



02

GAKUTO
MIKUMO
Illustration by
MIYUU

HOLLOW REGALIA

BETWEEN THE DRAGON
AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA

HOLLOW
REGALIA

02

Between
the Dragon
and the
Deep
Blue Sea

GAKUTO
MIKUMO

Illustration by
MIYUU



Chiruka Misaki



**Luxuria's
Lazarus**
Hisaki Minato

Yahiro
Narusawa

"Watch
your
tongue,
kid."

"I am
Nina
Himekawa.
Twenty-two.
Single."

**Luxuria's
Medium**
Nina Himekawa

Iroha
Mamana





Opening Act:	Prologue
Act 1:	Fort Yokohama
Act 2:	Contract Talk
Act 3:	Government in Exile
Act 4:	War Begins
Act 5:	Vanagloria
Final Act:	Epilogue
Afterword	

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**Between the Dragon
and the Deep Blue Sea**

**HOLLOW
REGALIA**

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Between the Dragon
and the Deep Blue Sea

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Gakuto Mikumo

Illustration by MIYUU

YEN
ON
NEW YORK

Copyright

HOLLOW REGALIA—Between the Dragon and the Deep Blue Sea Vol. 2

UTSURONARU REGALIA VOL. 2 Between the Dragon
and the Deep Blue Sea Gakuto Mikumo

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

UTSURONARU REGALIA Vol. 2 RYU TO AOKU FUKAI UMI NO AIDADE

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Edited by Dengeki Bunko

First published in Japan in 2021 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo. English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: August 2023

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Leilah Labossiere Designed by Yen Press Design:
Madelaine Norman Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Mikumo, Gakuto,
author. | Miyuu, illustrator. | Avila, Sergio, translator.

Title: Hollow regalia / Gakuto Mikumo ; illustration by Miyuu ; translated by
Sergio Avila.

Other titles: Utsuronaru regalia. English

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2023- |
Contents: v. 2. Between the dragon and the deep blue sea — Identifiers:
LCCN 2022048784 | ISBN 9781975352790 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN
9781975368616 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) Subjects: LCGFT: Apocalyptic fiction.
| Monster fiction. | Light novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.M555 Ho 2023 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022048784>

ISBNs: 978-1-97536861-6 (paperback)

978-1-9753-6862-3 (ebook)

E3-20230804-JV-NF-ORI

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**Kill
the
dragons.**

HOLLOW
REGALIA

STORY/CHARACTERS

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

Galerie Berith

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



Yahiro Narusawa—Lazarus

He became a Lazarus after being bathed in dragon blood. One of the few surviving Japanese. He lived on his own as a salvager, retrieving antiques and artwork from the quarantined 23 Wards. He continues to look for his younger sister, Sui Narusawa, who went missing after the J-nocide.



Iroha Mamana—Moujuu Tamer

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

Iroha Waon



Giuletta Berith—Simpleminded Martial Arist

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



Rosetta Berith—Coolheaded Sniper

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



Josh Keegan—Upbeat Former Cop

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



Paola Resente—Pretty Soldier

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



Yang Wei—Quiet Avenger

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

Ganzheit

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



Sui Narusawa—Earth Dragon Medium

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



Auguste Nathan—Ganzheit Agent

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



Hector Raimat—Arms Dealer

Chairman of the leading weapons manufacturer: Raimat International. Bona fide noble with the title of count. Provided a lab for Nathan and went after Iroha in order to obtain the power of immortality granted by dragon blood.

Prologue

Japanese time—00:40.

Old-model civilian cargo ship *Quail*, loaded with 1,700 containers, was heading toward Osaka Bay.

Most of the load was preserved foods; the rest consisted of weapons and ammo. They were supplies for the British Armed Forces stationed in the Hanshin area.

The ship was off the coast of Cape Muroto—already within Japanese territory. It would cross the Kitan Strait and reach the Port of Kobe before dawn.

There was no other ship near the *Quail*. The radars remained silent, as did the AIS—the automatic identification system.

So many transport ships, fishing boats, long-distance ferries, and cruise ships used to cross the area, yet now there was just the one vessel on this sea.

On the horizon, Shikoku blended in with the dark of the night, not a single artificial light to be found.

No radio wave to be heard.

The land, shrouded in death, remained silent. This was the current state of Japan.

“Geez. Crazy how things can change in just four years. Crazy and sad,” said the man sitting in the captain’s seat while he observed the live satellite feed.

The Kinki metropolitan area once had a population of twenty-two million, but now it was a shell of its former glory. Most of the cities were destroyed, and all the people within them were dead. The reason? The J-nocide.

“Yeah. Can’t even feel happy about landing after so long knowing there’s no one left living there. There used to be this bar with really good food by the port, too,” his navigator responded impassively.

Veteran sailors were used to seeing prosperous countries fall to war or disaster. The downfall of peaceful Japan was surprising, for sure, but not a rare sight.

“By the way, Captain, have you heard the rumors?”

“Rumors?” He glanced at the navigator with suspicion.

His crewmate grinned. “There’s monsters over there. They say it was no virus that killed the Japanese; it was monsters that crept up from deep pits in the earth.”

“...Where did you hear that?”

“My sister’s husband is in the US Navy. Apparently they call the monsters Moujuu. He almost died fighting one in Iwakuni.”

“Seriously?” The captain looked sternly at the other man as he sighed.

Most people believed what killed the Japanese was an unknown virus brought to Earth by a meteorite, but everyone in the army knew this wasn’t true, though it was hardly discussed.

Just as the navigator said, the Moujuu’s emergence was one of the causes of Japan’s downfall. No one knew where these man-eating monsters had come from, but this threat to humanity now occupied the land of Japan. They had a tight grip on the former capital, Tokyo, in particular. Not even armored forces dared enter the area.

“I have heard that the armies remain in Japan because of the monsters. That they’re sealing off Japan, so the beasts don’t get any farther,” the captain answered in a low voice, so their other crewmates by the bridge wouldn’t hear.

The British Armed Forces, owner of the ship’s load, was among the many international armies stationed in Japan. There was no point in trying to hide it any longer, but spreading rumors could end up hurting their relationship with the client.

The navigator, however, shook his head with a cynical grin on his face.

“I appreciate the effort, if that’s the case. But don’t you find it strange?”

“Find what strange?”

“I mean, couldn’t they just annihilate the monsters with missiles or something? All the Japanese are dead anyway, so what’s the purpose of sending thousands of soldiers to close off a deserted island?”

“You’re right.” The captain couldn’t argue with his subordinate’s reasoning.

It really was strange when it was put that way. The armies had to be spending millions to send all those soldiers there. Rather than trying to keep the Moujuu inside the country, it’d make more sense financially to just burn the uninhabited land to the ground.

It would make sense if their goal was to colonize Japan, but the armies controlling sections of Japan were, on paper, allies, and it did not seem as though they were fighting each other for territory.

“What does your jarhead brother-in-law have to say about it?”

“He said they keep people on the bottom of the chain in the dark about all that.” The navigator shrugged. “But it seems like the higher-ups are looking for something.”

“What...?”

“No idea what it could be, but considering all the effort they’re putting into it, it must be something really valuable. Maybe a hidden treasure of the Japanese government...”

“A piece of Japanese legacy, huh...” The captain chuckled. He found the mere idea of the biggest armies in the world looking all over for something that might not even exist hilarious. “Whatever, I suppose none of it has anything to do with us.”

“Right.” The navigator agreed with practicality.

They both shrugged, then went back to their positions.

It was then that shrill alarm bells started ringing on the bridge.

A low, vibrating noise, like that of an earthquake, echoed just as the ship swayed violently. The engine switched to reverse, forcing the vessel to abruptly begin to slow.

“What on earth happened?!” the captain asked the crew standing at the

helm.

The *Quail* was an almost completely automated ship, and thus had few bridge crew members. There were only four people on the bridge, including the captain.

“We found a ship on our course! It’s about four miles from here! We might crash!” the helmsman yelled desperately.

The captain was momentarily speechless.

The ship was cruising near max speed—stopping was not easy. Vessels in the seventy-thousand-ton class, like this one, needed much more than a couple of minutes to decelerate. Four miles was not enough to slow down, let alone stop.

“Why didn’t you notice earlier?!”

“There was nothing on the radar! Nothing on the AIS, either!”

“It’s a stealth ship, then? That can’t be!” the captain bellowed as he stared at the silhouette through binoculars.

He couldn’t see the ship clearly due to the dark of night, but he could tell that, while not as large as the *Quail*, it was big. The outline was smooth, no unnecessarily protruding elements—the sign of a stealth battleship. But even then, it was strange that the radars didn’t catch it until they were this close.

“It doesn’t look like an official warship... Pirates, perhaps?” the navigator asked calmly.

“In this area? Well, I guess it makes sense...” The captain pursed his lips.

With Japan destroyed, this area was literally lawless. There were no authorities to punish any piracy.

While the number of commercial ships around here had declined, they hadn’t disappeared altogether. The lack of other ships to act as witness also only served as an advantage for pirates.

Or perhaps it could be a privateer pretending to be a pirate ship. That made more sense, in fact, considering they had a stealth battleship.

“Oh well. Try to evade them and prepare to counter. Wake up all deck hands.

We're going to war," the captain ordered his bridge crew.

The subordinates followed his orders without hesitation. The *Quail* was operated by D9S: the biggest private military company in the world. All crewmates, including the captain, were military personnel.

"You'll regret thinking this was a civilian vessel. It's basically a military ship on the inside." The corners of the captain's mouth curved up as he stared at the enemy ship.

The *Quail* was equipped with two 20mm autocannons for self-protection. It also had one 76mm naval cannon. It had no anti-ship missiles, but it was sufficiently armored to fight a first-class destroyer in close combat. They had the upper hand now, as long as the enemy still thought it was just a transport ship.

The enemy was likely waiting for the *Quail* to decelerate to avoid collision, so the plan was to take them by surprise and shoot as soon as they got within reach.

The captain approached his subordinates to relay the strategy, but before he got to it, the *Quail* shook violently.

The impact came from below. All members of the crew on the bridge were thrown.

It felt like a car crash. The captain let out a cry of pain as his whole body was slammed against the wall.

"What now?!"

"I don't know! Th-the ship got stuck on something!"

"How could the bottom possibly touch anything?! There's no way we'd find a reef out here!" the captain yelled angrily in response to his navigator's distressed report.

The sea was easily over 914 meters deep around these parts. There couldn't possibly be a reef or something similar for the ship's keel to come in contact with. Yet in reality, the *Quail* was tilted and loudly creaking as though it had.

The captain glanced at the dark ocean with confusion and once again went

speechless at what he saw.

There was something floating on the sea. A giant figure, kilometers long.

