amber color from the passage of long months and years. Mysteriously, the structure gave off nostalgic warmth even though it was their first visit.

"Please make yourselves at home in these rooms over here. The bathroom is down and on the right. There are two bedrooms on the left and two on the right. If you require anything else, I am at your disposal."

"Sorry, and thank you very much."

When Kojou made a friendly smile and spoke words of thanks, an expression of minor bewilderment came over the housekeeper. To someone living in a hierarchical society such as she, Kojou's demeanor, readily speaking words of gratitude despite being a monarch himself, might have come off as bizarre. A traveler such as Kojou perhaps ought to have acted according to the manners on her end, but Kojou couldn't rest easy if he didn't speak at least one word of thanks for taking care of them. That was why he didn't even notice the housekeeper's bewilderment.

At the same time Kojou and the others entered their rooms, the housekeeper's young subordinates brought in their luggage one after the next. These were the suitcases Kojou and company had entrusted to the airline when they'd boarded the aircraft.

La Folia's agents had apparently confiscated and sent over the luggage from inside the airplane after it had landed at the air force base. The fine attention to detail was La Folia living up to her reputation as a strategist.

The housemaids bringing in the luggage remained on standby in corners of the rooms. The atmosphere felt like they were observing Kojou and the others rather than awaiting their commands. The aura from the housemaids reminded Kojou that this was enemy territory.

The one saving grace was that Kanon herself, the target of the monitoring, seemed to be calmly accepting the maids' presence.

Having already relinquished her place in the royal succession, Kanon did not harbor any excessive expectations toward the former king. That was probably why she was taking the situation so calmly. Still, Kojou thought that the sight of Kanon so composed might come off as rather unnerving to those watching her.

"I'm glad we brought our school uniforms. This is okay to wear, right?"

Nagisa spoke in her usual sunny tone of voice, perhaps trying to soften the strained air. She was taking her Saikai Academy winter uniform out of her suitcase.

Asagi strove to be equally cheerful as she replied to Nagisa's question. "I suppose so. It's not like this is a formal diplomatic occasion, so there shouldn't be any problem at all."

The uniforms of students and policemen were recognized as proper attire at formal occasions. Surely such circumstances applied to Aldegia as well.

"I never thought the day would come when I'd meet a king."

Nagisa smiled somewhat nervously as she fussed over the creases in her uniform shirt.

"Your older brother is kind of like a king, too, you know."

A strained smile came over Asagi as she murmured in a voice so small that Nagisa barely heard it.

When the girls began to spread their changes of clothes out, Kojou moved to leave the area out of consideration for them. It was the next moment that one of the housemaids approached Kanon, seemingly slipping past the eyes of her coworkers to do so.

"Pardon me. I take it you are Lady Kanon?" the housemaid asked in a hushed voice. Her pronunciation was a little awkward, but she was speaking in easily understood Japanese.

She was a beautiful forty-year-old woman with blond hair, but her expression was dark; it seemed like she was afraid of something.

“Yes, that would be me, Kanon Kanase.”

Kanon smiled pleasantly and bowed her head deeply. The blond housemaid shook her head in surprise.

“Please lift your face, Lady Kanon. Her Highness the Royal Sister should not be lowering her head before the likes of a lowly servant such as I.”

“Is there something you wanted from me?” Kanon asked of the apologetic housemaid.

The woman nodded, hardening her resolve as she opened her mouth. “I fully understand it is rude to say this: Lady Kanon, please flee this place.”

“Flee?”

Kanon tilted her head slightly with a mystified look. Hearing the conversation between the girls, Kojou warily met Yukina’s eyes as she stood beside him.

After a brief, silent pause, the blond housemaid clenched both hands together as if struggling against fear.

“Yes. The queen mother is wise and full of wit, but she possesses a cruel disposition. Are you aware of how she has acted toward the former king’s partners in adultery until now? Also, of ghastly bloodshed—enough to keep lips sealed to this very day.”

The housemaid’s shoulders trembled, shuddering at her own words. She continued in a frayed voice.

“This very Tenotia House was employed for that purpose. The queen mother will surely never forgive the former king or Lady Kanon, daughter to him by another woman. Your life is in danger. Please flee the country before her rage swallows you whole.”

Kanon stared at the blond housemaid as she gently asked, “Why are you telling me this?”

The housemaid wordlessly undid the cufflink of one of her uniform’s sleeves and rolled it up to near the elbow. A deep scar, seemingly from a burn, marred her flesh. It was not a scar from any common accident. It was a scar left from being shot with a pistol at close range.

“Seventeen years ago, my life was saved by Lady Kotone. A court healer at the time, she treated me for grave wounds after an accident and spared my life. I must return the favor.”

Fresh surprise came over Kanon’s expression when the housemaid spoke the name *Kotone*. Kojou realized it had to be the name of Kanon’s mother.

“I was informed of this situation before coming to this country,” Kanon said in her usual gentle tone. A satisfied smile came over her lips. Then, the girl nodded as if accepting all that she had learned. “The queen mother seems to love the former king a great deal.”

“Yes…?”

Kanon’s out-of-place reaction caused a dumbfounded voice to slip from the blond housemaid. However, Kanon lowered her eyes in sadness out of pity for the queen mother.

“It is a sad thing to see someone you love develop feelings for another. I feel like I can understand that pain rather well.”

“Oh, um, I was not speaking about that.”

A completely lost expression came over the blond housemaid. Small surprise, but Kanon’s reaction was apparently well outside her expectations.

“It is only natural that the queen mother would hate me. That is why I had no intention of coming to this country,” Kanon said calmly before smiling bashfully. “But, if it is possible, I would like to say something to the former king in my mother’s place. Therefore, I will not return home yet.”

“Lady Kanon…you…”

The housemaid’s eyes went wide as she gazed at Kanon with visible surprise. Now she knew not only how off the mark she had been, but she finally understood Kanon’s reason for visiting Aldegia.

Kojou was just as surprised as she was. Kanon was a girl of few words; he felt like he was touching on what she really thought for the very first time.

“You don’t have to worry. We’ll protect Kanon,” Kojou said. He smiled at the housemaid to try to put her at ease.

Yukina stood at Kanon's side and nodded strongly. "Yes. That is why we have come."

"Besides, if Kanon runs now, the queen mother might blame you for undermining her plans," Asagi added, putting her clothing in order in the meantime. She'd been paying close attention to their conversation nonetheless.

"B-but—"

The blond housemaid was bewildered, stumbling over her words. It seemed from her expression that she was vexed at being unable to convey her fear of the queen mother.

Kojou stared at the housemaid a bit and scratched his head in mild consternation.

"Besides, this building… Tenotia House, was it? I don't think it's as scary a place as it sounded. If I had to pick one or the other, it feels like Kanon's being properly welcomed."

"Eh…no, that cannot be tr…"

"I mean, hey, this room has an incredible view. It'd be miserable if it was a place for someone you really hated. It's, like, too luxurious for that, right?" Kojou was examining the room all around.

The time was dusk. The window facing them was spread wide to display the golden sunset of a foreign land over a serene lake. To the left and right were majestic cliffs scraped by a glacier. Everything the eyes could see was like a gemstone, an incredible masterpiece.

"Yeah, yeah, this landscape's really moving. Plus, this building seems like something out a fairy tale," Nagisa murmured absentmindedly as she looked around the room.

"Also, the furniture and carpet are all fine antiques. You can't buy stuff like this at any price, right? It must've taken a lot of time and trouble to put it all together, though." Asagi stroked a nearby reclining chair as she sighed in a mix of praise and exasperation.

"Are you really all right with staying here?"

The housemaid’s voice trickled out quietly. Kojou and the others’ oddly favorable reactions seemed to leave her at a loss.

“I am very sorry,” Kanon said with a deep bow.

Kanon had a very apologetic expression as she deeply bowed to the housemaid.

5

It was eight PM. Having finished changing clothes, Kojou and the others were summoned by the housekeeper and made their way to the villa’s dining room.

Kanon and Nagisa were both wearing their school uniforms, while Kojou and Yaze were both wearing rented dinner jackets. Asagi’s outfit was a turquoise evening dress she’d taken a liking to.

However, Yukina was the one who most stood out among those present. That was because she was wearing a frock coat meant for a man.

“Oooh… Yukina, you look so cool,” Nagisa murmured as she walked, arms locked with Yukina. Nagisa was quite flushed.

“I’m sorry, Nagisa. I am here as an escort.” Yukina lowered her head and shook it with a blush plain on her face.

It all began with a directive from the housekeeper that the seating arrangements at dinner would place women next to their male escorts. It was only natural that Kojou, a guest of honor, would be escorting Kanon, the other guest of honor; the remaining issue was how to balance the numbers of boys and girls.

In the end, Asagi grudgingly consented to being escorted by her childhood friend Yaze, and after an impartial contest between the remaining pair’s heights, Yukina’s scant advantage of two centimeters resulted in her being assigned the male role.

However, in spite of her initial concerns, Yukina was quite gallant with her hair tied back and wearing men’s attire, looking so much like a pretty boy that even the housemaids helping her change clothes had been at a loss for words.

“Yeah, you look way nicer than Kojou. Enough that I want to marry you.”

“Marriage…is a little too much, perhaps…”

Nagisa’s genuine insistence made Yukina squirm a bit as she smiled stiffly.

Kojou was gazing at this in a daze when Yaze abruptly spoke to him.

“Hey, Kojou. What’d ya think of the woman from earlier?”

“By ‘woman from earlier,’ you mean the blond one who was talking to Kanase?”

Kojou looked back at Yaze, checking just to make sure.

“What do I think? She’s a little too old for you. True, she’s really pretty for her age. I mean, Yaze, even for a guy who likes older chicks like you, isn’t she a little out of your range?”

“Why’d you think I was talking about romance?!” Yaze forcefully cleared his throat and shouted back in anger. “I ain’t talking about that! I mean whether she was actually trying to trick us or not!”



“Trick?”

“Yeah. What do you think would happen if little ol’ Kanon ran and went home without meeting the former king? It’d be a huge slap in the face to Princess La Folia for setting up an audience without authorization. There’d be no way to avoid a worsening of relations between Aldegia and Itogami city-state, and with the government of Japan, for that matter, right? One wrong move and it might have an impact on the commemoration ceremony in three days.”

Yukina joined the conversation. “You believe she might be a spy for the faction seeking to damage the commemoration ceremony?” She would not be able to disregard that.

“Isn’t disguising someone as a servant to infiltrate a villa a pretty risky, roundabout way to go about it?” Asagi asked with a suspicious tone.

Yaze curled his lips, not particularly confident himself. “That’d minimize the risk from failure, too, though.”

“Even if she was a spy, she didn’t manage to convince Kanon, so there’s not a problem, right? It’s a lot more likely she was genuinely concerned for Kanon anyway.” Kojou dismissed their concerns. Yaze was right to have doubts, but since they didn’t have a way to confirm her identity, he felt like it was a waste of time to worry about it.

Kojou’s assertion made Yaze nod with a weighty expression on his face. “If what she said is true, that means we need to worry about intrigue from the queen mother here on out, though. Not that I think she’ll resort to direct actions straightaway, but…”

“If that happens, we will find a way to manage somehow. It would be reassuring if Sayaka were here, however.” Yukina pursed her lips after she spoke.

Unlike Sayaka, well versed in curses and assassination, Yukina’s specialty was direct combat with demons. If the queen mother set up an assassination in earnest, there was no guarantee that even her Sword Shaman ability of peering into the future could completely prevent it.

“The other side might know that, too. Maybe they changed the place for the

audience to this villa to keep Kirasaka from joining us," Yaze speculated.

His hypothesis was sinister. Yukina's expression tightened as she pondered the worst-case scenario.

"If possible, I would like to avoid combat. Aldegia's Knights of the Second Coming are without doubt the world's top class when it comes to achievements and experience in anti-demon combat exploits."

"That's because they're on the front line of combat with the Warlord's Empire," said Yaze. "Even now, it seems there's skirmishes and armed raids several times a year. They're not people to flinch just 'cause the opponent's the Fourth Primogenitor."

"An armed incursion might be a lot easier to deal with," Asagi said. "It's coming in through the back door that's a lot more trouble. The opponent's a woman feared by brain trusts in every country of the world by her alias of The Trickster Goddess. We don't want to be caught playing poker with her."

Asagi hated losing more than anyone else, and even she was speaking with a fainthearted tone for once.

However, Kojou keenly understood Asagi's feelings of wariness. "Well, she is the grandmother of La Folia." He grimaced.

That coldhearted princess had characterized the queen mother as frightening. He figured no amount of wariness was too paranoid.

The expressions on Kojou and the others grew graver as they approached the dining hall, which was the site for the audience.

"Sheesh!"

Nagisa raggedly exhaled as she suddenly stomped on Kojou's foot. Unlike Asagi, who was in high heels, Nagisa was only wearing loafers, but being caught by surprise made fairly ferocious pain run through his foot even so.

"Owww?! Nagisa, the hell are you…?"

Kojou let out a pained yelp and tried to lodge a complaint, but he swallowed the angry voice, never letting it leave his throat when he realized why Nagisa had that cheeks-puffed-up look. It was because Kanon, walking at Nagisa's side,

was casting her eyes downward with a conflicted look.

A guilty look came over Kojou as he apologized to Kanon. “Ahh… Sorry, Kanase. We were saying stuff that just made you worry.”

“No, it’s all right. I appreciate you worrying about me.” Kanon smiled as she shook her head.

It was then that the housekeeper guiding Kojou and company halted in the long corridor. With a lit candlestick in hand, she slowly turned back and indicated the large doors ahead of her with her finger.

“This is the dining hall. The former king and queen are already awaiting you. Everyone, please proceed.”

The housekeeper spoke those words, then slowly opened the doors without a sound.

Kojou slapped his own cheek to try and rouse his spirits before heading in at Kanon’s side.

“Well, let’s do this, Kanon.”

“Yes, Akatsuki. I am most inexperienced, but…”

“Er, um, that reaction’s for a somewhat different situation.”

Kojou smiled as Kanon deeply bowed her head. Thanks to that exchange, he felt like his tension had eased.

It was dark inside the dining hall. That was because the dozens of candles placed on the table served as its only interior lighting. However, Kojou felt no dissatisfaction because of it.

Part of the walls and the ceiling of the dining hall had transparent glass spread across, through which the silver light of the moon poured down. The moonlight reflected off the surface of the lake, adding to its brightness.

There were countless stars scattered across the sky. The ripples on the lake’s surface created a wild dance of light.

The designer of the villa had splendidly created this surreal scenery.

Seen off by the emotionless housekeeper, the pairs of Kojou and Kanon, Yaze

and Asagi, and Yukina and Nagisa entered the dining hall in that order. Kojou looked around the room for signs of the former king and queen mother supposedly waiting there for them.

He hadn't intended to be careless whatsoever. Yet, Kojou could not conceal his surprise even so.

"Eh…?"

For an instant, Kojou stood dumbfounded, unable to comprehend what was happening.

It was not that harm had been inflicted on them. The guests of honor for dinner were normally seated, nothing more.

At the center of the long table was an elderly man. He was fairly slender, with a rather refined face. There were deep creases carved into his cheeks and the corners of his eyes, but he must have been quite handsome when he was younger.

His vivid silver hair and blue eyes were probably characteristic for the Royal Family of Aldegia. He had to be Aldegia's former liege—Kanon's father, in other words.

However, for some reason, there was a black mask such as those used by criminals over his mouth, and his entire body was tied to his chair with rope. Kojou couldn't help but think he looked less like a former king than someone under investigation for being a serial killer.

Sitting to the left of this former king was La Folia, supposedly separated from Kojou and the others earlier. Her usual mischievous smile came over her face as she saw Kojou and company so unnerved.

And sitting to the former king's right was a slender, beautiful blond woman. Kojou remembered her face, for it was that of the housemaid who had told Kanon to flee a mere few hours prior.

The blond housemaid was clad in an extravagant robe with a low neckline as she sat at the dinner table.

Kojou no longer had any idea what quip he ought to make. The same went for

Yaze and Asagi.

But, in the middle of all that, only Kanon was utterly unaffected.

Speaking in a gentle tone no different than usual, Kanon greeted the tied-up former king. “You are His Former Majesty, I take it? Thank you for your invitation. I am Kanon Kanase.”

It was the blond woman who narrowed her eyes in satisfaction and nodded to her. The former king grew teary-eyed as he desperately attempted a muffled plea.

“I’m Kojou Akatsuki. Err, why is the former king tied up like that?” Kojou gazed at the appalling state of the former king.

“I spoke no lies. It is as I told you. The queen mother of Aldegia possesses a cruel disposition.”

The blond woman calmly made the statement. Her tone was majestic, but the look in her eyes held a mischievous glint that greatly resembled that of La Folia.

“He was so frightened of meeting his daughter at this late stage that he attempted to flee, so I bound him. I must say that these creatures known as men are truly unreliable at critical junctures.”

The blond woman shifted a chilly gaze toward the former king as she spoke the words. The former king attempted muffled excuses with his mouth still covered, but one glare from the woman silenced him.

“And what are you complaining about? Goodness, how did you ever serve as king without the courage to face up to your own past actions? ’Tis quite pathetic.”

Seeing that the former king was heartbroken and hanging his head in shame, the woman turned back toward Kojou and the others.

Naturally, after all that, they realized the woman’s identity. She possessed ingenuity not inferior to La Folia’s. She had overwhelming dignity and charisma. The fact that she looked nearly twenty years younger than her actual age threw them off, but they couldn’t think of anyone else who would treat the former king with so much contempt.

“Your Highness Kojou Akatsuki, Fourth Primogenitor and King of the Far East’s Empire of the Dawn, and assorted guests from Itogami city-state, I, Musette Rihavein, Queen Mother of Aldegia, welcome your visit from the bottom of my heart.”

The blond housemaid—or rather, Musette Rihavein, the Queen Mother—rose to her feet and elegantly bowed. That instant, Kojou felt like he was hallucinating that amid the dimly lit dining hall, she was enveloped by light—such was the elegance of the gesture. He really couldn’t wrap his head around her being nearly sixty years of age.

“No, thank you for inviting us. Sorry, kinda feeling bad about imposing with a big crowd.”

Kojou hastily bowed his head. In spite of having been so wary, he’d been completely led by the nose. He and the others no doubt looked full of openings to the queen mother’s eyes at that moment.

However, the queen mother looked at Kojou and the rest with a surprisingly cordial expression. “We have long retired from our duties. There is no need for any concern. Please make yourselves quite at home.”

“Ah, ahh… Um, what you said to Kanase earlier…”

Kojou remained perplexed; he still didn’t understand her true intent behind disguising herself as a housemaid to push Kanon into a corner.

“I engaged in a minor ruse to determine your true character. I apologize for my rudeness.”

“Determine our…true character?”

“To those dwelling in a royal palace, it is customary and expected to gloss things over with one’s superficial demeanor. One can learn nothing from this. It is only when coming into contact with trusted confidants or people of lower status that one’s true demeanor is revealed.”

The queen mother spoke those words as she displayed a smile beautiful enough to make Kojou’s blood run cold.

He felt like the former king still tied beside her had gone completely rigid

from fear.

“I spoke no lies. It is true that I have engaged in ghastly acts of vengeance against the lovers of His Highness the Former King. I shall never forgive the fools who would use the King’s affections to speak concerning national politics and human affairs, fill their own pockets, and harm Aldegia’s national interests. However…,” said Queen Mother Musette with a charming smile, turning a benevolent-looking gaze toward Kanon. “Kotone was not such a person. Nor are you, Kanon.”

“Eh?”

Kanon seemed mystified as she looked at the queen mother, who spoke of Kanon’s mother as if mentioning a close friend.

“Kotone quietly departed from this nation with this foolish King’s child in her belly to protect his standing. Kanon, it is said that you do not desire the standing or fortunes of a royal, either. I understand how you truly feel. Mind, had you been the sort of person to flee from us, I intended to have you hunted down and eliminated by any means necessary…”

The queen mother offhandedly spoke words even more terrifying than before. Even so, Kanon’s expression did not change.

“I merely wished to convey my thanks to His Highness the Former King.”

Kanon gazed at the still-bound former liege as she spoke.

“Your thanks?”

The queen mother narrowed her eyes inquisitively. Kojou and the others also watched Kanon with surprise.

“Yes. I heard from the abbess—from Lady Nina Adelard, that the abbey I was raised in was built by the former king for the sake of my departed mother.”

“Nina Adelard? The alchemist…?”

Surprise hovered in the queen mother’s eyes. Apparently, the name of Nina Adelard, the Great Alchemist of Yore of over two hundred and seventy years of age, had reached her ears, as well. Albeit, a good portion of the queen mother’s surprise seemed directed at the former liege, as if to say *How on Earth did you*

come to know such a woman?

“Thanks to that, I was blessed with many older brothers and older sisters. The abbey may be gone now, but many people left it beforehand. I have come to offer thanks in their place. Thank you very much.”

Everyone present stared in a daze as Kanon deeply bowed her head.

Adelard’s Abbey, the place Kanon was raised, was destroyed in the Wiseman’s Blood incident. A great many people living there lost their lives. However, according to Kanon’s words, others existed who had been saved by the abbey, people who had been saved because of the former liege.

“That is… That is all?”

There was a faint tremble to the queen mother’s voice. This time, it was pure surprise that she turned Kanon’s way.

“You came to Aldegia for no reason other than to convey those words? Even though you might well have been assassinated?”

“That is what I decided.”

Kanon nodded without hesitation. Then her cheeks faintly reddened as she gazed up at Kojou, standing right at her side.

“Besides, Akatsuki and Yukina came with me, so…”

“Huh?”

It was Kojou who was thrown off by Kanon’s sudden statement.

Protecting Kanon. It sounded grandiose, but in reality, Kojou had managed to do virtually nothing for her. The pure gratitude she expressed to him in spite of that made him feel downright embarrassed.

However, for some reason, the queen mother had a restless expression on her face as she nodded at Kanon’s words. Then she addressed Kojou with a sudden change in the tone of her voice.

“Fourth Primogenitor, you said that the scenery from this villa is a luxury, did you not?”

“Ah, err, yes.”

Kojou felt tense once more as he affirmed her words. He hadn't spoken it out of any particular malice, but he was worried that he'd rubbed the queen mother the wrong way somehow.

"This villa is a structure originally constructed as a reception house for entertaining guests from abroad," Queen Mother Musette said with a charming smile. The sudden disclosure made Kojou's eyes go wide.

"Reception house? So it really wasn't a facility for imprisoning lovers?"

"No. It is not a place we invite any save truly important friends."

"Ah…"

Kojou suddenly remembered La Folia's unexpected reaction when she heard the name of Tenotia House. It wasn't that she was frightened or concerned. It was surprise—surprise at the fact that the queen mother was inviting Kanon to a villa supposedly reserved for truly important friends.

"Today, Aldegia is a wealthy country due to the growth of sorcerous manufacturing, but it was once a poor country constantly involved in prolonged warfare. It was all we could do to put together this scenery. Even the furniture here was what we selected and put together bit by bit."

The queen mother looked at Nagisa, then Asagi, making a satisfied smile toward them.

"The people who notice the true intent behind it are few and far between… However, yes, Kojou Akatsuki. It has been forty years since another conveyed identical sentiments to me."

"…Forty years ago?"

"By the sovereign ruler of the First Dominion, the Warlord's Empire."

"You mean the Lost Warlord…the First Primogenitor…?"

The queen mother's words made Kojou draw in his breath. Forty years ago—that had to be the same year the kingdom of Aldegia and the Warlord's Empire had ended their eternal war and formed a peace treaty.

At the time, Musette Rihavein would have been queen of Aldegia, negotiating with the First Primogenitor right at her husband's side…probably in the very

same villa Kojou and the others were in that very moment.

Kojou had yet to be acquainted with the First Primogenitor. He had very mixed feelings about the fact that he'd voiced an impression identical to the founder of the Holy Ground Treaty.

"Tee-hee, you might indeed be cut out to be a primogenitor. I suppose that means La Folia's eyes saw true. Perhaps, I might say, as expected of my own granddaughter?"

The cunning former queen of Aldegia turned a suggestive gaze toward La Folia.

"But of course, Your Highness the Queen Mother."

La Folia smiled pleasantly, speaking with an invigorated tone of voice. For some reason, the casual conversation between grandmother and grandchild made Kojou's blood run cold. That was because he somehow picked up that countless things were racing back and forth behind the pair's brief exchange just then.

"You set eyes upon this scar earlier."

The queen mother pulled off the long glove on her left hand, exposing the scar beneath to all present.

"This is a scar from an assassination attempt seventeen years ago. The assassin shot me with two bullets. The remaining one is here."

She pointed to the center of her own chest, right above where her heart must have been.

The queen mother's ghastly pronouncement left Kojou and the others speechless. No matter how much cunning she might boast, she was a human being of flesh and blood. There was no way she could have survived being shot through the heart. It wasn't the sort of injury that surgery or healing magic could cope with. No normal healing magic, at least.

"Normally, it would be a wound from which one could not be saved. However, Kotone Kanase whittled away her own life span to employ the ritual she used to treat me when I was critically wounded, even though, had she

allowed me to die, she might well have become the next queen."

The queen mother of Aldegia turned an affectionate gaze toward Kanon, daughter of her love rival.

"Kanon Kanase, I owe you and Kotone a debt of gratitude I can never fully repay. I swear upon the name of the queen mother of the kingdom of Aldegia, and upon my own pride, that I shall honor this debt."

"Grandmother, you—" La Folia's eyes glimmered.

"Yes. Kanon, even if we are not linked by blood, I acknowledge you as my own daughter. You are a legitimate member of the Royal Family of Aldegia, and to us, precious kin."

The queen mother's declaration was solemn but firm. Her unexpected words left Kanon bewildered, yet even so, her lips loosened as she seemed a little happy to hear it.

La Folia's expression did not change as she let out a small exhale. It was a sigh of relief.

That moment, Kojou realized that this had all been La Folia's scheme.

It was a scheme so that her grandmother would acknowledge Kanon as a member of the royal family herself. It was a scheme to give Kanon, her aunt of fewer years, the absolute backing of the queen of the former liege.

Of course, if the queen mother had not acknowledged Kanon, that would have been that, but La Folia had probably felt certain that her grandmother would take a liking to Kanon. And Queen Mother Musette, knowing full well that she was being used, ended up doing as her granddaughter plotted anyway.

She was the adopted daughter of a former Court Sorcerous Engineer and friend of the little sister of the Fourth Primogenitor. Moreover, the girl possessed great spiritual power. Accepting the girl named Kanon Kanase as a member of the royal family was extremely advantageous for the kingdom of Aldegia.

Oh well, thought Kojou despite that.

It wasn't like having the royal family at her back was a bad thing for Kanon

whatsoever, and he didn't think the queen mother's affection toward Kanon was strictly a matter of such calculations, regardless.

As if seeing right through Kojou's hesitance, the queen mother addressed him as she smiled with delight. "The conversation became rather long without my realizing it. Now, shall we begin dinner?"

Sitting in the seat recommended to him, Kojou realized that a rather crucial matter remained. Since no one had mentioned it, he was a little unsure of what to do, but seeing those moist eyes staring straight at him left him inwardly sighing as he reluctantly opened his mouth.

"Um, that's fine, but isn't it time to let Mr. Former King loose already?"

"Oh my…"

I completely forgot his existence said the queen mother's glance toward her bound husband. The immobile former liege averted his eyes from his wife like a frightened puppy as he sought salvation from Kojou.

"Since the Fourth Primogenitor says so, and Kanon is such a good girl, I shall forgive you this one special occasion, but you understand, don't you? If a child from a different lover shows herself, you shall not get away so lightly. Come to think of it, I promised to break as many fingers as lovers I discover. Would that make it your left index finger this time…? Oh my, oh my, that would leave you unable to hold a fork for this long-awaited dinner, wouldn't it? Hee-hee-hee."

"Fghh—! …Fghh—…!"

Queen Mother Musette smiled as she continued whispering into the frightened former liege's ear.

The husband was a tireless adulterer, and the wife always obtained her revenge. Kojou felt oddly moved by the deep sense that the two might actually be a good match for each other.

"Somehow, I feel like I'm staring at Kojou's future," Asagi suddenly said.

Yaze nodded deeply in agreement. "Oh yeah. Well, maybe you can't be king of a nation without being at least this shameless."

"Huh…?! Wait a sec. What the heck have I done?!"

Kojou was ferociously consternated at being blamed for something he didn't remember committing.

Nagisa let out a weary, exasperated-sounding sigh. "He doesn't realize it at all. Right, Yukina?"

"I suppose not. Certainly, part of that is my being lax in monitoring him."

Yukina voiced words as if she was genuinely reflecting on the matter. This was thoroughly super-serious Yukina talking, so for her to suddenly say the queen mother's behavior was something to learn from sounded downright terrifying.

"Please rest at ease, Kojou. I have somewhat greater forbearance than my grandmother."

"Hmm. It might be good for me to teach Kanon how to deal with adulterous men while I have the chance. Do not be concerned. I have not been married to this man for over forty years with nothing to show for it."

"P-please and thank you."

Finally, even those related to the Aldegian royal house began running their mouths one after another.

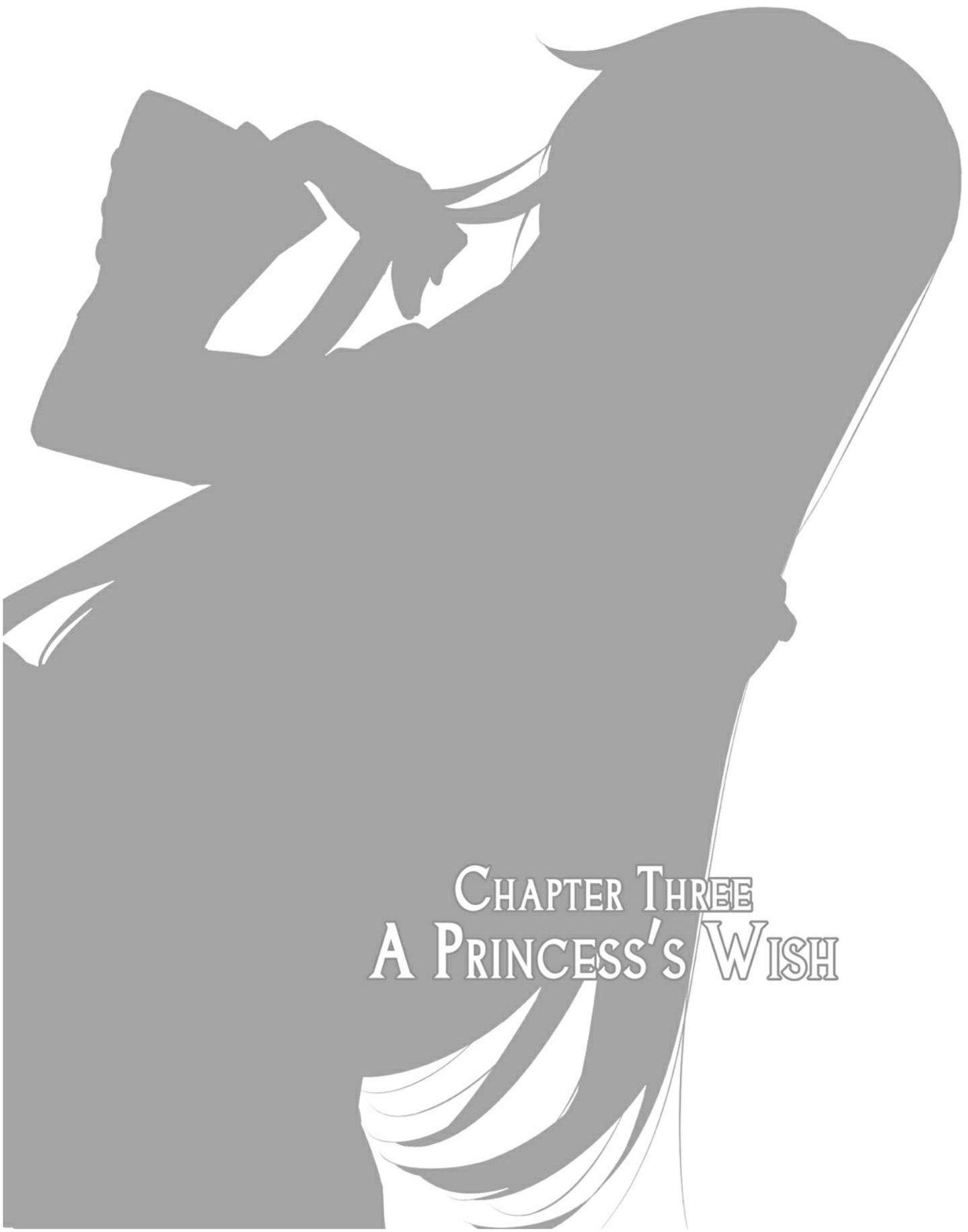
For some reason, the still-bound former king was gazing at Kojou with a look of pity.

During that time, waiters brought in one course after another. Each was an elaborately planned dish that lived up to Aldegia's fame for gourmet cooking. However, Kojou didn't feel like he could calm down and savor it just then.

"Gimme a break."

Kojou made a tiny murmur to himself as he looked up through the glass at the beautiful starry sky.

The moonlight reflecting off the lake shone gently upon the side of his face.



Chapter Three
A Princess's Wish

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1

Sayaka Kirasaka arrived at Tenotia House at just past eleven PM.

She had received a request from the Japanese embassy and the Aldegian police to cooperate in guarding the commemorative celebration in three days. Her main task was determining positions snipers might take and where could infiltrate through ritual magic. That day, she had visited several spots, and she ended up encountering two teams of actual terrorists along the way. Combat ensued, resulting in the capture of some of them. Now that her harsh first day had come to an end, she finally reached the villa to rendezvous with Yukina.

"The room is this way."

When Sayaka inquired as to Yukina's whereabouts, a housekeeper low on social graces showed her all the way to the room—a visitor's suite.

The comfortable rooms were by no means vast, but their fine quality was more than sufficient. Yukina had one of them all to herself.

"Thank you. Sorry it's so late," Sayaka said.

The housekeeper nodded wordlessly to the apology and returned to the antechamber.

After knocking on the door shown to her by the housekeeper, Sayaka peered into the room. Her lips spontaneously broke into a smile when she saw a small girl sitting in the chair next to the bed.

"Yukina!"

"…Sayaka? Is your work over already?"

Yukina looked back at Sayaka with a smile.

That beautiful, adorable smiling face caused a loud *ba-dump* to echo from

Sayaka's chest.

The situation, being greeted by Yukina in a room upon her return, reminded her of their time at High God Forest.

Sayaka and Yukina had been roommates during their Lion King Agency training era. To Sayaka, sleeping in the same room and waking up in the same room as Yukina was the best time of her life.

Sayaka put down the case for a bass guitar she was carrying and abruptly straightened her posture as she looked at Yukina. She reported in a hard tone, "Investigator Kirasaka of Lion King Agency External Department Three. I shall now deliver this Schneewaltzer to Investigator Candidate Himeragi of the Mobile Attack Mage Corps."

"M-Mobile Attack Mage Corps, Investigator Candidate Himeragi. I accept the Schneewaltzer."

Yukina stood up and straightened her own back. Sayaka handed Yukina the silver spear stored in the case.

A Schneewaltzer, secret weapon of the Lion King Agency, could not simply be handed over to an aircraft from Aldegian Airlines, a civilian corporation. Besides, a spear that was clearly a lethal weapon could not be taken into the cabin as carry-on luggage.

Sayaka, who had been made a provisional employee of the Japanese embassy, possessed the right to freely bear arms within Aldegia as a foreign dignitary. This was how Sayaka brought Snowdrift Wolf into Aldegia in Yukina's place. Naturally, Sayaka had her own beloved sword, Lustrous Scale, right with her.

"Thank you very much, Sayaka."

Relieved to have Snowdrift Wolf in her hands again, Yukina smiled pleasantly and bowed her head.

Seeing this, Sayaka's own expression softened, and she drew her face to Yukina with enough vigor that it seemed like she might break into a hug at any moment.

“I’m so glad to finally see you, Yukina. Are you all right? Happy and healthy? Did that idiotic perv-ogenitor Kojou Akatsuki do anything to you?”

“N-no… Not at present, at least.”

“*Haaah…* I’m so tired. Listen, Yukina. It was rough. Since yesterday, I’ve had to run through a series of seven meetings, and I’ve had to play tour guide and interpreter, all the while protecting VIPs. When I was called for assassination countermeasures, I did security check after security check. And on top of that, the Aldegian Army chief of security is a man, the chief of foreign affairs is a man, too, the cabinet secretaries are all men, and all of them were smelly and gross!”

Sayaka seized the opportunity to vent all of her pent-up frustrations toward Yukina. Since Sayaka was a specialist in curses and assassination, none of the staff had enough of a death wish to sexually harass her. That said, to someone who was uncomfortable around men—Sayaka—having to be in the same vicinity as so many of them was stressful enough.

“That’s, um—thank you for your hard work.”

Yukina’s demeanor somehow seemed impersonal, which made Sayaka puff out her cheeks in dissatisfaction. She stripped off her shoes and rolled onto the bed, kicking her legs around like a child throwing a tantrum.

“No way, no way. Not like that. Praise me more! Tell me I’m a good girl like you always do!”

“Eh?! But that’s…!”

Yukina glanced around the room with a conflicted look. However, Sayaka would not relent. Sayaka had always made Yukina indulge her like that when hard training was over back in their High God Forest days. One might call this Sayaka’s special privilege from being her roommate.

“Say it—! Console me—! If you don’t, I can’t work anymore—! I’m so tired—!”

“Er…err…you did your very best, yes? Good girl.”

With an air of resignation and a deep sigh, Yukina stroked Sayaka’s head. A childlike, unguarded smile came over Sayaka as she seized her chance and

grabbed onto Yukina's thighs.

"Eh-heh-heh-heh. Yeah, Sayaka did her very best. Thanks to that, I can be with Yukina from tomorrow onward—"

"O-oh. Um, but, Sayaka, it might be good to let go already…"

"I don't wanna! This, this. The touch of Yukina's bare skin has healing power all its…own…"

In the middle of doting on Yukina and looking completely defenseless, when Sayaka heard a sudden *rattle* sound, she opened her eyes wide and lifted her face. The door in the back of the room had opened, and standing right there was Kojou. He was wiping his hands with a towel as if coming straight in from the washroom.

"K…K…Kojou Akatsuki…?!"

"H-heya."

Kojou awkwardly returned her greeting with what appeared to be a guilty demeanor. He had an expression that said he'd seen something he should not have, leaving him unsure as to how to respond.

Sayaka pointed a trembling finger at Kojou.

"W-why are you in…Yukina's room?"

"Uh, no, this isn't Himeragi's room. It's mine."

Kojou gently corrected Sayaka, trying not to provoke her. Sayaka's brows shot up in indignation.