It looked like a black iceberg.

It was no submarine. Not man-made. Yet it couldn't possibly be natural.

It had countless bumps on its surface, like smashed rocks, all shining slimily wet from the splashing water.

The *Quail* was riding this giant figure, at a complete standstill. The ship was miraculously unharmed, but it could give way at any moment, unable to resist any more shocks and the weight of its own load.

"What in the world...?" The captain absentmindedly shook his head as he stared at the black figure that covered the sea.

The thing was still slowly rising above the water, tilting the *Quail* further and further. Something an iceberg could never do.

The captain noticed the countless bumps on its surface were orderly as soon as it was fully exposed. They were reminiscent of a reptile's scutes.

Could this giant figure be a living creature?

The captain shivered subconsciously at the mere thought of the impossible.

"We're receiving a call from the other ship!"

The comms operator's frantic voice made the captain come to his senses. Almost at the exact same time, a voice sounded from the international marine radio channel—the VHF—communicator's speakers. It was a young woman.

"Attention all crew members of the Quail transport ship."

"...An announcement?" The captain's face stiffened upon hearing the disrespectful, one-sided statement.

The woman knew the *Quail* was stranded atop this mysterious thing, yet she showed no sign of confusion. She knew this would happen. She had to be behind this. This silhouette rising from the sea was part of their attack.

"Your ship aims to intrude into our country's territory in order to provide resources to invaders. We have seized your vessel to prevent this. We demand

you hand over your cargo."

"Our country's territory...? Who in the world are you lot?" The captain interrupted her.

After a short silence, she answered, *"We are the Council for Japanese Independence. A provisional government and the rightful successor to the Japanese government."*

"Japanese survivors?!" The captain's eyes nearly popped out of his head.

The nation of Japan was gone. There was no one to claim ownership of these waters. No one save for Japanese survivors. If this Council for Japanese Independence truly was the successor to the Japanese government, then they had all the right to do what they were doing. However, another country had to recognize their legitimacy first for that to apply.

"We've got the data on the guardian," the navigator whispered into the captain's ear, tablet in hand.

"Guardian...?"

He furrowed his brow at the word. There was only one country that used that word to refer to destroyer-class ships. A country that no longer existed.

"Yes. It is the DDX-187. The *Hikata*. A JMSDF amphibious guardian."

"A Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force ship?" the captain muttered.

Japan had lost all self-defense forces after the J-nocide. If this DDX guardian was still intact, then it was very likely that the people inside it truly were Japanese survivors. The vessel was strong enough evidence that they were the rightful successors of the Japanese government.

"That's right, Mister Captain of the *Quail*. And this *Hikata* is the only territory the Council for Japanese Independence currently has hold of."

"...What?!"

Everyone on the bridge gasped as they heard the woman's voice coming from outside the ship. Not through the comms. From right before their eyes.

A thin, black-haired woman was illuminated by the stars with the night sky as

her backdrop.

She wasn't floating in midair, however. The black guardian had parted the seas and risen to the height of the *Quail's* bridge. She was standing on it.

She looked to be in her midtwenties. She wore what looked like luxurious formal military attire and was holding a radio transceiver in her left hand. In her right was a sword—a Japanese sword that glowed silver.

"I repeat. We are the Council for Japanese Independence. The *Quail* must immediately disarm and follow our orders. Or else...you will be dealt with," she said as she pointed the katana at the crew.

Then they realized: she was standing atop a giant monster's head.

It was a fantastical beast the color of amber. Its whole body was covered in thick scales like rocks. It moved slowly below the dark water's surface, the *Quail* stranded atop its back.

The beast raised its sickle-shaped neck to the skies and glared down at the *Quail's* bridge with its snakelike face. Its giant, emotionless eyes glowed like scorching lava in the darkness.

"It's...a dragon..." The captain uttered the beast's name hoarsely.

The amber dragon opened its maw and out came a ferocious roar that cut through the air.

HOLLOW
REGALIA

02
Between
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Presented by
GAKUTO MIKUMO

Illustration
MIYUU



Act 1 Fort Yokohama

1

An ash-gray train ran through the city in ruins.

It was armed with high-caliber turrets and too many machine guns to count, giving it the appearance of a hedgehog. Galerie Berith's own Yáo Guāng Xīng.

It was just two days after Galerie Berith had hired a Japanese survivor—the Lazarus known as Yahiro Narusawa—and defeated Count Hector Raimat after his wyrm transformation, thus suppressing the Japanese branch of the military company Raimat. The Galerie's operators had spent the last couple days retrieving what spoils they could, and were now finally on their way back home.

Galerie Berith's headquarters were in what once was the city of Yokohama. The train took the scenic route through Hachioji in order to avoid the quarantined 23 Wards, and managed to have an uninterrupted trip owing to that.

The train was slow because they had to stay alert for possible encounters with Moujuu. Most of the operators had too much time on their hands during the trip and spent it relaxing inside the train.

This was not the case, however, for one particular person who unfortunately was assigned to be in charge of cooking.

"Potatoes? Again?" Yahiro sighed as he glared at the bucketful of potatoes in front of where he stood in a corner of the kitchen.

The eight-car train had a maximum capacity of fifty-four operators, and naturally stored more than enough food for all of them.

"Uh, Giuli, you guys hired me to kill the dragons, didn't you?" Yahiro looked up, peeling knife in hand, and directed his question toward the young woman sitting at the dining room counter.

She was a small Asian girl with black hair and bright-orange highlights. Giuletta Berith, executive of the Far East branch of Galerie Berith. Yahiro's boss.

"Yup. We made a pinky promise, remember?" Giuli nodded calmly before grabbing a piece of cake from the three-tier platter and tossing it in her mouth. She was enjoying her pleasant teatime, and all the while Yahiro kept on working.

Yahiro pursed his lips and grabbed a new potato from the bucket.

"Then why am I here, endlessly peeling potatoes? I've done nothing but cook after we fought that Raimat geezer!"

"Head cook Shen was singing your praises! He really wants you to stay in the kitchen from now on. Aren't you happy?"

"How's that supposed to make me happy?! What about our promise?! Aren't we going after Sui?!" Yahiro lost his temper after hearing Giuli's unbothered tone.

Sui Narusawa had escaped from the Raimat base by helicopter, and her whereabouts were still unknown. They had gone through the documents left behind in the base's lab but found no clue as to where she had gone. Yahiro had finally found his sister after four years and now she was missing again.

"Dammit...!" Yahiro chopped a potato in half in his fury, the strike on the chopping board making a loud noise.

"Hush!" Iroha Mamana came out from farther inside the kitchen. The apron-clad girl scolded the boy. "Pipe down, Yahiro! My mic's picking up all your racket!" She puffed out her cheeks in a pout.

"...And what are you doing, Iroha?" Yahiro asked in confusion. She was wearing a silver wig and animal ear headband, while holding her smartphone with a selfie stick.

"It's Waon right now. Waoon! I'm recording the video I'm uploading later tonight. I'm making Japanese *korokke*."

Iroha puffed out her chest and posed for the camera.

“Waon” was her online persona. She had been posting videos in Japanese almost every day after the J-nocide took place.

Her amateurish videos never took off, but the presence of another Japanese survivor had helped Yahiro get through his lonely life. But now that he knew what she was like in real life, his feelings on the matter were more complicated, in a lot of ways.

“Oh, so you’re the one stealing the potatoes I peeled. I knew something was up!” Yahiro scowled as soon as he peeked over at the kitchen corner she was working in.

Iroha wasn’t as good a cook as she thought. One just had to take a look at the disaster—half-used kitchenware was all over the place. And yet...

“Take it easy. I’ll let you have a taste once I’m done with them. I mean, handmade *korokke* from your favorite streamer? Aren’t you a lucky guy?” Iroha stared at him with the smuggest look on her face.

Annoying brat. He grimaced.

“Just help me peel the potatoes instead, okay? This is supposed to be your kids’ job, y’know?”

“My siblings! Stop saying they’re my kids!” she corrected him indignantly.

For four years after the Japanese nation collapsed, Iroha had lived with seven orphans right in the middle of the Moujuu-infested 23 Wards.



Most of the children were around ten years old, the oldest being Ayaho at fourteen. The youngest, Runa, was only seven. Iroha was pretty much their guardian after taking them in as family for so long.

Still, Iroha was only seventeen; it was no wonder she didn't enjoy being treated like a mother. So, she was adamant about the little ones being referred to only as her siblings. Despite her words, however, her actions were always very maternal.

"Iroha's kids are in class," Rosé said just as she entered the dining room.

"...Class?"

"There are a few qualified teachers among the operators, so I directed them to take turns instructing the kids. They should be getting compulsory education at their age. And even if we were to make them work for the Galerie, we'd need them to have the absolute minimum of education," Rosé stated monotonously as she flipped her blue-highlighted black hair.

Rosé—Rosetta Berith—was Giuli's younger twin sister. Their faces were mirror images of each other; it would be nearly impossible to tell one from the other if it weren't for their hair. Plus, their general auras were polar opposites.

Giuli was whimsical and volatile, while Rosé was cool and rational. Yahiro always thought it would be just right if they could just combine their personalities and divide the result by two.

"Well, I have taught them the basics, like reading and writing and arithmetic," Iroha replied uneasily.

Iroha and her siblings must have had a hard time just getting by all alone in that city in ruins. Even if she took the time to teach them something, there was a limit to what she could do. She deserved praise for getting them to speak English well, though.

"Hey, wait. Making them work for the Galerie? Weren't you gonna let them flee overseas?" Yahiro asked, surprised by Rosé's statement.

Letting the kids go overseas, away from the dangerous, lawless Japan, was the condition they agreed to in exchange for making Iroha follow the Galerie's

orders.

“I thought so, too, but...,” Iroha mumbled with a complicated expression on her face.

“This is what they want. They don’t want to leave Iroha,” Giuli explained frankly after taking a sip of black tea.

“Huh.” Yahiro raised his eyebrows ever so slightly and turned to look at Iroha.

She giggled awkwardly. It would be better for the children’s futures to let them leave Japan, but he understood that feeling of not wanting to be apart from family. And more than anything, Iroha must’ve been happy to know they wanted to stay by her side.

“Well, it’s not our place to say what would make them happier.”

“I agree. And we couldn’t guarantee their safety even if we took them away from Japan, in any case,” Rosé replied with a pretty scary addition to Yahiro’s nonchalant comment.

“...What do you mean by that? The J-nocide’s over, right? The kids wouldn’t get killed just for being Japanese, would they?”

“They wouldn’t. But they’re still one of the dragon mediums’ family members.” Rosé sat next to Giuli and shrugged as she grabbed a biscuit.

“...You’re saying they’d use them as hostages against Iroha?”

“I’m just saying it wouldn’t be strange for someone to think of that. The dragon medium is just that valuable.”

“Which means they’ll be safer over here with us,” Giuli said with a smile.

Yahiro gave them a look of suspicion before saying, “And how can we know *you* won’t use them as hostages?”

“No way. We could never. We’re not so stupid as to believe such a thing would be of any use against a dragon.” Rosé grinned faintly.

Dragons were beyond human knowledge—beings closer to gods. Monsters above the laws of physics of this world. There was no point trying to negotiate with such an opponent, and these two understood that.

Looking at it the other way, however, this meant that they would not hesitate to use children as hostages if they knew negotiations were possible.

Suddenly, the train car shook with a loud metallic thud.

“...What was that?!”

The wheels shrieked as the Yáo Guāng Xīng slowed down. Yahiro stopped peeling the potato just before he cut off his own finger.

“Congratulations, Yahiro. No more peeling potatoes for you. For the meantime, at least,” Giuli said joyously after putting her teacup down and looking outside the window.

“Get ready to disembark. We’ve arrived at our destination,” Rosé stated emotionlessly as she stood up.

“Our destination?”

“So we’re at the Galerie Berith base now?”

Yahiro and Iroha looked at each other in confusion.

Then, they realized the view out the window was entirely different. There was no longer a ruined cityscape—beside the railway were messy rows of nondescript buildings.

At the center of the city was a giant cylindrical tower—a spiral-shaped building reminiscent of Bruegel’s *Tower of Babel*. Yahiro knew from rumors that this place had been Yokohama Station.

“No, this is just the last stop for this railway. The home of mercenaries in Japan—Fort Yokohama,” Rosé said as she looked up at the clumsy-looking, unfinished building.

The Yáo Guāng Xīng slid along the platform at the foot of the tower. The brakes screeched like a dying beast as the giant train slowly came to a stop.

2

Mechanics were waiting for the train’s arrival at the Fort Yokohama terminal. The men were all burly, and their work clothes were stained with oil.

One of them had this particularly tough look on his face, and Giuli casually approached him after getting off the train. He smiled broadly.

“Good to see you’re back in one piece, Giulietta Berith!”

“Guess we’re back, sir! We’ll stay over for a while again.”

“Mhmm. I heard you went inside the 23 Wards; hopefully you didn’t do harm to the Yáo Guāng Xīng?”

“It’s fine, all right, thanks to our very capable operators.”

“...Who’s that guy?” Yahiro asked Rosé, who stood beside him, as he stared at Giuli cheerfully chatting with the man.

Meanwhile, the other mechanics approached the train and started checking its wheels and engine. They were surprisingly nimble despite their rough exteriors.

“They’re the Guild’s support team. They take care of the Yáo Guāng Xīng’s maintenance.”

“...What’s the Guild?”

“Think of it like an alliance between private military companies in Fort Yokohama. They’re a neutral organization, not belonging to any nation or faction.”

“I had no idea such a thing existed...”

Rosé’s explanation came as a shock to Yahiro. From his point of view, PMCs were all mutual enemies, out there to trick and kill each other for their own benefit. He couldn’t believe they would set up a neutral organization for collaboration.

“Yokohama is the only big port that still functions in the Kanto region. The Guild’s objective is to keep it safe. It’s basically meant to watch over us, so no single company tries to hoard something or begin large-scale battles near here.”

“Oh...” Now it made sense to Yahiro.

Most of Japan’s land was deserted and in ruins now—the majority of everyday resources were imported. Food, medicine, and even weapons and

ammo to fight Moujuu. If the port became unable to receive cargo, the PMCs would have more important things to worry about than pursuing profit.

“So, you would be correct to assume the Yokohama surroundings are a safe place. Unless you go up against the Guild, in which case all PMCs in Yokohama would become your enemy.”

“Right... You heard that, Yahiro?”

“Are you implying I’d purposely make trouble?” Yahiro’s lips tightened upon hearing Iroha’s genuinely worried tone.

If any trouble was to come up in Fort Yokohama, it would most likely come from Iroha. Some PMCs who participated in Raimat’s operation already knew about the “Kushinada” and her power to control the Moujuu.

What’s worse, she didn’t really seem aware of her importance. Proof of this was the white furball she was nonchalantly carrying in her arms. The plush-like creature the size of a medium dog was the current form of the giant beast of thunder that had lived in the 23 Wards. A Moujuu. One could easily imagine the inhabitants of Fort Yokohama losing their minds at the mere idea of such a thing being brought into their city.

“Anyway. What a huge building, huh? It’s been a while since I last saw such a bustling place,” Iroha exclaimed while looking at the center of Fort Yokohama.

Crowds came and went in a hurry across the chaotic structure. The liveliness of the people living inside was palpable even through the dirty windows of the terminal.

“Looks more like a labyrinth than a fort. How many people live here?”

“There’s been no census, but they say there are about a hundred thousand mercenaries in here. Then on top of that you add the merchants and prostitutes coming here to offer their services.”

“Are you for real?” Yahiro felt overwhelmed by Rosé’s blasé answer.

A hundred thousand was pretty much the scale of a medium-sized nation’s army. You couldn’t quite compare this to that, though, considering differences in the equipment and training a real army gets, but still. He would never want

to get on the bad side of such a group.

“And Galerie Berith’s base is here?” Iroha asked.

“No. We’re taking a car for the rest of the trip. Our base is farther away from here, by the sea,” Rosé answered.

Yahiro then heard some hubbub behind him.

Iroha’s siblings were stepping down from the train’s sleeper car. Two young Galerie operators were guiding the way, like teachers: Josh Keegan and Paola Resente.

“All right, everyone. Hold hands and keep close to us. Consider yourselves lost forever if you stray even thirty centimeters away.”

“Okay!” The nine-year-old trio—Kiri, Kyota, and Honoka—replied to Josh’s blunt warning.

Behind them were eleven-year-old Ren and twelve-year-old Rinka. The oldest, Ayaho Sashou, seemed flustered and bowed her head again and again, apologizing for her siblings’ impolite behavior, while Paola tried to calm her down.

The youngest at only seven, Runa Senou, walked alone away from her siblings, coming to stand right by Yahiro.

“Um...Runa, right? Your mama’s over there.” Yahiro, perplexed, pointed at Iroha after the taciturn girl with ponytails grabbed his sleeve.

The girl simply shook her head, however, and didn’t let go.

“I told you I’m not their mama! I’m their sister!” Iroha pouted cutely.

Then, Runa silently grabbed Iroha’s hand with her empty one. She immediately smiled in satisfaction, standing between the two.

“Huh? What? You want us three to hold hands?”

“...Why me?”

Iroha and Yahiro furrowed their brows in confusion, but Runa did not answer. She only stared with emotionless eyes at the end of the platform where the train had stopped—in the direction leading inside Fort Yokohama. Yahiro traced

her gaze and noticed people coming their way from the back of the hallway—armed men and women, all wearing the same coats.

“Nuemaru...” Runa suddenly called the Moujuu’s name.

The white furball in Iroha’s arms jumped down and rushed to Runa’s feet. She let go of Yahiro’s and Iroha’s hands to pick Nuemaru up. In her arms, it really looked like just a large plushie.

Yahiro stared at the girl and the spectral beast with a puzzled expression, when all of a sudden, the blond woman leading the uniformed group shouted at them.

“Nobody move! This is the Guild’s Executive Branch!”

“...?!” Yahiro grabbed his sword’s hilt reflexively.

The woman’s subordinates took notice of this and aimed their guns—military-grade submachine guns—at him in unison.

Iroha was frozen in shock at the unbridled display of hostility. Nuemaru let out a low growl in reaction as his white fur stood on end and bluish sparks flew all around him. This was all he could do, however. Runa was holding him tight in place so as to not let him attack the group.

“Wait, Yahiro. Don’t move.”

Yahiro heard a soft, calm voice murmur right into his ear. Then, a tuft of hair dyed vivid orange passed right by him, as the girl stepped forward to defend them.

The uniformed group immediately lost composure, as though pulled by something invisible. It became clear right away: thin, silver steel wire wrapped around all of their guns, binding them in place.

“What are you doing?!” The blond leader pulled a gun that was holstered at her hip. It didn’t stay in her hands for long, though, as the other, smaller girl swiftly kicked it out of her grip.

Giuli kept her foot at the blond’s eye level and smiled broadly.

“Mind putting down your guns, Akulina? You’re scaring the kids.”

“...Giulietta Berith...!” The now-unarmed blond woman shot a frustrated scowl at Giuli.

The white woman had the air of a ballerina, perhaps due to her slender and tall figure. She looked to be in her early twenties. She had a pretty face, but was far from being a cool beauty—she looked too uptight.

“What’s the issue here, Akulina Jarova?” Rosé stepped between Giuli and the blond’s staring contest.

Akulina finally regained her cool and sighed as she relaxed her posture.

“Rosetta Berith... The Head calls for you. We were asked to bring you twins with us.”

“I don’t believe the Guild’s head has the power to force attendance of any members?”

“I know. That is why we were asked to accompany you.”

Akulina’s tone was not high-handed. The group had only reacted to Yahiro’s killer aura, and had no intention of fighting Galerie Berith in the first place.

“May I ask why?” Giuli replied in a friendly tone.

Akulina softly shook her head. “We weren’t told anything besides that you would understand if I said it’s about the trouble you’ve brought.”

“I see... Yes, we understand.” Rosé consented right away while casually glancing at Yahiro and Iroha. Then, she addressed her subordinates, still waiting by the rear. “We need no escort. You stand by inside the Fort. Take turns keeping an eye out; otherwise you’re free to do as you please. Josh, Paola, take care of the kids.”

“Got it. We just gotta give them something nice to eat, right?”

“I want...cherry pie. Also some ice cream...from Foster’s.”

The two operators bantered back and forth in order to let the children breathe easy. The first to show reaction were the oldest—Ayaho and Rinka.

“Ice cream?!”

“R-really?!”

“...Ice cream?” The other kids were taken aback by how happy their older sisters were. Understandably so, since they had only eaten homegrown vegetables and preserved foods scavenged from the ruins ever since the J-nocide. There must have been no window to even mention the words *ice cream*.

Naturally, Yahiro and Iroha were also excited about the ice cream, but Giuli had crueller plans for them.

“Yahiro, Iroha, you two come with us.”

“Huh?! Whaaa...?!” Iroha looked up at the sky as though it was the end of the world. Yahiro may have thought she was exaggerating a little, but he understood her feelings.

Akulina stared at both of them with visible suspicion.

“Who are they?”

“The trouble Leskin spoke about.” Rosé answered the Guild staff member’s question.