"Excuse me?! I asked the mansion person where Yukina's room was and she told me to come here, I'll have you know?!"

"Well, Himeragi's certainly right here."

"Nagisa and Kano went to sleep ahead of me, so I imposed upon this room. I thought I should speak with senpai about tomorrow's schedule."

As she said this, Yukina lifted up the book she had been reading. The book's title was *Wandering the Earth: Kingdom of Aldegia Edition*—a famous guidebook catering to travelers.

“Ah… Kojou Akatsuki…um, by any chance, did you hear? Earlier, I mean…”

Finally grasping the situation, Sayaka sought to confirm with a faltering tone of voice.

After a brief silence, Kojou gave up on glossing things over and nodded.

“By earlier, you mean being pampered by Himeragi? ‘Praise me more’ and stuff, ‘tell me I’m a good girl’—yeah?”

“N-no!” shouted Sayaka, vigorously rising to her feet.

“Huh?” said Kojou as he looked back at Sayaka.

“That’s…just an inside joke, I’ll have you know! I’m the upperclassman. There’s no way I’d have Yukina pamper me, right?! It’s just a little performance we put on once in a while!”

“Ermm, I feel like it’s more accurate to say you do this every time…” Kojou glanced back with a suspicious look as Sayaka continued desperately making excuses.

Sayaka grumbled, her words catching in her throat. She hung her head and began shaking a little. “Heh…heh-heh-heh-heh-heh…”

“K-Kirasaka?”

Kojou peered at Sayaka with concern as a hushed, laughing voice trickled out from her.

In the corner of Kojou’s vision was a single silver flash of light. Without a sound, Sayaka had leaped off the bed and drawn her silver long sword.

“Dieeeee!!”

“Whoaaaa?!!”

When Sayaka thrust her sword straight at Kojou’s heart, he bent backward and dodged by a paper’s breadth. His face twitched at the genuine killing intent with which Sayaka infused her attack.

“Wait a…! Stop messing around! Just now you activated that something-spatial severing ritual, didn’t you?! You trying to kill me?!”

“P-please calm down! Sayaka!”

Sayaka brusquely shook off the two hands with which Yukina hastily tried to stop her. The eyes with which Sayaka glared at Kojou gave off a glint of despair, like a wild beast backed into a corner.

“Don’t stop me, Yukina! If this man dies, there will be no one left who knows the secret of our shame! There’s no other way for us to be happy!”

“Like I’m gonna get killed over a crazy reason like that?! In the first place, you getting pampered by Himeragi didn’t exactly start today, did it?!”

“Th-that’s not the case at all! Not at all!”

As Sayaka was shaken, Yukina seized the opportunity and snatched Lustrous Scale from her hands. Sayaka had lost her weapon, yet she did not falter for even an instant as she thrust her fingers toward Kojou’s face.

When Kojou realized that the fingers were aimed at his eyeballs, he was aghast as he jumped backward. Sayaka, an expert in assassination, was monstrously dangerous even with her bare hands.

When Sayaka tried to take her sword back, Yukina put distance between them while earnestly continuing her attempts to calm her down. “Ah, um, I think that is just fine, Sayaka. That aspect of you is adorable.”

Sayaka swayed slightly as a hollow smile came over her. “Thank you, Yukina. Now all I have to do is kill this man and we can be happy together.”

“What kind of logic is that?!” Kojou shouted at the top of his lungs.

At present, Sayaka had completely lost herself due to accumulated stress and shame. No persuasion would suffice in that situation.

That moment, the door behind Sayaka opened. Yaze and Asagi entered the room, accompanied by the rattling of an ice pail.

“We’re baaack. Got the glasses and drinks we asked that mansion maid for. Plus some ice.”

“Er, Kirasaka? When did you get here…er, what are you doing?!”

Back from a trip to get drinks in the stead of a nighttime snack, Asagi and Yaze’s eyes went round with astonishment at the violence blowing through the room’s interior.

Sayaka froze as unexpected outsiders barged in. During that time, Kojou explained.

“Er, I kind of walked in when Himeragi was stroking Kirasaka’s head, and—”

“Shut up———!!”

Regaining her senses, Sayaka picked up a pillow that happened to be beside her, slamming it into Kojou’s face with maximum force.

2

“Aww, crap, that hurt. Kirasaka didn’t need to be that angry about it, sheesh.”

Having left the bedroom, halfway fleeing from it, Kojou was strolling around the villa’s courtyard. He figured he’d get some fresh air while waiting for the frenzied Sayaka to calm down.

The villa’s courtyard was beautiful as it welcomed the late spring.

The tree branches swayed in the nighttime breeze. Silver moonlight shone on the flowers as they slept in their flower beds. Rosebushes had been landscaped to resemble a majestic corridor that continued to the edge of the water. Tiny waves rippled across the surface of the dusky lake, almost like a carpet of pure silver.

It was against that phantasmal scenery that a slender figure stood.

She had long, silver hair and white skin. The side of her face was as beautiful as that of a goddess straight from myth. The hem of her thin negligee was being toyed with by the wind as the girl gazed up at the moon.

“La Folia…?”

Kojou was in a daze, unable to even call out to her as he watched her from behind.

The princess turned around as if she had sensed Kojou.

A strong breeze immediately blew.

Rose petals danced upward like snow, blinding Kojou for an instant.

By the time he brushed off the flower petals sticking to his hair and returned his gaze to the lake, the La Folia he had surely seen there had vanished like an illusion.

“Where did…she go…?”

Unable to comprehend what had happened, Kojou hastily looked around the area.

Someone’s voice abruptly spoke into his ear.

“Are you looking for someone, Kojou?”

“Dwah?!”

Turning around in surprise, Kojou set eyes upon La Folia, who was smiling with both hands crossed behind her back. Under the moonlight gently pouring upon them, the silver-haired princess in the negligee shook her head as if admonishing a little brother. Her forward lean allowed him to peer past the outfit’s neckline to the swell of her surprisingly ample breasts.

“No, Kojou. Peeking is wrong.”

“Sorry. I just happened to be passing by and saw you standing over there. Then…” Kojou apologized. Even if it was for a brief time, the fact remained that he had been staring at her from afar. But when Kojou’s words vaguely trailed off, the princess looked back with a mischievous narrowing of her eyes.

“And? You were enchanted by the sight of me?”

“Pretty much.”

Kojou forced a smile as he nodded. He didn’t think it was embarrassing for his eyes to be stolen by the ethereal princess. All the same, Kojou hadn’t stared at La Folia simply because she was pretty.

“Ah, err. It’s kind of cold, so are you all right wearing something so thin?”

“Yes. I have the blessings of the Spirits, after all.”

With those words, the princess spread both arms wide in the night’s refreshing air.

Even with April over, Aldegia’s nights were chilly, on par with Japan’s winter.

However, with her entire body covered in a faint light, La Folia showed no sign of feeling the cold.

Even among all the girls of the Royal Family of Aldegia born with powerful spiritual abilities generation after generation, hers were particularly strong. The Spirits residing in La Folia's body were protecting her from the low temperatures. The effect probably had something to do with the divine aura enveloping the princess.

"However, Kojou. If you wish it, I do not mind revealing all of myself to you here and now."

When Kojou went "Oh" and nodded in apparent admiration, La Folia giggled and let a provocative smile slip.

However, Kojou looked beside himself as he gazed at the princess putting a finger to the neck of her negligee.

"That's a lie, isn't it?" asked Kojou in an oddly calm tone of voice. "You don't show anyone what you really feel, do you?"

"Oh my."

La Folia raised her eyebrows in apparent amusement. Kojou mixed a languid sigh with a critical look.

"The story about Kanase getting assassinated was a lie, wasn't it? From the beginning, the queen mother was never after her at all."

La Folia readily acknowledged that Kojou's assertion was the truth. "I suppose not. The one to blame for the past adultery is Grandfather, so Kanon has committed no crime whatsoever. I knew that my grandmother would judge as much. She is a very fair individual."

Kojou glared half-lidded at La Folia. "Figures. There's even less reason for other royals to target Kanase. She has no royal succession rights, so even if they assassinated her, they're not getting anything out of it, plus they'd put their own positions in danger."

"Yes. Besides that, did you really think my grandmother and I would allow foolish knaves to run amok and inflict harm upon guests of the royal family?"

If anything, La Folia seemed amused by Kojou's somewhat hostile follow-up as she tossed a question back his way.

"Albeit, even I did not truly know whether Grandmother would take a liking to Kanon. However, that appears to have been a needless concern. I have never seen Grandmother in such a good mood in my life."

"That's…a good mood?" Kojou asked, surprised.

Thanks to her powerful dignity and charisma, he couldn't help but have a frightening impression of Musette the queen mother, but now that La Folia mentioned it, he could sense some kindness in Musette's eyes when she looked at Kanon.

"Well, fine. And? Why was us coming to Aledgia so important that you had to lie to get us here?"

A bitter expression came over Kojou as he glared at La Folia. If there wasn't anyone aiming at Kanon's life to begin with, there was no reason for Kojou and Yukina to escort her. It was far more natural to believe that it had merely been an excuse to get Kojou and company into the country.

However, the princess shook her head, quite serious for once.

"We very much wish for you to protect Kanon. Even if there is no danger of assassination, the possibility of a sudden terrorist attack cannot be dismissed. That, Kojou, is why I wanted not just you to come along, but Yukina and Sayaka as well."

"Come to think of it, you mentioned that part at the start."

"I expected that Asagi would come with you. Though, I did not expect Motoki and Nagisa to tag along…" La Folia made a pained smile as she seemed to reflect upon the naïveté of her calculations. "Nevertheless, Kanon's protection was not my sole aim. The other reason I called you to Aldegia is for the fulfillment of my very own wish."

"Your wish?"

"Yes, a meager, truly meager and personal desire. Surely you, too, will understand as tomorrow comes. I shall keep it a secret until then."

“It’s not a wish that’s gonna expose someone to danger, is it?”

Kojou locked eyes with the princess.

If it was a matter of involving Kojou alone in something troublesome, he’d leave it at that. He owed La Folia that much, but he would not honor a request that would harm Yukina and others—not even from the princess. That was a line he absolutely would not cross.

“Yes, I swear. I shall not involve the people of Itogami Island whatsoever.”

La Folia crisply made the pronouncement, seemingly seeing straight through Kojou’s resolve. He trusted her words at face value. La Folia might be a strategist, but she wouldn’t lie about this, for she understood better than anyone that words of truth were the greatest weapons in her arsenal.

“Well, then I’ve got no complaints. I just have to wait till tomorrow, right?”

La Folia smiled and a nodded. The princess standing by Kojou’s side turned to the lake. Then she looked off into the distance, remembering something fondly.

“Do you remember, Kojou? The place where we first met was a lake much like this.”

“The deserted island Magus Craft used for experiments. You saved me and Himeragi when we were attacked by Automata, didn’t you?”

“Oh my, I was certain we met once prior to that.”

“Eh?”

“Did you not peek at me while I was bathing?”

La Folia looked up at Kojou’s suspicious expression and broke into laughter.

The image of the princess washing her pale, naked body in a lake with no one around returned to the back of his mind like a flash of light. He coughed on reflex, loudly and fiercely.

“Peek…?! Er, you’re wrong. I was looking for Himeragi at the time and heard a sound, and before I knew it, I saw by pure accident—”

“And then?”

Amused, the silver-haired princess was paying close attention to Kojou’s

reactions. Apparently, La Folia had been well aware of Kojou blundering his way into an encounter with her while she bathed.

“Er, well, I was taken by the sight, but…well, I couldn’t help it! Like I could even imagine someone like you bathing there like that!”

He couldn’t exactly say it to her face, but at the time, Kojou had genuinely wondered whether he was seeing an angel or not. The impression the crown princess had made on Kojou had been that vivid.

Accurately reading Kojou’s inner turmoil, La Folia smiled beautifully. “Then take responsibility.”

“Eh…?!”

The princess’s deeply suggestive words made Kojou go stiff.

It was the next moment that the moon was obscured.

The glimmering silver lake was covered by a dark shadow.

It was above Kojou and La Folia’s heads. Something had gently interrupted the cloudless sky of beautiful stars. A giant ship was leisurely sailing in the upper sky at an altitude of tens of thousands of meters. It was an enormous airship clad in gray armor.

Though there was nothing floating in the sky to compare it with, Kojou still had a firm grasp of its bizarrely large scale.

Including its stabilizer wings, its total width was easily four or five times that of a civilian passenger plane. It was a twin-fuselage, armored airship reminiscent of a steel, two-headed shark.

“What is that…?” Kojou exclaimed. He sensed malevolence from the enormous airship crossing the sky.

“*Bifrost*, first ship of its class of flying battleships—our largest, most cutting-edge armored airship, and the pride of our kingdom of Aldegia,” La Folia answered quietly. “It is most likely escorting guests from the Warlord’s Empire, along with engaging in a show of force.”

There was faint anguish on the side of her melancholic face, as if she was foretelling an ominous future.

“It would be good if the terrorists targeting our kingdom gaze upon it and cower, but…”

3

The early morning sky was quite bright. Led by La Folia, Kojou and company left the villa and headed toward Verterace, royal capital of Aldegia. Their objective was to tour the capital.

When they crossed a bridge separating the royal city from the outskirts, they got out of the vehicle and into a silver-colored tram. Pedestrians were prioritized, and driving vehicles for personal use was heavily restricted in Verterace, so the tram was a crucial way to move around the city. However, Kojou and company were fine with this. The tram was several times better than being hauled around in a paddy wagon.

“So this is the kingdom of Aldegia’s capital, huh? Pretty city.” Kojou voiced his simple impression as he gazed at the royal city’s landscape beyond the window.

Verterace, surrounded on all four sides by the sea and canals, was small for a city; it would only take one half a day to walk from one edge of it to the other.

The skyline and structures were functional, and the whole city looked like it had an art nouveau, handicraft chic to it. For an urban area, it had numerous parks and other greenery, and its intricate water’s edge scenery engendered a refined atmosphere worthy of its nickname, the Goddess of the Baltic Sea.

“This city repeatedly suffered great damage in wars with demons, with large areas lost to the flames. Today’s Verterace was rebuilt by Lande to enter the twentieth century.” The silver-haired princess, disguised in a hooded poncho and glasses, elucidated for Kojou and the others. She was without question the most extravagant tour guide in the country.

“Lande? Who’s that?” Kojou asked.

It was not the princess who replied, but rather Yaze. “Balthazar Lande. A famous sorcerous architect. Incidentally, he was also Senra Itogami’s mentor.”

Kojou looked at Yaze in surprise. “Senra Itogami—you mean the guy who

designed Itogami Island…?!”

A Demon Sanctuary floating on the ocean said to be technologically impossible—the giant artificial isle Itogami Island had been designed by the genius sorcerous architect Senra Itogami. The very decision to name it Itogami Island was to extol the greatness of his work.

However, Kojou and the others already knew about Senra Itogami’s fearsome side. He’d used a saint’s relic as the keystone to support Itogami Island and had revived Meiga Itogami, his own grandson, as a jiangshi. Itogami Island, praised as his masterpiece, was itself an enormous sorcerous device for conducting forbidden magic.

So it was the teacher of that fearsome sorcerous architect who was the father of this beautiful city.

Kojou and the others looked around in a daze at the odd and surprising amount of green in the capital’s cityscape.

“So that makes Verterace and Itogami Island something like sisters?” asked Asagi.

“I feel like that’s not what sister city actually means, but I suppose they’re works of the same style.”

“Now that you mention it, the atmosphere does feel kind of similar.”

“No doubt Senra Itogami used this as a reference when he designed Itogami Island,” Yaze said bluntly.

An important trading city since ancient times, Verterace, too, was a city constructed atop dragon lines. Though this natural terrain and the artificial isle were very different, there were numerous similarities in the technology they used to control the vast energies hailing from the dragon lines. Chances were high that Itogami Island’s design had been influenced by Verterace.

When the tram reached its stop, Nagisa and Kanon let out their own casual impressions as they got off.

“I have to say, it’s really lively. Is everyone here to see the commemoration ceremony in two days?”

“I feel like I could get lost here.”

Their stop was the entrance to a large street known as Nakaris Way. It was one of the several shopping districts within city limits, lined with the fashion brand and sorcerous device stores that represented Aldegia.

Along the street were rows of various stores such as restaurants, flower shops, and accessory boutiques and the like being visited by a large throng of residents. Many foreign tourists could be seen among them.

The street was especially lively, bustling with activity drawn in by the peace commemoration ceremony taking place in two days.

“Let us partake of the Nakaris Way market before heading off to Senate Square in front of the central station. It is also the site for the commemoration ceremony, and it is close to the Aldegian government ministries and the Verterace Cathedral.”

La Folia pointed to street signs oriented toward tourists as she told them her recommended route. Sayaka’s expression hardened at the sight of the princess so very used to the place.

“Um, Princess? I am grateful for you showing us around the royal capital, but is it really all right for you to walk around the city like this?”

“Well, Sayaka. You are here as my bodyguard, are you not?”

When Sayaka furrowed her brow in concern, La Folia tossed back her head in amusement. Sayaka’s expression grew darker still.

“No, ah, I can manage against an assassin, but what if the general populace notices you are here? I feel like it would be a large uproar?”

“There is no need for concern. The masses shall not realize a thing. As you can see, my disguise is perfect.”

“Perfect…? Is it…?”

Sayaka made a pathetic face as she gazed at the princess wearing only glasses and a poncho. A disguise of that level was not nearly enough to conceal La Folia’s beauty. If people noticed the princess, who boasted such passionate popularity among the masses, there was a high chance of a major clamor

breaking out. Naturally, even Sayaka had no confidence in her ability to protect the princess from a large crowd rushing in all at once.

For her part, La Folia's expression was thoroughly composed. She probably snuck in and walked around the city regularly. Kojou could only imagine the trouble her escorting knights went through. He sympathized a little with the leaden look that had come over Sayaka.

When they entered the market district, fragrant scents hovered in this place and that, emanating from the various food establishments along the way.

The aromas came from all kinds of seafood and grilled vegetables, sandwiches and soups, meatballs and sausages, and numerous dishes unfamiliar to Kojou.

"That's a country of gourmet food for you. The dishes from those shops look super-delish."

"Huh?!"

"You're gonna eat more?!"

Asagi's immediate response to the food made Kojou and Yaze stare at her in surprise. After all, they'd only just finished an extravagant breakfast at Tenotia House.

"What? I've come all the way to Aldegia. It'd be a shame not to try the food."

Asagi promptly approached the nearest establishment as she spoke. In terms of fully enjoying the royal tour, perhaps her demeanor was the right one.

"Hey, Kojou, let's go, too."

"R-right."

Pushed by Nagisa, Kojou also looked at the establishment's colorful sign, but he took note that Yukina was standing still, almost in a daze.

"Yukina? Is something the matter?" Kanon asked, her sharp eyes detecting the abnormality. Gasping as she came back to her senses, Yukina shook her head with a slight blush.

"Oh, it's nothing, but I thought, you can see so many people dressed up in outfits like *that*."

“Dressed up?” said Kanon, turning her eyes in the direction Yukina was looking.

“For sure. I mean, they’re cute… Really cute…!” exclaimed Nagisa, letting out a breath as if deeply moved.

Yukina and the others were gazing at the colorful native clothes worn by the Aldegian townspeople. They included tunics tailored from felt fabric in vivid pastel colors and hats decorated with fine embroidery. The hems of their skirts were heavily pleated, and they wore stoles ornamented with countless straps over their shoulders. They were warm defenses against the cold while retaining the beauty of dresses, and they were adorable outfits. Small wonder they had attracted Yukina’s interest.

“That is native dress from Aldegia’s northern reaches. By rights, it would be customary to wear such outfits as determined by one’s place of birth, but…,” La Folia began explaining as they entered a nearby building. It was a building where many people in native dress were gathered and seemed to be some kind of tour guide office.

The building’s shelves were lined with bags and accessories that looked like traditional handicrafts. All were intricate and beautiful, and every product seemed to radiate handmade warmth.

Finally, La Folia returned with a tour guide in tow. The woman grinned and nodded as La Folia introduced Yukina and the others to her.

“It seems that as a special exception, they shall lend out outfits for the sake of pretty young ladies arriving from far-off lands.”

“Huh?! Really?! Yay!!” Nagisa cheered.

“I introduced you after all, so please. Kanon, Yukina, you too!”

“Yes.”

“B-but I…”

Kanon smiled pleasantly and nodded, while Yukina hesitated as she turned her eyes toward Kojou. She seemed to feel she would be neglectful of her observation of Kojou while changing into native dress.

Yukina remained like that when Sayaka tossed her a smile with a particularly buoyant expression on her face.

“It’s all right, Yukina. I’ll keep a tight watch over Kojou Akatsuki. Don’t worry, I’ll snuff him out if he tries anything!”

“Cut it out! Now I’m worried! You still have a grudge about yesterday, don’t you?!”

“Be quieeet!”

When Kojou lodged a complaint, Sayaka tried to pound a hand chop into his neck in earnest. Apparently, she was still mad about the night before.

Yukina was still watching Kojou and Sayaka’s bitter glares with concern as Kanon and Nagisa pushed on her back, taking her into the tour guide office.

It was about ten minutes later when the girls finished changing clothes and came back out.

Yukina, Nagisa, and Kanon each wore colorful outfits.

The dresses, made out of vibrant blue fabric, used complex embroidery with red and yellow thread to be more vivid to the eye. They fitted their small statures well, making Yukina and the other girls clad in the outfits look like faeries straight out of a picture book. The sight of the three petite people stood out even amid the throng of a bustling market.

Nagisa looked up at Kojou with eyes filled with expectation as she asked, “What do you think, Kojou? We’re cute? Cute, yeah?”

“Ohh, looks great on you. Right, Kojou?” Yaze voiced words of praise before Kojou could state his own impression.

Kojou nodded. “Ahh, yeah. You look like an ornament, somehow.”

“Huh? An ornament?”

Kojou’s assessment, far from the words she was hoping for, made Nagisa taper her lips.

“Idiot,” whispered Asagi, delivering a swift elbow to Kojou’s ribs. “If you’re gonna say that, say ‘like a doll.’”

“Yeah, that,” he hastily said.

Nagisa glared at Kojou’s perfunctory correction as she sighed in resignation. Kojou had meant to give fervent praise; he didn’t know how he’d earned his little sister’s ire. On the other hand…

“S-so cute…! An angel! An angel is here among us!”

In contrast to Kojou’s blunt response, Sayaka was extremely excited. She forgot all about being entrusted with watching Kojou and did nothing but take photos of Yukina with a digital camera, almost like an indulgent mother come to watch her beloved daughter standing on a bright stage.

“S-Sayaka… Don’t you think, even for you, you’re taking too many pictures…?!”

“It’s fine. These precious images must be recorded for the sake of human history. It is my duty to convey them to the world that shall follow.”

“But is that not a camera for Lion King Agency reports?!”

Yukina, not accustomed to being photographed, was thoroughly red-faced as she attempted to chide Sayaka, who, burning with a solemn sense of duty, did not lend her ears. If anything, she derived sadistic pleasure from seeing Yukina blush, spurring her to continue taking photos from ever more risqué angles.

“You know, though, figures that Kanon doesn’t look out of place at all,” Kojou said.

“I suppose not. I can’t win against Kano. She’s too perfect for this.” Nagisa smiled and agreed.

Kanon humbly smiled and shook her head. “Nagisa, you and Yukina look splendid as well.”

As a matter of fact, Yukina and Nagisa respectively wore quite adorable outfits. But the Aldegian native dress’s use of vivid colors made Kanon’s hair and skin stand out in particular. Kojou keenly felt that even if she had no memory of it, this country was indeed Kanon’s other homeland.

Blushing as she attracted the eyes of others, Kanon timidly asked, “Akatsuki, do you like it?”

Kojou gave her a big grin and nodded. “Yeah. It’ll be a hell of a good memory.”

“I suppose it will. I believe I am proud to be her niece.” La Folia praised Kanon in roundabout fashion.

Kanon shrank as her face reddened further. The princess smiled as if satisfied to see Kanon like that before slowly looking at the people in the surrounding area.

Thanks to Yukina and the others changing outfits, the front of the tour guide office Kojou and company were at had at some point turned into a fairly popular spot. People were pushing their way in from hither and thither to get a look at the cute girls from abroad. The guide office staffer smiled in satisfaction at the drawing of customers as a result.

La Folia confirmed the situation with her own eyes as a typically elegant smile came over her.

“Well then, I believe it is about time, Kojou.”

“Eh?”

Faster than Kojou could shift his gaze, the princess pulled down the hood concealing her face. Her beautiful silver hair spread with a flutter, attracting the eyes of many. Further, La Folia removed her glasses before the surprised Kojou, exposing her characteristic blue eyes to view.

“H-hey, La Folia! If you take those glasses off in a place like this…”

“Kojou, you idiot!” Asagi strongly smacked shut the mouth with which Kojou had blithely called out the princess’s name.

“Ah…!”

But it was far too late. Exclamations spread across the people gazing at La Folia half in disbelief; a rumble arose that resembled an earthquake.

“Her Highness La Folia…?”

“The princess? You don’t mean…it’s really her…?!”

“What’s La Folia doing in a place like this…?!”

The interest of those gathered to watch the show given by Yukina and

company switched to La Folia all at once. The shocked voices hailing from them served to bring over others still.

“Oh myyy… This is terrible… It seems that I have been noticed…”

La Folia seemed to raise a nervous voice on purpose. It was as if she was reading from a script.

The throng gazing at the princess had a vortex of excitement and zeal that was borderline dangerous.

In that country, La Folia’s popularity was incomparable to that of any mere voice actress or idol. One false move to provoke them and Kojou was worried they’d be crushed by the gathering crowd.

That didn’t mean he seriously thought they could fool anyone now. There was barely a human being in the entire country who didn’t know La Folia’s face.

And during the time Kojou and others were in a daze, the numbers gathering around the princess increased further.

“Princess, you must take shelter!”

Judging that any further mixing with the crowd was dangerous, Sayaka shouted and rushed to the front as if to shield La Folia. That served as the trigger for the throng to race toward Kojou and the others like an avalanche.

“Well, if Sayaka says so. Let us be off, Kojou.”

When the throng turned its gaze on Sayaka, La Folia did not let the momentary opportunity slip, entwining her own arm around Kojou’s. Having at some point pulled her hood back up, she gracefully mixed in with the throng, pulling Kojou along as she broke into a run.

“Eh?! Hey, La Folia…!”

Kojou was helpless but to follow the princess. Whatever was going on, he figured the first priority was getting La Folia out of there. Asagi and Yaze seemed to gape as they looked back and realized Kojou and the princess had fled.

Unfortunately, the furious force of the onrushing human wave was in their way, leaving them unable to move. Sayaka and the rest were awash in the

throng as La Folia grew ever more distant. Then, the quick-witted staffer escorted the trio of girls who had just changed to take shelter inside the tour guide office.

“Senpai!”

From inside the building, Yukina earnestly stretched out a hand toward the fleeing Kojou.

The anguished voice with which she called out to him was obstructed by the noise of the crowd, never to arrive.

4

Racing through the barest of openings in the bustling crowd, they were exiting a narrow canal lane. When they couldn’t hear the uproar from the market on Nakaris Way anymore, La Folia finally stopped running.

“It would appear we’re fine here. It seems the escorting knights were nicely ensnared as well,” La Folia said as she checked behind them. Then she flashed a smile toward Kojou.

There was no sign of La Folia’s escorts through this seldom-used lane. The knights had apparently been tailing the group from a distance so as not to tip off the general populace about the princess’s presence.

“You…planned to do this from the start, didn’t you…?” Kojou was slightly out of breath as La Folia continued leading him by the hand.

The princess nodded without a single shred of guilt. “I could not think of any other way to be alone with you.”

“Alone with me? Why do all this…?”

Kojou warily stared at La Folia. If anything, it was far more natural to worry that the princess had manipulated this situation into being because she had some other scheme in mind.

La Folia never lost her composure. “Kojou, do you remember what I spoke of last night at the villa?”

He nodded. “You mean wanting me to fulfill some kind of wish?”

La Folia smiled. She seemed pleased, but when Kojou looked closely, he could faintly see loneliness behind her expression.

“Even I, wanting for nothing and able to obtain everything I desire, have one matter in which I do not have total freedom,” she said, drawing herself close to Kojou—close enough they resembled an amiable pair of lovers.

“That is, to walk in the city side by side with the man I adore…,” she whispered, stretching up a little to reach his ear. “Just the two of us, like a normal couple.”

A mischievous glint hovered in the princess’s eyes. Kojou’s, on the other hand, were merely exasperated.

“Is that…really what you want?”

“Are you surprised? Whatever I may seem to you, I am a girl of tender age, yes?”

La Folia looked up at Kojou, pouting cutely. Even though he knew it was an act, the adorable expression still tugged at his heart.

He still broke into a tiny laugh when he stared at her, though.

“You laughed, did you not?” she asked, eyes wide in surprise. She hadn’t expected that reaction. Kojou could tell she felt put off by his chuckle.

He hastily shook his head. “I don’t mean anything bad by it. I just thought, it figures that even you don’t understand yourself very well.”

“What are you talking about?” La Folia asked peevishly, no longer putting on an act.

Cold sweat coursed down Kojou’s back as he gave up on smoothing things over. He would have to be honest; this princess couldn’t be mollified by superficial words.

“I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, but to me, you always seem bound by something, working harder than anyone else to get what you really want.”

“Eh?”

La Folia’s usual composed smile vanished. Before he spoke, Kojou had suspected his words might anger her. When she glared at him a little, he uncomfortably averted his eyes.

“To be honest, I respect that part of you. It’s got nothing to do with lineage or rank or anything,” he said after a pause. That’s what he truly felt.

La Folia gazed at him in silence for a time. Even with her glasses on, her beauty shone through loud and clear, leaving Kojou feeling restless.

He couldn’t endure the silence any longer. “…La Folia?”

Adjusting her glasses, La Folia touched both hands to her cheeks and lowered her eyes. For some reason, her cheeks were red. Surely she was accustomed to praise, yet she was genuinely blushing.

However, her hesitance vanished as if an illusion, and in the blink of an eye, the princess was gazing at the Fourth Primogenitor with her usual composed face. The strength of the glimmer in her blue eyes took Kojou’s breath away.

“I suppose you are right. I shall amend my statement,” she said. “What I really want, I will obtain by any means necessary. That is how it has always been and how it always will be.”

“R-right.”

The odd force behind La Folia’s grinning declaration made Kojou squirm slightly as he nodded.

The princess entwined her arm around Kojou’s once more.

“So let us go and see my first wish fulfilled. I believe we should first try what is known as ‘eating around.’”

Kojou exhaled briefly as he gazed at the crepe shop at which La Folia was pointing. “…Well, fine. We’re all meeting up in front of the station later anyway.”

The chaos from the princess’s appearance at the market was still ongoing, but Kojou figured his little sister and friends were unlikely to have been caught in the uproar. Yukina and Sayaka were with them, and they could handle a decent

amount of physical peril.

At the moment, if anyone was in danger, he felt it was La Folia. If the situation got rowdy again, Kojou honestly had no confidence he could protect the princess all by himself.

Whether or not La Folia knew of Kojou's concerns, she grinned enthusiastically as she charged straight into the crepe shop.

"Tee-hee, leave the haggling to me. I have not been handling numerous international negotiations to date for nothing."

"Er, I think it's overkill to show off your royal negotiating skills on an old man in a shop."

Feeling a swift onset of fatigue, Kojou stuck with La Folia as she bought food for dining in. Watching the princess smiling so innocently, he didn't feel like blaming her for running away from her escorts. He figured he'd put up with her selfish ways, at least while he was visiting.

La Folia was eating a crepe stuffed with free toppings as they strolled down a lane at the canal's edge. The pair got into a gondola for tourists and went down the canal itself. She played with a flock of countless doves at the water's edge and raised a delighted voice at a street performer's show.

She could be mistaken for any normal girl like this. Her smile stole Kojou's eyes many times over. Her face was charming to an unfair degree. If anyone published a photo of her like this, he had no doubt the magazine containing it would fly off the stands.

"Let's make our way to the park next, Kojou."

"The park?"

Although Kojou thought the sudden proposal was odd, he turned in the direction the princess pointed.

She led Kojou to a little park on top of a slightly tall hill.

At the top of a long stairway was a fountain, in the center of which stood a beautiful sculpture. It was a magnificent bronze statue in the image of a Valkyrie. The park had neither a wonderful view nor any statuesque buildings,

but it was still crowded with tourists.

“Maybe it’s my imagination, but it feels like there’s a lot of young couples here,” Kojou murmured, suspicious. He suddenly stopped on the stairs.

It wasn’t so much that there were a lot of couples as there was *nothing but* couples. Young boys and girls with their bodies intimately nestled together were speaking loving words in that not particularly large park.

“In a sense, this is the most famous tourist attraction in Verterace,” La Folia explained, her voice taking on a mildly suggestive tone.

“Really?” He scrutinized their surroundings. He wondered if this was a historical monument or something.

Kojou’s reaction made the princess let out a giggle in an adorable voice. “According to legend, lovers who kiss before the Valkyrie are together for all of eternity.”

“Ahh, that sort of thing. So there’s romantic charms like that in Aldegia, too.”

Kojou looked like he’d been thrown around as he let out a pained breath. He’d heard of similar folklore on Itogami Island, too. Most of it was made-up nonsense for tourists.

However, La Folia lowered her voice and continued with a serious expression. “Yes. It is said that even if they flee to the ends of the earth, the man who breaks his promise will be slain by the Valkyrie’s curse without fail.”

“That’s not romantic at all! That legend’s scary as hell!”

A chill rocked Kojou; that was beyond what he’d expected from the legend. It was less of a charm and more of a curse, but maybe easy-to-grasp content like that was more popular with the Aldegian populace. At the very least, it fit La Folia’s temperament like a glove.

“Well then, Kojou. Please.”

La Folia stopped in front of the statue and removed her glasses. She placed her hands before her breasts like making a prayer as she stared up at Kojou.

“…Huh?! Wait, you want me to kiss you?! Me?!!” Kojou exclaimed, flustered, only just realizing what La Folia had meant. She must have planned to bring him

here for this very purpose.

“Were you not going to fulfill my wish?”

La Folia defenselessly closed her eyes; Kojou felt backed into a corner. He wouldn’t have minded if this was a prank, but La Folia didn’t play those sorts of tricks. If she ordered you to do something, she was 100 percent serious.

“*This* is your wish?! But this is bad—bad on a whole bunch of levels…!”

“What exactly is so bad about it?”

“Er, I mean this is something you should only do with someone you genuinely love—”

“That is where you’re mistaken. This situation is precisely the opposite, Kojou. If I allow this opportunity to slip, never for all eternity shall I have another. I shall be a pitiable daughter of the royal family, never permitted romance as I choose.”

The princess spoke with a composed tone. Her words were gentle, yet they had power behind them.

La Folia, first in the royal line of succession, had no right to select her partner for marriage. The condition sought for a groom was someone of influence who would bring national gain. That was all. Her will had nothing to do with it.

Rumor had it that La Folia had not yet been forced into a political marriage thanks to the current king’s doting upon her, and thus she remained at his side. Such a circumstance would not be permitted forever, though. Just as the princess had said herself, this was the first and final opportunity for her to experience playing at romance.

“Or rather than a kiss, is it my fresh blood you desire?”



However, not a single shred of sadness could be sensed from La Folia's tone as she brushed her hair upward, seemingly to seduce Kojou. When she removed her hood, her long silver hair tumbled forth, exposing her slender neck.

"Uh…"

Kojou's eyes were drawn to the princess's white skin. *Thump* went the ragged leap of his heart. His vision turned crimson, and his throat was struck by an abnormal sense of thirst—vampiric impulses.

When Kojou resisted his powerful craving for blood, La Folia provocatively drew her body even closer.

Spurred by his desires, Kojou's arms moved to embrace her.

Just before he reached her, a hostile energy out for blood came at Kojou.

"I have found you, La Folia Rihavein!"

The air quaked with an angry voice as an enormous man wearing a silver cloak in bad taste leaped down from behind the Valkyrie statue.

The muscles of his arms and legs, his shoulders and chest covered by armor—basically everything was thick. His red, disheveled hair and his thick eyebrows were reminiscent of a lion's mane. The masculine aura emitted from his entire body made Kojou feel his breath was catching from just the sight of him.

The man held an aged, round shield in his right hand, and his left gripped a huge sword. The blade spanned over a meter, but the man wielding it made it seem shorter than a normal sword. The blade itself was as thick as a Demon's war ax and was engraved with intricate magical symbols.

"Wha—?!"

Kojou's face paled when he realized that the tip of the huge sword was being swung straight down at his cranium without a single word of warning.

"Diiiiiie!!"

With a powerful shock wave, the huge man's swing downward smashed the stone paving over the ground, kicking up a cloud of white dust.

Pandemonium whirled about. In the blink of an eye, the tranquil park where

lovers were gathered had turned into a battlefield.

5

“Nnngh!”

With great force, the man pulled the great sword from where it had plunged into the ground before he shot Kojou a wrathful glare.

Having reflexively picked up La Folia and jumped away when they were attacked, Kojou landed four to five meters removed from the man.

“He escaped?! Impudent tricks…!”

The man readied his sword again. His outfit, reminiscent of a Viking in the Middle Ages, was silly, but he had no openings. He was a far more skilled swordsman than Kojou had expected.

Was he an assassin after the princess’s life, or was he a terrorist opposed to the peace commemoration ceremony? Either way, he was dangerous. Kojou had to take him seriously.

“Get back, La Folia!”

“Yes, darling.”

“…‘Darling’? Well, fine.”

After Kojou bid the princess to flee, he lowered his center of gravity. Gazing at the sight of Kojou acting so dependable, La Folia politely obeyed his instructions.

The huge man’s cheeks contorted with rage. “Brat, you are a vampire, yes?! The rumored Fourth Primogenitor, I am sure!”

“Who’s asking?”

Kojou defied the bloodlust directed at him. Rather than a reply, a ragged slash resembling a cannonball came in its stead.

“You dare ask my name?! A foul insect leeching off the daughter of royalty?!”

“Wha—?!”

Kojou barely evaded the blade, but the mere shock wave created by the man's attack sent his body flying with ease. This opponent's upper body strength was superhuman.

"He's strong… Stronger than Old Man Eustach…?!"

The incomparably powerful slashes generated by his large-framed physique made Kojou think back to Rudolf Eustach, the Lotharingian Armed Apostle. Although Eustach had worn augmentation armor to bolster his strength, the herculean might of the man before him was equal—maybe even greater. Not only was the man not using such augmentations, but also his attacks were so quick that even the vampirized Kojou's motion perception couldn't completely keep track of them.

The fact that Kojou still managed to dodge his attacks left the man indignant.

"Don't jump outta the way, brat!! You call yourself a man?!!"

"You nuts?! If I don't dodge, I'll be dead meat!"