Akulina gasped. “Those features... Are they Japanese? Could it be...?!”

“We were already planning on stopping by to say hello. Saved us the effort of asking for an appointment, I guess.” Giuli grinned mischievously.

“I see now. Yes, you sure brought great trouble to us, Berith sisters!” Akulina’s lips trembled and she could say nothing else.

She shot a wary look at Iroha, but the girl was too bummed about missing out on her first ice cream in four years to even realize.

Iroha stared longingly and enviously at her siblings as they walked away, which only made the blond Guild staff member’s brow furrow even further.

3

The Guild head’s office was at the top of Fort Yokohama Tower.

The tower was built on the former site of a big department store, but after countless unplanned renovations, it barely resembled one anymore. The glass

elevator was the only remnant that suggested it used to be a commercial building.

“We’re here, Gramps,” Giuli called casually to the man sitting at the desk in the back of the office as soon as they entered. Her tone truly was that of a grandchild arriving at her grandfather’s house to hang out.

Akulina’s beautiful face twitched upon hearing this, but she just barely controlled herself, for she was in front of her boss.

“It’s been a while, Evgraf Leskin. Good to see your business is as prosperous as ever.” Rosé bowed her head politely after taking a look around the whole office.

The room was sparsely furnished, quite unlike what one would expect from the general manager of a hundred thousand mercenaries. Rosé was obviously being sarcastic. Leskin knew this and his lips tightened.

The old man had a sturdy build and a bald head. He was about a head taller than Yahiro, and likely double the young man’s weight. He had to be over sixty years old, but his imposing aura showed no trace of the decline of old age. The scar on his forehead implied that he, too, was a veteran mercenary. After all, a bureaucrat would have a hard time leading such a rowdy bunch.

“Giulietta Berith...Rosetta Berith...and two new faces.”

“Should I say my name?” Yahiro asked without reservation.

Akulina pouted once again, but Leskin only smiled faintly. His tolerant attitude showed he was used to dealing with disrespectful youngsters.

“That will not be necessary, Yahiro Narusawa. My reliable sources have already told me all about you.”

“Tsk...” Yahiro grimaced at Leskin’s knowing response.

Leskin glanced at Iroha. “What about this girl?”

“I’m Iroha Mamana. Nice to meet you. Uh, um, if you don’t mind, you can have this.” Iroha bowed her head awkwardly and anxiously stepped forward. She offered Leskin a plastic container the size of a bento box.

“What’s this?” Akulina reacted as though it was a bomb, but Leskin gracefully

stopped her and stared at the box.

Iroha smiled shyly and said, “It’s just a bit of my cooking. I heard you’ve been of great help to the twins.”

“Food?”

“Japanese *korokke*. It’s um, deep-fried po-tay-toes. Okay?” Iroha opened up the box and showed him the *korokke*. They looked a bit unshapely—she was no great cook, after all—but the fried panko breadcrumbs smelled quite nice.

“You brought this for them?” Yahiro asked in disbelief.

“I consider myself a very thoughtful woman.” Iroha puffed out her chest, and confidence shone bright on her face.

Leskin nodded solemnly, trying to hold in his laughter as he accepted the box.

“Thank you.”

“Sir?! We should check it for poison fir...”

“Oh, that’s good.” Leskin bit into Iroha’s *korokke* without heeding Akulina’s warning.

Giuli and Rosé observed the whole thing with great interest.

“I mixed the mashed potatoes with kombu, *katsuobushi* broth, and red miso. I actually wanted to use soy sauce, but oh well. I made up for it with my secret recipe.” Iroha quickly explained her methods after hearing Leskin’s praise.

“I see. This would be great for snacking with some alcohol. Here, you should try one, too.” The old man nodded at the explanation and offered some to Akulina.

Akulina took the box on reflex, then stood frozen in place.

Leskin used an expensive-looking handkerchief to wipe his hands, then straightened. He looked coldly at the twins and cut to the chase.

“...So you killed the count.”

“Hey, it wasn’t us who destroyed Raimat’s Japanese branch. It was the Moujuu that Superbia summoned. The base was already in ruins when we got there,” Giuli answered.

“I heard you fought RMS by the Tama River.”

“We simply rescued our guide. In fact, I would say we were the victims of the alliance contract breach,” Rosé replied.

“Your guide, eh?” Leskin said and glanced at Yahiro.

Yahiro did not answer. Leskin may have already known about him, but it didn’t mean he had to give the man even more intel.

Leskin sighed deeply. “Yes, we have the Raimat survivors’ statements backing that up.”

“I am glad you understand,” Rosé said.

“Although, that doesn’t change the fact that you’ve brought trouble to Yokohama.”

“What do you mean? Yahiro, what’d you do?” Giuli asked him, not pressured in the slightest by Leskin’s stare.

“Why ask me? It’s obvious I’ve got nothing to do with whatever’s going on in here,” Yahiro replied with a frown.

This was, in fact, the first time Yahiro had been in Yokohama since the J-nocide, and he had just learned about the Guild a few minutes back. There was no reason why he should be of any trouble to Leskin, and yet...

“That’s not entirely true.” Leskin’s response was icy.

“What?”

“We’ve got visitors from Ganzheit. They want to meet you.”

“Did you just say...Ganzheit...?” Yahiro’s expression soured.

He had heard the word before. It was the organization that supposedly had his sister, Sui Narusawa, under their wing.

“They’re acting faster than expected,” Giuli said without a shred of surprise.

Leskin narrowed his eyes in annoyance. “So you knew this would happen.”

“Yes,” Rosé answered.

Then, steps were heard from outside the office. It sounded like people were

arguing right outside by the hallway.

“Look at the time, Mr. Leskiiin! How long are you gonna make us waaait?!” A voice with a unique drawl spoke as the door opened.

The Guild personnel by the door couldn’t stop the short woman with fluffy, curly hair from barging in.

“They’re already here, aren’t theeey? Let me throuuugh!” she yelled and entered with firm, loud stomps.

It was a young Asian woman not even 152 centimeters tall. Her age was hard to guess since she was baby-faced. She was wearing a washed-out shirt dress that looked like loungewear. This only added to her bizarrely childlike appearance. She couldn’t be older than college age.

“Wait, miss...!” The uniformed Guild employee reached out to try and stop her, but his arm was halted halfway through. A young man was standing right behind her like a shadow, and he’d grabbed the employee’s hand.

“Do *not* touch her.” The man wearing a black hoodie glared at the employee, and the Guild staff member gasped and backed off, pale in the face.

The girl with the curls didn’t pay any attention to what was going on behind her and briskly walked all the way up to Yahiro.

“Oh, there you are! You must be the Lazaruuus. Ah-ha-ha, you’re really Japanese. What was your name again? Uh... Yahiko? No, no. Yahito... Yahiro?”

“...Who are you?” Yahiro stared at her with confusion.

Despite her young appearance, he felt she had to be older than him.

Up close, she was quite pretty, although in a subtle way since she wore no makeup. Despite that, though, she elicited more confusion than affection due to how easily she ignored personal space.

The woman smiled broadly at Yahiro’s wary question, but before she could open her mouth to answer it, the man with the black hoodie stepped between them.

“Watch your tongue, kid, or I’ll kill you.”

“What the...?” Yahiro responded with a hostile glare at the young man’s blatant antagonism.

He was about as tall as Yahiro, and likely around the same age. It was hard to admit, but he was pretty handsome. This only made his aggressive behavior even more annoying to Yahiro.

“Hey! Yahiro!” Iroha noticed the tension in the air and hurriedly tried to calm him.

At the same time, curly-hair scolded the youth. “Don’t do that, Hisaki. No fighting!”

“But he...”

“No! Bad boy!”

“...I’m sorry.” The young man hung his head like a dog reprimanded by his master.

Now that he had backed off, Yahiro had no further reason to complain.

The woman then caught a glimpse of the plastic container in Akulina’s hand.

“Woah! Is that *korokke*? It has to be *korokke*. Can I have some? Can I?”

“Y-yeah...” Akulina nodded, overwhelmed by the young woman’s excitement.



The woman immediately reached out for the biggest of the bunch.

“Oh yeaah! Let’s see! Oooh, that’s good! Now we’re talking. I’m always saying the potatoes have to be this tender... And the hidden ingredient’s miso and...fish sauce?”

“Wow. Yes, that’s right.” Iroha looked shocked. She sure wasn’t expecting her to find out the secret ingredient.

The woman kept on munching the *korokke* while she stared at Iroha. Her expression was fixed in a smile, but her eyes looked strangely sharp. Like a biologist looking at a sample.

She swallowed before saying, “Oh, so you made this, Iroha Mamana? Or should I say, Avaritia?”

“...Huh?” Iroha’s shoulders trembled.

“Who are you?” Yahiro braced himself.

The woman narrowed her eyes further and laughed with a bright and clear voice.

“Ah-ha-ha! Meee? Oh, I’m one of youuu!”

““One of...us?”” Yahiro and Iroha asked in unison.

“Yup!” She nodded slightly. “I’m the medium of the marsh dragon, Luxuria. Nina Himekawa. Twenty-two. Single.” She introduced herself while making peace signs with both her hands to emphasize the fact that she was twenty-two years old. “Nice to meet you, Yahiro.” She stared deeply into Yahiro’s dazed eyes and gave him a big, friendly smile.

4

Galerie Berith’s headquarters was two warehouses at the Port of Yokohama. Old brick buildings that had been built over a century prior, full of a disorderly array of salvaged art pieces, imported weapons, and ammo.

The Galerie’s business MO was selling off artwork overseas—artwork left with no owner in Japan—then buying weaponry with that money, and ultimately

reselling it to private military companies within the archipelago. Yahiro scoffed at the name of the organization, but couldn't criticize them outwardly, considering he had been doing the same job as this "gallery." In fact, it was very likely that at least part of what he personally salvaged from the 23 Wards ended up funding Galerie Berith in some way or another. Talk about a bitter taste in the mouth.

And this wasn't the only thing currently annoying Yahiro.

"Yo."

"What's up?"

"What the hell are you doing in this room?" he asked the young man standing right in front of him—Hisaki Minato.

Yahiro was assigned a double room at the quarters inside the warehouses. The room was great, to be fair: officer-grade, perhaps out of consideration for his special role as Lazarus. The problem was...it was already in use. By Hisaki.

"I've been told to use this room while we stay in Yokohama. Rosetta Berith's orders."

"What in the world is she thinking?!" Yahiro growled before gritting his teeth and clicking his tongue.

Surely she hadn't given them the same room out of consideration for them both being Japanese survivors. Her being considerate like that would only be more shocking.

If what Nina Himekawa said was true and she really was a dragon medium, then it was more likely than not that this boy was a Lazarus just like Yahiro.