"If you have the stones, block my attacks from the front! If not, perish! Your coward's blood will be scattered all across the soil of Aldegia!"

"That doesn't make sense no matter how you slice it, old man!"

Kojou desperately continued dodging the attacks even as the man's high-handed words grated on him. To protect La Folia and the other people in the park, he couldn't run away, even if he was losing. He needed to keep the man pinned there until relief came, be it from the police or the army.

However, Kojou's passive combat tactics further fanned the flames of the man's anger. As if in response to the stirring of the man's emotions, his sword was enveloped with a magical glow.

"Very well. Then I no longer recognize you as a man worthy of a fair fight! I shall dispose of you like the whimpering stray dog you are."

"Stop it, you idiot!"

Kojou's expression froze as he sensed the explosive magical energy residing in the man's sword. It felt so hot that he scarcely believed a human being in the flesh could control it. If he released such a thing indiscriminately, many ordinary

civilians would be caught in it as well.

Realizing he couldn't dodge, Kojou released a portion of his vampiric power.

One of the tamed beasts dwelling in his own vampiric blood—a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor—took the form of a glimmering diamond crystal before Kojou's eyes. Mesarthim Adamas, the bighorn sheep with diamond skin, formed a crystal defensive wall that blocked an opposing attack and reflected it against the foe.

"Raaah!!"

The huge man sliced the wall apart but let out a bestial growl at Kojou's unanticipated counterattack. The flying crystals mutually slammed into one another, altering their angles as they turned into countless bullets that assaulted the man.

Bathed in the might of his own attack, the man's huge frame was sent flying. The aftershocks of Kojou's attack dug into the ground and sent dust dancing in the air. It was a blow powerful enough that any normal person might have been torn to ribbons.

"Crap… Did I overdo it…?"

Kojou's face blanched at the greater-than-expected destruction wrought by the Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor. No matter how vile a criminal the opponent might be, this was excessive for self-defense.

"Kojou, the fight isn't over!" La Folia sharply called out from behind him. When he looked up in surprise, he saw the man rising and brushing a downpour of rubble aside.

"That blow just now…he shrugged it off?!"

"Attacks from the likes of a cowardly stray dog such as you will not work against a real man!"

The huge man bellowed his nonsensical logic as he raised his sword high once more. Kojou turned his remaining crystals into bullets and fired them at the man, but…

"Kaaaa—!!"

“What?!”

The man’s sword smashed the tough diamond crystals into dust. That instant, Kojou realized the true nature of the magic the man wielded. But it was too late now.

The man closed the distance with Kojou before he could react. With his defense destroyed, Kojou had no way to fend off the attack.

However, the sword the man swung did not slice Kojou apart, for a silver flash launched from the side knocked the man’s sword away first.

“Nnngh?!”

“Senpai!”

The man’s groan overlapped with a girl’s clear voice.

It was Yukina, silver spear raised, who had saved Kojou in his moment of peril. She’d no doubt noticed the uproar in the park in the middle of looking for Kojou and La Folia and come running.

“Himeragi, watch out! This guy’s attacks—”

“I know. The Völundr System, yes?”

Yukina, changed back into her school uniform once more, pointed her spear as she landed. She glared at the large opponent, ready for combat. Her brief attack had surely told her this was a formidable foe she could not afford to be careless against.

As a general rule, weapons capable of slicing down the demonic energy of the Fourth Primogenitor did not exist. One of the extremely few exceptions was the so-called Völundr System, a pseudo–Holy Sword spawned from a magical device. Linked to a vast essence transmitted from a spiritual reactor, it raised the might of a normal weapon up to Holy Sword class.

However, this was the kingdom of Aldegia’s greatest national secret, employed exclusively by the Knights of the Second Coming.

The wielder of the Völundr System could not be some no-name small fry. He was either from an organization with technology equal to the Knights of the Second Coming, or perhaps he was some kind of traitor from within their ranks.

Either way, it was certain that he was a dangerous foe.

However, in contrast to when he'd been fighting Kojou, the huge man was suddenly shaken when he found Yukina's blade trained toward him.

"Wait, girl! Why do you side with this man?! He is an insolent lout who attempted obscene acts with the princess and has not a single whiff of manliness in him!"

"Hey, some terrorist trying to kill the princess shouldn't go off flapping his lips like that!" Kojou retorted on reflex.

It was true that Kojou had been falling for La Folia's seductions, but some unknown assailant had no right to complain.

However, for some reason, the man had an exaggerated reaction to Kojou's words.

"Wh-who's a terrorist—?!!"

"Crouching Thunder!!"

Yukina's roundhouse kick exploded into the tip of the man's wide-open chin. It was a magnificent surprise attack that made the man's huge frame totter. "Gahhh!" went the man with an anguished exhale, dropping the left arm with which he guarded his chest.

Yukina did not let that opening slip as she crept to the man's flank. Then, at point-blank range that left him utterly unable to evade, she slammed a fist into the man's solar plexus.

"Resound!"

Transforming ritual energy into physical concussive force, Yukina pounded that fist into him. It was an attack targeting the internal organs, which could make even high-vitality beast people faint. It was the trump card of the Sword Shamans, specialists in close-quarters anti-demon combat.

But Yukina's expression froze over at the unusual feedback she received from that critical blow.

"Rrraaarrrgh!! This is nothing!"

“Wha…?!”

The attack bounced off the man, sending Yukina’s small frame flying.

It wasn’t that Yukina had misfired her attack or that the man had used some special defensive technology. He had simply forced himself to endure Yukina’s blow through muscles and guts alone.

That said, even this man had suffered significant damage. Now that the man’s movements had finally slowed, La Folia extended her right hand. Her surroundings were enveloped by a pale phosphorescence as a vortex of cool magical energy formed around her.

“Daughters of the gods that inhabit my flesh. Binders of the host, rage forth!”

“W-wait! La Folia!”

The man’s eyes flew wide when he realized what incantation the princess was chanting.

Of course, La Folia did not cease. The Spirits controlled by the princess generated an extreme chill sufficient to freeze the air itself. That chill transformed into a small-scale whirlwind that blew violently around him.

“Sto—Guoah…?!”

Even if generated via magic, the low-temperature air was a physical phenomenon itself. Even the magic-nullifying Völundr System could not fend off the princess’s attack.

The huge man was frozen solid, armor and all, this time completely ceasing to move.

“Did we…beat him?”

Concerned, Kojou stared at the man who had become an ice statue.

La Folia’s devastating magical attack might well have instantly killed a normal human, but he didn’t think it was enough to kill this man. At most, it had probably knocked him unconscious from being frozen.

“How did a terrorist learn the princess’s whereabouts?” Yukina asked, tilting her head as she kept her spear raised.

Since she was a princess, it wasn't so strange that someone would be after La Folia's life, but this assault was baffling even so. That she had set out on a walk in the city in disguise was a closely held secret known to but a few even within the royal palace. Why, then, did the man know La Folia's whereabouts?

And why had he aimed not for the princess's life, but that of Kojou alongside her—?

During that time, with no answer to Kojou's misgivings arising, several vehicles approached and came to a stop in front of the park. Coming out of the vehicles were men dressed in unobtrusive black clothing. Kojou didn't know whether they were officers or royal guards, but it seemed that La Folia's escorts had arrived. Kojou felt at ease again.

However, the men in black had hard, strained expressions on them as they rushed over not to the princess, but straight toward the assailant-turned-icicle. Hovering in their eyes were looks of concern, melancholy, and resignation.

"Y-Your Majesty!"

"Your Majesty, are you all right—?!"

"Oh no. This is La Folia's freezing magic. We do not have the equipment to dispel it here. Take him to the palace immediately. Contact the Court Sorcerous Engineers! Hurry!"

Several of the men in black hoisted up the man's huge frame, carrying him to a vehicle with stuttering steps. Kojou and Yukina stood still, dumbstruck as they observed the men's actions. They had no idea what was going on.

"M…Majesty?" Yukina murmured, forgetting all about hiding her spear, seemingly beside herself.

"Majesty, as in *king*? Wait, then that's the king of Aldegia…?"

Hold on a sec. Kojou covered his eyes and put his thoughts in order. He recalled the assailant's words and deeds since first appearing before Kojou. If he was the Aldegian king, that would have made him La Folia's father. If he saw the daughter he doted on cuddling with and about to be kissed by a vampire he didn't know from another nation, he might have been spurred to fatherly anger… Never mind *might*. He would definitely be angry. Absolutely furious.

The hell is this all about? Kojou turned to La Folia, but the princess simply smiled, feigning innocence.

Cold sweat came over Kojou and Yukina as they met each other's faces.

The World's Mightiest Vampire had unleashed the demonic power of his Beast Vassal toward a nation's king, and his Lion King Agency observer had kicked the king's jaw and slammed a blow into his gut. The two shouted as one: "Wh-whaaat?!"

Before the watchful gaze of the Valkyrie statue, the silver-haired princess let out the tiniest of giggles.



Chapter Four
A Night in Verterace

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1

Gentle afternoon sunrays shone upon the beautiful stained-glass terrace.

It was a courtyard in Verterace Palace, the nucleus of the kingdom of Aldegia. Kojou and the others were seated in chairs at the edge of a large, elliptical table.

“Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho.”

With the table separating them, a woman dressed in a refined suit on the other side made a sophisticated laugh as her shoulders shook with each giggle. She had beautiful silver hair that greatly resembled La Folia’s. They’d heard she was finally reaching forty, but she looked much younger. Her innocent, childlike smiling face no doubt accounted for that.

Sitting beside the laughing woman was a hulking man with a sullen expression on his face.

His periodic sniffling was apparently an aftereffect of having been put on ice. This was Lucas Rihavein, King of Aldegia, and his wife, Queen Polyphonia Rihavein.

“Ahh, so amusing. So that is how you ended up hurt like that, yes? Oh-ho-ho-ho.”

After hearing the facts of the matter from the king’s own mouth, his wife the queen had continued laughing in vivid amusement. She had a soft, charming smiling face that brought feelings of happiness to all who beheld it. The gentle, fluttery atmosphere around her made Kojou feel she had that in common with Kanon. In one sense, that was only natural. The two were sisters, after all.

“There is nothing amusing about this.”

Lucas sullenly rested his cheek against a palm as he spoke. A white poultice was attached to his chin. This was treatment for the wound inflicted by Yukina's kick. The blow should have been enough to shatter the jaw of any normal person, but the fact that a single poultice was sufficient meant he was no normal human, indeed.

Kojou bowed his head deeply to the king. Yukina did likewise in reverent fashion.

"I really am sorry. I was sure you were some terrorist targeting La Folia or something—"

Lucas interrupted Kojou's words of apology. "Do not speak the given name of another man's daughter!!"

"Uhh…?!"

That's what you're upset about? thought a bewildered Kojou as he looked back at the king.

"There is no reason to apologize, Kojou. That was legitimate self-defense to anyone's eyes."

Sitting beside Lucas, La Folia spoke those words and shifted a chilly gaze her father's way.

"Hmph," went Lucas, averting his face from the princess like a rebellious child. "No law can restrain a father trying to protect his own daughter!"

"No man who attempts to attack his daughter's fiancé from behind deserves to call himself a father."

The words with which La Folia easily cut him down made Lucas grunt, his voice caught in his throat.

Listening to the conversation between father and daughter, Nagisa gaped in surprise and looked at Kojou.

"Fiancé?! Kojou and the princess are engaged?!"

"Er, of course we—"

Aren't, Kojou tried to say, but his voice was erased by Lucas's angry cry.

“No! I absolutely will not accept this marriage!”

“That’s not really the issue—”

“La-la-laaa! I cannot hear you! I have no ears for your excuses!”

Covering his ears with both hands as he exclaimed, Lucas ignored Kojou’s utterance. He resembled less a troublesome father and more a child unwilling to listen to anyone. Kojou didn’t think it was very regal at all.

On the other hand, the queen had never stopped smiling, her composure in place as she nodded.

“Oh my, is that not quite fine, I wonder? Isn’t it, Trine?”

“Yes. Among the senate, those planning to make Her Highness the Princess the bride of an influential high-blooded noble are not few. However, if the Fourth Primogenitor becomes Her Highness’s fiancé, they will surely have no choice but to back down.”

Answering the queen’s words was a young female official standing behind the queen. She was a secretary whose glasses were a good match for her very serious demeanor. Trine’s statement rubbed Lucas the wrong way; Kojou could tell from how his voice trembled.

“But this knave is a Demon! Do you think the citizens will forgive the mixing of the bloodline of the great and proud Royal Family of Aldegia with demonic blood…?!”

“Huh?! What the heck?!” Asagi yelled, rising to her feet and violently knocking back her chair.

Lucas had earned Asagi’s ire. To Asagi, proud to have been raised in a Demon Sanctuary, the king of Aldegia’s discriminatory statement surely was not something she could approve of.

“Calm down, Asagi! Why do *you* have to get ticked off over it?!”

“Well, excuse me, but I’m pissed off! I don’t know about royal bloodlines, but I’m amazed that some clown calling himself a king can look down on other people for a shitty reason in a so-called magically advanced country.”

La Folia smiled in agreement with the indignant Asagi. The silver-haired

princess then turned to her father, Lucas, as a glacial smile came over her.

“Royal bloodline? If you are to speak of that, Your Majesty, were you not born as a commoner of another nation?”

“Gnnh…?!”

The harsh words tossed at Lucas by his daughter left his face flushed. However, the next instant, La Folia grinned respectfully up at Lucas.

“That said, I cherish that my father has more pride than any other. That surely goes for the people of our country as well.”

“Hmm, hmmm.”

Buffeted by the princess’s conversational skills, insulted one moment and uplifted the next, Lucas could find nothing further to say.

“The circumstances of one’s birth have nothing to do with calling oneself king of Aldegia. The individual accepted as the partner of a royal princess with the blessing of the Spirits—it is he alone who is permitted to call himself king.”

“Y-yeah,” Kojou said, able only to nod vaguely.

“For your reference,” Trine said, pulling out a tablet device, “approximately twenty percent of Aldegia’s populace is composed of immigrants from the Warlord’s Empire, and even beyond them, another tenth or so are said to be people born of mixed descent from demons. Your Majesty, I believe it would be best to swiftly amend your discriminatory statement.” Her chiding of Lucas took on a businesslike tone.

The king’s lips twisted as he nodded gravely before glaring at Kojou with a resentful expression. “I understand that! What I do not like is not demons, but the knave himself!”

“However, much of the populace would not seem to agree.”

“What?”

Trine’s swift retort shocked Lucas. Still gazing at her tablet device, she gave her glasses a quick adjustment.

“In our country, the Fourth Primogenitor boasts exceedingly high popularity.

In man-on-the-street questionnaires, the total between values of highly favorable, favorable, and slightly favorable is seventy-four percent. The percentage believing in the existence of the Fourth Primogenitor exceeds ninety percent.”

“Eh? Why’s that?”

It was Kojou who was thrown off by the palace secretary’s report. He had no idea whatsoever why he’d be that popular among the people of a country he’d never visited in his life.

La Folia answered, grinning. “Because you defeated Dimitrie Vattler, Kojou. To our Aldegia, that man was a fierce foe against whom we have engaged in bitter conflict for centuries.”

Her words belatedly reminded Kojou that Aldegia had been on the front line of the conflict between humanity and the Warlord’s Empire.

Wars that had continued for centuries had taken the lives of many of Aldegia’s people. Doubtlessly, people slain by Vattler were among them. Even with the war over and a peace treaty formed, people had not forgotten their resentments.

That was why the peace commemoration ceremony mattered so much to both nations and why factions were attempting to obstruct it.

During the war of the primogenitors, Kojou had unwittingly stepped into their affairs. The commemoration ceremony two days hence was not an event that had nothing to do with Kojou.

“Hmph. That is none of their concern. I had intended to someday lop off the head of that would-be battle addict by my own hands.”

Lucas spoke those words with a minor click of his tongue. The sore-loser talk got his wife’s attention; Queen Polyphonia stared at the side of his face and strained a smile.

“Oh my. You say that, and yet during Mr. Aradahl’s duel, did you not cheer on Kojou as much as you possibly could?”

“Tha—You are mistaken! That knave’s way of fighting was so unpolished that

I could not bear to watch, that was all…! I absolutely was not cheering you on, understand?!”

Lucas’s face was bright red as he angrily yelled at Kojou. “Well, um, thanks,” Kojou murmured as he scratched his head.

Kojou didn’t know who had been there in person or who’d watched with a video feed, but apparently, the king had witnessed Kojou’s duel with Aradahl. They called it a duel, but the act was so unlike him that he felt embarrassed for even participating in it at all. The fact that new acquaintances had seen him there only made Kojou feel even more uncomfortable.

“I could add to this that the Fourth Primogenitor rescued Her Highness the Princess from the evil designs of Magus Craft Incorporated,” Trine continued in a businesslike fashion, “clearing away the regrets of the knights slain by the same, both extensively reported throughout our nation.” She paid no heed to Kojou’s turmoil.

“Her Highness the Princess, rescued at the time, would later support the Fourth Primogenitor in his battle against the Duke of Ardeal during the war of the primogenitors, saving the world from peril. It is said that they appeared almost as if they were the legendary king and queen who founded the kingdom of Aldegia.”

“Well, when you put it that way, it does sound like an incredibly attractive offer,” Yaze said, forcing a smile.

Asagi furrowed her brow as she glared at La Folia. “Princess… Don’t tell me you calculated this from the very beginning…?”

“Calculated? Of what do you speak? I was merely rendering assistance to a friend.”

La Folia smiled like a saint as she spoke those words.

Asagi’s shoulders sank. Whatever the princess’s aims, the fact remained that the people of Aldegia held favorable feelings for the Fourth Primogenitor. It was no easy matter for even Lucas, king of the nation, to undermine that. In other words, he could not publicly block La Folia’s engagement.

“The royal succession?! What do you intend to do about your royal succession

rights?!”

Backed into a corner, Lucas looked desperate as he cross-examined his own daughter.

La Folia held the top position in the Royal Family of Aldegia’s line of succession. If she was to wed Kojou of Itogami Island, the seat of the next national leader would rest vacant. This would inevitably lead to an unnecessary war of succession that would whittle down the royal family’s influence. Surely La Folia desired no such thing.

“You have Londe and Pascalia, do you not?” came La Folia’s instant reply, her expression unchanged. She’d surely had the answer on hand from the start.

“Who?” Kojou asked without thinking.

“Princess La Folia’s younger sisters,” whispered Yukina into his ear.

“Little sisters? She has sisters…?”

“Yes. However, both should still be in elementary school.”

Kojou gave an understanding nod. Since they weren’t at an age suitable for coming onto the international stage as of yet, their names were not widely known as their older sister’s. That meant if La Folia relinquished her royal succession rights, one of those two would automatically inherit the spot.

Unexpectedly, it was Queen Polyphonia who objected to La Folia.

“Oh my, we cannot have that.”

The instant rebuttal elicited a silent glare from La Folia. Then, with a smile still on her face, the queen gazed at Kojou.

“Historically speaking,” Polyphonia said, “it is not particularly rare for a single king to rule over two or more states at once? Since it is you, Mr. Kojou, you can do this much, at least?”

“Eh? Err, that’s—”

When Kojou hesitated, La Folia took over and made a crisp declaration. “But of course. Kojou promised me he would fulfill my wish, whatever it might be.”

Kojou was aghast at the princess’s arbitrary assertion.

Lucas let out a loud, incoherent voice. “Kojou, you…”

“Senpai…”

“Kojou Akatsukiiiii…!”

Asagi, Yukina, and even Sayaka trained disdainful looks toward Kojou. They were apparently amazed at the irresponsibility of Kojou’s alleged statement.

In contrast, Nagisa and Kanon had surprisingly favorable reactions. The two had reddened cheeks as they put hands over their mouths, letting up little cheers. All Yaze did was shoot Kojou a leering grin, a pitying expression hovering on his face.

Then, finally snapping back to his senses, Kojou shook his head. “I did not! I didn’t say I’d grant *any* wish!”

“Impermissible! Absolutely impermissible! If you truly wish to be engaged to La Folia, you must first defeat me!”

Lucas rose to his feet in a rage, taking the sword on his hip into his hand.

Queen Polyphonia held the nation’s king in check with a smiling face, questioningly tilting her head ever so slightly.

“My oh my, have you not already fought Mr. Kojou and lost?”

“Th-that bout does not count! I merely slipped when the girl from earlier and La Folia joined the Fourth Primogenitor’s side. I did not lose!”

“Do you intend to make such unsightly excuses even if you lose on a genuine battlefield?”

“Gnh…?!”

The blunt question voiced by the queen made Lucas stiffen, virtually frozen.

Polyphonia had no intention of blaming her spouse; she was merely asking the question that honestly came to her mind. That was simply how deeply her words bored into Lucas’s heart. One might say the fact she wasn’t a schemer like the queen mother and La Folia made her words sting even worse.

That very queen still had a grin hovering over her as she turned tranquil eyes toward the king.

“In the first place, have you forgotten whom you have to thank for using the Völundr System to begin with? Or would you rather say it is my power’s inability to measure up to that of the girl over there that was the cause of your defeat?”

“N-not at all.”

Thick, cold sweat coursed over the king of Aldegia as he backed down of his own volition.

Seeing that her spouse was now completely silent, the queen looked at Kojou with satisfaction.

“Now, then. I am quite pleased at this marvelous marriage proposal.”

“Wait a… Wait a minute. Please wait.”

Though overwhelmed by the queen’s mysterious coercive force, Kojou interrupted her words. His expression tightened, feeling guilt over how the queen’s eyes were filled with expectation.

“It was hard to get the words out before now, but I don’t have any intention of getting engaged to La Folia—”

“Why, you!! Are you implying you’re dissatisfied with our daughter?! Try saying that out loud!”

Before Kojou could even finish his words, Lucas slammed the table and got back up. Though not intending to let his daughter marry, he apparently couldn’t accept his daughter being dumped, either.

“Aw geez, this old man’s really a pain…” Kojou let out an irritated sigh. Queen Polyphonia giggled with apparent delight as she gazed at Kojou’s reaction.

“I understand. Our daughter set this all up to check the senate’s plot for a political marriage, I imagine?”

“…Eh?”

“I am truly sorry that this resulted in you being used in the process. Rest at ease. I have no intention of forcing you to marry.”

“Ah, sure,” Kojou acquiesced, nodding with a stupefied look.

When he abruptly shifted his gaze toward La Folia, the sight of the princess

with her cheeks puffed up in a pout entered his eyes. She was apparently dismayed that the queen had seen right through her plans.

“That is Mother for you. You knew everything from the beginning, did you not?”

“But of course. I am your mother.”

When La Folia posed the question with tapered lips, Polyphonia giggled and proudly puffed up her chest.

Listening to their conversation, Nagisa and Kanon seemed to finally grasp the circumstances. Complex expressions with a mix of dejection and relief came over them. Yaze made a strained smile with a twinge of relief, and Asagi and Sayaka lowered their guard ever so slightly.

As if taking advantage in the momentary softening of the tense atmosphere, Polyphonia gave a light clap of her hands.

“Also, if you are going to have children, you should do it as soon as possible. Mr. Kojou, which do you wish for? A boy? Or a girl? Any child between you and La Folia will be adorable, I’m sure.” With an innocent smile over her, the queen sought agreement from Kojou. “Such fun, yes?”

La Folia blushed—almost on purpose—as she touched a hand to her cheek. Lucas was so shaken that he was at a loss for words, his mouth merely opening and closing as if he was a goldfish.

“You don’t get it at aaaaaall!!!”

The queen’s willingness to create “established fact,” exceeding even La Folia’s, left Kojou yelling at the top of his lungs.

Yukina, expressionless as she looked between Kojou and the queen, let out a sigh.

2

On the third day of their stay in the kingdom of Aldegia, Kojou and company took the evening to visit the royal palace in Verterace once more. The queen had personally invited them to a celebration on the eve of the peace

commemoration ceremony.

Kojou and Yaze were wearing the same rented tuxedos as two nights before, but the girls all wore brand-new cocktail dresses, ordered from a shop used by the ruling family that La Folia had introduced them to.

Yaze was accustomed to corporate events as the current head of a conglomerate. Asagi, daughter of a politician, and Kanon, off in her own world, wore their usual expressions. In contrast, Nagisa clearly could not conceal her tension. She was not used to high heels or to an open-back dress, things that apparently weighed on her mind a fair bit.

However— “I…incredible. There’s so many people attending, it’s like a summit! Kings and presidents of one country or another, ministers and CEOs of major corporations…!”

Nagisa looked around the area, eyes glimmering with excitement at the guests throughout the hall. It was only natural for a party held at the royal palace, but the invitees were all famous around the world. Though he lacked any interest in international politics, even Kojou recognized faces here and there.

“Never thought I’d be invited to a party at the royal palace. Couldn’t feel more out of place,” Yaze complained.

“Tonight’s party is supposedly only for people the royal family knows personally, so isn’t it fine? We barely know anyone here personally, so if we behave, there shouldn’t be a problem,” Asagi replied bluntly.

As a matter of fact, the prevailing atmosphere at the hall was laid-back, completely disconnected from the weighty atmosphere of a formal ceremony or any strained sense of tension. The faces of the participants were all relaxed and showed enjoyment. This was no doubt a reflection of the lack of pretension by the man holding the party—Lucas Rihavein, king of Aldegia.

Asagi drew her face close to Yaze’s and asked in a tiny voice, “So what do you think?”

Yaze glanced at a detection device embedded in the cuff of his jacket and gave a slight shrug.

“Figures for the royal palace of a magic-savvy place like Aldegia. Incredible magical barrier. I think it completely blocks eavesdropping and covert photography, and trespassing from the outside is pretty much impossible.”

Asagi agreed with a nod. “Their hacking countermeasures are really something, too. The defenses burned even my hands a bunch of times. For the time being, I got in Mogwai to gather data on the military and the knights, but it doesn’t look like the talk of the Fourth Primogenitor’s popularity among the Aldegian people is any lie or exaggeration. The loyalty to the royal family is solid, too.”

“No worries about assassination or terrorism for the moment, it seems.”

Yaze let out a deflated breath. He and Asagi had more or less forced themselves onto the trip all the way to Aldegia to guard against Kojou getting wrapped up in a terror attack.

To both of them, Kojou was a precious friend, but he was also the greatest fighting strength Itogami city-state had, the very cornerstone of their autonomy. They absolutely could not afford to lose Kojou or for him to get tied up in an incident in Aldegia. Asagi and Yaze had gone out of their way to accompany him to Aldegia solely to support him.

Of course, if no trouble arose, that was best, but it did leave the pair with a lot of time on their hands.

“I suppose we should get something to eat for now.”

“Yeah. The maids are all hotties, so I might as well get a little closer to ’em.”

“You are the worst.”

When Asagi shifted a chilly gaze to Yaze, he justified himself with minor irritation. “Why?! It’s intel-gathering basics, right?!”

“Pardon me.”

Suddenly, an individual addressed Yaze. He was a well-built middle-aged Black man.

“Would you be the new head of the Yaze family?”

“President Teixeira? The investment banker from Neustria…” Yaze

straightened his posture.

Nuno Teixeira was a well-known businessman in the field of international finance. His main area of operation was centered on Europe, Aldegia included, but he'd recently made inroads into businesses on Itogami Island and other parts of Asia. His links to the Yaze conglomerate ran deep.

"So you do remember me. It's good that large-scale spirit reactor incident was settled nicely. So actually, some new information has reached my ears—"

"R-right…"

A twitching, amiable smile came over Yaze as he went along with Teixeira's business talk. Judging that the conversation was going to run a good while, Asagi left Yaze behind and headed for a table with food placed on it.

As expected of a party held at a royal palace, the food was frighteningly extravagant. Not only were the ingredients high quality, but the cooking was also done by skilled hands. Asagi was mulling what to lay her hands upon first in earnest seriousness when a familiar face appeared right before her eyes. It was a tall foreigner with swarthy skin.

"The Priestess of Cain, is it?" The man raised an eyebrow in surprise.

Asagi grimaced slightly at the individual's unexpected appearance. She'd never expected to bump into a person aware of her true nature in a place like this.

"Good evening, Chairman Velesh Aradahl," she greeted. "This isn't a coincidence, is it? Your Warlord's Empire is the other main party in this peace commemoration ceremony, after all. I suppose it figures that the chairman of the Imperial Assembly would make a personal appearance."

The vampire with long black hair spoke in a dead-serious tone of voice. "It is as you surmise. Your presence, on the other hand, is unexpected, Priestess of Cain."

Velesh Aradahl, Chairman of the Imperial Assembly of the Warlord's Empire—it was said even Dimitrie Vattler had held him in high esteem. There was no more suitable individual to attend the next day's commemoration ceremony in the stead of the First Primogenitor, the Lost Warlord.

This same Aradahl glared at Asagi with a grave expression.

“I can understand that the Royal Family of Aldegia would invite the Fourth Primogenitor. Subordinates of the Second and Third Primogenitors shall no doubt arrive in this country tomorrow, but you coming here is excessively rash.”

Asagi did not flinch whatsoever as she asked back in a casual tone, “What do you mean by that?”

She had no idea why, but Aradahl seemed genuinely concerned for her well-being. That didn’t mean she felt good being suddenly lectured by someone she barely knew.

“I am saying that you should be a little more aware of the fact that it is you who props up the Empire of the Dawn, territory of the Fourth Primogenitor. The Fourth Primogenitor’s combat strength is certainly menacing, but Kojou Akatsuki has limits to what he can accomplish alone. He does not have any vampiric vassals, after all.”

Aradahl made a gloomy sigh as he spoke.

“That various nations, the government of Japan included, do not lay a hand on Itogami Island, the Legacy of Cain, is because you wield the power of The Cleansing. As a matter of fact, while you are on Itogami Island, the menace you pose rivals that of the Fourth Primogenitor. This is because that artificial isle is itself a magical device that manipulates various coincidences, turning them into inevitabilities to protect you.”

“So you’re surprised I’d just leave the island like this without a care?” She smiled impetuously as she looked up at him.

The black-haired vampire nodded with a sour expression. “I would call it rash rather than unexpected. I even pondered whether I should seize the opportunity to kill you and cut off future evils at the root.”

“Wanna try and see if you can?” she asked provocatively, adding a haughty laugh at the end.

Bewilderment hovered in Aradahl’s eyes. “What?”

“Inside and outside are surprisingly vague concepts. It’s not as if the real

world has hard boundaries like you see drawn on a map. Even outside the country, they treat the grounds of embassies and stuff the same as the home nation's territory, right?"

"Certainly, that is the case."

Grudgingly conceding the point, Aradahl watched Asagi closely. Asagi grinned broadly as she boldly received the gaze of a monster counted among the top five of the Warlord's Empire.

After a silence where neither seemed to breathe, it was Aradahl who averted his gaze first.

"I see. It seems you did not leave without a plan. My earlier statement was rude. I apologize."

"No, thank you for worrying."

The black-haired vampire had erred, but Asagi accepted the apology.

A pained, self-deprecating smile came over Aradahl.

"I am not worried about you. I am merely attempting to avert unnecessary chaos. Thanks to Vattler's absence, the interior of the Warlord's Empire has become somewhat astir. The militants' movements have become quite active. In one sense, that battle maniac served a useful purpose as a check against them."

"You're saying it's possible the commemoration ceremony will be attacked?" she asked to confirm.

"Yes." He nodded slightly. "Unfortunately, I cannot completely deny the possibility. Albeit, the strict security at the ceremony site should make the odds of a successful terror attack close to zero, but—"

"I see. I'll take that into account." Asagi returned a nod in understanding.

It was the next moment that Aradahl sharply narrowed his eyes as if he'd noticed something.

There was a sound of glass breaking somewhere in the hall.

The hall's elegant lighting suddenly went dark. A number of screams began.

3

Kojou and Yukina were standing at the edge of the royal palace's hall as they gazed absentmindedly at the party scenery. Kojou, unable to satisfactorily speak in English, let alone Aldegia's official language, was unable to chitchat with the unfamiliar participants, leaving him with time on his hands as a consequence.

No doubt the situation would turn on a dime if Kojou announced himself as the Fourth Primogenitor. He had no intention of horribly standing out like that, though. He'd take boredom alone in a corner of the hall instead.

Meanwhile, Nagisa and Kanon were having fun with two young girls not far off from Kojou and Yukina. Even though one side spoke Aldegian and the other Japanese, their thoughts got across surprisingly well despite the language barrier.

The two Aldegian girls were silver-haired twins with young faces. They were Londe Rihavein and Pascalia Rihavein, the younger sisters of La Folia of whom Kojou had heard.

"…I am super uncomfortable. It's like I feel some weird gaze on me," Kojou murmured after a slow exhale.

Nagisa must have mentioned she was Kojou's sister. The silver-haired twins looked like they were biting back laughter as they sent little glances his way. He got the feeling he was the target of sympathy, amiability, envy, and pity. It wasn't that they were exactly mocking him, though he couldn't tell from their faces precisely how they felt. Their expressions also seemed mixed with an odd degree of respect for Yukina.

The hell are they talking about? A vague sense of anxiety wracked Kojou. He wasn't bothered by the innocent gazes from the girls; the wariness and suspicious stares drifting about the hall were what rubbed Kojou the wrong way.

"It's because some guy who's a few cards short of a full deck is hanging around the royal family, I'm sure."

It was Sayaka, pushing a cart with food on top, who spoke to the grimacing Kojou. She was not wearing a dress, but rather the uniform worn by the housemaids at the royal palace. The long skirt reaching down to the ankles and the puffy sleeves suited the tall Sayaka very well.

“Who are you calling an idiot?! Anyway, Kirasaka, why are you working as a waitress?”

Sayaka pointed to the cart and sulked. “If it wasn’t for this, I could never bring Lustrous Scale into the hall. I’m really glad Yukina is here.”

The silver long sword that was her personal divine armament was fastened to the underside of the silver cart’s top. She’d forced it to stay put with metal needles, but at a glance, it looked like nothing more than a fixed ornament.

Besides Kojou and company, several VIPs dispatched by the Japanese government were in the party hall. Sayaka had disguised herself as a housemaid so that she could keep watch inside the hall to protect them.

“I apologize for the oversight,” Yukina said, directing her attention to the cello case at her feet. “I only prepared a disguise musical instrument for myself.”

The party participants included more than politicians and entrepreneurs: famous actors and musicians were present as well. There was even a band for live performances inside the hall. Thanks to that, Yukina blended right in.

“It’s fine, Yukina. I mean, that dress is adorable on you!” Sayaka asserted, completely serious.

“That is irrelevant,” replied Yukina, conflicted over Sayaka’s typical behavior.

Yet, there was no doubting the fact that Yukina was absent of suspicion also because of how well her elegant, monochrome cocktail dress suited her. No one would dispute that such a lovely Asian girl was a commoner, a musician unrelated to the royal family.

“What do you mean by a disguise musical instrument? It’s not just Snowdrift Wolf inside the case?” Kojou asked.

Yukina nodded. “Snowdrift Wolf is concealed within the cello so that I may pass a body check. The instrument is playable, as well.”

“Huh… Wait, Himeragi, you can play the cello?”

“No, er, I have practiced only a tiny bit, but the rest is managed with an autoplay function,” Yukina said, bashfully lowering her eyes.

“Autoplay… Wow, the Lion King Agency is really something else…”

Kojou admired the excessive dedication of the staff more than the power of their technology.

“But if you’ve practiced, that means you can play a little, right? I’d love to listen another time,” he said.

“Eh?! I—I cannot. I really am not good at it at all…” Yukina blushed and hastily shook her head. It was a rare reaction from the girl who seemed to do everything so well. Kojou smiled, amused by her reaction.

“B-but it really is embarrassing…,” she insisted.

“Just a little. A short part. I’ll keep it a secret from Nagisa and Kanon, so…”

“Wh…why are you being so pushy about it…? Goodness…” Yukina bit her lip, glaring at Kojou with upturned eyes.

Kojou brought both hands together before her. “Please. Later, when it’s just the two of us.”

“If you keep it a secret from everyone…and it really will be only a tiny bit…!”

“Hold on a minute! The cello?! You two really are talking about playing the cello, right?!”

Perhaps imagining something indecent, Sayaka hastily interrupted Kojou and Yukina’s conversation. Kojou’s and Yukina’s eyes widened as they tilted their heads, unaware of the reason behind Sayaka’s nervousness.

Suddenly, from the corners of their eyes, their fields of vision seemed to brighten. A burst of extravagance made the air sway.

La Folia, wearing a bewitching cocktail dress, waved her hand as she approached. “Tee-hee. Are you enjoying the party?”

The princess nestled against Kojou with a bright expression. The swell of her breasts pressing against his upper arm made his entire body stiffen. Sharp

glares from the men at the party became jealous daggers stabbing through him.

“Are you sure about this, La Folia? We’re really standing out.” Despite the attention on him, Kojou asked more out of concern for La Folia’s standing than for his own self-protection. Perhaps it was not to the extent of Sayaka’s earlier line, but he was worried her being seen so intimate with some strange boy from parts unknown would harm her reputation.

However, La Folia giggled—with a wicked glint in her eyes.

“Pay it no mind. Thanks to this, the senate should behave itself for a good couple of years. Thanks to you, Kojou.”

“Only a couple, huh?”

Kojou grimaced at the princess.

Even with her many schemes to impede pressure on her for a political marriage, she would still only have a reprieve for two brief years. That fact hit Kojou hard.

However, La Folia grinned confidently. “All will be well if you genuinely become my fiancé within two years, Kojou, which is not such a poor gamble at all. One can even have a pair of children in two years. Let us do our utmost.”

“Seriously, cut that stuff out. It’s in bad taste even as a joke,” Kojou protested weakly.

Mystified, La Folia stared at Kojou. *I did not intend it as a joke*, said the look on her face.

Sayaka wearily exhaled a bit as she listened to the exchange between Kojou and the princess. That she was not shaken as much as he expected must have been because she’d finally become well accustomed to La Folia’s personality.

“Ch-children…”

It was Yukina who was shaken in a different sense. Perhaps she was remembering the girl who greatly resembled her that she encountered only three weeks ago. Her cheeks were red as she looked up at the side of Kojou’s face. *Surely this will not happen*, she seemed to say to herself as she shook her head. And then— “Senpai!”

Yukina suddenly looked up like she'd been slapped. Virtually simultaneously, wary expressions came over La Folia and Sayaka as well. They'd noticed something odd was happening in the party hall.

"What's this creepy feeling…?!"

Kojou wobbled, dizzy from the shimmer in the air. It resembled the aftereffect from Natsuki Minamiya's teleportation, but the surge felt far rawer and more unpleasant than that.

"A spatial manipulation spell…! Something is being sent here!" Yukina shouted as she noticed the glows of magical energy occurring throughout the hall. She was about to open her cello case for her spear, but La Folia gently stopped her.

"Wait, Yukina. You must not move now."

"B-but…"

Yukina looked back at La Folia in surprise, but the silver-haired princess merely shook her head in silence.

During that time, a number of gates were forcibly opened throughout the hall in the royal palace. Enormous monsters stepped through.

These were strange creatures, reaching seven to eight meters in total length and standing on four stout limbs. They were protected by thick hides with intimidating spiked carapaces covering their backs. Their heads resembled those of ancient carnivorous dinosaurs, filled with sharp, sharklike rows of fangs. At the risk of understatement, their appearances were terrifying and vile.

"These are…demon beasts…?!" Kojou exclaimed.

These were mysterious beings that had diverged from the normal path of evolution, living creatures that manipulated demonic energy nonetheless, and there were many of them here. Their power was astounding, rivaling IX-4 and the World's Mightiest Demon Beast, Leviathan.

"Tarrasques. They're demon beasts that inhabit the center of Western Europe. They are said to be Grade Six, able to sink enormous ships and even destroy cities—monsters on par with a vampire's Beast Vassals," La Folia

explained. However, she sounded oddly composed given the situation.

“Demon beasts? Why’d stuff like that appear from teleports?” Kojou exclaimed in shock.

“Tarrasques are violent demon beasts, but they’re quite intelligent. It is possible these were tamed when they were young and trained to follow commands. There are rumors about countries that raise them as living weapons even today, although the use of demon beasts for military purposes is banned and a violation of the Holy Ground Treaty.”

“So sending these living weapons in means there’s enemies here…!”

Kojou’s lips twisted as he finally grasped the situation. When he thought more, it was fairly obvious that a horde of rare demon beasts inhabiting far-off lands had not appeared in Aldegia’s royal palace by chance. Someone had sent them through deliberately. Their objective had to be interference of the peace commemoration ceremony the next day.

It wasn’t just Aldegian royals gathered in the hall; VIPs from every nation planning to attend the ceremony were present. If there were casualties among them, holding the ceremony would become difficult. That alone would accomplish the terrorists’ objective.

“Sayaka, return to your station and stay on guard. You need not be concerned for Kanon and Nagisa. The Knights of the Second Coming shall protect them.”

“Y-yes!”

Drawing her sword from the cart, Sayaka obeyed La Folia’s command and broke out in a run. She was heading to protect the government VIPs.

Sayaka wasn’t the only guard undercover in the party hall.

The Knights of Aldegia poured into the hall like an avalanche and drew off the tarrasques. Meanwhile, Attack Mages from every nation emerged seemingly out of thin air to lead their own nations’ important people to safety. Their responses were quick in spite of the abruptness of the demon beasts’ teleportation. The Royal Family of Aldegia had anticipated that the party hall would be attacked. That was probably why La Folia could maintain her composure.

“Yukina, stay as you are and keep watch over the area. The tarrasque assault is likely a diversion to create chaos in the hall. The true objective of whoever arranged this disturbance surely lies elsewhere. The culprit must be kept from learning your identity.”

“…You believe the tarrasques are a decoy…?” Yukina’s expression hardened as she examined their surroundings.

Including bodyguards and servants, over a thousand people were assembled in the royal palace’s vast hall. If the terrorists were sprinkled among them, she could not see a way to spot them immediately.

That was why La Folia had told Yukina not to make a move. That kept Yukina’s martial prowess on hand as a countermeasure against enemy surprise attacks.

Fortunately, the palace knights had already evacuated Nagisa, Kanon, and La Folia’s younger sisters. Yukina didn’t need to protect them.

With Yukina on standby, Kojou asked, “What should I do?”

La Folia’s eyes narrowed in a hint of a grin. She’d invited Kojou to Aldegia for this very circumstance.

“Please dispose of the tarrasques. Your abilities are not suited to protection.”

“You’re sure?”

The silver-haired princess smiled and nodded.

The power of the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor was mighty indeed. If he released their power inside a building, it would affect the surrounding area, too.

“We shall overlook moderate damage. The safety of the people comes first.”

“Roger that! Don’t forget you asked me to do this!”

With that reminder to the princess, Kojou raced toward the center of the hall. There were eight tarrasques present. The garrisoning knights resolutely continued to fight, but there were simply too many creatures. They could only manage to slow them down.

However, the chaos inside the hall was surprisingly muted. The guests were

all first-rate big shots from around the world. Virtually none let up an unsightly shriek or lost their composure. Even as they calmly observed the ferociously raging tarrasques, they silently obeyed the instructions from their bodyguards and evacuated.

Swapping places with those guests, Kojou stepped in front of the tarrasques, tauntingly glaring up at the enormous monsters. As the creatures whirled about, he thrust his right hand forward, unleashing the demonic power he kept suppressed.

“C’mon over, Al-Nasl Minium!”

With a roar, the demonic energy gushing out from Kojou’s entire body created swirling winds. These gusts distorted the air and became the form of a scarlet summoned beast. This was the ninth Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor—a bicorn governing super-oscillation and raging winds.

Its huge crimson body, well outstripping those of the tarrasques, made a sound resembling a fighter jet in flight as it let out an earsplitting war cry. This roar transformed into a cannonball of shock waves that collided with the tarrasques head-on.

Though each tarrasque weighed over ten metric tons, two of them were blown away outright.

However, the destruction wrought by Kojou’s Beast Vassal did not end there. The shock wave cannonball punched straight through the royal palace’s outer wall, carving an enormous crater into the courtyard. Fragments of shattered carapaces scattered about like shotgun pellets, assailing the knights engaged in combat with other tarrasques from behind. Trailing explosive winds shattered every piece of glass in the hall, and several stonework pillars tumbled over as well. The spectacle made it difficult to determine who the real terrorist was.

“Wh-what are you doing, Kojou Akatsuki?! Are you trying to kill us, too?!” Sayaka, caught up in Kojou’s attack, waved her sword around in protest.

“This is me holding back as much as I can!”

Kojou struggled to control the rampaging Beast Vassal. The Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor were extremely strong, specializing in indiscriminate

mass destruction; trying to restrain their firepower was beyond difficult. The slightest bit of carelessness on Kojou's part would allow them to run amok in an instant.

He somehow managed to pacify the bicorn even so and succeeded in neutralizing a third tarrasque. One direct hit to the rampaging creature from the bicorn's super-oscillating hooves kicked it away, causing it to faint in agony. Compared to the initial attack, the damage to the surrounding area was minimal. All it did was cause a cave-in of the royal palace's floor about ten meters in diameter.

"Do not get carried away because you defeated two or three demon beasts, brat! I haven't acknowledged you yet!"

Lucas Rihavein, commanding the knights during their battle with the tarrasques, stomped his foot in an angry tantrum over having his prey snatched from him. The king looked mortified.

"Is this really the time?!" Kojou yelled. He noticed another demon beast approaching the king from behind.

Lucas whirled around, great sword raised. However, the demon beast was simply too huge. Even with the blessing of a pseudo–Holy Sword, it was not an opponent one could fight head-on.

In spite of this, Lucas did not retreat. He smiled impetuously, glaring at the oncoming demon beast.

The demon beast suddenly came to a halt, as if Lucas had unnerved it. Kojou gawked. The king had cowed the creature solely with his fighting spirit.

"Dance, Ghoula!" a voice cried.

As Kojou watched in a daze, the tarrasque's huge body gushed fresh blood. Before Kojou realized it, a swarm of daggers appearing from thin air had poured down onto the tarrasque like hail. A certain vampire with long black hair controlled those dark weapons.

"Aradahl?!"

"If I may be so presumptuous, I shall lend a hand for a short while. You are

fine with this, King of Aldegia?" Aradahl asked Lucas, completely ignoring Kojou.

The Aldegian king lowered his great sword and nodded gravely. "Mm. I thank you for your manly words, Duke of Severin."

"Why does he get to help without you getting angry at him?!" Kojou frowned with half-lidded eyes at Lucas. Rather than favoritism, this was probably the king's normal response. It was his enmity-filled behavior toward Kojou that was out of character.

"Shut up! You will not have my daughter! If you don't like it, then defeat me!"

"I said this ain't the time or place for that stuff!!"

"Kojou! Behind you!"

While the pair pointlessly argued, a new monster suddenly appeared. A ninth tarrasque had arrived by way of teleportation.

But when Kojou turned due to the voice's warning, a vermilion bullet shot past him, turning the tarrasque into a collapsing mountain of salt.

"Asagi?! That power… How…?!"

Kojou gaped at Asagi's attack.

Asagi had employed The Cleansing—the forbidden spell that rewrote the world itself, and she had done so on Aldegian soil. Supposedly, this could only be performed on Itogami Island.

"I see," Aradahl said, ready to explain Asagi's process for Kojou. "So you utilized data left upon the networks to adjust local server rules to your liking, allowing you to draw upon the power of the Itogami Island sorcerous device."

The black-haired vampire was observing the smartphone Asagi gripped in her right hand. An AI avatar designed after a badly sewn teddy bear was displayed in the middle of the tiny screen. Its grin was downright sarcastic.

"Correct. Nothing gets past you, Mr. Aradahl. Though, the power I can use through just a smartphone is only enough for self-defense at best," Asagi said as she casually waved around the smartphone.

In other words, Asagi was using a bug in the rules of magic to reproduce The

Cleansing even outside of Itogami Island.

“Admirable, Priestess of Cain. I see… Small wonder you could deal with Vattler on equal terms.” Aradahl’s praise came from a place of amazement.

“I suppose so. I can understand why my little La Folia recognizes her as a romantic rival. She’s cute, clever…did I mention cute?”

It was Queen Polyphonia who had spoken. She approached the group with a casual gait. She had apparently remained in the hall-turned-battlefield to supply the knights with the spiritual energy they required to activate the Völundr System.

“Eh, no, I’m not really a…romantic rival, uh…”

The queen shot the blushing Asagi a grin as she casually activated her own magic. “Tee-hee, I cannot allow myself to be shown up, now can I? Please, O Spirits—”

It was the same freezing spell La Folia had employed back in the public park. But its might was off the charts. Four surviving tarrasques were frozen white, making their motions grow sluggish.

“So, this is the power of the Royal Family of Aldegia…”

With the tarrasques’ movements dulled, they were no match for the knights, supported by both their king and queen. The knights’ valiant work to neutralize the tarrasques all at once made Kojou covertly twist his tongue.

Even with assistance from Kojou and Aradahl, it hadn’t taken five minutes to defeat nine tarrasques. Rather than make people lose trust in the Aldegian royals, morale had further improved.

“Was that it? No way,” said Kojou.

Just when everyone in the hall was beginning to believe the terrorist attack had failed, only La Folia kept her guard up as she surveyed the hall’s interior.

Suddenly, a teleportation gate opened from her single blind spot—beneath La Folia’s own feet.

“I see. So I was the target all along—”

The silver-haired princess was calm to the very end.

Normally, it wasn't difficult to detect the precursors of large-scale magic like teleportation. La Folia was not one to fall for such a simple snare.

However, sending in nine large demon beasts back-to-back had disturbed the air around them. On top of that, Kojou and Aradahl, and even Asagi and Polyphonia had scattered around large amounts of magical power; the hall was overflowing with magic. That meant not even La Folia could sense the presence of the trap. The assault by the nine tarrasques had been a distraction to ensnare La Folia alone.

Kojou immediately sensed something was wrong. "La Folia!"

It was too late. The princess's body had already completely sunken into the gate.

"Ngh!" Yukina grunted.

"Yukina?!" Sayaka shrieked.

Before the gate that swallowed La Folia could close, Yukina had already leaped into it. Her form shimmered like a mirage before seemingly melting into thin air.

"Himeragi! La Folia!"

Kojou desperately raced over when the gate vanished before his eyes without a sound. Even the ripple-like shimmer in the air disappeared immediately.

Standing stiffly in the place Yukina had vanished, Kojou and Sayaka murmured helplessly.

"Himeragi and La Folia have been…kidnapped…"

"No… How…?"

No one replied to their voices. All that filled the ravaged hall was a terrifying silence.

4

Kojou and the others returned to Tenotia House shortly before midnight.

The Aldegian military and police were already mobilized to search for the abducted La Folia and Yukina. Even if Kojou and the others had stayed in the royal palace, they'd only have been in the way.

They understood that, but they still found it hard to stomach as they arrived, dragging their fatigued bodies into their rooms. If anything, the unsociable demeanor of the housekeeper who greeted them was a saving grace.

Video of the royal palace just after the attack was playing on a loop on a satellite-broadcast news channel. Kojou unwittingly grimaced as he recognized the hall on display. "It's on the news already?"

"Leaking video proof to the media as you claim responsibility is kind of Terrorism 101," Yaze said nonchalantly.

As a matter of fact, a public claim of responsibility from a criminal group for the royal palace attack had been unveiled on a video site. The video on TV of the tarrasques emerging was uploaded by the culprits, as well.

"They succeeded in attacking the royal palace and abducting the crown princess after all," Asagi said while she tapped on her smartphone. "Pretty big stuff for criminals. No reason not to announce it." Her plainly foul mood was no doubt due to the terrorists having gotten away cleanly despite her being right there.

Kojou felt the same regret.

La Folia had warned Kojou beforehand that the tarrasque attack was a decoy and the culprit had some other objective, and yet he had been unable to protect her. That La Folia herself had not been able to decipher the enemy's plan…would merely be an excuse. The fact remained that Kojou had momentarily let his guard slip right after the tarrasques had been wiped out.

Kanon put both her hands together in front of her, murmuring as if speaking a prayer. "Yukina…"

Nagisa drew close to Kojou with an earnest expression as she fired off questions. "It's going to be okay, right, Kojou? Yukina's not going to be killed or go through something horrible?"

"Well…"

Kojou had no assurance to give her. He didn't even know the names of the criminals behind the abduction. He could say nothing as to whatever they might intend for Yukina and the princess.

"For Himeragi, well, no need to worry, I figure," Yaze said, keeping things lighthearted, hoping to put Nagisa at ease. "If this bunch really is that smart, there's no way they'd go out of their way to make an enemy of the World's Mightiest Vampire by harming his loved—Err, his associates."

It was optimistic speculation bordering on consolation, but that didn't mean his hypothesis was without any basis.

Kojou and the others were outsiders without any direct connection to the country. Even if the criminal group harbored enmity for the Royal Family of Aldegia, surely they did not want to antagonize Kojou on top of them.

"Meaning Himeragi becomes a hostage to keep the Fourth Primogenitor from intervening," Asagi speculated.

Yaze nodded. "After all, the portal spell Himeragi got caught up in was aimed at the princess in the first place."

From the assailants' perspective, Yukina being caught up in the gate meant to abduct La Folia was unplanned, confronting them with the risk of making an enemy of the World's Mightiest Vampire as a result.

This being the case, the best choice for them was to use Yukina as a shield and demand the Fourth Primogenitor sit on the sidelines. In other words, Yukina had value as a hostage. Extreme circumstances notwithstanding, it was only natural to think they would treat her with courtesy.

"The problem's La Folia, huh?"

Kojou clenched his hands together as they shook with irritation.

The assailants were confronting the Royal Family of Aldegia from the start. There was no way they were afraid of a grudge at this late hour. Even if La Folia became a bargaining chip, this only required her being alive. There was no guarantee she wouldn't go through a terrible ordeal while held prisoner.

Asagi was reading from a list of demands from the criminals being shown on

the TV screen. “Looks like the criminal side demanded that the peace commemoration ceremony be canceled and some forty-three sorcerous criminals in penal service be freed.”

Yaze exhaled with visible exasperation.

“No way in hell those demands get accepted. If they did that, the Aldegian government would completely lose face. It’d prove the country not only can’t protect one crown princess, it’s a country that’ll do whatever terrorists tell it. Plus, there’s no proof they’ll release the princess even if they do as demanded.”

“But what will happen to La Folia then?” Nagisa asked, dejected.

This time, even Yaze could not reply with anything but a weighty silence.

Kojou spoke up instead. “It’s all right. La Folia’s dad and other people are talking about it right now.” From his tone, he was speaking to himself as much as to her. Kojou’s feckless words made Nagisa pipe down and nod.

It was right after that they heard the sound of overly serious knocking. A tall girl shown in by the housekeeper entered the room. It was Sayaka, dressed not in the servant’s outfit but in her usual school uniform instead.

Kojou shot to his feet. “Kirasaka? The meeting’s over already?”

Sayaka nodded with a hard expression. “Yes. The government press secretary will hold a news conference at one AM.”

“They’ve decided how to respond to the terrorists’ demands?” Yaze asked as he furrowed his brow.

Sayaka tossed a bag on top of an unoccupied sofa, then flopped onto the sofa herself. The long conference had apparently been quite exhausting.

“They will acknowledge that the royal palace was attacked, but they will say it is not true that Princess La Folia has been abducted, therefore there will be no compliance with their demands—that’s the royal family’s policy.”

“Not true… Wait, it sure as hell is true! She really was abducted!” Kojou exclaimed.

However, Yaze muttered an “Ohh” with a scrutinizing gaze. “They’re hiding the fact that the princess was abducted while planning to negotiate with the

perps under the table. Pretty slick."

"So they'll put up a public front that they won't negotiate with terrorists while making a backroom deal? Maybe there's no other way to maintain national honor while trying to save the princess, but…" Asagi seemed a bit surprised as she glanced between Yaze and Sayaka.

"It'd be nice if they're dealing with people who'll strike a bargain…" Yaze smiled weakly as he drew in his chin. The bunch that had abducted La Folia weren't kidnappers in it for profit. There was no guarantee a deal could be made.

"It has the effect of prolonging the negotiation time, at the very least. Use the bargaining to buy time during which to save the princess… Seems they concluded that was the most realistic and effective method."

Sayaka sounded like she was suppressing her own dismay as she spoke. Most likely, she didn't care for the conference's consensus herself. However, Sayaka was nothing more than an agent of the Japanese government. She had no standing to alter the result of the conference.

Kojou looked at Sayaka with a reproachful gaze. "Rescuing La Folia… Can you really do that?"

Sayaka's eyes were moist as she glared at Kojou. "Whether we can or not, we have to! If not, the princess and Yukina will…"

Kojou shook his head left and right, smiling, in an effort to calm down Sayaka. "Sorry. That came out wrong. I wanted to ask if…we need to lend a hand."

Asagi twirled her smartphone around in the palm of her hand as she said bluntly, "Well, even if you say no, we're going to anyway."

"Pretty much. Wasn't only the princess who got abducted and all." Yaze leisurely stretched his back and let out an elderly sounding exhale of "there we go."

"What, do you intend to do?" Sayaka prompted back, eyes wide.

Asagi coolly shrugged her shoulders. "We can't do anything unless we figure out La Folia's location by any means necessary. We'll do our thing and look for

her our own way.”

“That’s why I’m asking what you intend to do…?!”

“Ain’t like we’re gonna get in the Aldegian police’s and knights’ way. Or do you guys have a better idea?” Yaze directed a leering smile at Sayaka, whose words caught in her throat.

“We…were dispatched only to guard the commemoration ceremony, so…”

“The commemoration ceremony, huh?” Kojou rested both elbows on his lap as he sank into thought.

The original reason for dispatching Sayaka was to protect important members of the Japanese government. Yukina and La Folia being abducted didn’t mean they’d let her wander off and search for them as she pleased. Guarding the commemoration ceremony came before saving the pair.

However, that was only if the commemoration ceremony was actually held. As a matter of fact, the criminal group had demanded the ceremony be canceled, and the two were bargaining chips to that end.

“Hold on. La Folia’s expected to attend the ceremony, too, right?”

“Yes,” came Sayaka’s immediate reply.

As the crown princess, La Folia would naturally attend the ceremony to represent the Aldegian side. Indeed, more than a few citizens were likely participating just to get a chance to see her.

“So what happens if La Folia can’t be rescued before the start of the commemoration ceremony?”

“…Then it would really mean a complete loss of trust in the Royal Family of Aldegia, I suppose,” Sayaka replied in a subdued manner, finding the words difficult to speak.

Kojou lowered his eyes, twisting his lips in silent contemplation. “In other words, the start of the ceremony is the time limit for rescuing La Folia?”

“The terrorists understand that, too,” Asagi murmured, turning her eyes to outside the window. “Negotiations won’t be easy.”

The reply to her came from an unexpected direction.

“I imagine you are correct. However, I have an idea for how to turn this situation around.”

Kojou and the others looked toward the voice in unison. Standing in the entrance to the room was a middle-aged woman—Queen Mother Musette, La Folia’s grandmother.

“The queen mother…?”

Asagi looked up at her in surprise. Musette slowly regarded Kojou and the others in turn.

“However, this plan cannot be put into effect without your assistance. I know I have no right to ask this of you, Kanon—”

The queen mother went down on one knee before Kanon. Then, she deeply bowed her head to the girl.

“Wouldst thou lend us thy strength to save Aldegia—no, save La Folia?”

The unimaginable scene left Kojou and the others at a loss for words.

The very proud queen mother of Aldegia was bowing her head to Kanon, a royal, albeit with no standing whatsoever. That spoke to the strength of the resolve, and the sacrifice, Musette sought from Kanon.

Amid that tense, frigid atmosphere, Nagisa meekly called out to her friend. “Kano…”

Even if it was to save Aldegia, Kanon had no reason to sacrifice herself in the process whatsoever. Nagisa was doing all she could to convey that no matter what Kanon might choose, Nagisa would be her ally to the very end.

Kanon kindly smiled back at Nagisa. She stepped forward.

She crouched before the kneeling Musette, taking her hand into her own.

Kanon spoke crisply and without hesitation.

“Absolutely.”

5

At one AM in the dead of night, an unfamiliar man was being shown on the TV screen. He was middle-aged with an honest, intellectual air about him. This was the government of Aldegia press secretary.

Lighting from a flurry of camera flashes dyed the screen white for a moment. The official government press conference concerning the previous night's royal palace attack incident had commenced.

"So it's starting," Yaze murmured as he listened to the press secretary give an explanation in English.

As Kanon, Nagisa—stuck to Kanon like glue—and the queen mother had departed together, that left only four people in the room: Asagi, Yaze, Kojou, and Sayaka.

"The commemoration ceremony starts at noon today. That means there's just under eleven hours left." Asagi plugged away at the keyboard of her favorite laptop as she made a sigh.

"So we have to find La Folia before then," Kojou confirmed again.

"Yeah." Asagi sipped some coffee, which took the place of her nighttime snack. "We'll have to rely on the queen mother's scheme if it comes to that, but the effect will be half wasted if we can't pinpoint the princess's location before the start of the ceremony. Have to do what we can before then."

Sayaka peered over Asagi's shoulder to see her screen. "Um, Asagi Aiba? What have you been doing for a while now?"

Displayed upon her computer screen were countless dots hovering over a map of the royal capital, Verterace. In tiny pop-up windows from the dots, grainy black-and-white images were being played one after another at high speed.

"I've taken over the security cameras all over Verterace. That's a magically advanced nation for you. The fact that it comes with real network infrastructure is a huge help."

Asagi spoke rather nonchalantly while she wrote an original facial recognition program.

The special processing she was conducting on her personal computer meant she'd be able to instantly locate Yukina or La Folia if even a portion of their bodies was caught on camera. She'd also put together an algorithm to prioritize the search according to possible kidnapper escape routes and safe houses suggested by artificial intelligence. On top of that, she'd given it military and police communications interception functionality so that it could steal the data it required. That was how she was making up for not having home field advantage.

"Taken over… Wait, isn't that normally a crime…?!"

Sayaka's expression stiffened. Exasperated, Asagi glanced up at Sayaka.

"Himeragi's life is in danger, so we don't have time to worry about little things like that."

"W-well that may be true, but…!"

Sayaka pursed her lips, swallowing the words she was about to speak. Silently watching for a while as Asagi continued to tweak the program, she seemed to harden her resolve as she belatedly inquired, "Why are you going this far for Yukina's and the princess's sakes?"

Asagi didn't even look back as she replied, "Would Himeragi abandon me if our positions were reversed?"

Sayaka silently shook her head.

"Then I can't let myself do any less. Besides, a chance to put that girl and a royal princess in my debt comes once in a blue moon, right?" Asagi grinned as if she was joking.

"That's a lovely personality you have there, Asagi Aiba…"

Sayaka made a weary-sounding sigh. Truthfully, she was inwardly surprised by Asagi's attitude.

No doubt if it had been Asagi kidnapped, Yukina would try to rescue her even at the risk of her own life. That's because Yukina was an Attack Mage. Protecting people from the menace of demons—that's what she was raised to do.

However, Asagi did not have that kind of background. Though she had a fair bit more talent than most people, Asagi was merely a student. It wasn't her duty to rescue Yukina and La Folia at all.

Indeed, it was to Asagi's advantage for Yukina and La Folia to stay kidnapped. Yukina was Kojou's Blood Bride, and the princess had asserted that Kojou was her fiancé. To Asagi, who perhaps cared more for Kojou than she wanted to let on, their presence wasn't to her advantage.

And yet, Asagi had not hesitated whatsoever to try to save Yukina and La Folia, even engaging in dangerous criminal activity to do so. Sayaka admired the sight. At the same time, it faintly terrified her.

She remembered Queen Polyphonia's words. La Folia acknowledged Asagi as her rival in love.

Proudly seeing things through by any means necessary—certainly Asagi and La Folia were cut from the same cloth. Just as La Folia was a princess of Aldegia, Asagi Aiba was the Priestess of Cain—the priestess of Itogami city-state, the Fourth Primogenitor's domain.

If Asagi were to become the Fourth Primogenitor's Blood Bride, would Kojou Akatsuki not become a fearsome existence beyond anyone's reach? Sayaka was suddenly captive to that concern.

Asagi's comments pulled Sayaka from pondering ominous notions. "I've finished setting the traps for now. If the princess and Himeragi are caught on camera for even an instant, I'll be able to instantly pinpoint their location. They should still be here in Verterace somewhere, after all. Right?"

Sayaka hastily smoothed over her expression as she replied rapidly, "Y-yes. All of the roads leading outside the royal capital have been sealed off under strict watch, and barring exceptions like the Witch of the Void, no one should be able to teleport for long distances…"

Asagi tapered her lips in frustration. "The problem is if they're in underground canals or forested areas without security cameras installed…"

Even with full access to Aldegia's digital networks, she still couldn't get footage from places without security cameras. Unlike Itogami Island, where the

entire isle was an artificial construct, it wasn't as if the entirety of Aldegia was run by computers.

"I'll figure something out. The broad range makes it a little rough, but if it's just determining whether people are there, I'll manage," Yaze said. He sounded annoyed.

Sayaka turned to him quizzically. "What do you mean? You have a means to search a wide area?"

"Sorry, that's a trade secret. Well, just don't expect much, 'kay?" he answered dismissively.

Sayaka sourly pursed her lips.

She could use detection ritual spells to search using *shikigami*, but she couldn't exactly search the entirety of Verterace that way. Within the Lion King Agency, it was likely only the Three Saints who could manage such a feat. That Yaze could easily claim to be capable of doing so dented Sayaka's pride as a specialist in ritual spells. She felt like her own helplessness was being rubbed in her face.

"What should Kirasaka and I do?" Kojou asked frailly. His question relieved Sayaka somewhat.

Asagi's reply to Kojou's question was simple and brief.

"Sleep."

"Huh?"

Kojou's eyes snapped wide as he looked at Asagi. Sayaka's cheeks flushed red as she inadvertently looked into Kojou's eyes.

"Wh-why would I…s-sleep with Kojou Akatsuki…?!"

Asagi yelled in response to Sayaka's wide-off-the-mark protest. "I'm telling you to get some sleep and save your strength! Better rest now while you can. It'll be you two moving your butts once we find those girls, you know."

"Ohhh." Kojou gave a nod of understanding. Sayaka was too embarrassed to even raise her voice. "Got it. If that's how it is, I'll head back to my room. Wake me up right away if anything happens, all right?"

Kojou got up and headed for the bedroom for the boys. Sayaka hastily followed him out.

The news conference was still on TV. The reporters continued mercilessly questioning the press secretary as he asserted that the crown princess was safe.

“Kojou Akatsuki!”

Sayaka chased Kojou into the bedroom before he could close the door. Kojou grimaced, recalling the embarrassing misunderstanding from just earlier as he looked back at her.

“What?”

“Um… Yukina’s safe, isn’t she?”

“Yeah.”

How should I know that anyway? Kojou pondered as he sat down on the sofa right beside him. Quirks aside, it was still a villa, so the bedroom’s interior was fairly spacious. After all, it had not just beds but sofas and a table, and it came fully furnished with a toilet and bath.

All that said, Kojou naturally still felt a little tense at being alone in a room with a girl.

For her part, Sayaka sat down gingerly upon a corner of a bed with its side facing Kojou. Given the conversation that had just ended, her behavior could make someone think she was inviting Kojou over. She sure let down her guard a lot for someone who hated being around men. That said, Kojou couldn’t exactly point that out to her, sighing wearily instead.

“Well, you probably don’t need to worry about Himeragi. She’s with La Folia and all. Kirasaka, you should know pretty well by now that princess is a smooth talker.”

“Well, that’s true, but…”

Sayaka seemed to lack confidence as she cast her gaze downward. Kojou knew well just how precious Yukina was to her. Really, she had to want to rush off and save Yukina that very moment.

Kojou understood her feelings well. He didn’t have it in him to be hard on

Sayaka.

“Anyway, let’s leave it to Asagi and Yaze for now. Aldegia’s army and police have to be looking for her with everything they’ve got. It’s all right. We’ll find them soon.”

“Yeah.”

Sayaka nodded a little as she grasped the hem of her skirt.

As a matter of fact, there was nothing either of them could do that moment no matter how nervous they got. It was better to save their strength just like Asagi had told them to. Sayaka surely understood that, too.

“By the way, why’d you come to my and Yaze’s room? The girls’ room is over there.”

“I—I did not come because I wanted to, but now that Yukina is unable to continue observing you, I need to take over her mission for her…”

Kojou dismissed her excuses. “That doesn’t mean you have to sleep in the same bedroom! That’s just weird! If you’re gonna sleep, go to your own bed—”

He abruptly swallowed his words. He’d just remembered a small detail.

“Oh, right. Kirasaka, can you use ritual spells to make people sleep better?”

“Eh?”

An expression of blatant distrust came over Sayaka.

“What do you intend to do after forcing someone else into sleep…?!”

“Not that. I’m asking you to make me sleep. Figures that with Himeragi and La Folia on my mind, I don’t feel sleepy at all.”

“Ahh.”

Sayaka seemed accepting, as she nodded. Kojou being a vampire made him quite a night owl by default, and even if the fight with the tarrasques had tired him, he didn’t think he’d fall asleep any time soon.

“Guess I have to. I can cooperate with you if it is something like that.”

Sayaka plucked a strand of hair from her own ponytail. Kojou watched in

admiration. A strand of hair seemed like something you'd use in all kinds of ritual spells.

From there, Sayaka fished out a hard, metallic coin from her pocket. She tied her hair to it, dangling it before Kojou's eyes.

The five-yen coin was swinging back and forth on the end of the lock of pretty, chestnut-colored hair. Kojou was dumbfounded as he gazed at it.

"A five-yen coin. Isn't that for hypnosis?!"

"There's no other way! Vampire resistance is too strong for magic and ritual spells to work on you!"

"…But this will 'cause it's hypnotism?"

Kojou thought Sayaka's explanation sounded plausible, but he still didn't fully believe it could be true. Nonetheless, Sayaka nodded with a serious look on her face.

"The point being, hypnotic suggestion is using your own subconscious to control your body, so resistance against magic doesn't make a difference, no matter how strong it is. Even if it wasn't a five-yen coin, a pendulum or a candle flame, the sound of a bell, or even an aroma could induce someone into a trance state."

"Huh… When you put it that way, I feel like it might just work."

"If you get it, then focus on the movement of the coin."

"Okay."

Kojou watched the suspended five-yen coin. At first, he'd felt it was ridiculous, but he certainly felt more relaxed as he watched the regular, pendulum-like swinging of the coin. It was also a little amusing to watch Sayaka's oddly earnest expression on the other side of the coin.

Within Kojou's field of vision, the body of that very Sayaka abruptly fell onto its side.

"Wait, *you* fell asleep?!"

Even as Kojou watched in shock, Sayaka had flopped onto the bed as she

began making pleasant-sounding sleeping noises. He didn't know if the hypnosis had any effect on her, but she was solidly asleep.

"Well, I get that you're tired, but you'll catch cold like that."

Weakly shaking his head, Kojou took off Sayaka's shoes. He picked up Sayaka's body, light given how tall she was, and properly put her in bed.



His impression of Sayaka was of perpetual anger, but she was just plain cute when she was asleep. She had long eyelashes and refined features. Her glossy lips were a light pink. Even with her clothes on, the bulge of her ample breasts was very distinct. Her graceful thighs were poking out from the hem of her disheveled skirt.

“Guess I’ll go take a shower.”

Feeling an intense dryness in his throat, Kojou hastily put a blanket over Sayaka. His canine teeth were throbbing—a precursor of vampiric urges. For the time being, Kojou pretty much fled toward the bathroom to cool off his head. Given the situation, he didn’t think Sayaka had any right to complain if anything happened, but Kojou didn’t intend to be corrupt enough to pounce on a moron falling for her own hypnosis.

“Haaah…”

His vampiric urges vanished over the course of a cold shower. As he regained his calm, he became worried about Yukina and La Folia’s abduction all over again.

The terrorists had timed their attack to coincide with the start of the nighttime party at the royal palace, porting a horde of tarrasques into the hall. With that simple diversion, they’d accomplished their true objective of kidnapping La Folia via teleportation. Using the captured princess as a hostage, they’d pushed the peace commemoration ceremony to the brink of cancellation while demanding the release of incarcerated sorcerous criminals. It had been a simple but effective plan.

Whether the demands were complied with or not, the Royal Family of Aldegia’s authority would plummet, accomplishing the objective of the war-seeking terrorists. There was nothing strange about that part.

But Kojou felt a faint misgiving about how overly neatly everything was flowing together. He felt like he was missing something. Perhaps one of the reasons he felt that way was because he was one of Natsuki Minamiya’s pupils. The woman also known as the Witch of the Void was able to freely manipulate teleportation magic as easily as she breathed.

But the culprit isn't Natsuki*!*

"That's right… Calculating the coordinates… How the hell did the culprit know La Folia's exact location?"

Kojou upped the temperature of the shower as he sank into thought.

Using high-level spellcraft like spatial manipulation required a great deal of skill and accurate measurements.

Relative distance. Relative speed. Changes in elevation relative to sea level and the curve of the Earth's crust. Changes in the tides caused by the moon. Furthermore, there was slippage in absolute coordinates due to the rotation of the Earth and its orbit around the sun.

Thanks to her pact with a devil, Natsuki Minamiya possessed power literally beyond human comprehension, enabling her to instantly compute the answers to these complex calculations. However, it was not possible for mere sorcerers to copy Natsuki.

Yet, the terrorists had sent nine tarrasques into the royal palace and had opened a gate precisely under La Folia's feet. Short of checking out coordinates within the palace beforehand and sticking a transmitter or something on La Folia herself, that should not have been possible.

"Don't tell me the culprit was already inside the royal palace…?"

Kojou listened to the sound of the shower as he murmured to himself.

A human being with access to the royal palace could both do a thorough check of the coordinates required for teleportation and stick a tracking device on the princess's outfit. He didn't know why such a thorough criminal would resort to the crude means of attacking a party, though. If it was just a matter of kidnapping La Folia, there had to be any number of simpler opportunities.

If La Folia's abduction was itself a diversion for a larger plan— "Master Kojou."

"Whoa?!"

Just when Kojou's thoughts were coalescing, the voice he suddenly heard caused them to dissipate. Even the World's Mightiest Vampire could not remain

calm when hearing a voice from behind while in the shower, particularly when it was that of a woman.

“I am sorry for the rudeness, Master Kojou. Am I interrupting?”

“Ah, er, interrupting?”

Well, I’m in the shower. Kojou looked back, still nude. Standing on the other side of the bathroom’s glass divider was a woman wearing a housemaid’s outfit. He remembered her face.

“You were there with the king, weren’t you—?”

“Yes. I am Trine Halden, secretary for the royal family. Please call me Trine.”

The woman spoke calmly, unmoved at seeing Kojou’s bare physique. Her showing up in the bath must have meant she’d come in through the adjoining bedroom. He resented Sayaka slightly for being so sound asleep on the bed that she hadn’t even noticed the intrusion.

“So, Miss Trine, why are you here?”

Kojou wrapped a bath towel over his hips as he finally regained a minimal level of composure.

It was late, and the princess had been abducted; a secretary for the royal family had to be unimaginably busy. *So why do you have the spare time to come to a place like this?* Kojou pondered.

Taking off her steam-fogged glasses, Trine took on a serious, weighty tone of voice. “I have come with a message from the crown princess.”

“A message from La Folia?”

“Correct. She said to convey it to the Fourth Primogenitor should anything happen to her.”

“Got it. I’ll put clothes on right away, so wait outside, ’kay?”

Kojou was surprised. If she had come to deliver the message personally, it had to be fairly urgent. *If it really is important, I guess it makes sense for her to barge into the bathroom*, Kojou accepted.

“No, that is not necessary. I shall join you.”

“Huh…?!”

Seeing Trine suddenly begin to undress, Kojou’s mind was completely thrown into chaos.

In front of the stiffened Kojou’s eyes, Trine stripped off her old-fashioned corset. Next, she pulled her skirt down and put her hands upon her stockings.

“Wait, wait! Why do you have to strip, too?!” Kojou shouted as he finally came to his senses. Trine tilted her head a little, finding his reaction odd.

“One does not enter the bath with clothes on.”

“Well, I said to wait until I came out, didn’t I?!”

“What is there to be shy about at this stage? You have so many lovers by your side, after all.”

With a giggle and a smile on her glossy lips, Trine stepped into the bathroom interior.

Taking off her trim, white shirt, she exposed her skin. Now all she had hiding her naked body was her lascivious black lace underwear.

Trine was fairly small of stature for an Aldegian woman. Even so, her mature physique gave her an adult sensuality that Yukina and others lacked. The swell of her breasts was ample, and her waist was tight. Her perfume had a seductive aroma.

“Would you like to sample my body as well, Fourth Primogenitor?”

Pursuing the naked Kojou to the wall, Trine pressed the soft bulge of her breasts against him. Kojou gulped—loud enough that Trine could hear.

“What are you trying to pull? What happened to that message from La Folia—?”

“That was just an excuse to get close to you, of course. More importantly, let’s have some fun.”

Trine wrapped both her arms around Kojou’s neck. She slid her tongue across his skin and proceeded to nibble on his ear. That instant, Kojou was assailed by dizziness.

It was not an unpleasant feeling. Rather, his body felt dominated by an intoxicating sensation, going numb to its very core.

“Miss Trine…you’re…the…”

Back still against the bathroom wall, Kojou’s body sank down bit by bit. Trine mounted Kojou’s hips, moistening her red lips with her tongue.

“Yes. Just close your eyes and leave everything to me.”