The most natural conclusion was that Rosé, being the pragmatist that she was, considered it easier to handle if she just chucked both of them in the same room.

"Where do you think you're going, Yahiro Narusawa?" Hisaki stopped him with an icy tone just as Yahiro was turning on his heel to exit the room.

"I'm gonna ask them to give me a different room. You don't want us to room together, either, do you?"

“So you’re running away?”

“What?” Yahiro turned back around, his temples twitching.

Hisaki looked at him blankly as he continued, “Sure, I don’t think I’ll enjoy staying in the same room, but I have no complaints. This will only make my mission easier.”

“And what, exactly, is your mission?”

“Surveillance. I must make sure you don’t get any ideas about Nina.”

“Ideas?”

“What I mean is—don’t you dare try to hurt her.” His tone was deadly serious.

Yahiro found this all ridiculous. He sighed.

“I don’t have any intention to do so, at least for now. That might change if you two decide to go up against me, though.”

“...Didn’t Galerie Berith hire you to kill the dragons?” Hisaki gave him a suspicious glance.

Yahiro casually shook his head. “The only one I gotta kill is Sui. Himekawa has nothing to do with this.”

“Sui Narusawa... Superbia’s medium?”

“You know her?” Yahiro approached him all of a sudden.

He hadn’t gotten even a whiff of Sui’s whereabouts after he let her get away back at the Raimat base. He needed even the tiniest hint he could get.

Yet Hisaki pushed him back and shook his head.

“I’ve only heard the name and that she’s in Ganzheit’s care, supposedly for medical treatment.”

“There we go with Ganzheit again... What in the world are those guys?”

“I’ve heard they’re like an international secret society. I know nothing else.”

“A secret society?” Yahiro’s eyes widened at the ludicrous term. For a second he thought the other boy was joking, but Hisaki’s expression remained serious.

“They say they protect humanity from the threat of dragons, but I suspect

their real aim is the Regalia.”

“The Regalia...as in, the mark? The symbolic treasure?”

“Yes. You know about it?” Hisaki raised a brow.

Yahiro nodded in silence.

The hero who slayed the dragon was given a treasure for his feat. This became the mark of the Dragon Slayer—the symbolic treasure, the Regalia. Galerie Berith had hired Yahiro in order to obtain this treasure, so it wouldn’t be strange if this supposed secret society called Ganzheit had the same objective.

“What’s your relationship with Ganzheit?” Yahiro asked gravely.

It was surprising to him that Hisaki Minato had been answering honestly up to this point. Perhaps his coldness, rudeness, and inconsideration were just poor communication skills—maybe he was a nice guy after all.

“Every dragon medium has a corporation or group behind them. After all, not even a Lazarus could take on big military organizations on their own.”

“I agree,” Yahiro said.

A Lazarus’s near-immortal body was capable of regeneration, but it was not almighty or invincible. Its greatest weakness was the death slumber, which came without warning.

In order to make up for the vitality lost in regeneration, Yahiro’s body fell into a sudden, deep sleep that was close to death. This condition could last for days. His body naturally couldn’t heal in that state, so there was no guarantee he could ever stand again if killed in the interim. He wasn’t *completely* immortal.

Were he to fight alone against a big military organization, sooner or later he would run out of energy and lose. This happened already in his fight against Raimat. If it hadn’t been for Giuli and Rosé’s help, he wouldn’t have survived.

“Backing Nina up is CERG—the European Organization for Graviton Research. She was a researcher at CERG to begin with.”

“I guess Galerie Berith is backing Iroha, then...” Yahiro’s mixed feelings showed on his face as he looked down at the Galerie uniform he was wearing.

Although he didn't intend it, ultimately it was because of Yahiro that Iroha ended up with Galerie Berith. They had no other choice, but honestly, he wasn't happy with the decision. How could he be? He didn't even know why they wanted the Regalia.

"CERG is part of Ganzheit. Galerie Berith, too, probably." Hisaki dropped further shocking revelations.

"Wait, you mean the Galerie's in cahoots with Ganzheit?" Yahiro asked desperately.

"No." Hisaki shook his head. "I wouldn't put it like that. Ganzheit is an amalgamation of various corporations. It's not a monolithic organization. I'm sure they have their own internal conflict."

"...So you mean people within Ganzheit are fighting each other over the Regalia?"

"With that in mind, doesn't it make sense now why they have Superbia's medium under their own wing?"

Yahiro nodded reluctantly.

Sui was in the same position. She was under the protection of another Ganzheit faction under similar circumstances as to why Iroha was with the Galerie. And that faction was antagonistic to Giuli and Rosé. After all, in order to obtain the Regalia, one had to slay a dragon. And only a Dragon Slayer—a Lazarus with the same powers as a dragon—could do so.

"...Then what is your objective, Hisaki Minato? Why did you two come here to see Iroha?" Yahiro glared at him, his guard up again.

If the European Organization for Graviton Research's aim was to get their hands on the Regalia, then it would be easy to conclude the reason Hisaki and Nina had come to Yokohama was to kill Iroha. The answer Yahiro received was simple:

"I don't know."

"What?"

"I'm just here to protect Nina. She said she wanted to meet *you*, so I came

with her. That's all."

"...Wait, *me*? She's not here for Iroha?" Yahiro raised a brow.

It was right then that they heard Iroha's shrill scream coming from somewhere in the dormitories.

5

"I destroy all units within the area of effect of Poison Swamp!" Nina Himekawa said as she showed a card to Iroha.

"Huh?! Wait, what?!" Iroha yelled, eyes wide.

They were in the dorm lounge—the common space operators used when off duty.

Iroha and Nina were facing each other across a table, where cards depicting monsters were lined up. They were in the middle of a trading card game. The game was called Monsters Nightmare—it has been popular back when Yahiro was in grade school.

"I counter your Burning Flame with my Immortal Knight. Then I use my Purple Sage Dragon's acid torrent to deal a total damage of twenty-four points. I win."

"N-no way..." Iroha's voice trembled in disbelief at Nina's relentless attack.

She never had a chance. She was helpless. It was a massacre.

"Wow. You're so cool, Nina..."

"Amazing... Never thought I'd ever see Mama lose so bad."

"I never imagined you could use a poison deck like that."

Iroha's siblings commented on the match with excitement.

"Ah-ha-ha. Yes, I'm cool. I'm very cool. Keep the praise coming."

"W-wait, let me try again! I'll definitely win next time."

"Hmm. I don't think that's happening. The fire deck requires a lot of thinking on the user's part—it just doesn't seem to be the right fit for you, Iroha."

"Ugh..." Iroha trembled in humiliation as Nina reveled in her victory and the

children's praises.

Yahiro came running into the room after having heard the scream, then stopped by the door in absolute bafflement. The dragon mediums, women with enough power to destroy the world, were playing card games for some reason. It made no sense to him.

"What're they doing?" Yahiro asked one of Iroha's sisters who happened to be nearby.

"Oh, Yahiro. They, um, they were fighting over how to split the room and decided to settle it with a game... Iroha was the strongest of us, but..."

The girl, wearing a summer sailor uniform, seemed to be the reserved type. She shyly blushed when he talked to her.

"You're Ayaho, right? Haven't you changed a little?"

"Wha...?! You think?!" Ayaho cast her eyes down bashfully as Yahiro tried taking a closer look at her face.

Rinka noticed their exchange and grinned smugly. "Nina showed her how to do her makeup and even did her hair."

"I—I said she didn't need to, but Rinka and everyone else insisted..."

"No denying that you're cuter now, though. Don't you agree, Yahiro?"

"Yeah, I think you look good."

"B-bwuuh...?!" Ayaho lost her cool after hearing Yahiro's simple agreement.

Meanwhile, the rest of the siblings gathered around Nina as she put away the cards.

"Nina, can you tell us how to solve this problem?"

"We all thought hard about it, but we can't come up with the solution."

"Yeah, and Iroha's attempt at explaining it only makes it more confusing."

"All right, got it. I will teach you eeverything."

Nina produced candy out of nowhere and handed it out to the kids before helping them with their studies. It was hard to think the heartwarming scene

was taking place in the dorms of a private military company.

“Seriously, what’s that chick even here for?”

“Do not refer to Nina as a ‘chick,’” Hisaki grumbled at Yahiro’s remark.

Yahiro also found it strange just how loyal Hisaki was to her, but he had no interest in whatever was behind that, so he didn’t ask.

“Wah... Yahiro...” Iroha ran up to Yahiro, her eyes tearing up because the kids no longer gave her the time of day. She pointed at Nina as though accusing her of a crime and continued, “That girl’s been embarrassing me all day! That *Nina*! She’s using all sorts of dirty tricks to get the kids to do her bidding! She’s setting me up!”

“...How has she set you up, exactly?” Yahiro asked, devoid of sympathy.

Iroha looked away. “Well, she, uh, she destroyed me in MonNight, and she helped Kyota with his studies and pointed out every math error I made.”

“None of that’s setting you up... I think you’ve just been embarrassing yourself.”

“No... I wasn’t asking for fair reasoning!” She shook her head desperately before clutching it and crouching down.

Runa, hugging Nuemaru tight, came over and patted Iroha on the back. *The guardian’s getting soothed by the seven-year-old?* Yahiro covered his eyes on reflex. The following moment, however, his face froze over at the bloodthirsty aura exploding right beside him.

“Minato?!” Yahiro spun around and saw Hisaki drawing the sword on his back.

The double-edged long sword had a blade about ninety-one centimeters long. The way it narrowed as it neared the tip was reminiscent of a spear. The blade itself wasn’t very sharp—it was rather meant to hack the enemy with its sheer might.

Hisaki raised the sword high, then immediately swung down. Down at Runa. Yahiro jumped in front of her right as he realized and stopped the sword with both arms.

“Yahiro...?!” Iroha screamed as she saw blood spurt out.

Yahiro's face twitched in pain, but so did Hisaki's in confusion.

Hisaki's sword stopped halfway through. Hard crystals like a dragon's scales covered Yahiro's arms like armor to halt the blade. Crimson armor engulfed in flames—the Goreclad. Some blood-colored crystals were smashed, raining down to his feet.

Hisaki's expression didn't change at the sight of Yahiro's transformed arms, however.

"What...what are you doing, Minato?!"

"That's what I should be asking you, Yahiro Narusawa. What is a Moujuu doing in here?" Hisaki shot a fiery glare at the white furball in Runa's arms.

"Moujuu...? You mean Nuemaru?" Iroha recovered from the shock and looked at Hisaki with confusion.

Runa didn't seem afraid of the sword pointed at her; she only tried to calm Nuemaru down as he attempted to counterattack.