Once she stripped off her underwear, Trine’s entire body was covered in soft fur. White fangs were poking out of her smiling lips. The eyes with which she looked down at Kojou were slender and gold like those of a cat.

“I shall grant you the ultimate pleasure, Fourth Primogenitor. For eternity—”

Kojou’s vision was hazy as he looked up at the bestialized Trine.

All that hovered in the bathroom was white steam and the sensual scent she scattered around her.



Chapter Five
The Traitor in the Sky

Chapter Five

The Traitor in the Sky

1

Yukina awoke to an unpleasant sound like that of a motor's snarl.

She was in a functional, bleak room that resembled a train car compartment. For a moment, her mind was in chaos, unable to remember why she was in such a place.

In the room were two prison cots. There was a narrow table and a small sofa. It had the minimum furniture required for rest, and not a single thing besides. The plastic-built walls had no window; a TV monitor was embedded into one of them instead.

"Good morning, Yukina. Did you sleep well?"

Yukina sat up in surprise when she heard the princess's voice from next to her. That instant, her arms encountered an odd snag. Yukina felt both of her wrists encased in metal manacles.

"La Folia? Are you unharmed?! Where…is this…?"

Having said that much, Yukina let out a small yelp. She'd noticed that she was wearing nothing besides a bustier and shorts.

"Do not be concerned. It is I who removed your clothes. It would have been a shame to damage that dress, after all."

Sitting on the sofa, the silver-haired princess gazed with amusement at the shaken Yukina, grinning as she spoke.

When Yukina looked closer, the cocktail dress she had worn the night before was hanging securely from one of the room's wall hooks.

"It does not seem that the criminals who assaulted the royal palace have any intention of violating us, for the time being at least. Had they wanted to do so,

it would have already happened.”



“V…violate…”

Yukina felt a chill up her spine at the word La Folia had spoken so casually. Having leaped into that gate without a single prior thought only to be captured by terrorists, it would not have been strange if she really had undergone something horrific like that.

Yukina had a strained expression when La Folia gazed at her with serious eyes.

“That is correct, Yukina. To be specific, a crude man with lustful, bloodshot eyes would rip off that dress, strip you of those pure-looking undergarments and hold you down as you resist, fondling your modest breasts with his thick, ragged fingers. Then he would force your legs open, exposing a place you have yet to allow even Kojou to touch—”

“That’s quite enough! I do not need to hear the specifics!”

When the princess suddenly began suddenly gushing wild delusions, Yukina stopped her with a beet-red face.

When Yukina saw La Folia’s giggling expression, she understood very well that taking off her clothes was not done to keep the dress from being damaged, but so that La Folia could be amused by Yukina’s shock.

“Is your throat not dry? There are drinks inside the refrigerator. Unfortunately, they have not gone so far as to supply alcohol.”

“Ah, ahh.”

Yukina nodded vaguely, somehow regaining her composure. With La Folia relaxed as usual in front of her, it felt downright silly to be the only one nervous.

Yukina’s memories cut out the moment right after she’d instantly jumped into the teleportation gate to go after La Folia. She’d apparently lost consciousness from the shock of the teleport. She’d forced herself into a gate intended to port La Folia alone, in the first place. One might consider it good fortune the damage was so slight.

“I explained to our abductors that you are the lover of the Fourth Primogenitor.”

“L-lover…?!”

“Naturally, even they possess enough intelligence not to make an enemy of the Fourth Primogenitor. It seems they intend to use you as a hostage to hold him in check.”

“I am…a hostage… I suppose that makes sense,” Yukina murmured quietly.

Yukina assiduously changed back into the dress that had been stripped from her. If she was being honest, she could not call the party dress easy to move in, but there was nothing else to wear, so she would make do.

Fortunately, the several spell tablets she’d hidden inside the bustier were still intact. Believing the princess’s words about Yukina being the Fourth Primogenitor’s lover, the terrorists hadn’t touched her at all.

Even without using Snowdrift Wolf, concealed within the cello case, Yukina’s *shikigami* could slice through the chains of her manacles with ease.

“It does not seem there are guards outside the room. I shall prepare to escape immediately.” Yukina closed her eyes and probed for auras beyond the door.

Considering it was made of such lightweight materials, the door was surprisingly sturdy and tightly sealed, but the lock itself was unexpectedly brittle. It surely would not be all that difficult to destroy it with brute force.

However, when Yukina prepared a ritual spell to enhance her body and prepared to kick down the door, La Folia quietly stopped her.

“That will not be necessary. Escape is impossible either way.”

“Impossible? But—”

“This room is not being watched because it is not necessary to watch it. Even if we get out of the room, there is nowhere for us to go,” La Folia said gently but firmly.

Yukina gasped and looked around the area. She remembered having been imprisoned in a similar environment once before.

“You do not mean this is…inside of a ship?”

Yukina looked down at her own feet.

It was a narrow, compact room. There were dull vibrations being conveyed through every part of it. This indicated that the room was on the interior of a much larger vehicle.

The fact that she felt virtually no shaking surely meant it was not an airplane or a train. This made her think of a huge passenger ship like the *Oceanus Grave*. Failing that, a warship? And if this was inside of a ship, escape would indeed prove difficult.

“I suppose it is. I shall give you a passing grade, if only just.”

When La Folia listened to Yukina’s reply, she smiled as she made that suggestive comment.

“For the moment, let us drink tea or something and watch the news. If the culprits provided us with a television, there is no doubt something they wish to show us.”

The silver-haired princess took drinks out of the fridge as she used a wall panel to turn on the TV. An international English-language news channel was being broadcast.

Rubble of a building Yukina recognized. A throng of journalists and police officers investigating the crime scene. She could see knights on guard as well. The video was of the kingdom of Aldegia’s Verterace Palace.

“News concerning the royal palace attack incident?” Yukina asked for confirmation.

“An extremist organization advocating Demon eradication calling itself July Purple seems to have claimed responsibility.”

July Purple was a well-known international terrorist organization active mainly in the Middle East and Western Asia. It had also been identified as a dangerous group by the Holy Ground Treaty Organization.

“They claim to have kidnapped Crown Princess La Folia during the attack. They have demanded the cancellation of the peace commemoration ceremony and the release of forty-three sorcerous criminals as their conditions for freeing their hostage. On the other hand, the royal family side denies the abduction having happened; therefore, they reject the perpetrators’ demands.”

“They…deny it?”

Yukina blinked hard when La Folia finished her explanation.

The practical concern was that terrorists had captured La Folia before the eyes of the king and queen, along with Yukina. It was not remotely possible the royal palace was ignorant of the reality of the situation.

“False information so that negotiations may proceed advantageously. If they acknowledged my abduction, the government’s potential countermeasures would be greatly limited. Otherwise, they could neither plan to negotiate with the perpetrators under the table and reach a monetary resolution nor arrange substitutes for us and assert that it is we who are the fakes.”

The princess explained more simply so that the bewildered Yukina could understand. In spite of the princess herself being a bargaining chip, the tenor of her voice had the calm of someone completely disconnected from the matter.

“However, denying the perpetrators’ assertions puts them on even terms. Now the perpetrators are forced to prove that I am the genuine La Folia Rihavein.”

La Folia sounded amused.

Certainly, it would be difficult for the terrorist side to prove the abducted princess was not a fake, particularly when the royal family, surely holding La Folia’s life in greater esteem than anyone, had denied the princess’s abduction.

Yukina tensed. “However…with you as their hostage, does that not place you in danger…?”

If the royal family wasn’t going along with the culprits’ demands, La Folia, right there with Yukina, would lose her value as a hostage. Yukina was protected by the unknown menace posed by the Fourth Primogenitor, but La Folia stood in a place of far greater danger.

“That is inevitable. Such is the fate of the royal family.”

La Folia was so calm. The gentleness of her expression took Yukina aback all the more.

“Besides, I am certain the perpetrators are lying as well,” the princess added.

“Lying, you say?”

“The perpetrators are not necessarily the real July Purple, and there is no guarantee that their demands are genuine. Indeed, the chances they are fictions meant to toy with the Aldegian government are far higher.”

La Folia continued to watch the TV screen as she elegantly brought her drink to her mouth. It was an incredibly refined gesture for someone merely drinking water from a plastic bottle.

La Folia’s insightfulness, reading the intentions of both the terrorists and the royal family from a few fragmented pieces of information, left Yukina at a loss for words. Although, there was no proof La Folia’s words were completely true.

Yukina could not wrap her head around such malicious bargaining tactics.

“False demands? What meaning would such a thing bear…?”

“The answer is provided by the reason they have treated us courteously like this rather than harm us in any way. The perpetrators do not seek to negotiate with the royal family. They wish to bargain with *us*.”

La Folia shifted her gaze toward the closed door as she spoke. That instant, she sensed an aura swaying on the other side of the door. Yukina realized that someone had been standing there for some time.

The princess quietly spoke toward the other side of the door. “Is my assumption correct, Trine?”

The next moment, a young woman’s voice broke into laughter outside the room.

“That is Princess La Folia Rihavein and her famous insight for you. Good. That will make this go quickly.”

Yukina bit her lip at the words coursing from her through the speaker. She should have realized it from the absence of guards outside the room. Yukina and La Folia’s conversation had been eavesdropped upon since the beginning.

The reinforced plastic door opened without a sound. A lasciviously dressed woman entered.

“Wha…?!”

Yukina let out a suppressed yelp. It was not the woman's appearance that shocked her. The cause of Yukina's turmoil was that of the boy dressed in a tuxedo standing practically glued to her side.

He had bangs devoid of pigmentation and a decently handsome face with an expression that somehow seemed languid. Yukina knew him. After all, this was the person Yukina had been observing for some time.

"Senpai…why…?" Yukina's voice shook.

"Seems you're in good health, Himeragi. You too, La Folia."

Looking back at Yukina, standing rooted to the spot in her dress, an indifferent grin came over Kojou Akatsuki.

2

"Allow me to introduce him. This is our newest brother as part of the Holy Ground Liberation Organization—my obedient slave, the Fourth Primogenitor, Kojou Akatsuki."

Gazing triumphantly at the aghast Yukina, the woman pressed her breasts against Kojou's right arm. However, Yukina could not even manage to be angry about that. She was simply unable to process what was happening before her very eyes. She didn't think the scene could be real. She felt like it had to be some sort of bad dream.

"Now you have truly done it, Trine Halden. Even I did not anticipate this."

La Folia's shoulders sank, impressed but upset.

The woman named Trine narrowed her eyes in surprise.

"Oh my. You did not even attempt a boorish bluff. That is the princess for you," she said, pleased.

She was apparently quite satisfied at having surprised the perceptive princess.

"You are…?"

Yukina widened her eyes a bit as she gazed at the woman's expression. The differences in clothes and atmosphere made her not realize initially, but Yukina

belatedly recalled that she had met this woman before.

“Trine Halden, secretary for the royal family of the kingdom of Aldegia. So we meet again, Yukina Himeragi.”

Turning to face the surprised Yukina, Trine courteously bowed. Her gesture was refined, as befitted one accustomed to the etiquette of the royal palace.

“A royal secretary…abetted the attack on the royal palace…?” Yukina murmured in a daze.

Trine had exchanged words in a normal fashion with Lucas and Polyphonia Rihavein during Kojou and company’s audience with them. Yukina could not conceal her surprise that someone of such high stature was working with terrorists.

On the other hand, a woman of her position could easily bring Kojou into this. As royal secretary, it was surely possible to approach Kojou, a guest of the royal family, without rousing suspicion. Then she had made Kojou obey her using Yukina as La Folia as hostages. *That must be what happened*, internalized Yukina.

“The title sounds grandiose, but a royal secretary is simply someone who handles the personal affairs of the royal family,” La Folia explained. Her tone was level, as if she was uninvolved. “In other words, an errand girl. They possess no political power whatsoever. Yet, the job is busy, vacations few, the salary is low, and they are flung about by the royal family’s selfish whims… Of course discontent accumulates.”

Trine reflexively reverted to her royal secretary tone as she shouted, “If you understand, then put some effort into improving things! Do you have any idea how much you all have put me thr—?”

Even after revealing her true nature as a terrorist, the habits of long years immersed in royal palace life apparently could not be left behind so easily.

Trine cleared her throat a little and spoke rapidly to gloss things over. “…Well, fine. Thanks to all that, it was easy to infiltrate the royal palace.”

“I suppose it was. For all their lack of practical authority, it is easy for a royal secretary to get into the palace. The background checks for hiring are lax as

well.” La Folia gave Trine a frosty stare as she smiled.

“Even though you were not the *real* Trine Halden with Aldegian nationality, the chances of your being detected were low. You captured a young girl of similar height during study abroad, adopted her identity, and infiltrated an enemy nation, positioning yourself as an official at the very center of the government—a common method employed by spies.”

“Spies…?”

Yukina’s shoulders quavered at La Folia’s abrupt word. The silver-haired princess was suggesting that Trine was no simple terrorist, but a spy assigned by some country or other.

Trine did not deny the princess’s words.

“Goodness, you truly are a wily one, La Folia Rihavein. Oh, what will I do? Is that composure because you realized the true reason we have abducted you?” Trine inquired in a loathsome tone.

The silver-haired princess maintained a tranquil expression as she observed Trine. “Your true objective is the destruction of the Warlord’s Empire fleet participating in the naval review.”

Yukina unwittingly let out a questioning voice. “Destruction of a fleet…?”

The naval review of which La Folia spoke must have meant the international naval review that was the backdrop of the peace commemoration ceremony scheduled for that day. The display of a number of warships made it a military parade, but the objectives were military interaction and an improvement of relations. Numerous fleets from friendly nations were participating. Of course, among them were warships from the Warlord’s Empire, the other chief participant in the peace commemoration ceremony.

But if that Warlord’s Empire fleet was destroyed, it would be war. It would be nothing like terrorism akin to the attack on the royal palace. Yukina did not think they were capable of such a thing.

“It is not impossible. Not with the *Bifrost*.”

La Folia bluntly repudiated Yukina’s prediction.

“*Bifrost*…!”

Yukina’s expression tightened as she shifted her eyes to her own feet.

Yukina knew of the existence of the *Bifrost*, the ultra-large armored airship constructed by Aldegia. However, it had never occurred to her that she had already been brought inside of it.

Yukina’s supposition that the room was inside a ship was not incorrect, but nor was it completely accurate. Now she keenly understood why La Folia had only given her a “passing grade.”

“Yes. With this flying battleship, the pride of the kingdom of Aldegia, it is a simple matter to sink several of the Empire’s piffling warships. Even if they are not completely annihilated, the fact that Aldegia will have attacked the Warlord’s Empire shall remain.” Trine gazed at the surprised Yukina with amusement as she continued. “Disrupting the commemoration ceremony via terrorism will likely have no effect whatsoever upon the peace treaty between Aldegia and the Warlord’s Empire, but if an Aldegian battleship attacks Warlord’s Empire warships, it is another story. I suppose war between humanity and Demonkind shall erupt in this land once more.”

“The biometric signature of an Aldegian royal is required to activate the *Bifrost*,” La Folia calmly pointed out.

Trine’s lips faintly twisted.

Warships and military aircraft rarely had ignition keys or the like. After all, a weapon that couldn’t be moved for a stupid reason like misplacing a key was meaningless.

However, there were exceptions to this rule, such as nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. Strategic weapons able to inflict mass destruction, and thus with great political and diplomatic effects, were strictly locked under normal circumstances so that none but the nation’s leaders could make the decision to employ them.

Just like those things, the *Bifrost* had no doubt been designed so that none but the royal family might activate it. In other words, this was proof the *Bifrost* had power rivaling that of a strategic weapon.

La Folia continued staring straight at Trine as she smiled. “The demand to halt the ceremony and release sorcerous criminals was false information to make people believe I am purely a hostage. Meaning, your real objective was to take me as the key to activate the *Bifrost*.”

“Correct.” Trine shrugged, glaring right back at the silver-haired princess. “You will cooperate with us, won’t you, Your Highness La Folia Rihavein?”

“And just what would make me cooperate with you?” La Folia narrowed her blue eyes as she tilted her head slightly. Though she was an abductee and a captive, she was negotiating with Trine on equal terms.

Those bold words elicited a provocative smile from Trine.

“Perhaps the eight hundred thousand lives of the citizens of Verterace?”

“You are claiming that if I do not obey you, you shall have Verterace destroyed?”

The smile on the princess’s lips vanished.

Trine made a show of lowering her eyes in sadness. “If possible, we would rather not behave in such a manner. After all, our objective is the abrogation of the Holy Ground Treaty, not the genocide of the Aldegian people.”

“What proof do you have that you will destroy Verterace?”

“That is what he is here for. Isn’t that right, Kojou?”

Trine snuggled into Kojou like she wanted to be pampered. Kojou, who’d been watching the conversation between Trine and the princess with boredom to that point, nodded with an impetuous smile.

“Sen…pai…?”

An expression of disbelief came over Yukina as he gently stroked Trine’s hair.

It wasn’t the behavior of someone forced to comply because of a hostage situation. The atmosphere felt not simply intimate, but that of a pair of lovers infatuated with each other.

Noticing Yukina’s reproachful gaze, Kojou lowered his gaze with a look of anguish. Covering his eyes with his right hand, he spoke with a grandiose,

theatrical tone.

“Forgive me, Himeragi. This is simply my duty as the inheritor of a great accursed power. Now I am a slaughterer devoted to Lady Trine’s ideals. The Kojou Akatsuki you two once called friend no longer exists.”

Making some kind of supposedly cool pose she didn’t recognize, Kojou gave a nod, intoxicated by his own lines.

Staring intently at the sight of Kojou acting so strangely, Yukina asked a sincere question.

“…Excuse me?”

3

“So in other words, Kirasaka, during the time you were sleeping on Kojou’s bed, Kojou vanished?” Asagi asked.

Dawn had arrived in Tenotia House. In a guest room drinking a cup of thick coffee the housekeeper had brought, Asagi put a hand to her brow.

Sayaka gulped and nodded, her entire body cringing like a little child being scolded.

“E-even though I was sleeping on Kojou Akatsuki’s bed, I was sleeping soundly because I fell for the hypnosis I was trying to use, nothing else. It is not to mean we were sleeping together in the same bed.”

“Ahh, it’s all right, I get that part.”

Asagi sighed a little as she picked up the five-yen coin with a strand of hair tied to it.

She knew that over the last several days, Sayaka’s assignment to government VIP protection and guiding around Kojou and the others had left her frighteningly busy. The girl probably hadn’t slept at all since the previous night. It wasn’t particularly strange that she’d fallen asleep first trying to use hypnosis on someone else.

But on the other hand, Sayaka was an expert in ritual spells, so Asagi had

some doubts about her making such a rookie mistake. If anything, it seemed more sensible to assume someone had used some spell or ability to force her into a slumber.

“So there are signs of Kojou having gone to wash up, and this was left behind in the bathroom?”

Speaking those words, Asagi spread the dropped article Sayaka had retrieved before her eyes. It was part of a woman’s outfit, a sort of shapewear.

“What’s this? Is this a corset?”

Taking the item from Asagi’s hands, Yaze gazed upon it like it was a rarity. It was a high-end, fashionable corset worn over a skirt. It didn’t seem very functional, but it most certainly came off as high-class.

“Has a good smell, huh? Perfume?” Yaze sniffed at it intensely like a dog.

Sayaka glared at him in disgust. “Why, you… You’re sniffing it?! A woman’s clothing, out of the blue…!”

“Let me see,” Asagi said, taking back the corset and bringing her face close.

“There certainly is a scent. It’s like musk, but a little different…”

“Asagi Aiba, even you…!”

“I think this is one of those corsets the female officials working in the royal palace wear for their uniforms. They were cute, so I paid a bit of attention to them,” Asagi said as she tapped the keyboard of the laptop in front of her. The screen was displaying employee information for the female officials appointed to the royal palace. She was peeking at the royal palace’s human resources data without authorization.

Being directly after a terrorist attack had taken place, virtually all palace staff were working. It seemed that even the ones off duty had been recalled to deal with the cleanup and to aid the police in their investigation. The staff who had been working without sleeping a wink since the night before were far from few.

Among them, there was a single female official away from her workplace, absent without leave.

“Here. Second Secretary of the Royal Family, Trine Halden. She left the royal

palace just after the terrorist attack occurred last night and remains missing. On top of that, she used her ID card to enter Tenotia House afterward."

"So this chick's the one who whisked away Kojou?" Yaze curled his lips as he gazed at the portrait displayed on the computer's screen. "Hmm."

The person in the photo was wearing glasses, which gave her an air of competence. Her age was twenty-seven, according to the records. She had black hair, relatively rare among Aldegians, and apparently she had gone to Lotharingia as a foreign exchange student. The royal secretary uniform she was wearing was the same corseted outfit the perpetrator had left behind.

"If a royal secretary was one of the terrorists, it would explain the craftiness with which the princess was abducted," Asagi commented with a grimace.

Now that she thought of it, the oddly apt timing with which the demon beasts were sent in and the abnormal accuracy of the teleportation gate were both possible because someone inside the royal palace was pulling the strings.

"Can you track her down?" Sayaka asked, staring at the side of Asagi's face.

Asagi nodded. Without touching the keyboard, she said, "Doing it right now. How about it, Mogwai?"

"Bingo, li'l miss," The AI avatar that was Asagi's partner replied with a sardonic tone. Apparently, the car driven by Trine Halden with Kojou on board had been firmly caught by security cameras on a main thoroughfare.

The destination predicted from analysis of the images was brought up on-screen along with a photo. When Yaze set eyes on it, the stiffening of his expression was obvious to everyone.

"They were heading to Askola Air Force Base…?"

"…I see now. No wonder we couldn't find them no matter how much we searched up and down inside Verterace. Even I didn't go as far as hacking military facilities."

Asagi lowered her shoulders with visible admiration. An official military facility was a complete blind spot where a terrorist safe house was concerned. Military personnel were supposedly aiding in the search for La Folia, but no doubt even

they never imagined the princess was incarcerated on one of their very own bases.

“Why would the Aldegian Air Force kidnap their own country’s princess?” Sayaka asked, flummoxed.

Asagi slowly shook her head side to side.

“Just because it’s an air force base doesn’t mean air force troops are the ones who did it, right? If the terrorists have a royal secretary working for them, it wouldn’t be strange for them to have soldiers among the kidnappers, too.”

“R-right. I suppose so…but why an air force base, I wonder? Do they plan to fly a plane and escape?” Sayaka inquired further.

“If they planned that, a civilian business jet would do. Air force planes are monitored a lot more strictly,” Yaze pointed out. He furrowed his brow and sank into thought. Asagi tilted her head without a word.

It was the laughing “heh-heh” of a badly sewn teddy bear avatar that broke the silence.

“Looks like an Aldegian flying battleship is moored at Askola Air Force Base.”

“A flying battleship? The heck?” Asagi replied.

For some reason, Mogwai smiled proudly on-screen.

“First ship of the flying battleship class, Bifrost*—their latest and greatest ultra-large armored airship.”*

“It’s huge.” Yaze was transfixed by the image on-screen. “What the hell is this thing?”

On standby in the airspace above the Air Force Base was a twin-torsoed, armored airship that resembled a pair of blue whales joined at the flanks. The sight felt surreal thanks to the lack of objects in the vicinity to compare to, but the sheer enormity of it was obvious nonetheless. He felt like he really was staring at a battleship floating in the sky.

“It has firepower rivaling a missile destroyer, but its speed is eight times that of the average destroyer,” Asagi explained, her voice mixed with both praise and exasperation. “On top of that, it has reinforced armor on par with a tank.

Calling it a monster is an understatement. Its downfall is that its construction costs are too high, and it's very difficult to control. No way you'd get something like this to fly the skies without Aldegian sorcerous technology."

By any normal kind of thinking, constructing an overly huge armored airship was basically meaningless. The doctrine of great ships and huge guns was no longer practical in the present age. It was a different story with Aldegia, though. This was because Aldegia was the world's only possessor of the technology to equip airships with spiritual reactors.

The vast spiritual energy generated by these reactors gave Aldegian armored airships movement capabilities exceeding those of passenger planes, along with great defensive strength. They were many times faster than normal warships and turned into flying fortresses in the airspace of whatever city they arrived at. That was the true nature of the flying battleship called the *Bifrost*.

"On top of it being locked up tight, activating it involves a magical ceremony that's a pain in the neck, so even hijacking it doesn't mean you can make it budge, but there's a shortcut for emergencies. Looks like you can force it to start up if you have an Aldegian royal family biosignature."

Listening to Mogwai's explanation, Yaze clicked his tongue. "So that's what the princess was abducted for…"

He had only wispy fragments of information, but he felt like he'd neatly clicked them together in his head. Unfortunately, the picture they formed was a forecast of the worst possible future.

"This is really bad. If they attack with something like that, it'll make the tarrasques look like mice. They could blow the commemoration ceremony site sky-high."

Asagi checked the time. It would soon be eleven AM. Many participants had already begun gathering at the commemoration ceremony site. As the crow flew, it was less than thirty kilometers from Askola AFB to the ceremony site. The *Bifrost* could cover that in ten minutes flat.

The firepower of the so-called flying battleship *Bifrost* could turn the peace commemoration ceremony site into a sea of flames. If the terrorists' objective was to obstruct the commemoration ceremony, there was surely no more

effective means of doing so.

With his synthetic voice, Mogwai further fanned their concerns. *“Heh-heh. It’d be great if it was just the commemoration ceremony.”*

“What do you mean?”

“There’s an international naval review scheduled for after the peace commemoration ceremony.”

“Naval review?” Asagi blinked, confused.

“Means a warship parade,” Yaze explained. “You invite other countries’ ships with various objectives like promoting peace and deepening interrelations… Well, basically, it’s a sideshow. It’s fun to watch big ships together, right?”

Mogwai made an amused nod in the middle of the screen.

“There’s gonna be several Warlord’s Empire warships participating in the naval review, too. They should be entering Aldegian waters right about now.”

“Th…this is no joke!” Asagi’s face was flushed as she glared at her laptop. “If an Aldegian flying battleship sinks a Warlord’s Empire fleet, begging forgiveness on hands and knees won’t cover it. This could end up a full-blown war between demons and humanity…!”

“This isn’t good…”

The usual flippancy in Yaze’s voice had vanished. Asagi grabbed her childhood friend’s collar, practically wringing his neck with anger.

“It’s beyond not good! I’m saying it could be a war!”

“No, I don’t mean that. This Trine Halden chick whisked Kojou away, right? Not just the princess. Doesn’t that mean Kojou’s on the flying battleship, too?”

“Ah…”

Asagi made a very slight sound as her face paled.

The *Bifrost* may have been a powerful weapon, but it could not compare to the absolute might possessed by the Fourth Primogenitor’s twelve Beast Vassals. It was possible for them not just to sink one Warlord’s Empire ship, but the entire fleet, for that matter.

If Trine Halden had some kind of way to control Kojou, the possibility she would command him to attack the Warlord's Empire war fleet was high. If that happened, it would no longer be an issue between Aldegia and the Warlord's Empire. The war would envelop Itogami Island as well, and perhaps even Japan.

"Kirasaka!"

"I—I get it. I'll contact the royal palace immediately! We have to stop the *Bifrost* from starting up…!"

"Unfortunately, looks like it's too late for that," Mogwai said in a mocking tone of voice.

"Too late…?" prompted back Sayaka, bewildered.

Mogwai chuckled out of pity for her. *"The* Bifrost*'s activation sequence just started. It'll be, oh, two minutes until it's complete. The princess's biosignature check is complete. This flying battleship's taking off."*

4

Trine led Yukina and La Folia to the *Bifrost*'s bridge. Kojou remained at Trine's side the entire time. He was acting not so much as her bodyguard than like a host club employee for a female customer. Or perhaps the atmosphere he gave off was more like that of a kept man on an older woman's leash.

There was an eight-person crew already deployed on the bridge. The *Bifrost* had begun preparing to activate.

Noticing their presence, the crew bowed to Trine as one.

"So they have already taken control of the *Bifrost's* crew as well," La Folia noted, surveying the bridge.

Trine had brought in other insurrectionists, but aboard the bridge, everyone was a regular crew member. However, they obeyed Trine's orders, not those of the princess, La Folia. As with Kojou, Trine was manipulating them through her ability.

La Folia remained calm. "As with aircraft, flying battleships only require a small number of personnel compared to that of normal ships, but it seems that

has backfired upon us. No, I assume your plan intentionally took advantage of this weakness."

If it were a normal warship, even a destroyer class, a crew of nearly a hundred—shift replacements included—would be required for the ship to exhibit its proper capabilities. However, the *Bifrost* required only sixteen core personnel. Apparently, Trine was capable of completely controlling that number of people.

Entering the middle of the bridge, Trine demanded, "This room is a little hot, Kojou. Undress me."

"With pleasure, Lady Trine."

Kojou swiftly approached Trine from behind and pulled her non-slip sleeves down her arms, exposing her skin for all to see. Her shoulders and arms were bare. The open-back top displayed her skin from behind, and a cut-out on the front accentuated her cleavage. The scent of her lascivious perfume wafted throughout the bridge.

"This too, Kojou."

Boldly sitting in the seat provided for the admiral of the fleet, Trine thrust her right leg out toward Kojou. *Take off my stocking*, was her implied command.

"Leave it to me."

Bending down on one knee, Kojou reached his hand toward Trine's thigh. Setting eyes upon the spectacle, Yukina's brows rose high, eyes wide.

"Wha—?!"

"Oh my, what is it, Yukina Himeragi? You're making such a frightening face." Trine's voice was frigid.

Yukina clenched her fists, shoulders trembling as she endured the humiliation.

During that time, Kojou took off the stocking on Trine's right leg, taking her left leg in hand next.

"Thank you, Kojou. A reward from your Big Sis."

"I am deeply honored."

Kojou gently kissed the top of Trine's outstretched left foot. Yukina clenched

and ground her teeth. Her face reddened in anger.

“This cannot be… But how…?! Vampires are supposed to be immune to mind control magic…!”

She had half disbelieved her eyes to that point, but Kojou’s action that moment confirmed it. He was not grudgingly obeying Trine because Yukina and La Folia had been taken hostage. Trine had taken complete control of his mind.

However, as a vampire primogenitor, Kojou had a strong resistance against magic, and it was said the resistance to magic that interfered with the mind was particularly strong. The only one who’d managed to control Kojou in the past was Yuuma Tokoyogi, a witch. However, that was not control of Kojou’s mind, but the method of using spatial control magic to swap which body their nervous systems were linked to.

But Trine appeared to be controlling Kojou without using a risky method like Yuuma had. Yukina didn’t know how Trine was doing it, which also meant she didn’t know how to free Kojou.

“You have tamed him splendidly, Trine. For future reference, would you teach us the secret of how to make him do as we please?” La Folia inquired.

Trine laughed. “Secret? Hmm, adult charm, perhaps? Oh, I’m so sorry, I said something quite cruel.”

Showing off the accentuated cleavage of her breasts, Trine laughed scornfully to taunt Yukina further. The inside of Yukina’s head went white with rage for a moment.

“Senpai! Please wake up! Why do you have to do what someone like this tells you?!”

Kojou seemed mystified as he looked back at Yukina, her eyes tearful as she glared at him. “What’s wrong, Himeragi? You’re putting that pretty face to waste.”

“Excuse me?!”

Yukina was too upset for words. Curious, Kojou merely watched her tremble in anger. His reaction was so natural that you wouldn’t think he was being

mind-controlled.

“Ahh. Could it be you’re jealous? Don’t worry. You’re cute, Himeragi. That dress looks great on you, too.” Kojou’s tone was haughty, and he gently caressed a lock of her hair.

Then he came to an unnaturally sudden stop. There was an odd silence, almost as if he was trying to remember what he’d been doing.

“Yes, that’s quite enough. Time for playing house is over,” Trine said after a moment, dragging Kojou back toward her. Then she turned toward La Folia, using her chin to indicate the center of the bridge. “Activate the *Bifrost*, La Folia Rihavein.”

Yukina glared at the silver-haired princess as she shouted, “You must not, La Folia…! It might truly mean war!”

La Folia calmly shook her head at the Fourth Primogenitor’s watcher. “The lives of eight hundred thousand citizens of Verterace cannot be replaced. Surely you do not wish for Kojou to commit mass murder, either?”

“No…!”

Yukina’s words lodged in her throat. If La Folia did not activate the *Bifrost*, Trine would probably order Kojou to attack Verterace. In his current state, Kojou would likely burn away the royal capital as Trine commanded. The great atrocity would be Kojou’s to bear.

“Politics is about abandoning all other things for the sake of one’s interests. It is a royal’s duty to make such decisions. If sacrifices are unavoidable, one must select the better future.”

“If war arises between humanity and Demonkind, is that a better future…?!”

“If the gain obtained exceeds the sacrifices, war becomes another political choice.”

Yukina was aghast at the princess’s cruel words. Trine whistled aloud.

La Folia’s emotionless eyes met Yukina’s as she continued. “For over a thousand years, Aldegia has withstood the incursions of the Warlord’s Empire. Our soil has been trampled upon, our people have become casualties—even

now, the grudges linger like a smoldering flame. Not all of my people desire peace."

Yukina could say nothing in return.

"Shall we speak of something more realistic? Aldegia is a nation of magical technology, but that high degree of technology brings about advances in the weaponry that generate warfare. In other words, our country plays a big role in the military-industrial complex. If there is a new war, great profit for us shall surely come about."

"That cannot be…"

"In this world, there are many nations that have not ratified the Holy Ground Treaty, which stipulates coexistence between demons and humanity. They shall surely greet my decision with delight. The Holy Grounds Liberation Organization…yes? Your side shall cooperate as well, Trine?" The princess abruptly turned to Trine.

"Y-yes. I suppose so. Of course," Trine hastily replied. "We have the Fourth Primogenitor. We have no fear of the Warlord's Empire."

"I am relieved to hear those words." La Folia nodded in satisfaction. She walked in front of the captain's chair and gently placed her right hand upon a semispherical panel.

"By the command of La Folia Rihavein, Crown Princess of Aldegia—awaken, *Bifrost*."

The panel faintly lit at the same time La Folia spoke her command. There was a vibration through the flying battleship's giant hull as instruments within the bridge went into motion one after another.

"Was that all? Is the *Bifrost* active now?" Trine murmured, disappointed at how the ceremony had ended with a whimper.

La Folia turned to her with a smile. "Yes. However, I have made use of the forced activation sequence using royal family biometric signatures prepared for emergencies. It cannot engage in regular operational activities that use the formal command structure."

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that with the exception of ballistic weapons, the weapons of the *Bifrost* remain locked. The sorcerous armaments require a separate confirmation from me.”

“So without the princess’s leave, it cannot utilize its full capabilities?” Trine clicked her tongue in annoyance.

She glanced at the man sitting in the captain’s chair. The captain, wearing a Knights of the Second Coming uniform, gravely nodded in confirmation. “That is true.”

“How troublesome.” Trine’s shoulders sank. Perhaps Trine had intended to eliminate La Folia as soon as she had finished activating the *Bifrost*. However, against her expectations, she required La Folia’s continued cooperation.

La Folia smiled at Trine, speaking to her with a tone of equality until the very end. “You need not hold back. When combat commences, I shall lend you my power.” She paused before adding, “I must say, that gave me quite a sweat. Prepare a bath, would you?”

“Wh-what?” The abrupt demand made Trine gawk, completely forgetting about her grievances against the princess. With a weary sigh, she commanded one of the crew members, “Take them to the bath.”

“Let us be off, Yukina. We shall surely meet Kojou again later…”

The silver-haired princess gave a polite gesture before setting off toward the bathroom.

Yukina felt faintly dizzy as she reluctantly followed behind La Folia.

5

Amazingly, the *Bifrost*’s interior was furnished with a large Japanese-style hot bath and even came fully equipped with its own sauna. According to the princess, Aldegia was the land where saunas first began, and so many domestic homes came with them installed.

Yukina and La Folia were sitting on a wooden bench, wearing nothing but the

bath towels wrapped around their bodies. It was usual Aldegian custom to enter a sauna wearing swimsuits, but naturally, swimsuits had not been prepared for them.

“It truly does feel good to sweat it out in a sauna. I have heard that Japanese warships are also provided with baths, but let us say that an armored airship with a sauna is something you will only find in Aldegia. The system employs excess heat from the spiritual reactor’s cooling system, making it environmentally friendly.”

“R-right.” Yukina could only stare at the princess, who was quite proud of her country, with a vague expression.

Certainly the *Bifrost*’s sauna was rather extravagant, well worth her boasting. It even came with a television and its own water supply, allowing one to pass the time in comfort.

“Wait, did you really only want to take a bath?! I was quite certain you had some kind of plan in mind…!”

“My. The bathroom is the optimal place to put one’s thoughts in order. It is said that a famous scientist of old discovered the principle of buoyancy while bathing and was so overjoyed that he was still naked as he ran out into the streets.”

La Folia smiled softly as she used a towel to wipe some sweat off her cheeks.

Thanks to the towel wrapped around her long hair, Yukina could see more of her slender neck than usual. The princess’s white skin was ever so faintly red from the rush of blood. Even with a bath towel covering her body, her curves were easy to notice. In the bath, La Folia looked divinely beautiful, enough to justify the praise of her as the Second Coming of Freya. Yukina was of the same gender, and even she was taken by the sight.

Yukina was, however, aware that the situation did not permit them to take their sweet time in the sauna.

“We have no time for leisurely conversation! At this rate, a war truly might begin!”

“I understand that. However, Trine brought over twenty soldiers of unknown

nationality with her. Adding to them the Aldegian knights in thrall to her, the enemy's fighting capacity grows further still. Even you cannot neutralize such numbers by yourself."

"That is, true, but…" Yukina nodded with chagrin.

Sword Shamans were the Lion King Agency's specialists in anti-demon combat, but they were not well suited to fighting large groups. This was a team of soldiers under a unified command—furthermore, it would be difficult to overcome even a single one of the elite Aldegian knights.

"Moreover, Kojou is on Trine's side. He is not someone you can defeat. If you meant to destroy him with the Schneewaltzer, it would be another story, but…"

"Destroy…senpai…? With Snowdrift Wolf…?" Yukina bit her lip.

If Kojou was going to attack Verterace City or the Warlord's Empire fleet, it was Yukina's duty to stop him. She had not forgotten that. Fortunately, the weapon to do so remained at Yukina's side that very moment.

"Wait a second," Yukina said, thinking. "If Miss Trine is controlling senpai with magic, perhaps Snowdrift Wolf's ability can nullify it."

"No, that is likely futile," La Folia refuted, destroying Yukina's last thread of hope. "You said it yourself, Yukina. Mind control magic does not work upon vampires, because they possess a strong resistance to it."

Yukina's voice, akin to a shriek, echoed throughout the sauna room. "Then how did senpai end up as Miss Trine's minion…?!"

La Folia gazed at the distraught Yukina and gently nodded. "Indeed. If we cannot solve that mystery, we have no chance of victory. But if we can…"

Yukina's voice turned soft, as if she were praying. "I see… If we can bring senpai back to his senses, then…"

"Yes. If Kojou is on our side, the number of Trine's subordinates is irrelevant. The Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor could surely sink this *Bifrost* with a single blow." La Folia gently smiled before she then cast her gaze downward with a modicum of gloom. "Unfortunately, I question whether Kojou is truly without sanity as it stands. It looked to me as if he was obeying Trine of his own

will.”

“Not senpai… Even for him, that surely is not…” Yukina tried to stand up for Kojou, but her voice faltered.

“If we avert our eyes from the truth, we will not see who the real enemy is,” La Folia scolded before softening her tone. “It is all right, Yukina. Believe in yourself. If you, his watcher, cannot take back Kojou’s heart, then who can? Take Kojou back from Trine.”

“But…what can—? What should I do…?”

Yukina grasped the edge of her bath towel, her voice trembling. Recalling Kojou at Trine’s feet sickened her. Her heart was cracking. She was feeling all sorts of dark emotions she hadn’t known she could.

La Folia gently touched a hand to Yukina’s chin, narrowing her beautiful eyes. “You need not worry. You possess a weapon Trine does not.”

“What…might that be?”

Gazing down at her towel-wrapped chest, Yukina let out a weary sigh.

She was aware that she had a small figure in every way, but she’d never dwelled upon it before. However, when she saw Trine’s demeanor and the blatant way she flaunted her cleavage, she could not help but feel a fair bit outclassed. *Men and boys alike really are weak to breasts, I suppose*, she earnestly believed, among other things that ought not to have mattered to her.

La Folia interrupted those melancholic thoughts.

“It seems the commemoration ceremony is about to begin…”

The princess was looking at the screen of the TV built into the sauna room wall. It was a live broadcast from the peace commemoration ceremony site.

With the time of the ceremony’s commencement impending, leaders from various nations, Aradahl, representing the Warlord’s Empire, and people from the Royal Family of Aldegia were already gathered at the site. Yukina spontaneously raised her voice when she spotted an unexpected individual among them.

“Princess La Folia…?! How?!”

She caught sight of a princess all dressed up, standing beside the Aldegian king and queen at the ceremony site. Her long hair was tied up, adorned with a tiara, but her lovely face and characteristic blue eyes made plain that this was La Folia herself. Not a single citizen watching the broadcast would have any doubt about the sight.

“So they have prepared a substitute…I see. So that is the play.”

La Folia broke into giggles as she touched her sweat-drenched cheek. That was when Yukina finally registered the existence of one other girl with an external appearance greatly resembling La Folia’s.

“K-Kano…?!”

“Grandmother’s craftiness at work, it would seem. Tee-hee, this has become quite interesting.” La Folia was genuinely amused by the sight.

There at the ceremony site, Kanon had a somewhat tense-looking expression but steadfastly fulfilled her duty as princess even so. Of course, Kanon was of smaller stature than La Folia, and her face was a bit younger, but it wasn’t enough of a difference that someone would notice on a TV broadcast. The ordinary citizens visiting the site and watching from a distance were even less likely to notice.

“Now then, surely Trine expected that faith in the Royal Family of Aldegia would be lost due to my absence from the commemoration ceremony, but now our positions are reversed. The terrorists so widely publicizing their achievement of kidnapping a princess shall now be deemed simple liars.” La Folia couldn’t help laughing. Once her fit of giggles subsided, she caught her breath and resumed a serious manner. She continued her speculation.

“Surely it was not Trine’s faction alone seeking to hinder the commemoration ceremony, so one false move and they shall be seen as the associates of liars. This leaves Trine and her people with few options.”

The walls of the sauna suddenly shook.

A weighty sound echoed, possibly of an enormous engine shifting gears. The floor seemed to tilt as they were struck by an odd feeling of acceleration.

“The *Bifrost* is…!”

Yukina exclaimed as she realized the truth behind the roar and the acceleration. The ship, which had remained unobtrusively moored up to that point, had finally gone into motion.

“Yes. Now that Trine cannot hope for chaos to arise at the ceremony site, she is forced to put the *Bifrost* into motion. This will convey to the royal palace that I am present. Others have likely realized it already, however—”

The princess shifted her gaze to the sauna room’s little window. The only thing she had seen through it was a serene blue sky without a single cloud, but now, through the corner of that window, a dark, birdlike silhouette was hovering.

Yukina audibly drew in her breath when she realized what the dark spot truly was.

It had pale-blue armor that glimmered like a glacier. It was adorned with gold and bore the emblem of a Valkyrie wielding a great sword.

It was another armored airship, one that had once visited Itogami Island and participated in the war of the primogenitors— The *Böðvildr*, flagship of Aldegia’s Knights of the Second Coming.

6

“Not good. The *Bifrost*’s taken off.”

On the bridge of the armored airship *Böðvildr*, Yaze’s voice went shrill as he gazed through a spare pair of binoculars.

The flying battleship that was supposed to be on standby at the air force base was now raising anchor and gaining altitude. Its ferocious speed was impressive for its enormous size.

As it floated in midair, the *Bifrost*’s enormity was far greater than it seemed on video. Even the *Böðvildr*, which was over a hundred and fifteen meters long, felt puny and frail before the might of the flying battleship.

Asagi sank into thought, gazing at the flying battleship with a sober look. “It was floating to begin with, so the more accurate term is ‘rising.’”

“Is this really the time for splitting hairs?!” Sayaka growled, gripping her silver long sword. She could not conceal the nervousness on her face.

The activation of the *Bifrost* made it certain that the kidnapped La Folia and Yukina were inside the ship. However, knowing their whereabouts didn’t leave the group with any means of rescuing the girls. That fact grated upon Sayaka.

Queen Mother Musette was sitting in a seat reserved for royalty as she posed a question to the captain of the armored airship with a grave expression. “So we were not in time, just as I feared… Captain, your message to the base commander…?”

It had not even been forty minutes since Sayaka and the others realized Trine Halden’s whereabouts. Musette’s reaction after receiving their report had been swift.

Instantly contacting the knights, she had also called the *Böðvildr*, on patrol over the royal capital’s airspace, over to Tenotia House. Then she personally boarded the ship and headed straight to Askola AFB. Having experienced several wars during her time as queen, her actions were overwhelmingly decisive.

However, even with the queen mother’s lightning-swift response, they had been unable to stop the *Bifrost* from activating because their communications with Askola Air Force Base had been severed at the time.

The middle-aged captain, whose weathered face looked like a pirate’s, stroked his beard with a weighty look on his face. “My message got through, but the base interior seems largely in chaos. Apparently, those tarrasques have been rampaging inside the base, and there are a great many casualties.”

“To buy time until they finished preparing to activate the *Bifrost*? Hmph.” The queen mother let out a snort.

Thanks to the tarrasques invading the base interior, not even the base’s air traffic controllers had noticed the *Bifrost*’s activation. Trine’s scheme was ongoing.

However, the restoration of communications suggested that the chaos within the base was all but wrapped up.

“Askola AFB’s fighters are being scrambled. The commander’s venting that he’ll stop the *Bifrost* even if they have to shoot a hole in her engines.”

The queen mother solemnly nodded. “We cannot allow the *Bifrost* to head out to sea. I support the base commander’s judgment.”

The *Bifrost* was the kingdom of Aldegia’s most important asset, but this did not mean they could stand and watch as it attacked a foreign nation’s fleet. If it was going to be the trigger for a war, shooting it down beforehand was the natural judgment to make.

Even if it was an armored airship with high maneuverability, the *Bifrost*’s handling was far inferior to that of a fighter jet. Furthermore, the exposed air supply and exhaust ports of the engine were critical vulnerabilities for any airship. It took destroying only the engine to stop the ship without any concern that hostages inside would be harmed.

Listening to the conversation between the captain and the queen mother, the bridge of the *Böðvildr* was enveloped by an air of relief. But— The sensor operator’s report froze the nearly-relaxed air in an instant.

“Captain, powerful demonic energy reading above the *Bifrost*! Detectable limit breached!”

The demonic energy emanating from the flying battleship increased in density and changed into the form of an enormous summoned beast. That mass of energy became a vampire’s Beast Vassal.

“Natra Cinereus! Why is Kojou Akatsuki’s Beast Vassal…?!” Sayaka trailed off, realizing how grave the situation had become.

The enormous beast shrouded in silver-colored armor was the fourth Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor—the phantom beast that represented the vampiric ability of mist.

Concealing oneself by transforming into mist was a basic ability possessed by many vampires. Natra Cinereus took this ability further; the Fourth Primogenitor could change not only himself but any and every type of matter in the surrounding area into mist. Furthermore, any slip of control over this Beast Vassal and there was no guarantee the matter would return to its original form.

Natra Cinereus was troublesome to use safely—difficult to use for anything save destruction.

The silver-colored carapaced beast's ability had been turned upon the runway of Askola Air Force Base.

Silver mist spread forth, completely covering the runway. Then, when wind dissipated the mist, the runway had vanished from sight. All that remained was the cruelly gashed surface of the ground—Kojou's Beast Vassal had annihilated the runway in an instant.

The destructive spectacle shocked the bridge of the *Böðvildr* into silence.

The Fourth Primogenitor's abilities were simply absurd, and he was Trine Halden's ally—that fact had been driven home to the entire crew.

"Hopefully there aren't casualties, but those fighters sure aren't getting off the ground now," Yaze said.

"We can't expect any support from the Air Force Base, then," Asagi concluded.

The pair was accustomed to the Fourth Primogenitor's absurd powers and had regained their senses first.

Musette held a dignified expression, turning her eyes to the captain in search of agreement. "We shall have to do it ourselves."

"We'll do everything we can, at least," the captain said, scratching his head and grimacing, his thick lips in view. "To be honest, it won't be easy. I never imagined we'd be slugging it out with another airship."

Though a fellow armored airship, the *Böðvildr*'s main role was for transporting and supplying the knights. Its equipped weapons were mainly defensive machineguns and intercepting missiles; it was never intended for a head-on duel with an enemy warship.

The *Bifrost*, on the other hand, was a flying battleship built with the intention of sending it into the front lines of combat. The *Böðvildr* had no chance against it in a straight-up brawl. That was simply the difference in their firepower.

"Found 'em. Both li'l Himeragi and Miss Princess. Nice," Yaze murmured, his

favorite headphones over his ears.

Sayaka jumped at Yukina's name. "Are both of them safe?! Where are they?!"

Yaze closed his eyes, clearing his head as he nodded. "Well, I think I can say they're safe but… What's this echo? A bathroom?"

"…Huh?"

"Er, for some reason, it seems that li'l Himeragi and Miss Princess are in the bath together." Yaze looked bewildered.

La Folia and Yukina, supposed hostages, continued leisurely bathing while the flying battleship went into motion. Naturally, not even Yaze understood the situation whatsoever.

He tilted his head. Sayaka was ferociously thrown for a loop as she closed in on him.

"What do you mean by that?! Even I haven't taken a bath with Yukina for almost a year! For that matter, how do you know this?! Are you peeking?!"

"As if!! I'm just analyzing the surrounding environment from the echo and phase change of the sound!"

"What the? So you're…eavesdropping?"

"Never mind me, dammit! The bad part is Kojou. He's with that Trine chick on the bridge."

Even Sayaka stopped moving when she heard that.

Asagi covered her eyes and shook her head. "Welp."

"We expected this, but it's worst case, huh? So this Trine Halden really is controlling Kojou."

"Control, but…how…?!" Sayaka exclaimed.

Asagi shrugged. "Honey trapping, maybe?"

"That's crazy! Even Kojou Akatsuki wouldn't…probably wouldn't…"

Sayaka faltered, lacking confidence in her rebuttal to Asagi's half-joking comment.

A warning siren abruptly sounded on the *Böðvildr*'s bridge. The captain responded instantly with instructions. Already on red alert, the crew swiftly followed his orders.

"Fire control targeting laser confirmed. Volley incoming."

"Ready the Svalinn System! Evasive maneuvers!"

Lights flashed all across the enormous hull of the flying battleship visible through the window. They were the flashes from a gun volley.

"Spiritual reactor to maximum power. Deploy the Svalinn System!"

"Tactical AI taking navigational control. Executing predicted evasion!"

There was a roar and an impact like a thunderbolt, ferociously shaking the *Böðvildr*'s hull. A pale glow they had called the Svalinn System enveloped the armored airship, which deflected the incoming shells.

"Damage report!"

"Engineering all green. No hull damage. Svalinn System load rate, seven percent," the operator reported.

"…They only hit us with normal shells?" The captain frowned, perplexed.

The *Bifrost* had a more powerful spiritual reactor than the *Böðvildr* did. Had it employed this vast spiritual energy for its sorcerous guns, it would surely have been possible to punch through the *Böðvildr*'s Svalinn System.

A firm smile came over the queen mother. "It would seem La Folia has not lifted the seal on the sorcerous armaments."

Without official orders to launch, using the *Bifrost*'s sorcerous armaments required the approval of the royal family. As a hostage, La Folia had permitted its activation, but she had not permitted the use of its sorcerous armaments. In other words, the *Bifrost* was unable to employ its full capabilities.

"Now we have a real shot at victory," the bearded captain said. His rueful tone belied his words, though.

Even if the *Bifrost*'s sorcerous armaments were sealed, the difference between the two ships was still too vast. He knew he could not be optimistic

about the situation.

“XO, can the Forseti punch through just the engine?” he asked.

“We can target it. But whether a ship-to-air missile has enough power to breach the *Bifrost*’s armor—”

“Do it!” the captain ordered, silencing the executive officer.

Perhaps accustomed to such rough treatment, the executive officer revealed no particular dismay as he resumed speaking.

“Roger. Forseti One through Four, beginning attack.”

“Forseti One through Four, launching.”

The dull jolt from the launch faintly shook the bridge of the *Böðvildr*.

The ship-to-air Forseti missile was a weapon originally intended to intercept fighter jets and the like. It lacked the force to penetrate the *Bifrost*’s armor and sink it.

However, if the *Bifrost*’s engine absorbed fragments of the missiles, the engine would likely be damaged. Perhaps the other side understood this; their anti-air machineguns put up a barrage to shoot down the incoming missiles.

“Four seconds to impact. No Svalinn System deployment!”

“Please hit…”

The captain brought his hands together, hoping for a miracle. Perhaps his prayers had been answered—three of the four missiles fired slipped through the barrage, reaching the *Bifrost*’s hull.

No matter how stout the flying battleship might have been, no one thought it would emerge unscathed after receiving three missiles simultaneously.

Everyone harbored that hope, yet a dazzling golden flash emerged to protect the ship.

“Wha—?!”

“It’s Regulus Aurum!”

The captain’s shout and Sayaka’s overlapped each other.

The golden flash was the Fourth Primogenitor's Beast Vassal Number Five—an enormous lion imbued with lightning. In an instant, it mowed down all of the incoming missiles, charging back toward the *Böðvildr* at the speed of a thunderbolt.

"E-evade!"

The captain's verbal order was erased by the roar of the impact. The lightning lion's attack breached the Svalinn System defense barrier with ease, inflicting great damage to the Böðvildr's hull. Countless alarms went off on the bridge, and crew members let out various screams.

"Svalinn System limit reached. Starboard engines Three and Four are destroyed. Purging fuel tank."

"From only a graze—such power…!"

Still on the floor after sliding out of his command chair, the captain was in a daze. It wasn't enough damage to cause them to crash; perhaps the Beast Vassal had held back. However, there was no mistaking that their combat capabilities had precipitously diminished. The *Böðvildr* was no longer capable of stopping the *Bifrost* alone.

Yaze, tossed from his seat without any means of breaking his fall, rubbed his back as he rose to his feet. "It's no fair when his Beast Vassals are on the other side! With Kojou, they don't even need the sorcerous armaments!"

"'Twould seem he is not also known as the World's Mightiest Vampire for naught," the queen mother said, dismayed. Not even she had a plan to turn the situation around.

Mere machinegun fire would not penetrate the *Bifrost*'s hull, and the lightning lion would intercept any missiles that did manage to get through. Even without a barrier like the Svalinn System, the flying battleship's defenses were airtight.

However, the *Böðvildr* could not run. The reason the *Bifrost* remained stalled in that airspace was because it was wary of being shot from behind by the *Böðvildr*. If the *Böðvildr* withdrew, Trine would immediately head to annihilate the Warlord's Empire fleet. To stop her plans, they had to neutralize the *Bifrost*

then and there.

“If it was going to come to this, we should’ve brought Natsuki to Aldegia, too.” Asagi ruefully twisted her lips and sighed.

Even Asagi’s capabilities were insufficient to hack and take remote control of an active warship. The only way to seize control of the *Bifrost* was to directly access a terminal inside the ship.

Yaze was deep in thought. “Hmm… If we got inside that ship over there, Kojou couldn’t use his Beast Vassals, either… Huh…”

Without the sorcerous armaments, the *Bifrost* currently had no defense against a sorcerous attack. In other words, it was possible to teleport to invade the ship’s interior.

However, even if they were in combat at relatively short range, the *Böðvildr* and the *Bifrost* were separated by six thousand meters at the least. Natsuki Minamiya, the Witch of the Void, was probably the only one who could jump that kind of distance without any proper preparations.

Sayaka strongly lifted up her head as she seemed to remember something. Asagi and Yaze’s conversation had reminded her about something from during the war of the primogenitors.

“Teleport…!” she exclaimed. “Captain, can we use this ship’s teleportation chamber?”

The captain opened his eyes wide and gaped. “The teleportation chamber, you say?”

The *Böðvildr* was equipped with a spiritual reactor that enabled teleportation. Sayaka knew of its existence because she had used it once previously when La Folia had dragged her along for a ride.

“It’s possible, but it can’t be used multiple times with the spiritual reactor’s current output,” the executive officer explained.

The bearded captain scowled. “So we can’t send over a big force, then.”

Two armored knights could enter the teleportation chamber at most. If people were packed in without weapons, it might support three, maybe four.

He thought that sending such a small number of people onto an occupied flying battleship was essentially meaningless. It was tantamount to sending people to their deaths.

“Then send me. If I can use a terminal on the inside, I can take over the *Bifrost*’s tactical AI.”

Sayaka was shocked as she watched Asagi calmly raise her hand and volunteer.

“A-Asagi Aiba…?!”

With the *Bifrost* cut off from the external networks, Asagi could not employ her power as the Priestess of Cain. She would be nothing more than an ordinary high schooler. Sayaka thought that Asagi leaping into the middle of a bunch of terrorists was pretty much suicidal behavior.

However, Sayaka knew where Asagi was coming from. Asagi wasn’t putting herself in danger to stop a war, but for the sake of her friends—both to free the captive Yukina and La Folia and to ensure Kojou did not slaughter the masses.

“Captain, can you get the access codes to operate the *Bifrost*?” Asagi asked, a pained expression on her face.

“Of course I can do that, but…”

He was doubtlessly conflicted about handing military secrets to a foreigner.

“I mind not, Captain. Please grant them to her,” Musette commanded. She indicated she would take full responsibility. “Justina, you go as well. Protect the Priestess of Cain.”

“As thou commandest, Your Majesty the Queen Mother.”

They heard a voice from out of nowhere. Suddenly, a tall female knight dropped down from ceiling of the bridge. She had short silver hair and a no-slip military outfit customized to resemble ninja garb. This was Interceptor Knight Kataya Justina.

It occurred to them that they hadn’t seen her for a while, but she seemed to have been quietly protecting Asagi and Yaze. She was probably faithfully executing La Folia’s orders.

When Asagi and Justina headed toward the teleportation chamber, Sayaka hastily followed suit. “W-wait, if you need protection, then I’m going, too!”

Preventing international sorcerous terrorism was very much the job of Attack Mages of the Lion King Agency. Sayaka couldn’t just push that duty onto a civilian in high school and leisurely watch from the back row. Besides, Sayaka was a specialist in curses and assassination. Infiltration and sabotage of enemy territory was well within the expertise of Shamanic War Dancers.

Asagi smiled boldly. “Thanks, Kirasaka.” She turned to her friend. “So, Motoki, what are you gonna do?”

“Well, now I’ve gotta go. If I die, I’m holding a grudge, Kojou…!”

Even if his direct combat skill was meager, Yaze’s ability allowed him to accurately ascertain the state of things inside of the *Bifrost*, a terrifying advantage under the circumstances, and a fact of which Yaze was no doubt well aware. In contrast to his tone of voice, Yaze’s expression seemed amused somehow as he slumped his shoulders.

One of the crew called Sayaka and company to a halt just as they were about to leave the bridge.

“Hold on. There’s an optical message from the *Bifrost*. This is…Her Highness, Princess La Folia?”

Displayed on a monitor was a window of the *Bifrost* from which tiny flashes of light were visible. They were being generated by a ball of light from a beginner-level spell. Apparently, La Folia was sending some kind of message via the blinking light. It was a skillful ploy so that Trine and her allies within the Bifrost would not notice.

“What does La Folia say?” Musette asked a crew member.

The young crew member had an especially perplexed expression while conveying the brief message to the queen mother.

“To…bring the following with all haste.”

The queen mother’s voice overlapped with Asagi’s and Sayaka’s as all three peered at the memo.

“This is…?”

“The heck…?”

“What is the meaning of this?”

That was simply how unexpected the content of the message La Folia had sent turned out to be.

The queen mother touched a hand to her temple as if she had a headache. “Goodness. Just what is that girl thinking…? Justina, can you immediately see to this?”

“As thou commandest.”

The capable knight brought her hands before her chest and bowed, letting Musette know to leave it to her.



Chapter Six
Fireworks

Chapter Six

Fireworks

1

In spite of it being a chilly season, Verterace's central square was enveloped in a feverish air.

A great number of people had gathered from around the kingdom to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the signing of the peace treaty between the kingdom of Aldegia and the Warlord's Empire. There were many visitors from neighboring nations, the Warlord's Empire included, and numerous happy-go-lucky tourists hoping for a glance at the princess's widely praised beauty had traveled to Verterace. Many people were on the rooftops of buildings surrounding the square, watching a parade of dancers, marching bands, and the like that added to the extravagance of the ceremony.

In contrast, Lucas Rihavein, host of the ceremony, waved to the masses from an open-top car as he gazed far into the distance with a grave look on his face. It was in the direction of Askola Air Force Base.

Periodically, small lightning-like flashes flickered at the back of the clear sky. When he focused on his ears, he could hear a low vibration like the rumbling of the sea. Two large armored airships were locked in air-to-air combat.

"The *Bifrost* and the *Böðvildr* are fighting…?!"

Lucas's shoulders trembled at the escorting knight's report.

The Fourth Primogenitor had disappeared. Tarrasques had appeared at the air force base. And a flying battleship had been hijacked.

Despite having ascertained La Folia's location, the situation had only grown worse.

On top of that, he could not move a muscle while he participated in his own ceremony. He could not cause unrest among the large number of citizens and

foreign guests. His complicated position generated a great deal of stress; even as hardy a monarch as he was, he could not conceal his growing nervousness.

"I am told the target of the hijacked *Bifrost* is the Warlord's Empire carrier strike group participating in the naval review," the knight whispered into Lucas's ear. The king uttered a low, irritated groan.

An Aldegian military armored airship intended to attack a Warlord's Empire fleet. Even Lucas could easily imagine the worst-case fallout.

"And the state of the battle?"

"The *Böðvildr* has lost most of its combat functions and is pulling back, but I have been told Interceptor Knight Justina Kataya and a few others are using the teleportation chamber to invade the *Bifrost*'s interior."

"Mmmm."

At the same time Lucas made that low growl, an explosive flash flared in the eastward sky once more. The delighted voices of the masses erased the sound, and virtually no one had noticed even by that point, but it was unclear how long that situation would hold.

The vampire with long black hair sitting beside Lucas asked in a level tone, "Is something amiss, King of Aldegia?"

Velesh Aradahl, Chairman of the Imperial Assembly of the Warlord's Empire—he was said to be of the moderate faction of late, but the valiant aristocrat had achieved great exploits in many past wars against humanity.

Lucas could request his cooperation to put matters to rest, but this would create a heavy debt Aldegia would owe to the Warlord's Empire. Considering the political and financial damage created from such a result, it was not something Lucas could lightly accept.

"Nothing, merely internal discussions. Pay no heed, Duke of Severin," Lucas said. It pained him to say those words.

Aradahl silently stared at the side of the king's face. "Is it related to the attack on the royal palace last night?"

"No, that issue has already been taken care of. As you can see, we have

already rescued La Folia from her abduction.”

Lucas pointed to the silver-haired princess riding in a different vehicle. Disguised as La Folia, Kanon Kanase smiled and waved to greet the people at the roadside. She looked so much like the real La Folia that even Lucas could scarcely tell them apart.

“Hmm. Already rescued, you say.”

As Kanon stood in the vehicle, Aradahl slowly turned toward her and met her gaze. For an instant, his eyes were dyed crimson, and he released a powerful aura akin to a black flame.

To Aradahl, this was nothing more than an ever so slight release of the power he normally kept under strict control. But Kanon was assaulted with a sense of powerful pressure that a normal person would find unendurable. The Demon’s surge of energy was such that even trained soldiers might fall into a state of terror— But Kanon smiled calmly as she let it wash over her. The royal power possessed solely by the women of the Royal Family of Aldegia—spiritual energy so vast that people called it the blessing of the Spirits—canceled out Aradahl’s aura.

“I see. It seems you have not swapped a gemstone with some cheap bauble out of desperation. Understood, King of Aldegia. We shall observe in silence for a little while longer.”

Forgive my rudeness, his nod said to Kanon as he cast a smile Lucas’s way.

Aradahl was suggesting he saw through the deception; Lucas grimaced slightly. Apparently, Aradahl had noticed far earlier the abnormality in the air above the base.

The car transporting Lucas and Aradahl arrived at the ceremony site’s stage.

Stepping out of the car, Lucas thrust a fist above his head, drawing cheers from the assembled masses.

When Aradahl exited next, he, too, was greeted by thunderous applause and cheers. Lucas felt like the voices of young women were more prominent upon Aradahl’s appearance than when he was greeted, but at present, he did not have the luxury of paying that any heed.

The excitement of the masses reached its zenith when Polyphonia and Kanon waved hands toward them. Lucas glanced in the direction of the air force base while the public's attention was poured on Kanon and the queen.

The midair combat was still ongoing, but naturally, he did not know the fine details of the situation at present. If it was only possible, he wished he could cast the ceremony aside and rush to battle that very moment.

"Oh, no you don't, darling. Let us leave this to La Folia and her friends," Polyphonia whispered into Lucas's ear as if she was reading his mind.

"B-but…" Lucas, vexed, clenched his fist and grunted.

To a former knight like Lucas, his being forbidden to join the battle, forced to watch without lifting a finger, was tantamount to torture. A situation with the fate of the kingdom of Aldegia on the line made it that much worse.

But in spite of Lucas's feelings on the matter, the time of the ceremony's commencement was nigh.

Led by the knights, Lucas stepped onto the stage.

Unexpectedly, it was Kanon who opened her lips that moment.

"It will be all right, Your Majesty the King—"

Lucas halted and looked at Kanon, who greeted his surprise with a smile, narrowing her blue eyes. It was a soft smile meant to reassure others.

It was unlikely that she was not feeling the tension from playing the role of La Folia. She was surely worried about her abducted friend. Even so, Kanon gazed at the sky that had become the field of battle.

"Akatsuki and Yukina are there."

Kanon put her unwavering faith in them.

Lucas nodded with an "I see" in spite of himself.

Then, with an expression stripped of all doubt, he headed for the dais.

2

Yukina sighed as she immersed herself in cool water up to the shoulders.

The shocks and vibrations from gunnery shook the surface of the bathwater. It made sense to cool off after being in a hot sauna, but her sense of urgency demanded to know if this was truly the time.

“Um, La Folia? Just how long should we remain in the bath like this?” Yukina asked. The princess was also soaking.

La Folia scooped up some water with the palm of her hand, slowly lifting her face as she looked at the Sword Shaman.

“Yukina, there is something I wish to ask you. Why did you leap into the gate with me when I was being abducted?” La Folia asked abruptly. Her tone was blunt. The lack of the usual silliness she gave off was not like her at all. It was if she was rebuking Yukina.

“As a result of your absence, Trine captured even Kojou,” the princess continued. “As the watcher of the Fourth Primogenitor, were your actions not excessively rash?”

“That is…exactly right, La Folia.”

Yukina made no attempt at excuses. She knew she was at fault.

If she’d been at Kojou’s side, Trine would not have been able to waltz in and take control of him like that. That it happened at all was because of Yukina’s own failings. As a result of her actions, it was not only the princess’s life on the line but also those of Aldegia and the Warlord’s Empire—no, people around the world would be exposed to the dangers of war.

“However, it was possible that the terrorists here would simply murder you without responding to negotiations whatsoever,” Yukina refuted. “I could not just stand and watch knowing that you might be killed, could I?”

“Are you saying you made the right decision as a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency?”

“Yes.” Yukina nodded without the slightest doubt.

One aspect of her mission of observing Kojou Akatsuki meant keeping a check upon the latent menace posed by the Fourth Primogenitor.

Normally, he came off as quite laid-back, but Kojou harbored a fundamental, even excessive fear of the people around him getting hurt. This was probably a reflection of his past experiences of being unable to protect his younger sister Nagisa or Avrora.

Though he'd obtained the power of the World's Mightiest Vampire, being able to keep that power in check was largely due to his deep desire to protect others. If La Folia, abducted before his very eyes, was killed by terrorists, just what reaction Kojou would exhibit was profoundly obvious.

He would sink into despair, absolutely unable to forgive the terrorists. He would likely annihilate them all, the people backing them included. And one act of retribution would lead to a string of others as the world was enveloped in a vortex of slaughter.

It was the future that the young man calling himself The Blood, whom she had once met, desired for Kojou.

As Kojou's observer, it was Yukina's duty to prevent this.

To Yukina, the worst possible future was not one where Trine succeeded in her terrorism. The worst would be for harm to befall people precious to Kojou, turning him into a true calamity. She'd judged that she had to protect La Folia to stop that worst-case scenario. She had no regrets about her decision.

"But it is not merely that." As a disappointed expression came over the princess, Yukina hesitated before haltingly adding to her words. "Also, because you are senpai's—no, you are our friend."

La Folia was taken aback. Her eyes, resembling glaciers that would never melt, gazed straight at Yukina until finally, a small voice escaped the princess's lips much like a sigh.

"Tee-hee… Tee-hee-hee…!"

"La…La Folia?"

When the silver-haired princess clutched her belly and her serene voice burst into a fit of giggles, Yukina gawked in abject surprise.

When they'd first met on a deserted island in the Pacific Ocean, La Folia had

said Kojou and Yukina were her friends of a foreign country. That was why Yukina addressed her as such rather than focusing on her political status.

And just as Kojou desired to protect La Folia as a friend, Yukina had a reason to protect her, as well.

“So not because I am a princess, not because the nation known as Aldegia holds any practical advantage for you, but because I am your friend? You truly have beaten me, Yukina. I lose.”

“Eh?”

“Human beings are not swayed by reason and schemes alone. Now that you have brought friendship to the table, my defeat is ensured.”

“O-oh.”

Yukina vaguely nodded, still perplexed by the princess’s words. She didn’t understand what La Folia meant by winning and losing in this context.

La Folia grinned proudly. “It is the same reason why I invited not only Kojou but you to Aldegia as well.”

Yukina had wondered about that, too. Thinking about it rationally, a royal like La Folia had no reason to invite Yukina to Aldegia. And yet, she’d always intended for Kojou, Kanon, and Yukina to come together; she provided tickets for all of them. Yukina was the only one Princess La Folia had invited as a friend on equal terms.

“That is why I ask this, as your friend. Please free Kojou from Trine. This is something only you can do, Yukina.”

The silver-haired princess’s smile vanished as she locked eyes with Yukina. This was probably the first time La Folia had asked anything of Yukina without a scheme in mind.

“But what can I do…?”

Anguished, Yukina shook her head. She was irritated with herself for being unable to meet La Folia’s expectations. She had no idea how to free Kojou from Trine. She felt utterly useless.

However, the princess shook her head with her usual expression of self-

confidence. “Do not worry. Your weapon has arrived.”

“My weapon?”

As the perplexed Yukina asked for clarification, she felt the air suddenly shimmer behind her.

A silver-haired woman wearing a knight’s uniform dropped down from the bath’s ceiling. Yukina had no idea where she’d come from, but she’d apparently crawled her way through the ducts of the *Bifrost*.

“Miss Justina?!” Yukina exclaimed.

“You have done a great deed, Justina. I trust you have brought what I asked for?” La Folia asked, quite pleased and naturally unfazed.

Justina was carrying a small bag of clothing at her side, which La Folia had requested from the *Böðvildr* via a magic-generated optical message. Yukina’s “weapon” of which the princess spoke rested within.

“Also, we have analyzed the tarrasques captured during the royal palace attack—”

“I expected as much. Well done.”

La Folia smiled as she glanced at the device Justina presented to her. Yukina realized what the information meant—this was the analysis of why the terrorists obediently did as Trine commanded.

“Now, let us be off, Yukina. The final touch awaits.”

Clear water droplets scattered from La Folia as she rose to her feet.

“The final touch?” Yukina asked as she also stood. She was suspicious of what exactly the princess meant.

A glimmer of wickedness shone in La Folia’s blue eyes.

“Justina.”

“As thou commandest.”

The silver-haired knight circled around Yukina and grasped her shoulders from behind. La Folia stretched both hands toward the now-immobile Yukina. Yukina had no idea what the well-coordinated teamwork between servant and master

was leading to.

Without the slightest hesitation, La Folia stripped away the bath towel covering Yukina's body.

Yukina stood completely naked within the bathroom as she let out a high-pitched shriek. "Eh?! Ehh…?!"

3

When their teleportation had completed, Sayaka and the others were assaulted by an incredible gust that nearly blew them away. The *Bifrost* was turning while traveling over two hundred kilometers per hour. As a result, something akin to a large-scale typhoon constantly raged across the top of its hull.

"Wait a… The heck is this?! This wind pressure's absurd!"

Sayaka instantly grabbed hold of a railing, dragging Asagi close and pushing her down onto the deck. Long-range teleportation came with margins of error. They couldn't know beforehand where they'd end up when teleporting to the overly enormous *Bifrost*.

"Guess we really couldn't port inside the ship at the drop of a hat," Yaze grumbled after clicking his tongue.

He bit down on a pill. The effect circulated through his entire body as he stepped forward to shield Sayaka and Asagi.

The strength of the raging winds assaulting the girls suddenly weakened. It was almost as if the flow of the wind had changed, avoiding the pair.

"Atmospheric current manipulation…?!" Sayaka exclaimed.

"Hurry! My puny ability won't hold for long!" Yaze yelled to her as he cast a glance backward.

Sayaka nodded and drew her beloved long sword. "Lustrous Scale!"

The silver long sword, imbued with the ability of pseudo-spatial severing, cut through the *Bifrost*'s armor without the slightest resistance, opening a hole just

wide enough for people to get in. The trio proceeded through, tangling together as they fell into the ship's interior.

"Oww… Sorry, Kirasaka. You all right?" asked Asagi, who'd ended up on top of Sayaka.

"Yeah, somehow."

They both rose to their feet, and then Asagi swiftly called Sayaka to a halt.

"Wait a sec, Kirasaka. Your skirt! I can almost see a bit too much! Also, your hair's a mess!"

"Wha—?! Thanks…and Asagi Aiba, your bangs that you put so much work into styling…"

"…Worry about appearances later, you two."

Yaze watched with an exasperated face as Sayaka and Asagi began fussing with their hair and clothes. He put his headphones over his ears. These headphones were not for enhancing his ability, but to protect his overly sensitive sense of hearing.

Examining around them, Sayaka asked, "Where is Miss Justina?"

That knight had assuredly entered the teleportation chamber with them, but she was nowhere to be seen.

"Seems she hooked up with the princess," Yaze reported, full of praise. "That's a ninja for you."

"Nah, it's not like she's actually a ninja. She's just a cosplayer," Asagi joked.

"So what are we gonna do? Right now, we're probably right around here…" Yaze spread open a map of the *Bifrost*'s interior.

The core portions of the twin-fuselage flying battleship were centered on the hull to which the left and right floats were connected. The trio had teleported to a point near those central sections, the closest of which was marked ENGINEERING.

"I'll hijack the tactical AI controlling this ship. Lately, warship computer networks have become distributed systems, so I should be able to access it from

any terminal.”

“Meaning that from here, our objective should be the spiritual reactor control room,” Yaze said. He mumbled in thought, “They probably have the combat information center under strict guard any way you slice it—”

Stopping himself, he suddenly whirled around, on guard. He could hear the footsteps of soldiers running down the corridor.

From those heavy sounds, he determined neither Kojou nor La Folia was with them. By the time Yaze came to this judgment, Sayaka had already drawn her sword and broken into a run.

“Reverberate!”

Two soldiers raised their guns when they noticed Sayaka charging at them. But Sayaka’s hand had already thrown a pair of spell tablets their way. The metallic spell tablets transformed into birds of prey that attacked the soldiers, throwing them off balance as Sayaka slammed fists infused with ritual energy into their abdomens.

Both men, each of far larger than Sayaka, were blown several meters back before fainting from agony.

“That’s just nasty. Well, she sure is dependable in this situation…” Yaze shuddered.

The uniforms worn by the toppled men belonged to neither Aldegian knights nor the Aldegian Air Force. They wore plain black combat suits without a single piece of identifying information. These were probably Trine Halden’s comrades.

Yaze’s brow creased as he muttered, “Annoying.”

They’d have to defeat more than Trine alone.

As they arrived at the spiritual reactor control room, Asagi shouted, “There! A terminal!” She raced over to the console.

The spiritual reactor was running on automatic with no operator visible, but the terminal for maintenance purposes was active.

“What’s with this API?! A homegrown standard?! I figured it’d be something like this, but…!”

“Can you manage, Asagi?”

“Somehow! Aww geez, what a pain in the butt!”

Connecting her laptop to the terminal, Asagi started hacking away. As befitted a cutting-edge warship from a sorcerous technology nation like Aldegia, the *Bifrost*’s control system was complex enough to give even Asagi trouble. Nonetheless, she began analyzing the system at a speed beyond reason, piecing together a program with which to seize control of the ship.

“Kirasaka girlie, enemies on the stairs in back! Four of ’em!”

“K-Kirasaka ‘girlie’…?”

An odd expression came over Sayaka at Yaze’s overly intimate form of address as she scattered spell tablets once more.

Bird-form *shikigami* flew at high speed, rending the limb tendons of the four approaching soldiers with precision. They wouldn’t die from those injuries, but they wouldn’t be moving for a while—it was an attack focused on incapacitation.

However, they were immobile only for a single second.

The entire physiques of the wounded soldiers swelled up, and the supposedly severed tendons fused back together. Their howls were ferocious as they charged into the control room.

“They shrugged it off?!” Sayaka reflexively repositioned her long sword for an attack.