Hisaki showed slight hesitation at her reaction. "Nuemaru?"

"That furball is like Iroha's pet. It's not dangerous."

"A Moujuu pet?! That's absurd!"

"Yeah... Anyone would think so." Yahiro sighed as he pushed Hisaki's sword back.

Although he had gotten used to it over the last few days, Nuemaru was still a Moujuu. It was understandable for Hisaki to feel wary of it. His reaction was perfectly reasonable.

"I know, right? I was reeeally surprised, ah-ha-ha." Nina walked up to them as she laughed heartily.

"Nina...!" Hisaki hurriedly tried to stop her. He was afraid Nuemaru could harm her, but she kept on walking like it was nothing and approached Runa.

She narrowed her eyes as she glared at him. "Hisaki, I told you not to fight with them, remember?"

"B-but the monster...!"

“I can’t believe it, either, but yes, that Moujuu seems attached to them. Maybe this is Avaritia’s power.”

“What? No. Nuemaru’s been protecting me ever since I met him.” Iroha shook her head after catching Nina’s glance.

Yahiro had heard that before, too. Apparently, she managed to survive the chaos immediately following the J-nocide thanks to Nuemaru protecting her. This was before she was even aware that she was a dragon medium.

“Ah-ha-ha, very interestiing. So it’s either taming with endless effect or a perpetually activated charm... Yes, very interesting. Anyway, Hisaki, don’t put a finger on them. We’re not here to fight them.”

“I’m sorry...” Hisaki dropped his shoulders and put his sword away. He didn’t seem entirely convinced, but at the very least he had no intention of going against Nina in order to deal with Nuemaru.

“Sorry for the trouble, Yahiro. Let me treat that wound.” Nina nodded in satisfaction before smiling and grabbing Yahiro’s hand.

Yahiro’s cuts on both arms were over an inch deep, reaching all the way to his bones. His Goreclad hadn’t been enough to completely stop Hisaki’s sword.

Nonetheless, Yahiro refused Nina’s offer.

“No need. It’ll heal soon.”

“Ah-ha-ha. C’mon, just accept my apologyyy.”

Yahiro tried to brush her away, but she only grabbed him harder. He soon felt a particularly soft sensation on his upper arm. It was then that he realized how busty Nina was despite her height. She must’ve been as, if not more, voluptuous than Iroha.

“Hold on, I said I don’t need treatment.”

“Yes, yes. Don’t worry. Just let me take care of iiit.”

Yahiro couldn’t resist—not because of the sensation of her breasts on his arm, no—as Nina dragged him out the room. Strangely enough, Hisaki didn’t stop them. Though rather than because of his trust in her, it was because he was already used to her whimsical behavior.

On the other hand, Iroha was in a total state of unrest.

“Are you okay with that?” Runa muttered as Iroha only watched Yahiro being taken away.

“Hmph...!” Iroha huffed like a sulky child and glared at Nina’s back.

6

Nina took Yahiro out of the Galerie dorms and to the seaside. The dorms were built right at the edge of the pier, so it wasn’t even a hundred yards before they reached the quay.

“That’s a really nice view. The water’s so cleeeear.” Nina stretched, silhouette framed by the peak-summer-blue sky.

The quality of the water in Tokyo Bay had dramatically improved over the four years since the collapse of Japan. Just as Nina said, the surface was clear and bright as it reflected the sunlight and the spindrift sparkled rainbow-colored.

“Did you know? The Yokohama Bay Bridge used to be here at the tip of the pier. It looked beautiful at night. But, well, it was completely destroyed during the J-nocide.”

“Great... Add one more item to the list of things Sui did,” Yahiro said cynically.

The dragon Sui Narusawa summoned opened a hole at the center of Tokyo that led to another realm, from which the Moujuu invaded and razed Kanto. The bay bridge must’ve fallen around that time.

“It might not have been just her. As you know, I’m a dragon medium, too. Perhaps I also helped her out unknowingly.” Nina shook her head with a smile.

Eight dragons had been identified around the time the J-nocide happened. They were named after the Eight Trigrams symbolizing nature: Heaven and Earth, Marsh and Mountain, Fire and Water, and Wind and Thunder. From this list, Yahiro had only seen the earth dragon Sui summoned—Superbia.

If Nina really was the marsh dragon’s medium, then it would make sense for her to have been complicit in the J-nocide. But that wouldn’t make Sui’s crime lighter.

“So, what did you come here for anyway?”

“To meet you, of course, Yahiro. I’m very interested in you.”

“To meet *me*? You’re not after Iroha?”

“Iroha, eehh? She’s a good girl, yeah.” Nina narrowed her eyes as if she was looking at something bright. “She cares for her family, she’s kind and earnest. And she’s cute and curvy, to boot. Of course even the Moujuu would like her, don’t you agree?”

“Whatever...” Yahiro glanced away. *Don’t ask me for agreement on that.*

Nina burst into giggles.

“But that’s it. Her power as a dragon medium is too average, or should I say, incomplete? She’s missing something important.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ah-ha-ha, you ask meee that? How would I knooow?” She slapped his back while laughing loudly for whatever reason. “I kiiid... I think I have an idea. She should realize it already, too. She has to know she’s empty.”

“...!” Yahiro gasped at her wording.

Iroha was missing something as a dragon medium. Something she had talked about herself already. She had no memories of being a kid. She didn’t know her true parents or family. And it had been her current siblings, whom she met through the J-nocide, who filled that hole in her heart.

That was why she was obsessed with protecting her family. She was awfully afraid of losing them. But put that in another perspective, and she had no further wishes. No desires of her own. She had the power to change the whole world but didn’t wish to use it. With that in mind, perhaps it wasn’t wrong to put it as her being *empty*.

“So you’re saying you’re not?”

“Course I’m nooot! In a sense, there’s no dragon medium more wicked than I am. After all, I am trying to reveal the world’s secrets,” Nina stated with confidence. “Human desires are finite. We all get tired of any sort of luxury eventually. But our craving for knowledge knows no bounds. People will

sacrifice anything to satisfy their curiosity. Even if we know that what waits on the other side is demise...”

Nina let out a happy giggle after saying all that in one breath. Her eyes shone bright and dangerous.

“And so, Yahiro, now you’ve piqued my curiosity. You’ve curried the favor of *two* dragon mediums. You’re one of a kind in the whole world—a double Lazarus.”

“Double...?” Yahiro parroted back the word that echoed in his mind.

“Oh, you hadn’t nooticed?” Nina raised an eyebrow. “You were cursed with the blood of two dragons, Superbia and Avaritia, in equal amounts. This is very rare. It’s always been one Lazarus to one dragon.”

“...But Sui had her own Lazarus,” Yahiro countered.

When he met Sui at the Raimat base, she was guarded by a Lazarus using Superbia’s power. Yahiro being under Sui’s blessing or curse contradicted what she said about it being one Lazarus per dragon.

“You mean Auguste Nathan, right? Yes, I noticed that, too. There must be some sort of trick I’m not aware of. Hmm... Yeees... Very interesting.” Nina nodded repeatedly while playing with her bangs. “So, you understand now why I’m interested in you? Now that you do, I want you to let us follow you for a while. Ah-ha-ha. I look forward to hanging out!”

“Hey, I never said yes.” Yahiro grimaced in annoyance.

He had no reason to go along with her just to satisfy her curiosity. And his contract with Galerie Berith was enough of a burden as it was. He couldn’t handle dealing with even more people.

Then, Nina grinned mischievously, as though she had read his mind.

“You won’t have to do it for freeeee. You’ll get a heeefty reward. For example, in exchaaange, how about we help you kill Sui Narusawa?”

“...Are you serious?” Yahiro gaped for a moment before glaring at her sternly.

Fighting Sui would be remarkably easier with the help of another dragon medium. It would also be useful when trying to negotiate with Ganzheit.

“Hee-hee. Seems like you’re fiiinally interested in me, too.” Nina smiled broadly upon seeing Yahiro’s obvious reaction. “Don’t worry, I proomise. I assure you, we’ll be more useful than you expect. I’ll show you just how alluring an adult woman can beee.”

Then, she drew closer and closer to him. She moved her face near his, close enough that their lips might touch at any moment.

Yahiro reared back in shock and, at the same time, a clattering noise came from the shadows of the containers piled nearby. He turned around and saw Hisaki and Runa, as well as Iroha with her face on the ground. Clearly, she had fallen down while trying to eavesdrop on their conversation.

“Ah-ha-ha! You were listening? Niiice. Yes, curiosity is the fuel of life,” Nina said cheerfully to Iroha as she stood up, red in the face.

Nina must’ve noticed they’d had an audience. She showed no sign of surprise at their sudden appearance.

“Well then, how about we have some tea? Let me hear what funny excuses you come up with for eeeavesdroppin... Huh? Wait.” Nina’s smile vanished all of a sudden.

Nuemaru, in Runa’s arms, was growling while staring at the pier adjacent to the Galerie’s base—in the direction of the port’s main facilities, full of warehouses.

“Hey, Nuemaru, what’s wrong?” Iroha tried to calm the Moujuu down.

“I knew that Moujuu was dangerous.”

“Wait, he’s acting strange.” Yahiro hurriedly tried to stop Hisaki as the other boy reached for his sword.

There was no need for it, though, since he didn’t draw it in any case as he was distracted by a huge flash coming from the pier.

“Wha...?!”

Everyone’s hairs stood on end at the rumbling that followed. Waves surged in the sea from the power of the blast. There had been an explosion at the pier.

A cargo ship full of containers crashed into the pier it was supposed to land at,

but the scale of the explosion wasn't that of an accident. It had to have crashed at close to max speed.

"What the...? Why here...?" Iroha's frail whisper reached Yahiro's ears as he stared bewildered at the ship in flames.

It didn't take long before he understood what she meant.

Something strange squirmed among the flames and smoke. Monsters of a shape different from any known species—beings from out of this world.

"Moujuu...!" Yahiro shouted the name of the beasts.

On cue, countless Moujuu immediately flowed from the crashed ship.

7

"Give me a damage report! Call for support from the Guild's HQ! Go rescue the injured, quickly!" Akulina Jarova shouted orders in the branch office of Fort Yokohama that managed the Yamashita Pier.

It was no coincidence she had been there when the report of the Moujuu's emergence came in. Managing the Port of Yokohama was the Guild's main job, and Akulina was also responsible for pier security.

However, not even the Guild could do anything against a cargo ship crashing into the dock at full speed. And they had no way of knowing it would be full of Moujuu.

"Dammit, what is going on here?! Where did they come from?!" Akulina yelled, then gritted her teeth as she looked down at the pier from the highest story of the management building.