“Beast people!” Yaze shouted, crushing a new pill capsule with his teeth.

“Why are demons working with terrorists who want demonic genocide?!”

“Probably camouflage to throw the investigation off the scent!”

The soldiers pounced toward the perplexed pair.

Sayaka hurled *shikigami* to slow them down, but with their bestialization complete, they were fast enough to beat the flying *shikigami* out of the air. They followed with a counterattack that Sayaka fended off with a pseudo-spatial severing barrier. The soldiers retreated to put some range between

them. Sayaka ducked behind the nearest pillar.

“They’re strong…!” She grunted.

That went for both their individual combat strengths and their seamless teamwork. Sayaka gritted her teeth at the beast people’s discipline, far beyond that of any ordinary terrorists.

However, Sayaka and Yaze had an advantage of their own—they were in the spiritual reactor control room. Fearful of destroying the control equipment with stray bullets, the beast people weren’t using their guns. Plus, fighting in the confines of a cramped room was Sayaka’s specialty as an assassin.

“Blazing/Extermination!”

Sayaka’s surprise attack used illusions and divine arms. After splitting the enemy into separate groups with her spatial severing barricades, she attacked the neck of one soldier standing alone with a needle she kept hidden. This was from the Eight Divine Generals School—that which contained the Lion King Agency’s silent assassination techniques. With his nervous system paralyzed by the needle, he fainted without being able to exhibit the regenerative ability possessed by beast people.

“Full Star/Expiration!”

As her special barricades disappeared, Sayaka crept into the flank of the next soldier. She pounded a blow into his diaphragm—a vital spot for beast people. Sayaka’s palm strike with her physical enchantment toppled the second soldier.

That was as far as Sayaka’s surprise attack went, though.

Right after her attack finished, the third soldier brandished a knife as he lunged for Sayaka’s defenseless back. She had no time either to evade or to pick up the long sword she’d had to let go of in order to launch her palm strike.

However, as Sayaka braced for death, there was a sudden explosion of sound. It was a roar on par with a flash-bang grenade. The soldier’s body wobbled.

“Sound Burst. Works pretty well on beast people with sensitive ears, huh?” Yaze said, relieved.

He’d used his Hyper Adapter power of controlling atmospheric currents to

create a powerful sound vibration out of thin air. Yaze's comment never reached the ears of the now-unconscious soldier.

With that taken care of, Sayaka beat down the fourth and final soldier with her long sword. She'd struck with the back of her blade, a blow infused with a stun curse. Even a beast person would be out cold for several hours.

Unfortunately, it was safe to assume the roar of Yaze's Sound Burst had thoroughly exposed Sayaka and company's invasion of the ship's interior. There was no guarantee they would be able to withstand the next enemy attack.

"Are you done yet, Asagi?!" he asked in a hurry.

"Hijacking a warship isn't that easy! I'm working as fast as I can!" Asagi angrily shouted back, typing commands with one hand.

Guon, went the echo of a weighty sound. Thick shutters closed the front and rear entrances to the control room. Asagi had seized partial control over the ship's interior and used that to lower the emergency bulkheads.

"That's Aldegian cutting-edge tech for you. It'll take a hundred and eighty seconds to fully get a grip on the tactical AI, even with Mogwai's calculation speed."

"I don't know if that's fast or slow, but these bulkheads should last that long, at least…" Yaze sighed weakly. He looked drained as he leaned against the wall.

In the first place, the bulkheads were meant to protect the ship from explosions and fires caused by enemy artillery attacks. It was not as simple a matter as breaching them with mere bullets and hand grenades. Surely they would buy Asagi time until she finished her hacking—that judgment made Yaze relax slightly.

But then Sayaka screamed at him.

"No!! Motoki Yaze, run—!"

"Huh?"

Yaze flung himself to the floor without knowing why.

In an instant, they were struck by a frightening, scalding surge from across the bulkhead. Even a human being who wasn't a magic user could keenly sense the

powerful demonic energy.

A rainbow-hued flash raced across the area. It had come from the arc traced by a sword of light generated from vast demonic energy.

The rainbow-hued sword of light cut through the special alloy bulkhead like it was a thin piece of paper before stabbing the *Bifrost* itself, sending gigantic cracks through its hull. The destructive power was overwhelming, even absurd. In utter silence, Sayaka and the others watched as fragments of the flying battleship turned into tiny pieces of wreckage and fell toward the ground.

Through the gaps in the destroyed hull, they could see a giant Valkyrie with wings of fire spread forth.

Of course, it was no being of the human world. This was a summoned beast from another world, dense demonic energy that had taken material form. It was a vampire's Beast Vassal.

"Minelauva Iris…!"

Sayaka murmured the name of the rainbow-hued Beast Vassal, the sixth one under the Fourth Primogenitor's control. It held an immense power of Severing.

Sayaka and the others gazed at the Beast Vassal's host and master on the other side of the destroyed bulkhead.

There stood an Asian boy wearing a black tuxedo— Kojou Akatsuki.

4

"The World's Mightiest Vampire, huh? Having him as our enemy is a real pain," Yaze muttered. He sounded ready to give up.

The spiritual reactor control room itself was cramped, just large enough for a station wagon to fit in, but thanks to Kojou's Beast Vassal's attack having destroyed one of its walls, it looked a great deal more open. Fitting two or three microbuses in it seemed viable.

On the other side of that excessively ventilated wall stood six soldiers in combat suits, whom Kojou had brought along with him. Nestled at Kojou's side was a young woman wearing revealing clothing; the atmosphere was

completely different from when they'd seen her at the royal palace, but there was no mistaking that this was Trine Halden.

"He sliced the bulkhead…with pinpoint accuracy? Since when…?" Sayaka gaped at him.

Had Kojou been soft in his control, everyone in the control room would doubtlessly have been sliced right along with the bulkhead and annihilated. Yet, Sayaka and the others hadn't suffered a single scratch. In other words, this meant Kojou had complete control over his own Beast Vassal.

"Not quite as pinpoint as you said, though." Asagi clutched her head lightly as she glared at the section of hull destroyed as collateral damage. Thanks to Kojou's attack severing electrical and data transmission cables, she had no choice but to change her hacking route.

"Even so, it's a step up from what he usually does," Yaze said, cheek twitching. "Maybe he's overexerting himself 'cause of the mind control, or maybe he's using the full potential of the Fourth Primogenitor he usually keeps under wraps?"

Sayaka's cheek also twitched. "Put another way, it means it would not be strange if the Beast Vassal went berserk at any moment…"

"Pretty much, yeah…"

In his current state, Kojou was drawing out more power than ought to be the case. At any moment, this delicate balance could collapse and lead to a rampage.

Still seemingly unaware of that risk, Kojou released the summons and melancholically lowered his eyes.

"I have unleashed meaningless destruction once more. Is such my destiny as one cursed by the gods…?"

"…Huh?"

Kojou's abrupt soliloquy left Yaze responding in unwittingly serious fashion. Asagi couldn't hold in her tiny spurt of laughter. Sayaka was left earnestly wondering *What is the meaning of this?*

“Please. Back away, Yaze. I do not want to kill a close, irreplaceable friend. I…I don’t want to hurt any of you…!” Kojou continued in a bombastic manner. It was as if he was a one-man stage act.

“Umm…” Yaze suddenly got the feeling of his back being itchy as he pressed a hand to his chest. “What the heck is he saying? This a side effect of the brainwashing?”

“It kind of feels more like it’s his true, normally hidden nature laid bare?” Asagi suggested. She shot Kojou a look of pity.

Sayaka seemed irritated as she pointed the tip of her long sword toward Trine. “Wake up already, Kojou Akatsuki! You are being deceived by this Trine woman!”

“…Please. Do not blame her.”

Kojou spread both arms wide as if to shield Trine. He had a flair for the dramatic as he made a decisive pose like a dancer at the end of a performance.

“I decided this for myself. I will protect her even if it turns the entire world into my enemy. Yes, this is all a calamity called forth by this abominable power. Do not worry, though. I shall never forget the glimmering days I spent with you on Itogami Island.”

Asagi and Yaze both clutched their heads and cringed as if Kojou had inflicted some kind of psychological attack.

“Ugh… Just, oof…”

“Th-this is getting hard to listen to…”

Sayaka, on the other hand, shook her head firmly. She didn’t understand why Yaze and Asagi were so uncomfortable.

“You won’t get anywhere acting suave like that! Stand down!”

Kojou stared at Sayaka as he closed the distance between them. “So in the end, you would turn your sword on me, Kirasaka?” Kojou smiled, but his eyes looked sad. “It is because of our mutual attraction that we cannot help hurting each other. Now that I think of it, perhaps this was always our fate.”

“M-maybe so” was all Sayaka could sputter out.

No, no, went the wordless shakes of Asagi and Yaze's heads.

Even the soldiers surrounding the control room looked at Trine, perplexed by the fruitless conversation between Kojou and Sayaka.

"Major?"

"Say nothing. I know," Trine spat. Her expression gave the sense that she was biting into a bitter insect. "Not being able to control people as I please is the annoying thing about my stupid ability! Stand back, Kojou! We'll take care of them!"

"Stop!" Kojou halted Trine with a powerful tone of voice. "I will hesitate no more. If it is my fate to bury those that I love, then accept it I mu—"

"Reverberate!"

Before Kojou could finish his dubious speech, Sayaka activated her *shikigami* and launched an attack.

Yaze's eyes went wide in admiration. Sayaka had made Kojou think she was going along with his conversation while secretly preparing a surprise attack.

Sayaka had activated eight bird-shaped *shikigami* in all. Connected by metal wires, they circled in the area around Kojou and would surely pin him down, but — "That's futile!"

"Eh?!"

A rainbow-hued flash glimmered around Kojou, severing all the ritual spell–reinforced wires in a single instant. He'd exhibited the power of Minelauva Iris without having summoned the Beast Vassal itself.

Next, Kojou unleashed a lightning attack that shot down every last one of Sayaka's *shikigami*. His combat skills now rivaled those of top-class Attack Mages.

"Th-this is the Fourth Primogenitor's proper strength…?!" She gasped.

"I will not kill you, but forgive me, Kirasaka—"

"Kirasaka girlie…run!"

"Kojou, stop!"

As Yaze and Asagi screamed, Sayaka blocked the lightning attack unleashed by Kojou with her pseudo-spatial severing barrier. However, Lustrous Scale's ability could only be maintained for a single, brief moment.

Kojou released another lightning attack, timing it for when her defensive power vanished. Having swung down her sword, Sayaka was unable to respond to Kojou's unexpectedly great speed.

Sayaka's expression contorted as she girded herself for the impact.

The very next moment, a silver flash raced through her field of vision, slicing through the golden lightning attack.

5

Her glossy black hair fanned out and danced in the strong wind.

With a sound as light as a feather dropping, a small-statured girl landed in the wrecked corridor.

A single flash of her silver spear had erased the lightning attack burning the atmosphere without a trace. Kojou pulled back, surprised by the tearing of his tuxedo's collar.

Sayaka's eyes glimmered as she gazed at the tiny form gracefully landing before her eyes.

"Yukina!"

"I am sorry to have made you wait, Sayaka. I am glad I made it in time."

Yukina beamed as she deftly twirled her long, fully metallic spear.

Her outfit was not the dress she had worn during the attack, but her Saikai Academy uniform. For some reason, La Folia had demanded that Justina bring it over. The credit went to their just happening to have brought it on the *Böðvildr*, thinking Yukina and La Folia would require a change of clothes after their rescue.

"The Fourth Primogenitor's demonic power was erased? Schneewaltzer of the Lion King Agency…!" Trine exclaimed. She gave her soldiers a glance. Knowing

she could no longer leave this to Kojou, her eyes ordered them to attack.

However, Trine's subordinates did not move. The instant Trine raised an eyebrow in suspicion, the soldiers collapsed one after another. They hadn't been rendered unconscious, yet the spasms of all the muscles in their bodies made them immobile.

"By channeling spiritual energy through a blade, a Demon's bodily functions may be halted, robbing them of freedom of movement," La Folia explained as she walked down a set of stairs in the ship's interior. "It is one use of the Völundr System."

In attendance behind La Folia was Interceptor Knight Kataya Justina, who held one shuriken in each hand, both just like the ones that had struck the soldiers. It was likely she who had neutralized Trine's subordinates.

La Folia was delighted as she watched the fallen soldiers. "Their lives are not in peril. After all, we must have them testify concerning your, or rather, the North Atlantic Empire's treachery…"

Yaze lifted his head as if he'd been struck by lightning. "Wait… The North Atlantic Empire?"

The North Atlantic Empire was an island nation off the western edge of the European continent. It was a great military power with a long history.

"I see… Aldegia confronts the North Atlantic Empire over ocean floor oil deposit interests and ownership of Graceland Island," Yaze said. "By forcing war between Aldegia and the Warlord's Empire, they can take advantage and take over the whole stretch of ocean!"

"Yes," La Folia said in agreement. "There are few nations of the world that raise and train tarrasques and have beast-people units formed of formal military personnel. Of these, only the North Atlantic Empire desires war between Aldegia and the Warlord's Empire."

Trine sneered at them. "Us? From the North Atlantic Empire? And just where is your proof?"

"The proof is in these fallen soldiers and the tarrasques you sent to the royal palace."

La Folia's expression held strong; Trine's stiffened slightly.

The princess continued. "We discovered husks of insects native solely to the North Atlantic Empire's home island in the dung of the captured tarrasques. Be it from soil, mold, or DNA, analysis *by the Holy Ground Treaty Organization* has established that those tarrasques were raised for military purposes by the North Atlantic Empire."

"…Dung, is it? Dung… You really got us there. Don't tell me you feigned cooperation with us solely to buy time so that this might be confirmed, so that you might acquire proof that the North Atlantic Empire cannot explain away?" Trine muttered in a low voice, trying to suppress her irritation. "But all you can prove is that the terrorists attacking the royal palace were from the North Atlantic Empire, yes? It won't overturn the fact that an Aldegian warship will have attacked a Warlord's Empire fleet."

La Folia turned cold, emotionless eyes toward Trine. "Attack a Warlord's Empire fleet? Do you truly think I shall permit you to do such a thing?"

Trine laughed loudly. "You can't stop me. After all, you will die here, blown away without a trace by the Fourth Primogenitor, who you yourself invited."

Glaring at Yukina, Trine pressed her breasts against Kojou's back. Then she called to Kojou, practically whispering into his ear.

"Now, Kojou. Please. Slaughter all of our foes. I know it's hard, but Big Sis will comfort you plenty afterward."

"Wha…?!" Sayaka gasped, her eyebrows raised. This was the first time she'd seen Trine's coquettishness.

Asagi sneered without a word. It was a fearsome expression likely to chill the hearts of all who beheld it.

However, the corners of La Folia's lips curled up as she shot Yukina a knowing glance.

Yukina let out a sigh of unease and resignation as she quietly lowered the spear in her hands.

"Himeragi…?" Kojou seemed bewildered as his eyes wavered.

Yukina, guard down, turned to Kojou and walked calmly toward him.

Trine laughed in a high-pitched voice at the girl's helpless demeanor. "You won't resist? Good. Kojou, kill her. *Pret-ty puh-lease*?" She blew into his ear, and Kojou's shoulders twitched and trembled.

Watching this display, Yukina shook her head.

"Goodness… You truly are irredeemable, letting someone toy with you like this."

With a reverse grip, Yukina used Snowdrift Wolf to lightly graze her own neck.

Tiny droplets of blood bubbled up from the wound. Finally, several droplets trickled down onto her white flesh.

Yukina proceeded to brush up her hair with her left hand.

The scent of her hair softly spread forth. Her shapely ear, her slender contours, and her neck drenched in red became exposed to his view.

"This one time, though, I shall forgive you. So, senpai, please come back!"

Standing in front of Kojou, Yukina looked up at him with earnest eyes. She felt like she heard a sound from Kojou's throat. Sayaka, Asagi, and Yaze firmly held their breath.

"What are you doing?! Kill that little girl! Quickly!"

The musculature of Trine's body swelled as she was enveloped by white fur—bestialization.

The scent of a powerful musk hovered in the *Bifrost*'s corridor.

"Un…ghn…!" Kojou grunted.

He stretched both hands toward Yukina. With his strength as a vampire, he could surely snap the unresisting Yukina's neck in an instant.

However, all Kojou's hands did was twitch and shake when they touched Yukina's flesh.

Yukina did not squirm even slightly as she stared at Kojou.

Trine's voice was ragged. She seemed at the end of her wits. "Kojou, don't

you hear Big Sis's order?! Kojou!"

Yukina gently smiled and closed her eyes as she embraced him and pulled herself close. Then she whispered into Kojou's ear.



“Senpai, it’s all right…”

With Yukina’s arms wrapped around him, Kojou’s entire body twitched and convulsed.

Trine’s orders. Yukina’s words. The conflict between two diametrically opposed cravings tore at Kojou until he finally let out an anguished howl.

“Ungh…aaaaaaaaaaaaa!!”

His eyes dyed crimson, he raggedly bared his fangs. Those fangs thrust into Yukina’s neck.

Even as her shut eyelids winced, Yukina did not resist. Her cheeks faintly reddened as she strongly bit her lip, seemingly to withstand the rising pleasure. As Kojou swallowed, Yukina matched his movements while her own body shook with tiny shudders. Strongly hugged by Kojou, Yukina let out a heated breath.

“This…can’t be…”

Trine gazed at the spectacle in a daze. Kojou, supposedly under her complete control, had ignored her command, drowning in Yukina’s seduction.

“It is futile, Trine,” La Folia said. Her tone was level, of forced tranquility as she held in her biting laughter. “Your ability cannot win against Yukina.”

“How…?! Why aren’t my hypnotic suggestions working?!”

Trine glared at La Folia with a wrathful visage. With Kojou unable to move, she surely could have attacked him from behind, but she was apparently too shaken to even think of doing so.

Sayaka was taken aback as she looked at Trine. “Hypnotic…suggestions…?!”

Mind control spells didn’t work on vampires due to their powerful magic resistance. However, hypnotism that did work using your very own brain might well be effective. Sayaka herself had told Kojou as much.

Even so, Trine’s hypnotic suggestions were incredibly powerful. She’d made him summon a Beast Vassal and use it to attack Sayaka and the others, his true allies—certainly Kojou was a rank amateur without any resistance to hypnosis, but she didn’t think any normal hypnotic suggestion was capable of this.

Furthermore, Trine was simultaneously controlling not only Kojou, but dozens of crew members of the *Bifrost*. There had to be some kind of trigger with a wide range allowing her to keep people in a powerful hypnotic state.

“I get it! The scent…!” Yaze exclaimed.

The scent of the musk hovering within the ship. The scent left in the bathroom from which Kojou had been abducted. Properly speaking, it had been the corset Trine had abandoned that was permeated with the scent.

“Yes. Among living creatures, there are many that secrete special chemical substances—pheromones, in other words—with the ability to strongly influence others, strengthen their aggression, or perhaps sexually seduce them. Trine is doubtlessly a special type of beast person with such abilities,” La Folia said. Then quieter to herself, albeit in a serious voice, she added, “She will make a very interesting guinea pig.”

Then the Aldegian princess concluded, “Using those pheromones, you put Kojou into an intoxicated state, whereupon you gave him suggestions. The point being, scent is the hypnotic trigger—that is the true nature of your ability, Trine. That is why you cannot win against Yukina.”

“What?!!” Trine shot her a bloodthirsty glare. In contrast, La Folia kept herself composed.

“Do you still not understand, Trine Halden? To Kojou, Yukina’s scent is more appealing than your body odor. Your ability has lost out to Yukina’s charm—to the scent of a schoolgirl freshly out of the bath!”

As the princess’s voice reverberated, the silence that arrived made it feel like time itself had stopped.

Sayaka, of course, and even Trine stood stiffly, completely at a loss for words.

It was Yaze who recovered from surprise first as he logically worked through the situation. “Ahh… Come to think of it, there’s a phenomenon of scent triggering memories of a forgotten past and stuff. Kojou’s used to li’l Himeragi’s scent, so that must’ve helped him come to his senses.”

“I think it’s more that Kojou is particularly weak to Himeragi and her blood than that chick,” Asagi bluntly added. *Why didn’t I realize this sooner?* went the

regretful expression that came over Asagi. If Yukina's scent could bring Kojou back to sanity, she could have done the same thing herself, a thought that no doubt burned her to no end.

Trine's unusually revealing clothing. The way she stuck to him like glue. All of it was a scrupulous, calculated snare, increasing the effectiveness of the pheromones she was giving off. To counter this, La Folia had cleansed Yukina's body with a sauna and bath, increasing her metabolic rate.

"So bringing Yukina's uniform was to…?"

"I surmised that Yukina's clothing, which would carry her scent as well, would be more effective. Of course, I am also aware of the effect a schoolgirl uniform has—"

La Folia replied to Sayaka's question with an earnest look. Trine, shaking without a word up to that point, burst into anger that very instant.

"As if I can accept stupid logic like that—!!!"

Trine watched Kojou and Yukina as they embraced—and then she assaulted the pair with a flash of her elongated claws.

With her beastly strength, she could surely punch right through Kojou's chest and pierce Yukina's heart. Furthermore, with Kojou's and Yukina's bodies as her shields, Sayaka and Justina would not be able to attack her.

However, Trine's strike never reached the pair. Before it connected, Kojou turned with great force, sending Trine flying with nothing more than the overwhelming demonic power he had released.

"Have you awakened, senpai?" Yukina asked as she put her disheveled uniform in order. Her cheeks reddened out of bashfulness. The embarrassment over his drinking her blood in front of so many people had only just sunk in.

"Feels like I was having a long nightmare." Kojou violently shook his head, seemingly to drive the fog in his mind away.

Yukina giggled and smiled softly as she looked up at Kojou.

"Perhaps you got a little carried away, though."

"Ah…"

Kojou's expression stiffened as a torrent of memories suddenly came back to him. Flashbacks of his own embarrassing words and deeds sloshed inside his brain like waves of the sea, leaving Kojou writhing as he raised an unusually shrill voice.

"Aaaaaaaa…!!"

"It is all right, Kojou. I do not dislike that side of you whatsoever."

"R-right. It's good once in a while. Kinda funny."

La Folia calmly joined the conversation. "Well, it was the hypnotic suggestion's fault and not entirely in your control."

"Eh? Huh? What's going on?" Kojou asked, having come to his senses completely.

Yaze and Asagi added their own consoling words that were of small comfort. Sayaka was the only one with an expression of pure surprise, gawking curiously at the anguished Kojou.

Sent flying by Kojou, Trine grimaced in humiliation as she rose to her feet. "Grrr… La Folia Rihavein…how dare you…?"

La Folia, head raised high, haughtily gazed down upon her from the stairs above. Then the princess commanded with solemnity, "Trine Halden's objective is to bring about a new war between humanity and Demonkind. Kojou, please. Put a stop to these plans."

"Naturally…!"

Kojou ripped off the coat of his tuxedo, mussed up his tightly combed hair, and ferociously bared his fangs as he glared at Trine.

"My first foreign trip in a while is ruined. Now I have to live in shame…and on top of that, you tried to use La Folia to kick off a war! Now I'm pissed!"

"Correct. On top of that," Yukina said, shifting her own quiet indignation at Trine, "you tried to use the Fourth Primogenitor…to use senpai as a tool to hurt others!"

Rainbow flames encircled Kojou's entire body. The demonic energy from his Beast Vassal was leaking out. Ironically, the effects of being controlled by

Trine's hypnotic suggestions had raised Kojou's ability to control his own demonic energy another notch. In his current state, Kojou could draw out the demonic energy of his Beast Vassal without massively damaging to the *Bifrost*'s hull.

Kojou howled as he raised his rainbow flame–enveloped right arm high.

"If you want a war so badly, I'll give you one! From here on, this is my fight!"

Standing by his side, Yukina trained her coldly glimmering silver spear toward Trine.

"No, senpai. This is *our* fight!"

6

"*You* intend to take me on…?" Trine spat out saliva mixed with blood.

Her expression said that she could fight both Kojou and Yukina easily. The look bespoke absolute certainty that they could not apprehend her.

As if to intimidate the pair further, Trine laughed loudly enough to contort her face. "It is ten years too soon, children!"

Her body sank downward. *Bang!* went the gunshot-like roar as she kicked off the floor, accelerating so quickly that Kojou lost sight of her for a moment as she shifted right before his eyes.

"Wha—?!"

Trine only reentered Kojou's vision after she had already slugged him in the gut. It was an attack with such incredible speed that he didn't even know if she'd struck him with her fist, palm, or foot.

Unable to endure the blow, Kojou bent right over, whereupon Trine's knee strike exploded through his jaw.

Trine regarded Kojou with scorn. "Vampires are all small fries, overly reliant on the power of their precious Beast Vassals. Do you think you can beat Big Sis Beast Lady in close-quarter combat? Don't get full of yourself, *moron*!"

He snapped back and reeled.

Yukina and Sayaka shouted simultaneously.

“Senpai!”

“Get down, Kojou Akatsuki!”

Yukina used a sharp thrust to put Trine in check while Sayaka shifted her long sword to bow form and fired a cursed arrow. Such instant, perfect teamwork was nigh unthinkable.

However, Trine leisurely avoided both attacks. With nimble movements that could scarcely be believed, she evaded the tip of Yukina’s spear. Her whiplike roundhouse kick sent both Yukina and the spear she gripped flying.

Furthermore, Trine used the recoil from the blow to instantly close in on Sayaka right after she’d fired her arrow.

Judging she could not evade, Sayaka crossed both arms to receive Trine’s kick. However, the undiminished impact sent Sayaka’s tall body sailing into the air. Trine followed up with a heel drop that sent the bow flying from Sayaka’s hand and pounded her back with a spectacular blow that knocked the wind out of her.

“I heard that Sword Shamans of the Lion King Agency are experts in anti-demon combat, but they’re surprisingly unremarkable.”

Having kicked apart the trio of Kojou, Yukina, and Sayaka in an instant, Trine sighed in tedium.

Kojou groaned as he fell to one knee. “She’s fast… And what’s with that crazy power behind her attack…?!”

He’d expected that a trickster type wouldn’t be skilled in a direct fight, but that had been a great mistake on his part. This wasn’t divine bestialization or the like, yet that speed, that strength—of all the types of beast people Kojou had faced to date, Trine was the most terrifying.

“It would be prudent not to make any clumsy moves, Princess…for your own good.”

With Kojou and the others at a disadvantage, La Folia tried to unleash a spell to support them, but Trine’s admonition cut off La Folia’s efforts. When La Folia

slowly checked her rear, she saw fresh soldiers emerging from multiple passages inside the ship.

Trine had not brought only North Atlantic Empire troops with her—many of them were wearing Aldegian knight uniforms. These were the actual crew members of the *Bifrost*.

Yaze clicked his tongue when he realized their identity. “Those are…Aldegian Knights…!”

Standing in front of the control panel, Asagi seemed irritated and bewildered as she backed away. “Even if they’re under hypnosis, for a knight to turn a sword on the princess…?!”

“Well, can you blame them?” Trine flashed a lascivious grin. “The princess they’d believed was so pure and innocent made a boyfriend out of someone they don’t even know, and she claimed she would marry him. Knight or not, isn’t it natural they’d be jealous and envious?”

“So you brainwashed them to think that. Pretty nasty,” Yaze blurted out.

“They’re like groupies for a manipulative idol,” Asagi added in disdain.

La Folia listened emotionlessly to the former royal secretary.

“Now, what will you do, Princess? Have everyone here smell that little girl’s scent? Of course not.” Trine oozed smugness as she continued to scatter about her own odor. “But there’s no need for concern. They will not carry the dishonor of killing their princess. After all, everyone here is going to die. Even an immortal vampire can’t do anything if he sinks to the bottom of the sea, can he? Maybe some fisherman will trawl him up in a hundred years or so.”

“Sink into…the sea?” Yukina repeated, haphazardly getting on her feet. She blanched at the thought.

Kojou had escaped Trine’s control, and many of Trine’s subordinates had been defeated. La Folia turned from hostage to mutiny leader, and Trine couldn’t use the *Bifrost*’s sorcerous armaments. In that situation, it was no longer possible for Trine to achieve her objective of annihilating the Warlord’s Empire fleet.

If so, what was the next step she would take?

“She’s planning a suicide attack with the *Bifrost*…!” Kojou shouted, realizing Trine’s aim.

She would crash the ultra-large armored airship—with a spiritual reactor on board, no less—colliding it with her target. Whether it be the Warlord’s Empire fleet or the peace commemoration ceremony site, it would be a great disaster either way. It was more than enough to fulfill Trine’s minimum goal of whittling away Aldegia’s national might.

Before Kojou could recover from his surprise, Trine had already left. With the *Bifrost* already lowering its altitude, she intended to abandon it and escape alone.

“Kojou, Yukina, pursue Trine. She intends to escape with a ship-borne plane,” La Folia ordered. Aldegian Knights turned foe had surrounded her. Kojou and Yukina were the only ones capable of breaking away and chasing Trine.

“La Folia…! But the knights—”

“You need not be concerned for me. Have some faith in your fiancée.”

“You’re still saying that?!”

Like hell I’m engaged, thought Kojou as a stubborn expression came over him. But he reconsidered the matter, judging that, at the very least, he didn’t have the luxury of cracking that joke. It was certainly as La Folia said; all he could do now was trust her.

“Himeragi!”

“Yes!”

Knocking down the nearest soldiers, Kojou and Yukina broke into a sprint. Relying on vague memories of the ship’s interior, they headed toward the hangar in the *Bifrost*’s upper level.

As they did so, La Folia descended the stairs into the control room.

All of the corridors connected to the control room were surrounded, leaving everyone present with nowhere to run. Put together, Trine’s subordinates and the controlled knights numbered around twenty enemies in all. Justina and the

wounded Sayaka could not take on such numbers by themselves.

“What will you do, Princess?” Asagi asked, plainly nervous. “Just to make this clear, I can’t use The Cleansing.”

Her hacking of the *Bifrost* was making progress, but that would be rendered meaningless if Asagi and company were neutralized first.

However, La Folia was undaunted, turning a resolute, smiling face toward the Cyber Empress. “Asagi, can you hijack the ship’s internal communications?”

“If that’s all, I can do that in no time.”

“Thank you. Please do so, then.”

Shrugging at the princess’s words, Asagi punched a command into the terminal. She set things up so that the princess’s voice could be heard from every speaker and communication device within the ship.

“What are you gonna do? I don’t think persuasion is going to work in this situation,” Asagi commented.

“Persuasion? Perish the thought. Even if their minds are being controlled, they are still Aldegian knights.”

A laugh rising within La Folia threatened to spill right out as she took a microphone for internal communications from Asagi.

With Yaze’s support, Sayaka and Justina were managing to hold back the advancing soldiers, but it was unlikely that this equilibrium could be maintained for long. La Folia had tens of seconds at most. Understanding this full well, the princess calmly put her breathing in order before she began.

“The place to which heroes return, embraced by beautiful goddesses as they sleep. This lovely land, our motherland…”

Engaged in a beautiful melody, La Folia’s voice coursed through every broadcast device inside the ship at once.

Upon hearing this, the group of soldiers had two completely different types of reactions.

A wary expression came over some, wondering if this was some kind of

attack.

Others listened to her voice, their hearts seemingly wavering.

Sayaka and Yaze gasped and looked back when they realized the true nature of what La Folia's voice was weaving.

"It's not…a spell? A song…?"

"Aldegia's national anthem?!"

The knights supposedly under Trine's control seemed beside themselves as they came to a halt. Not understanding the reason why, unease spread between the beast-people soldiers as well.

"Glacier-formed mountains with peaks that reach the sky, the sunshine nurturing our green forests. Our esteemed country is named Aldegia, our homeland loved by the Valkyries…"

La Folia continued to sing. Asagi and the others held their tongues in admiration of the princess's sheer will to calmly sing in that situation, surrounded by bloodlust-filled troops. The overwhelming solemnity of her tenacious will and beautiful singing voice left the soldiers surrounding them in awe.

Even the beast-people soldiers serving under Trine were unable to move, gripped by fear.

"Let us sing to the heavens of our light, our hope…"

La Folia elegantly spread both arms wide toward the hypnotized soldiers.

This became the trigger for one knight, then another, to sing along with the princess's voice.

Trine had employed scent as the catalyst for hypnotic suggestions, and La Folia countered that with sound. By performing the melody the knights of Aldegia knew by heart, she had summoned back their loyalty once more .

"Our esteemed country is named Aldegia, our homeland loved by the Valkyries…"

When La Folia finished singing their national anthem, the men turned their

own song into a great cheer.

The song of victory granted the knights courage and instilled fear in the soldiers who opposed them.

“Princess!”

“Your Highness La Folia!”

Having escaped from Trine’s control, the knights choked back their tears of gratitude as they bowed their heads to La Folia one after another.

One among them—captain of the *Bifrost*—walked before La Folia and bent on one knee.

“To have fallen for the scheme of an enemy nation’s spy and turned our blades upon our princess is a failure unworthy of the Knights of the Second Coming. I believe this to be a crime that should be repaid with death.” Then he drew his sword and pointed it at the beast-people soldiers, fury burning in his eyes. “However, so that Your Highness might be rescued, please permit us to render judgment onto these villains.”

Realizing the situation that had befallen them, the beast-people soldiers scuffled around. There were more knights than beast people to begin with. Now that Trine’s mind control was no longer effective, the situation had been completely turned on its head.

And La Folia, her entire body enveloped in pale spiritual essence, spoke without mercy: “I permit it, my knights. With Holy Swords in hand, dispatch the enemies of our kingdom!”

“Raaaaaa!!”

The ship’s interior was filled with the knights’ war cries as their swords were enveloped in a spiritual light—the Völundr System. This was the anti-demon purging power only the knights of Aldegia were permitted to use.

“Uu…aa…!”

The beast-people soldiers retreated in abject fear.

Even if their numbers were inferior, the beast-people soldiers were still superior in individual capabilities. The balance of power was probably equal.

However, the beast-people soldiers' superior officer, Trine, had already fled, and the knights' leader had granted them a direct blessing. The difference in morale between the two was overwhelming. Victory and defeat had been determined before the battle even began.

Just when Asagi and company exhaled in relief at getting over the most imminent threat, La Folia said, "Let us leave this to them. We attend to the bridge."

Having finished changing course, the *Bifrost* was progressively losing altitude.

Trine Halden's plan was still in progress.

7

The place Kojou and Yukina arrived at was a complicated block resembling an automated factory. The dimly lit chamber, evoking an image of a parking garage, had elliptical crafts around the size of a car packed in orderly rows. There must have been over a hundred in total. They were legged tanks that could fly—one might call them legged combat helicopters.

"This is what she meant by onboard planes?!"

Kojou was faintly dizzy, feeling as if he'd wandered into a nest of ferocious hornets.

A door of special alloys creaked as the hangar's exit opened. Even if Trine was inside one of these onboard planes, they had no time to open every hatch and check inside one by one.

As Yukina surveyed the hangar interior, even her voice was tinged with unconcealable nervousness. "These are largely unmanned craft controlled by artificial intelligence. We need to find where the manned command planes are or—"

However, Kojou nodded at her words in apparent relief and smiled violently, interrupting her. "Unmanned craft, huh? Glad to know that."

"Eh?"

The explosive demonic energy emanating from Kojou's entire body made

Yukina's expression freeze. A malevolent crimson cloud swirled around and transformed into an enormous summoned beast.

"Sorry, La Folia, but I'm gonna break every last one of these! C'mon over, Regulus Aurum!"

Within the hangar interior, Kojou materialized a glowing gold lightning lion. It rained down high-voltage electrical strikes indiscriminately, destroying the legged combat helicopters. Had Yukina not instantly protected herself with Snowdrift Wolf, she and Kojou would have become caught up in the attack themselves.

Receiving the Beast Vassal's electrical onslaught, the legged combat helicopters gushed white smoke from their fried circuits, each and every one of their functions screeching to a halt. Indeed, all manner of machines in the hangar and even the lights were blown away as sparks flew all around. The entire *Bifrost* was nearly in danger of all its electrical systems being annihilated, rendering it unable to maintain flight.

Kojou's previously grinning face twitched. "Crap… Did I overdo it…?!" The damage inside the hangar had exceeded his expectations.

Weakly shaking her head, Yukina resigned herself to a smile. "It would appear to have fulfilled its purpose, though."

Just then, amid the destroyed unmanned craft, Trine wobbled as she got out, squinting her eyes in anger. The electromagnetic pulse had shorted out the combat helicopter, rendering her unable to escape.

"How can this…? Now you've done it, you brat… To think you'd unleash a monster like that Beast Vassal inside a ship…! Do you have a screw loose?!"

In response to Trine's screams, Kojou and Yukina both kept calm. "Thanks to that, I got to meet you again, right? Don't think you can escape all on your own."

"Please surrender, Trine Halden. You have nowhere left to run."

Trine's eyebrows twitched with hostility and scorn. "Nowhere to run? I'll have you know, I'm the one who allowed you to escape."

Shifting to her beast form once more, Trine extended sharp claws and howled. Kicking off from the frame of a wrecked combat helicopter, she accelerated toward Kojou and Yukina.

“Thanks to this, now I have to kill you! Regret your actions while fish eat you at the bottom of the sea, Fourth Primogenitor!”

“Grounded Lightning!”

Blocking Trine’s charge with the shaft of her spear, Yukina unleashed a palm strike with her right hand. It was a counter using her Sword Shaman ability to peer into the future. But…

“How careless!”

“…?!”

Beating away Yukina’s palm strike, Trine rammed into the girl’s frame with her shoulder. Taking the full brunt of the impact, Yukina’s delicate physique was thrown into the air.

“Why, you—!!”

Kojou punched at Trine in a rage. It was a blow with the speed of a god and the maximum of his vampiric physical strength behind it. However, Trine easily predicted Kojou’s movement, slicing with a razor-sharp claw into Kojou’s neck. Blood violently scattered about.

Trine laughed scornfully as she gazed down at the tottering Kojou. “Did you think you could beat me, a combat instructor for beast people? You filthy amateur!”

The wound on Kojou’s neck cut it close but had missed his vitals. His carotid artery and windpipe were both safe. However, his vision was hazy from the blood loss. His body’s regeneration speed couldn’t keep up.

“The regeneration ability vampires possess is so weak compared to beast people, it makes me want to yawn.”

Trine laughed as she gazed at the wobbly Kojou with contempt. Without fanfare, she swung her right arm, this time to completely claw out Kojou’s throat.

Yukina charged in to put a stop to that. However, Trine calmly continued to evade the storm-like series of spear thrusts. Trine was a powerful foe like none before her; spiritual power alone was insufficient to deal with her.

“Roaring Thunder!!”

Judging she could not catch the foe with her spear, Yukina launched a kick right at Trine’s eyes. Trine calmly caught the kicking leg in midair.

“You’re a stubborn one, little girl!”

“?!”

Trine kept a grip on Yukina’s left leg as she traced an arc with her somersault. Easily lifting Yukina into the air, she slammed her against a wall. Thanks to one leg being yes until the last split second, Yukina was unable to counter. The arm strength of a beast person plus centrifugal force sent Yukina hurtling headfirst toward the wall.

“Guoah…!”

The sound of bones breaking reverberated behind Yukina. A moment before she’d collided with the metallic wall, Kojou had caught her. Kojou protected Yukina from the impact by using his own body as a cushion. Sandwiched between Yukina and the wall, Kojou’s entire body creaked and let out unpleasant popping sounds.

“S-senpai…?! You shielded me…?!”

Yukina let out a brief shriek when she saw Kojou coughing up blood.

However, hovering in Kojou’s eyes was not pain, but an air of bewilderment and guilt. As an unpreventable consequence of the collision, both of Kojou’s hands ended up thoroughly grasping both of Yukina’s breasts.

Unable to find words, Kojou was fiercely thrown for a loop by the squishiness that seemed to suck in his fingers.

“Himeragi, this is…”

Yukina’s face turned beet-red as she justified herself.

“I-it could not be helped! Miss Justina did not bring a bra with her! And the

bustier from the dress is too stiff for combat, so…!”

Justina had brought a school uniform all the way to the *Bifrost*, but unfortunately, she had not provided Yukina with underwear as well. Because Yukina couldn’t fight in something so stiff, she was left with the choice of simply *going without*. Yes, at present, Yukina was braless.

This is not the time to pay attention to that, thought Yukina, but the damage from the collision left her unable to get up immediately, either. That went double for Kojou, with bones broken all over the place.

Even so, Trine showed no sign of carelessness as she approached the pair. She no doubt intended to ensure Kojou would not regenerate, and then she would slay Yukina as well.

Even as he realized Trine’s aim, Kojou let out a voice with little sense of tension.

“Himeragi, you smell really nice…because you just came out of the bath, maybe…?”

“N-never mind that!” Yukina shouted, flushed.

However, even as pain made Kojou’s breaths ragged, he continued whispering into Yukina’s ear.

“Remember the deserted island where we met La Folia for the first time? I tried and failed to use my Beast Vassal to catch fish and you got drenched, right, Himeragi?”

“…Senpai?”

Yukina’s emotions were muted as she met Kojou’s eyes.

Trine probably thought that Kojou had begun speaking of their memories because he’d resigned himself to defeat.

She would be wrong, though. Kojou hadn’t given up. He was trying to convey something to Yukina in words that Trine might hear but would never understand.

“We’ve lost most of our altitude. Sorry, but Big Sis is going to take care of you with haste and bail out. Don’t take it personally.”

“No, we shall capture you right here.”

Yukina wrung out the endurance remaining within her. Trine gave her a sullen glance. She was quite fed up with the pair’s stubbornness by then.

Getting her ragged breathing in order, Yukina wove a solemn chant.

“I, Maiden of the Lion, Sword Shaman of the High God, beseech thee.”

With graceful, silent movements, Yukina danced, silver spear in hand. She looked like a warrior praying to the gods for victory—or perhaps a priestess receiving a prophecy of victory.

“O purifying light, O divine wolf of the snowdrift, by your steel divine will, strike down the devils before me!”

The silver spear was enveloped by the pale light of spiritual essence. Yukina poised the spear and raced like the wind.

As a Demon, Trine could not carelessly touch Snowdrift Wolf in its current state, but she remained unbothered. Ripping off a metal pipe set against a wall, she swung it like a club to slap Yukina’s spear aside.

“Physical enchantment at this late stage? It’s no use. Slightly enhancing your muscle strength and reaction time is nowhere near enough to defeat me.”

“Yes. Certainly, I am unable to defeat you,” Yukina acknowledged.

Trine, having likely undergone harsh training in a military environment, was nothing like a sorcerous criminal resting on the laurels of her inborn physical abilities. Not only was she of a beast-person species, she was just plain strong as a soldier. In terms of close-quarter combat might, hers most definitely exceeded Yukina’s.

“However, I succeeded in luring you in, just like you did when you abducted the princess!”

“What?!”

Trine’s eyes wavered with bewilderment as her gaze subconsciously shifted toward her own feet.

Back then, she had opened a teleportation gate at La Folia’s feet.

Remembering what had happened at the time, she was no doubt wary Yukina had set some sort of similar trap. But Yukina had only pretended to set one. Yukina and Kojou's target was not at her feet—it was above her.

"C'mon over, Al-Meissa Mercury!"

Kojou summoned a twin-headed dragon with quicksilver scales. This Beast Vassal was the Dimension Eater that held the power to gouge out space and any and all dimensions associated with it.

However, the twin-headed dragon did not harm Trine; it stripped away only a single part of the *Bifrost*'s hull, then vanished. What it stripped away was above Trine's head, on the ceiling of the hangar.

"A Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor?! What in the world was it aiming for?"

Trine looked overhead, perplexed. Something was falling onto her entire body. It was a tasteless, odorless, transparent liquid—water.

"Water…? Water for cooling the spiritual reactor…? What do you intend to do with this…?"

Trine violently shook off the water droplets from her drenched fur.

The water of the spiritual reactor's cooling system was simple water, harmless to a person's body. As a matter of fact, the *Bifrost* had plenty of water for bathing. Kojou likely realized the presence of coolant system water pipes on the ceiling from water dripping into the hangar, but that didn't mean water alone could defeat Trine.

No. Water alone could not— "It couldn't be…?!"

Trine's eyes flew wide when she saw Yukina backing away, seemingly fearful of touching the water.

The breaking of various bones dulled Kojou's movements, but he stood up and raised his right arm high nonetheless.

Trine's breath caught as she gazed at the golden electricity enveloping that right arm. Water that included impurities served as a type of electrical conductor. And no matter how swift a beast person Trine might be, she could

not move faster than the speed of conducted electricity. No one could—!

"Don't die on me, *Big Sis*."

Kojou made an upward swing of his fist toward the pool of water spreading across the hangar's floor.

"S-sto—!"

Trine tried to shout at Kojou. He paid no heed and swung his fist downward.

"Regulus Aurum!"

With a limited summons, he transformed the Beast Vassal's demonic energy into a high-voltage electrical attack that raced across the hangar's floor.

A pale light enveloped Trine's body. She stood in place while she violently convulsed.

When that flash faded, Trine, enveloped in white steam, collapsed onto the floor. Her once-beautiful white fur was brown and scorched, and a disagreeable scent hovered all around her.

The wounds were such that any normal person might have died instantly, but fortunately, she was alive.

Her body still twitching from the electric shock, Trine let out a laugh from her throat.

"It's no use… Even defeating me…won't stop this airship from crashing… The insolent masses at the commemoration ceremony…will all be blown away…" Trine continued to laugh.

"Why?" Kojou asked. "Why do you want to kick off a war that much…?"

"Don't make me laugh so much, Fourth Primogenitor. Would it be all right to start a war if it's a reason you can accept?"

Trine inquired in a tone of voice so sober, it gave him a shudder. Kojou couldn't find the words to reply.

"I'm a spy doing a spy's work. The North Atlantic Empire's military is the only one that acknowledged my talents. I'm doing this for self-fulfillment. It's nice to have someone expect something of you."

Unable to understand Trine's motive, Kojou's empty voice trembled. "That's… all…?"

Trine had infiltrated Aldegia as a spy. Her opportunities to come into contact with North Atlantic Empire people had to be few and far between. Even so, Trine was trying to ruin Aldegia for their sake. They'd acknowledged her. That was all the reason she'd needed.

"Do you find that trifling? But those are the sorts of reasons why wars start. Discord between demons and humans, territorial issues, religion, history, loyalty to the national anthem… These are mere excuses made up after the fact for the public. Remember this, Fourth Primogenitor. Just because something isn't a lie does not mean it is truth…"

Unable to maintain bestialization, Trine reverted to the form of an injured human being. Even her species' regenerative ability was surely at its limit just keeping her alive. Her consciousness seemed to already be fading.

"La Folia Rihavein…understands all this well. That is why she never once asked…my reason for fighting… She may be a nasty, scheming woman, but she is a true royal… Though I'd rather rip my lips off than say I respect her…"

Even as she made those halting comments, a triumphant smile came over her.

"But in the end, I win. Take that, suckers."

With that final murmur, Trine completely lost consciousness.

Kojou and Yukina stared at Trine's lifeless body with pity. Certainly, Trine had been strong and capable—but that was all she was. She had not found any way to prove her own worth save through using others and destroying the established order. That was why…

"Nah, you've lost, Trine Halden."

Wiping the fresh blood trickling from his lips, Kojou smiled bitterly. A new message was arriving on his smartphone just then. It was Asagi.

"If you say you're starting a war for no reason, it's fine if we stop you on a whim, right?"

Making eye contact with Yukina, Kojou nodded at her and shifted his

attention to the hangar exterior.

Through the wide-open door, he saw a blue sky and Aldegia's green forests. The fast-approaching city of Verterace looked unexpectedly large and distinct.

8

Arriving at the bridge, La Folia knit her refined brows ever so slightly as she sighed.

The smell of gunpowder mixed in with the air. The navigational equipment, communications gear, and tactical AI terminal—all devices necessary for controlling the *Bifrost*—had been largely blown to bits. Trine had made the crew under her control destroy them.

"You've really done it, Trine Halden."

For once, a look of indignation came over La Folia's comely visage.

The *Bifrost* was heading toward the very center of the royal capital, Verterace, the site of the peace commemoration ceremony.

Trine intended to crash the *Bifrost* not against the Warlord's Empire fleet, which might evade such an attack, but against the ceremony site that was the surer target.

"Well, I expected as much," Yaze replied in his usual flippant manner. "I suppose we could say she takes her work as a saboteur seriously."

"Expected… Hmm…," Sayaka murmured. She stood stock-still, at a loss. This was no longer something a single Attack Mage could do anything about, not even a Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency.

"Mogwai," Asagi said to the AI on her laptop. "How long until this thing collides with the ceremony site?"

With the majority of the bridge equipment wrecked, Asagi's partner AI was the only thing left capable of controlling the *Bifrost*.

"At this speed, it'll be two minutes, seventeen seconds before the initial casualties. If the engines are cut this second, let's say three minutes or so."

“There does not seem to be time to evacuate us all.”

La Folia calmly nodded as if it was of little concern to her. Then, with a light shrug, she turned toward Sayaka.

“Sayaka, I request that you protect Asagi and Yaze. Take them and get off the ship immediately. The lifepod for royals should be usable.”

“Eh…?”

Sayaka’s eyes wavered with gloom. As a Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency, her top priority was to prevent sorcerous terrorism. However, at present, Sayaka lacked any means with which to halt the *Bifrost*’s descent.

This being the case, the next action Sayaka ought to take was surely to protect Asagi Aiba, the Priestess of Cain, and Motoki Yaze, chairman of a giant conglomerate. La Folia’s request did not conflict with Sayaka’s duty in any way. To do so, however, meant to abandon the princess.

“What do you intend to do, La Folia?” Yaze asked.

The princess’s reply was swift. “I shall ask Kojou to destroy the *Bifrost*. Surely his Beast Vassals are capable of blowing the ship away without leaving a single trace.”

“You planning on dying?” Yaze grimaced.

The princess did not back down. “I judge that it is the optimal means for my survival. I believe in Kojou.”

Her unwavering gaze silenced any refutations he could muster.

To protect the people gathered at the commemoration ceremony, the *Bifrost* had to be annihilated before it crashed. The Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor were fundamentally specialized for destruction. The odds they could save the people still inside the vessel were low. The situation was not ideal.

It meant destroying the giant *Bifrost* as it plunged from the sky at high speeds while saving only the people not on board. Yaze didn’t think Kojou was capable of such fine control while exhausted from his battle with Trine.

“If you’re going to believe in him, why not make a somewhat better bet?”

Asagi suggested.

“Asagi?” La Folia prompted quizzically.

Asagi suddenly began fiddling with her smartphone. She held it to her ear, addressing the person replying to her call with a laid-back, almost gossipy tone.

“Kojou. You getting this? You read the text I sent you earlier, right?”

“…Yeah. But is this really gonna be all right?”

The voice with which Kojou replied was plainly tinged with worry. She might have called it a better bet, but in the end, it was still a risky one.

“There’s no time. Ready to go now? Got it, Mogwai?!”

Ignoring Kojou’s hesitance, Asagi addressed her partner AI.

“Heh-heh. This is gonna be a show!”

A sardonic synthesized voice coursed over the smartphone’s speaker as the *Bifrost*’s hull swayed significantly. Roars seemed to echo from every direction as flashes and explosions stretched into the blue sky. A large quantity of turrets from the flying battleship emptied their missiles and machine-gun bullets.

Sayaka fearfully looked around the area as she shouted, “Asagi Aiba?! What in the world are you trying to do…?!”

The fired rounds were all shot toward the deserted sea. Even so, the impacts delivered to the surrounding area were incredibly frightful.

It was La Folia who realized Asagi’s objective first. “Expending all explosives? To prevent a chain reaction—”

The *Bifrost* was not being purged only of explosives. Jet fuel sprayed out, vanishing in midair as if it was steam.

Sayaka was gazing outside the window in a daze when Asagi gave her back a nudge.

“Kirasaka.”

“Wh-what?”

“For starters, you really should put on a seat belt. I think it’s going to be quite

an impact.”

“P-pardon me?”

Sayaka’s expression acquired a questioning air. The following instant, she pitched over and crashed into the window. The *Bifrost*’s enormous hull was being violently flung about as if it had been punched by some gargantuan, invisible fist.

“Kojou Akatsuki’s Beast Vassal?! What is he…?!”

Within her eyes, Sayaka beheld a scarlet bicorn that had appeared in midair.

The Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor unleashed furious winds and shock waves that struck from the front like a torrent, causing the *Bifrost*’s hull to heavily distort. The air bladders that made the *Bifrost* float were damaged one after another, and the materials stored within leaked out.

With its floating ability greatly decreased, the *Bifrost* lost speed. It was losing altitude more like a straight-up crash.

“With Engineering destroyed, we can’t maintain altitude or change course. But we can lower the altitude. Even though they call it something extravagant like a battleship, when push comes to shove, it’s still just an airship.”

“Wha…?”

Sayaka’s face blanched as she stared squarely at the quickly approaching ground below. She could see treacherous mountains and green forests and a deep lake created by a glacier.

“It’s all right. The land of Aldegia will protect us,” Asagi said, though Sayaka still found it irresponsible.

Asagi was staring at the back of the boy on the *Bifrost*’s deck. Standing with Yukina’s support, Kojou thrust both arms out and howled: “C’mon over, Sadalmelik Albus!”

Fresh blood gushed out from Kojou’s arms. The explosive demonic energy imbued within emitted a pale light.

Within that radiance emerged an enormous Beast Vassal with transparent flesh that seemed like a current of water. Its torso was that of a beautiful

woman, while its lower half was that of a translucent serpent. Its hair was a cascade of countless snakes.

It was a pale water maid—an Undine.

Fjords were terrain created by glaciers. Making all of the water of that lake part of its own body, the water maid's serpentine body danced higher into the sky. Then it caught the falling *Bifrost*.

With the power of restoration the water maid possessed, it barely managed to heal the hull as it was being destroyed by the recoil from the collision. Reverberations from excess restoration dismantled the special alloy armor, turning back the clock on an atomic level, but the consequence was to reduce the *Bifrost*'s mass and weaken the force of its fall.

Before losing consciousness from the impact, Asagi murmured as if making a prayer. "Hold on tight, Kojou."

Nodding with a smile that somehow seemed mischievous, La Folia closed her eyes with the utmost satisfaction. "Kojou, you truly are my—"

With the back of the boy who would someday grant her wish burned into those blue eyes…

9

A tumult began among the people at the anomalous sight of a flying object approaching the ceremony site.

Few realized that this was a flying battleship in the midst of crashing, but ordinary citizens were already aware of the recent attack on the royal palace. If anything, suspecting the descent of the mysterious aircraft of being a second terrorist attack was a natural reaction.

Standing on the ceremony stage, Lucas glared at the sky without a word. He could not carelessly speak in the middle of guests from countries around the world.

For his part, Aradahl, sitting right beside Lucas, appeared fascinated. He was the only one who'd noticed that the demonic energy of Kojou Akatsuki could be

felt from within the damaged battleship.

“Ohh…!”

Finally, a commotion rose from all over the site.

The weapons with which the flying battleship was equipped had begun firing all at once.

The roars from the explosions could be heard all the way from the still-distant ceremony site.

The flashes of star shells of differing colors. The exhaust trails traced by guided missiles. If the display was not due to the malevolent weapons of war, it would be seen as an unquestionably beautiful sight.

Then the sky was illuminated with a scarlet flash. It was the radiance of a bicorn wrought from demonic energy.

Enveloped by that flash, the flying battleship fell.

People held their breaths as they watched its descent and then a giant pillar of ice rose up from the lake.

Rising to the heavens like a dragon, the pillar of ice engulfed the flying battleship’s enormous frame.

Then, the flying battleship vanished from sight. All that was left was the azure sky as far as one could see.

The gazes of the people turned toward Lucas atop the dais.

Were the strange happenings that had unfolded in the sky above a terrorist attack, or a performance for the ceremony—? Everyone sought the answer to that question.

However, Lucas could say nothing, for even he did not understand what had just occurred.

It was an international political stage, as well. If he rashly spoke words of untruth, they would become a curse that would damage trust from other nations. But if the silence continued, the effect would be the same.

Feeling the heavy weight of responsibility, *I must say something*, thought

Lucas. The instant when he began to feel desperate— Kanon, waiting at the edge of the stage in her role as princess, suddenly but confidently rose to her feet.

The abrupt action by the beautiful princess made the eyes of those present turn toward her in unison.

Surely an ordinary girl with no experience in such matters could not endure such pressure.

However, Kanon received the gazes of hundreds of thousands of people like it was second nature to her. An elegant smile came over her as she spoke.

“The fireworks were splendid.”

Silence blanketed the site as people held their breath once more.

Then, the next moment, the rise of thunderous applause shook Verterace Square.

In an instant, one phrase by the princess had swept the anxiety of the people aside, whipping up a vortex of delight.

At that point, it became certain that history would record the ceremony commemorating forty years since the signing of a peace treaty between the kingdom of Aldegia and the Warlord’s Empire as a success.

So, too, would the fame of Aldegia’s wise princess spread throughout the world.


OUTRO

Outro

The voice Kojou heard over his smartphone was the thoroughly serious-sounding, honors-student voice of Shizuri Kasugaya Castiella.

“You were abducted by terrorists…?! What in the world have you been up to all the way in Aldegia?”

“Hey it’s not like I wanted to be caught up in this stuff. I’ll arrive on Itogami Island tomorrow, so gimme the details later. And say hi to Rui and Amase for me, would you?”

Leaving a suitable message for the friends he’d left behind on Itogami Island, Kojou pressed the button to end the call.

“Ah, wait a… Kojou—!”

Cutting off whatever Shizuri’s voice was trying to say, Kojou exhaled in relief.

In place of silence, what he heard was a public announcement listing flight departure times.

Kojou was sitting on a bench in the lobby of Verterace Airport. He was waiting for boarding information for a return flight to Itogami Island.

“Was that Miss Kasugaya?” asked Yukina from beside Kojou. She sounded wary.

If she’d overheard Shizuri’s voice from the smartphone, she had to understand it wasn’t much of a conversation, but somehow Yukina’s eyes had a pouting air to them as she watched Kojou talking to Shizuri.

Kojou had no clue how she felt, though. He nodded vaguely to her question.

“Yeah. I don’t really get it, but the gist was to get my butt back there soon.”

Yukina’s eyes gave an entirely different glint of concern than they had held to that point. “Has something happened on Itogami Island?”

“I don’t really wanna think about it…”

Kojou gazed at the phone he’d just locked, sighing deeply. He was thoroughly exhausted from that holiday’s string of events. He could barely take being

caught up in some weird incident back on Itogami Island on top of that, all the more because he hadn't even touched the school homework assigned before the holiday break.

Kojou glanced around the area, belatedly remembering someone. "Where's Kirasaka?"

The original plan was for Sayaka to return to Itogami Island on the same flight as Kojou and Yukina, and yet, even though it was almost boarding time, there was no sign of her. Kojou worried that she might have been injured from the *Bifrost*'s crash.

However, Yukina wore a sympathetic expression as she shook her head. "Sayaka is remaining at the embassy to take care of leftover work. She said she had to write a proper report concerning this incident."

"Sounds rough. Seems La Folia and her dad are still cleaning up from the incident, too."

Kojou's shoulders sank as he felt a fair bit of responsibility.

The damage from the incident amounted to a single cutting-edge flying battleship, but it was being handled externally as an accident during the performance; the involvement of the North Atlantic Empire had not been divulged to the public.

Of course, the Aldegian ruler seemed to be conducting under-the-table negotiations with the North Atlantic Empire over various matters, how to deal with the captive Trine and her subordinates included. La Folia insisted that the North Atlantic Empire compensate them for the equivalent of multiple *Bifrost*s, and the North Atlantic Empire side would have to make major concessions that would resolve outstanding territorial disputes and end in an announcement of shared ocean floor oil deposit extraction rights. That meant the failure of Trine's scheme would result in the North Atlantic Empire coughing up painful reparations.

But Kojou didn't think a single saboteur had that much political value.

Just maybe, La Folia, knowing Trine's identity from the beginning, had given her free reign so as to allow the princess information to bring to negotiations

with the North Atlantic Empire—such frightening speculation came to Kojou's mind.

As if to brush Kojou's ominous thoughts away, Yukina turned to him with a sunny smile.

"At the very least, I'm glad Kano was able to get along with everyone in the royal family."

Out of the corner of her eye, she was watching Kanon and Nagisa happily shopping for souvenirs at a stand in the airport; there were little girls with them as well. These were La Folia's twin younger sisters.

For some reason, the girls were oddly fond of Nagisa, so they'd come all the way to the airport to see her off.

The sight of Nagisa and Kanon acting like big sisters looking after younger twins brought a smile to Kojou's face.

"Well, guess all the hard work was worth it," Kojou murmured, concurring with Yukina.

He was pretty sure they hadn't heard his voice, but the silver-haired twins noticed Kojou's and Yukina's gazes, waving as they rushed over. Both had hair that was a fair bit shorter than La Folia's. The older twin, Londe, had her hair concealing her right eye, and the younger twin, Pascalia, had hers concealing her left.

"Kojou!"

"Yukina!"

"Londe and Pascalia, was it? Came to give us a send-off?"

Kojou made a languid smile as he watched the twins race over. For eleven-year-olds, the two girls were fairly short. Kojou and Yukina's sitting on the bench put them at just the right height for speaking to each other eye to eye.

The twins came to a standstill right in front of them, glancing between Kojou and Yukina's faces with great interest. Then the twins met each other's eyes.

"Hey, Yukina's really pretty."

The two brought their faces close to Kojou. He wasn't really sure whether it was the older or the younger whispering into his ear— "If Kojou marries La Folia, that'll make Yukina our older sister, huh?"

"Of course. They'll be Wife Number One and Wife Number Two."

"Which one will be Number One and which Number Two?"

"Who knows?"

"Well?"

The twins peppered him with questions.

When he looked closer, the twins' eyes differed a little from La Folia's and Kanon's. Even though both had tints of blue, Londe's were green, almost jade. Pascalia's had a bit of red to make them amethyst.

"Hey, stop talking like it's a done deal that I'm marrying La Folia. And Himeragi just watches over me, okay?"

Kojou remained calm. Over the last few days, his exchanges with La Folia had enabled him to build up resistance to *jokes of that nature*.

In contrast, when Yukina heard Kojou's words, she became incredibly expressionless.

Though he noticed the glacial glare Yukina was giving off, the twins had suddenly changed the topic.

"Hey, Kojou. You were talking to a white-haired girl just now?"

"White hair? You know about Cas?" Kojou replied, bewildered.

How the heck do the two of them know the color of Shizuri's hair? he pondered.

However, the twins did not reply to Kojou's question. They seemed to be looking far into the distance.

"Protect that girl, would you?"

"And beware of The Blood."

The twins' prophetic-like words made Kojou feel vaguely uneasy.

It was said that without exception, girls who were direct descendants of the Aldegian royal line were born with the power of strong spirit mediums. If so, perhaps they were spiritualists just like La Folia and Kanon. *Maybe that power's why they know about Shizuri*, he thought.

"The Blood…"

And, upon hearing the girls' words, Yukina was shaken even more than Kojou. She bit her lip with a hard expression, almost as if she knew the name.

Having finished their words of prophecy, the twins simultaneously grinned, elegantly curtsying in ladylike fashion.

Gazing at Kojou and Yukina, they took on a mature demeanor.

"As members of the Royal Family of Aldegia, we extend to both of you our thanks."

"We are most grateful you rescued our older sister, La Folia Rihavein, and our kingdom of Aldegia."

"R-right."

Thrown for a loop by the abrupt change in the girls, Kojou nodded and told them they were welcome.

Then they both kissed Kojou on his cheeks.

The unfamiliar sensation made Kojou awkwardly stiffen. Looking upon this with amusement, the twins exclaimed, "Bye-bye!" as they waved their hands in a cute fashion.

"Come meet us again."

"Take care until then."

Leaving those words behind, the twins departed like a storm, leaving Kojou in a daze as he watched them go.

Being little sisters of La Folia, it figured that even at that age, they were well versed in taking the people around them for a ride. *At this rate, they'll be terrifying when they grow up*, he thought.

Yukina glared at Kojou with frosty, half-lidded eyes. "What do you think you

are doing?”

Kojou was a bit taken aback as he looked at Yukina.

“I didn’t really do anything. That’s a normal goodbye in these parts, right?”

“You had an indecent look on your face when they kissed you.”

“How would you know…?!”

Yukina’s voice grew sour. “Because I am *merely your watcher*.”

Kojou didn’t know what he’d done to anger her. But when Kojou, naturally put off, opened his mouth to refute her, he suddenly heard a voice heartily laughing.

The speaker was a young man who looked like a tourist. From his appearance, he seemed to be in his early twenties. He had short hair and was a tall guy, probably over a hundred and ninety centimeters. He was slender, but thanks to his musculature, he didn’t give off a weak impression whatsoever. He gave off the air of a soldier, or perhaps an athlete.

He was not what you’d call a pretty boy, but he was certainly a good-looking man. He was wearing rough, baggy pants and coarse work boots. On his upper body, he wore a tank top, and he had a leather parka slung over a shoulder. His exposed left shoulder was decorated with a dragon tattoo.

“Yo. So we meet again, boy. I saw it all. You sure are popular.”

The man spoke with a hearty voice as he gave Kojou’s back a few slaps. He probably meant them to be light, but they had excessive strength in them.

“You sure are a lucky one. Those girls are gonna be real beauties down the road.”

“R-right.”

Kojou tilted his head as he watched the man chummily wrap an arm around his shoulders.

“So we meet again,” he’d said, but Kojou had no memory of him, especially not a guy who stood out this much. *This some kind of new scam?* he wondered with concern.

A woman who seemed to be with him tried to pacify the quite overbearing man. “Cool it, would you? You’re making his girlfriend jealous.”

She was an adult beauty with golden-red hair like the glimmering sun. Her outfit consisted of leather pants with knee cut-outs and a simple shirt, but the ensemble made her look frighteningly gorgeous.

She was without question a beautiful woman, but she didn’t give off a frivolous, flirtatious image at all. She had a sunny, colorful charm that easily attracted attention from any who caught sight of her.

Overwhelmed by the sudden appearance of the beautiful woman, Yukina hastily denied her words. “No, not at all. I am not his girlfr…”

When Yukina shook her head with reddened cheeks, the redheaded woman stared at her with her impressively large eyes. “Ohh, you’re so cuuute! I like you!”

Yukina’s eyes bulged when the woman suddenly hugged her. The Sword Shaman stiffened like a cat picked up by a stranger as the woman rubbed her cheek against Yukina’s.

On top of attracting too much attention, the man and woman were far too friendly. *What’s with these two?* thought Kojou.

“Just who are you…?”

“Shh! Be quiet. We don’t wanna stand out,” the strange man said. They had already raised quite a ruckus.

Still hugging Yukina, the woman also went “Shh!” as she cutely raised a finger. “A troublesome bunch is after us. Let us hide just a little bit.”

Kojou blurted out the thought from his head. “R-right… You eloping or something?”

Short of being criminals or running from debts, it was the only reason he could think of for a couple at their age to be trying to avoid attention while coming to an airport.

Hearing that, the woman let out a little laugh.

“Tee-hee. I suppose you could call it running away from home. There’s a lot of

annoyances at home, you see.”

“And you are going to Itogami Island?” Yukina asked with a hint of surprise. She must have noticed the ticket to a flight for Itogami Island sticking out from the woman’s shirt pocket.

“Yeah. Haven’t been out Far East in a while.” The man made a leering smile.

“You’re going to Japan, too? Shouldn’t you be at the boarding gate?” the woman asked.

“Yeah. But we’re taking a different flight.”

The tickets the couple had were of an airline different from the one Kojou and company were using. Furthermore, the boarding time for their flight was drawing near.

They surely understood that. The man stood back up with some regret, extending his right hand toward Kojou.

“Right. Hope we can meet again on the other side. I’m Ki. Ki Juranbarada.”

Shaking the man’s hand, Kojou introduced himself. “Kojou Akatsuki.”

That instant, he felt a chill run up his spine. It was the kind of fear one had from thrusting one’s hand into the maw of some ferocious beast.

“I’m Zana. Zana Lashka. Nice to meet you, Yukina.”

The woman gave Yukina a peck on the cheek and waved cutely toward her.

Then, as if to shun the eyes of others, they lowered their bodies and raced toward the boarding entrance.

“Himeragi, why did that person know your name…?” Kojou asked with a tilt of his head.

If they know Yukina’s name, maybe we did meet them sometime before, he thought.

“Senpai. That couple just now… Perhaps they might be…” Her voice was wavering.

“…Himeragi?”

Kojou was thrown off from seeing Yukina go pale. Yukina's head remained slightly bent down, her entire body going rigid. She, a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, was cowering in fear.

"Himeragi…what's wrong? Something happen?"

Kojou touched Yukina's shoulder. Yukina slowly lifted her face, seemingly trying to tell Kojou something.

But before she could, they heard the ragged footsteps of someone else rushing over. It was a vampire with black hair wearing an old-fashioned coat, appearing with a number of subordinates in tow.

"Kojou Akatsuki!"

"Aradahl? What's the big rush? Some incident or something?"

Aradahl's vividly haggard expression left Kojou feeling an inauspicious premonition. If a man of Aradahl's caliber was nervous, he couldn't imagine it being something trivial.

Coming to a standstill in front of Kojou and Yukina, Aradahl was catching his breath. "Have you seen a suspicious couple? A man and a woman who unusually stand out."

"A couple that stands out…?"

Kojou's premonition turned into a chill. They'd only just finished speaking to people with those exact characteristics.

"I met some person named Ki. Ki Juranbarada… I think? The other was—"

"Why do you know His Lordship's name?!"

Aradahl grabbed and shook both of Kojou's shoulders. Aradahl's ghastly expression made Kojou unwittingly draw in his breath.

"H-His Lordship?"

"Ki Juranbarada is the true name of our Primogenitor, the Lost Warlord…!"

"L…Lost Warlord…?! That guy's the First Primogenitor?!"

This time, Aradahl's shocking statement left Kojou aghast.

The First Primogenitor was the ruler of the world's oldest Dominion, the Lost Empire, and he was the man who'd drafted the Holy Ground Treaty stipulating coexistence between humanity and Demonkind. It was no exaggeration to say that he had single-handedly brought the peace and prosperity of the present age into being.

The shocking fact that this individual had been there moments prior left Kojou feeling dizzy. Small wonder Yukina had such a fright.

"Quiet. Keep in mind where you are, Kojou Akatsuki. If people knew His Lordship was present, there would be an airport-wide panic."

"W-well, that's true, but…"

Don't surprise me like that, then, Kojou thought, but he swallowed the words as he begrudgingly nodded.

Aradahl's words were fact. Even among the three Primogenitors publicly acknowledged to exist, the Lost Warlord was both the most dangerous and the most mysterious. If it was known such a man had appeared, forget the airport—there would inevitably be a worldwide incident.

"So where is our primogenitor headed?" Aradahl asked with a serious look in his eyes.

"Ahh?!" went Kojou, letting out a moan that was very near to a shriek. "Those two were waiting for a flight to Itogami Island! He said he hadn't been to the Far East in a long time…"

"Wh…at…?"

Aradahl's jaw dropped wide open. The First Primogenitor was heading to a Demon Sanctuary—however non-public it might be, he was visiting the Dominion ruled by the Fourth Primogenitor. The calamity that such a whim might invite had unnerved even Aradahl.

"Are you saying His Lordship is visiting Itogami Island because the happenings there have piqued his interest…?!"

Aradahl seemed completely beside himself as he turned his face toward the heavens.

The airport's internal information board indicated that the flight to Itogami Island in question had already taken off.

Seeing this for himself, he gave Kojou a sharp glare with bloodshot eyes.

"We will pursue him immediately. But please, Kojou Akatsuki. You are not obliged to do as we say, but I ask you to watch over His Lordship to ensure he does not engage in fruitless conflict."

"Watch over him…?"

You're kidding, right? thought Kojou, more shocked than surprised.

To be blunt, Kojou didn't think he could lay a finger on that Ki guy in a fight. Indeed, his premonitions said that nothing good would come from contact between the two. However, he couldn't think of any other option.

Aradahl had the demeanor of a person backed into a corner. "Above all else, do not cause His Lordship to *lose interest*. Otherwise, there is no telling what might happen!"

With that, Aradahl spun on his heel. He was heading outside the airport, subordinates in tow. He was no doubt heading to prepare to pursue Ki.

"H-hey, Aradahl…!"

Kojou called on Aradahl to stop, but the black-haired vampire never even looked back as he ran off. He was in such dire straits that Kojou's voice didn't even reach him.

"Gimme a break…"

Kojou sighed heavily and slumped limply against the bench. Yukina's eyes wavered with concern as she watched Kojou without a word.

"So we meet again," said Ki. Yes, Kojou had met him once before. He had to have been there at the Garden of Whispers at the height of the war of the primogenitors.

Kojou had struck a deal with him—a deal that made Itogami Island the territory of the Fourth Primogenitor. The price of that deal was Kojou's victory over a retainer of the First Primogenitor—Dimitrie Vattler. It was this fateful ground of Itogami Island where the First Primogenitor was headed.

As for what his objective might be, no answer was forthcoming, no matter how much he thought.

Having finished their shopping, Nagisa and Kanon had returned to Kojou and Yukina. Realizing the despondent state the pair were in, Kanon asked with concern, “Akatsuki? Is something amiss? Yukina?”

Nagisa had a little box of sweets in her hands. These were the famous black plums of Aldegia. *Don’t take sweets from people you don’t know*, Kojou would have scolded, but he couldn’t summon the energy for even that.

When Yaze and Asagi returned with bags from a tax-exempt shop, they immediately noticed something was off with Kojou and Yukina. Apparently, the two had horrid expressions on their faces right then.

“Well, that’s that. We bought souvenirs, so now we can finally go back to Itogami Island.”

“Yeah. When I get back, I want to loaf around for a while—um, Kojou, what’s wrong…? You have an awful look on your face, you know?”

At that moment, Yukina finally recovered from her fright. “Senpai,” she called out in all seriousness.

“Yeah,” Kojou merely said.

Whatever that man’s objective, what Kojou had to do was obvious. He’d protect Itogami Island—just as he’d protected La Folia and Aldegia.

Sensing from the mood that Kojou and Yukina were privy to something just between the two of them, Nagisa asked with a suspicious tone, “Hey, something’s going on between you two, right? Guys…?”

The looks on Asagi’s and Yaze’s faces showed they were very tempted to press the issue with Kojou.

Kojou languidly sank his shoulders, turning his eyes toward the window.

The setting sun shone golden upon the foreign land nurtured by forests and glaciers.

An unfamiliar airplane took off into the twilight sky visible through the glass.

He stared at a sky that continued all the way to Itogami Island, far, far away.

Afterword

So there you have it. *Strike the Blood*, Vol. 18 has hit the shelves.

This episode is based on the currently on sale OVA for the “Kingdom of the Valkyries Arc” (the prototype for this work), reconstituted in novel form. For *Strike the Blood*, it’s a little unusual for an episode to be published as an anime in advance of a novel.

That said, since the timeline is a little different and the place that turns into the main stage is wholly different, the end result is that they are largely completely separate works. In particular, the first half is largely original. If you think it’s easy to write something up because the anime version already has a “formula” going, you’d be totally mistaken. In my entire time writing this series, this volume might take first or second place for the trouble involved. Nonetheless, it was an awfully fun arc to write.

In the beginning, the desire to take Kojou and friends out on a foreign trip in the anime originated from my own desire to go on an overseas trip in the name of research (which, moreover, did not result in my going on a trip). I modeled Aldegia after Northern Europe as a whole rather than on any country in particular, but many view it as Finland. The resemblance is probably due to something a friend gave me while I was thinking up this episode. I think that the powerful taste of salmiac left a strong impression in my mind (such as from the plums a certain person gave Nagisa in the final part of this episode).

If you ask why Northern Europe, it’s simple: since Itogami Island is set up as a tropical country, I wanted to base this setting in a cold country. Ever since then, I’ve thought of having Kojou and Yukina get lost in some South American jungle. That would be amusing in its own way. I’ve quietly become enamored with the idea of writing that. It’ll be in an episode having to do with the Third Primogenitor. Probably.

Incidentally, there has been a lot of unexpected trouble (a busted air conditioner, the dismantling of a neighboring building) arising during the writing of *Strike the Blood*, but this time, there was a traffic accident. Well, what I mean by *traffic accident* is that a neighbor’s car slammed into my car, totaling it while

it was parked in the parking lot. It’s not as if that lot faces an intersection, and being at a right angle, you’d have to cut the steering wheel hard, so what gives, neighbor?! I never expected to be involved in a traffic accident while sleeping at home.

Fortunately, no one was hurt, and when the accident clean-up was complete, I was paid full compensation, but having to deal with getting roused from bed after finally falling asleep, plus dealing with an all-nighter by a police officer doing an on-site inspection, shook me up a fair bit. To everyone reading this book, please be careful of traffic accidents. Don’t let your guard down even while sleeping at home.

To Manyako, the illustrator, I’m truly in your debt this time around. It was a tight schedule as usual, and for dealing with a foreign country’s cityscape and even more arbitrary clothing changes for the dramatis personae, I’m truly grateful that you drew up such superb pieces of work.

Furthermore, to everyone involved in the production and distribution of this book, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Since, no matter how you look at it, I was behind schedule, I apologize for the great trouble caused.

Of course, I thank to the utmost all of you who have read this book.

I hope to see you again next volume.

Gakuto Mikumo

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