There were Guild mercenaries at the pier to protect it in case of an attack from antagonistic private security companies or organized crime, but they were only prepared against human soldiers. Moujuu necessitated high-grade armored vehicles in order to be defeated, and that was out of consideration.

"Can you apprise me of the situation, Akulina?" An emotionless, almost mechanic voice came from behind her.

The annoyed woman turned around and found a girl with blue hair and a cheongsam blouse.

“Rosetta Berith? What are you doing here?”

“The cargo was intended for Galerie Berith. I had my men waiting by the pier to receive it, but, well...” Rosé trailed off and pointed at the ship.

“I see. I guess they waited in vain.” Akulina pursed her lips sarcastically.

The cargo ship had exploded after crashing into the pier, and was still in flames. Even if the cargo was intact, it would take some time before they could carry it out.

Rosé, however, showed no sign of disappointment. Her expression remained unchanged as she asked, “So what happened?”

“...Moujuu.”

“Moujuu?”

“There were Moujuu on the ship. We’ve identified at least seven Grade IIs. We’re assuming they wiped out the crew. The ship reached the pier on autopilot.” Akulina’s voice hardened as she spoke.

Rosé raised an eyebrow. At least she was somewhat surprised.

“So they encountered the Moujuu out at sea? And they’re not flying Moujuu?”

“I also found this strange. After all, they say Moujuu only appear in Japan and don’t cross the sea. But it’s a fact that the ship brought them in.”

“So they got on the ship along the way...” Rosé placed a hand to her mouth and pondered in silence.

All remaining trace of expression left her beautiful face, emphasizing her otherworldly, doll-like appearance. Her silence didn’t last long, however.

Rosé lifted her face, her eyes shining with that particular glow of someone plotting wicked deeds.

“How about we make a deal, Akulina?”

“A deal?”

“Yes. Let Galerie Berith take care of the Moujuu. In exchange, let us investigate the scene after we exterminate them, before the Guild’s own survey team gets to do so.”

“You plan on investigating where they came from? In the first place, can you deal with them on your own?”

“Yes.”

Akulina felt shaken by how easily Rosé nodded.

She didn’t entirely trust the girl, but there was no denying the Guild was in a tough position. It wasn’t a bad deal. Besides, Rosé was also a businesswoman. She knew not to go against a contract in a way that could harm her reputation.

“Fine. But you won’t do that investigation alone. The Guild will accompany you.”

“I understand. Let’s seal the deal, then... Got that, Giuli?”

“*Got it, Rosy.*” Another person’s voice suddenly came from within the collar of Rosé’s cheongsam blouse.

Akulina clicked her tongue. The Galerie’s troops had been listening to their entire conversation.

This is why I can’t trust these twins. Akulina, being the straightforward woman she was, was fuming.

Whether aware or unaware of her feelings, Rosé kept on talking in monotone:

“Akulina, order the Guild’s mercenaries to stand down. If you don’t want your subordinates to be caught in the fight between the Lazarus and the Moujuu, that is.”

8

Yahiro and the others arrived at the pier about thirty minutes after the ship had crashed.

The cargo’s intermittent explosions had already simmered down, but the ship was still in flames. The smell and blinding smoke covered the area.

“It’s playtime! Let’s kick Moujuu butt,” Giuli exclaimed as soon as they arrived, as nonchalantly as if they were going out on a picnic. “Wei-Wei, how’s the situation?”

“We have visual confirmation of seven Moujuu. We’ve never seen these types before. Yahiro, Iroha, have you?” Operator Yang Wei showed Yahiro his tablet.

The drone camera feed showed two Moujuu specimens. Both of them had light-green shells and eight limbs. Their sizes ranged from three to four meters. They didn’t look fast, but they were capable of vertical movement thanks to the string they spit from their mouths. Their shells seemed tough enough to resist rifle bullets.

The Guild’s mercenaries didn’t stand a chance against them, ultimately. This type was sure to be a mighty opponent despite their silly appearance.

“No, that’s the first time I’ve seen that. They’re like...spiders? Or crabs?” Yahiro shook his head with a sour look on his face.

The cargo-ship Moujuu were different from any kind he had seen in the 23 Wards, which in turn meant they had no way to know how powerful they could be. They looked about Grade II, but could easily surpass that depending on what sort of special powers they were hiding.

“Uh... What are these things? And their cries... Gross.” Iroha took the binoculars off and covered her ears. She lurched forward as though she was about to faint; Yahiro immediately supported her.

“Ah-ha-ha... Must be because of that fog. liinteresting,” Nina said with an eerily joyous tone after taking Iroha’s binoculars.

“Fog?” Yahiro resisted asking her why she’d followed them.

“Yeah, that fog coming from inside the ship seems to be forming some sort of barrier. That might be why they aren’t being affected by the dragon mediums. Maybe that’s their power?”

“No idea. So you’re saying Iroha can’t control them?”

“Control... The Kushinada’s power, eeeh? Not sure, but that’s likely. Such a shame, I would’ve loved seeing Iroha in action.” Nina’s shoulders slumped and

she pouted.

Yahiro sighed. What he got from that was that Nina only wanted to observe Iroha and not help out with defeating the Moujuu in the slightest.

“Are there more crabs still on the ship?”

“Yup. Lots of them, top to bottom. Don’t even want to count them.” Wei forced a smile while piloting the drone.

Yahiro shook his head feebly before turning to look at commander Giuli.

“We gotta kill them all? What’s our strategy?”

“Huh? You don’t have one?” Giuli tilted her head cutely.

Yahiro was taken aback for a moment. Sure, he had vast experience fighting Moujuu, but his style was tailored to fighting alone—his experience in groups was close to none. Not to mention his “style” was mainly focused on running as fast as he could the moment he encountered one; going out of his way to fight Moujuu was nowhere on his list of strategies. It didn’t matter that he was a Lazarus.

“Our contract involves only killing Sui. I was not hired to exterminate random Moujuu.”

“Helping us out might eventually lead to fulfilling the terms of our contract,” Giuli whispered into his ear.

“What do you mean?”

“We’ve never heard of Moujuu emerging outside Japanese territory.”

“I’ve heard. Not even flying Moujuu follow you outside Japanese seas, right?”

“That’s exactly right. So here’s the problem.” Giuli nodded before narrowing her eyes like a cat. “That cargo ship was coming in from international waters. Where do you think they came across the Moujuu?”

“...You mean someone summoned them out in the sea to attack the ship? Was it...Sui?” Yahiro muttered hoarsely. He felt rage creeping up his spine.

Sui Narusawa, as dragon medium, had the power to summon Moujuu. She could’ve easily done so to attack a ship out at sea—and time the attack so it

crashed into the pier just after Yahiro arrived at Yokohama.

“Rosy wants to search the ship to find out which dragon medium’s involved. So, you know, the dots might connect.” Giuli shrugged as though she wasn’t invested in any of this.

Yahiro gripped the sword in his left hand harder.

He couldn’t imagine Sui, up to now in Raimat’s hands, would have had the time to set such an elaborate incident in motion—but he couldn’t ignore this. He had to hold on tight to even the tiniest clue he might get to find her.

“Let’s go, Yahiro.” Iroha, holding Nuemaru tight in her arms, bumped his shoulder against hers.

“Iroha?”

“We can’t leave those crabs be. The kids are right there.” Iroha raised her eyebrows as she shot the Galerie base a glance.

The base was less than half a mile from the pier. It could easily become the first target if the Moujuu were allowed to leave the ship. As their guardian, she couldn’t allow any danger to befall them.

“All right... Let’s burn everything down. That okay?” Yahiro sighed while shaking his head before making the bold suggestion.

“Burn everything down, eh? Mhmm...”

Yahiro felt bothered by Nina nodding right behind Iroha, but didn’t have time to lose by paying her any attention.

With the kids in danger, Iroha would rush toward the enemy even if Yahiro didn’t want to help. So the best course of action was for him to take the lead.

The problem was, while Yahiro could probably take on one or two Moujuu, he had no chance against this many at a time. He needed Iroha’s Regalia. Which in turn meant that he needed Iroha by his side to use it.

From his experience so far, he knew that Iroha had to be within eyeshot in order to activate the Regalia, and that its powers were boosted the closer they were to each other. The best thing would be for them to hold each other tight—but that would mean dragging her into the fight. And she was no Lazarus, nor

did she have combat training. It was asking too much of her.

“I don’t know, but I’ll try. Trust me.” Iroha clenched her fist with a confident look on her face; Yahiro couldn’t tell whether she understood his concern or not. The excessive confidence she could produce out of nowhere gave him a slight headache.

He considered leaving her behind for a moment, but this hesitation proved futile—the Moujuu climbed the steel fence surrounding the pier.

It was no coincidence one of them headed straight for Yahiro and Iroha. Whether it was reacting to Yahiro’s Lazarus smell or the dragon medium’s, he had but one choice.

“Hold on tight, Iroha!”

“Huh?! Eeep!”

Yahiro grabbed her by the waist and lifted her in his arms before dashing forward.

Yahiro suppressed his panic at the feeling of Iroha’s softer-than-expected body and drew his sword—the Kuyo Masakane. Fresh blood spurted out and formed a crimson armor, then spewed flames that engulfed the blade.

Yahiro frowned at the heat, but Iroha didn’t seem to feel it. The flames couldn’t hurt her, naturally, for it was her Regalia.

“Blaze!” Yahiro swung the Kuyo Masakane in a sweeping horizontal motion.

A flash like the sun dying on the horizon instantly flared—a flaming blade nearly twelve meters long. Iroha’s Regalia took on the form it had used to burn Count Raimat to a crisp in a single strike after his wyrm transformation.

The flaming blade swiftly slashed and melted away the Moujuu at the head of the pack, taking a couple of others behind with it as well.

Then—a violent explosion erupted right in front of the two of them.

“Agh?!”

The blast, encapsulating stronger heat than that of the Regalia, swept Yahiro off his feet. He protected Iroha from crashing headfirst onto the ground, and

the shock knocked the air out of his lungs.

The ground shook with aftershocks as the rubble raised by the burst rained down around them.

Yahiro didn't plan to do that. The explosion was out of left field.

"Iroha?! Are you okay?!"

"...Ouch... Ugh... My ears are ringing..." Iroha lifted herself up from Yahiro's embrace while shaking her head. She wasn't unharmed, but at least she had no grave injuries.

"Sorry, Yahiro. Have a second?"

"Wei?"

He heard Wei's voice coming from speakers in his uniform's collar. *So that's why it felt oddly stiff. Just how many features did they install on this thing?*

"I'd forgotten to mention most of what's brought into this pier is illegal ammo for the PMCs. That's what was on the crashed ship as well."

"Ammo... Wait, then if we ignite that stuff..."

Yahiro paled as he looked around at the containers haphazardly piled up all over the pier. It was obvious now that the explosion happened because Yahiro's attack ignited some powder.

"And because of that, the Guild's refraining from using heavy weaponry. Which is partly why they had such a hard time against the Moujuu."

"Are you for real...? How're we supposed to do this now...?" Yahiro groaned weakly as he stood up.

Avaritia's element was fire. Using Iroha's powers carelessly could produce further, more powerful explosions.

"Sorry," Iroha said as she hung her head.

"It's not something you should apologize for." Yahiro sighed before roughly patting her head.

Four Moujuu had been taken down by the explosion, but this only served to call in reinforcements—more of them had appeared from inside the burning

ship. Too many to handle without the Regalia.

“You stay back, Iroha. I’ll take them on by myself.”

“Yahiro...?!”

He pushed the shocked girl back before grabbing his sword again. There was no reason to have her by his side if he couldn’t use the Regalia. She would only get in the way.

“Come at me, crabby bastards... Grilled crab legs might be off the menu, but I can just make sashimi out of you instead!”

Yahiro roused himself with a soliloquy before rushing into the enemy cast. He shallowly slashed his left arm, bathing the Kuyo Masakane in fresh blood.

Lazarus blood was poison to the Moujuu. Pouring enough of it into their bodies was lethal, though it also had the adverse effect on Yahiro of chipping away at his stamina. But he had no other method of killing them without relying on the Regalia. And yet...

“What?!”

...the Moujuu’s hard shell had easily repelled his blade. Its surface was terribly burned as though acid had rained on it, but that was it. It was far from being a fatal wound.

“These guys are tough!”

Yahiro fretted, but he still managed to dodge the Moujuu’s counter. While off-balance, he slashed again, this time at the crab’s joints. He succeeded in chopping a leg off, but losing one limb was no considerable damage to the eight-legged Moujuu.

On the other hand, the following pincer attack deeply gouged Yahiro’s side.

“Yahiro!”

“Moron! What’re you doing here?!” Yahiro groaned in pain as he saw Iroha run toward him.

She stood before him as a shield and the Moujuu rushed toward her. She then crouched down and touched the back of the white Moujuu that had come with

her.

“Nuemaru! Help!”

Nuemaru’s body, shrunken to the scale of a medium-size dog, suddenly recovered its original size. He let out a thunderous growl and lightning struck the attacking Moujuu, pushing the whole herd back.

“Ohh!”

The Moujuu were flipped onto the back of their shells, exposing their unprotected bellies. Yahiro didn’t let the chance slip away and forcefully stabbed them with his blood-drenched katana. The first Moujuu dissipated in a puff of black miasma.

Finally—proof that his Lazarus blood could still kill them.

“It’s time for revenge!” Yahiro spat out fresh blood and fiercely twisted the corner of his lips upward.

His entire body felt like burning because the Regalia had activated once again due to Iroha’s proximity. He knew that feeling—the same feeling as when he defeated the reinforced Fafnir soldier, Firman La Hire.

Yahiro’s field of view narrowed; his vision was dyed in crimson flames.

Certain that he could burn the Moujuu to a crisp now, he gripped his sword tight.

Then someone forcefully pulled his shoulder back. He heard an apathetic, fed-up voice.

“I can’t bear to watch your nonsensical fighting style any longer.”

“You...?! ”

“Hisaki?! ”

Yahiro and Iroha turned around in confusion. They thought Hisaki would stay by the sidelines, but there he was, stopping Yahiro from using his powers.

“I wanted to take a better look at your Regalia, buuut I’ve changed my mind. We’ll take care of this. Let’s go, Hisaki.” Nina spoke gently from Hisaki’s side.

The small woman stood on her tiptoes and kissed Hisaki’s cheek. Then, a

whirlwind blew all around him.

Yahiro felt his sense of direction go out of whack, as though the ground at his feet was sinking. As though he had wandered into unknown lands. A strong sense of physical unease.

“Roger, Nina.”

Hisaki, clearly the source of that unease, then dashed away silently. He rushed into the Moujuu herd, which was already recovered from Nuemaru’s lightning strike, and swung his sword without hesitation.

“Wha—?!”

Hisaki’s sword easily slashed through the hard shell that had repelled Yahiro’s katana.

No, actually, it didn’t *cut*—it *melted* the shell. It took Yahiro until he saw the Moujuu’s flesh fall to the ground to realize. The Moujuu had dissolved from Hisaki’s attacks as if it had been showered in acid.

Liquefaction. The power to control the boundary between solid and liquid. That was Nina Himekawa’s—the marsh dragon Luxuria’s—Regalia.

“Sink!” Hisaki swung his giant sword.

Humid wind blew all around and, the next moment, the dozens of Moujuu all melted away into nothing.

Yahiro and Iroha could only observe, mouths agape.



“Trouble’s arrived,” a girl softly muttered as she stood on the roof of an unmanned storehouse at the back of the pier where the ship had crashed.

She was young, thin, and tall, wearing a full pantsuit set with matching vest and trousers. Her long, black hair was tied up in a ponytail, and she carried a golden ornamental sword at her waist.

She was hidden within the thick fog covering the pier, observing Yahiro Narusawa’s battle against the Moujuu. Unfortunately for her, unexpected interference had prevented her from seeing what she truly wanted to see.

“Luxuria’s medium, Nina Himekawa... Have you noticed our intentions? What a bother.”

“I’m...sorry, Amaha. It’s all because I couldn’t keep the Moujuu under control...,” another girl beside her said faintly.

Her fluffy hair was chestnut brown, and her big eyes were framed by long eyelashes. No one would deny that she was a beautiful girl. Her slim shoulders trembled for not being able to meet the black-haired woman’s expectations, but not out of fear of criticism. In fact, Amaha’s reaction was to softly pat her head.

“Don’t apologize, Chiruka. I got a grip on the Lazarus boy’s personality now. We’ve fulfilled our goal. We can finally set our plan in motion,” she said softly to calm the fearful girl down before slowly turning around.

There she found a Moujuu with a light-green shell. One of the monsters that escaped Hisaki Minato’s attack had discovered them, but Amaha kept her cool. She unsheathed her ornamental sword and stabbed the Moujuu.

The crab fell down with a thud. Amaha did not even glance at it as she sheathed her sword and called to the girl beside her.

“I hope they like the *Hikata*.”

The small-framed girl, Chiruka, looked up at Amaha with a shy smile.

The pure-white fog enveloped them, and by the time it cleared, they were nowhere to be found.

The only thing left was one Moujuu covered in miasma, left for dead with

slashes all over its body, as though assaulted by a barrage of endless blades.

Act 2 Contract Talk

1

Two days after the Moujuu attack, Rosé took Yahiro back to the former Yamashita Pier, in order to investigate the interior of the crashed ship. Yet, Galerie Berith couldn't come to any conclusions after meticulously searching the burned vessel—the origins of the Moujuu remained unknown.

“...In the end, no traces of the ship meeting with other suspicious vessels out at sea were found, huh?”

Akulina had a complex look on her face as she listened to Rosé's report back at the port office. She, too, was present during the investigation as a representative of the Guild.

It seemed like finding no evidence would be more unlikely than finding just bits and pieces. She wasn't sure she entirely believed the reports.

“The ship's transport data tells us there was nothing out of the ordinary by the time they crossed the Uraga Channel. If anything went wrong, it must've been after they entered Tokyo Bay.” Rosé, sitting right across from Akulina, continued the report in her usual emotionless tone.

Galerie Berith had set about uncovering the Moujuu's origin of their own accord. Whether or not the Guild believed their findings didn't matter to Yahiro or Rosé. Still, overly serious Akulina simply couldn't accept the fact and kept questioning it.

“So we're moving on not knowing where they came from?”

“Indeed. Which in turn means we cannot rule out the possibility of a similar accident happening again.”

“I heard there were survivors on the ship.”

“About ten people were hiding in the storage and engine room. Unfortunately, they didn’t know where the Moujuu came from, either.”

“I—I see...”

“Fortunately, most of our cargo was fine. The ship itself should also be able to sail after some emergency repairs. It’s up to you whether to make full repairs or take it to open seas for sinking.”

“I understand... We’ll take care of it.” Akulina nodded heavily before looking down at the ship moored at the pier.

Her shapely eyes were shadowed deeply by her fatigue. She hadn’t been able to get enough rest since she was busy leading the cleanup after the chaos.

The dock the ship crashed into was sealed off, but the rest of the pier remained in operation. The place was—miraculously—largely unharmed despite so many Moujuu attacking. It was all thanks to Hisaki and Nina taking care of them so fast.

“I still can’t believe you defeated all those Moujuu by yourselves. You can’t underestimate a Lazarus’s powers,” Akulina said earnestly while glancing at Yahiro.

“That was Minato and Himekawa. We did nothing.” Yahiro looked away awkwardly.

He had taken her praise as sarcasm, but she hadn’t meant it that way. Akulina nodded pensively.

“Yes, those Japanese who came here to see you... I suppose she truly was a dragon medium.”

“Seems so. Eh, that’s what she said from the very beginning, so...,” Yahiro said curtly while glancing back at her. He found it surprising she used the fantastical term so casually. “You knew about the dragons? How well-known is this anyway?”

“I have no idea how many people have heard the rumors, but I believe top management at the Guild are all aware of the truth. Though to be honest, before seeing the Regalia with my own eyes, I couldn’t entirely believe it...”

Akulina's shoulders trembled as her voice trailed off. Now she was fully aware of what a threat the Lazaruses posed to the Guild.

"Liquefaction, huh? I had heard some talk of it, but it's more than I expected. It appears even the strongest defense is nothing against those two," Rosé said.

She was wary of the Regalia as much as Akulina, but unlike the latter, she seemed to be explicitly considering going up against Nina. Not surprising, Yahiro supposed, as she had asked him to kill all the dragons.

"But it's also thanks to them that your cargo was intact, yeah? We couldn't have defeated the Moujuu without damaging everything around," Yahiro said, advocating for them.

He didn't trust them yet, but at least for now, he had no reason to fight them. And he didn't think he could easily beat them in the first place. Luxuria's ability to melt everything away was too dangerous for him; he didn't think a Lazarus's healing power could save him from getting liquified.

"Yes, we should thank them. We didn't have to show our hand thanks to them." Rosé agreed, but in an unexpected way.

"Our hand? You mean Iroha's Regalia?"

"A cargo ship intended for us is attacked by Moujuu the day we arrive at Yokohama. Don't you think that's too much of a coincidence, Yahiro?"

"I thought the same. It lines up too well..."

"And the pier it crashed into was right within a stone's throw of our base. Having the Moujuu attack that spot was basically forcing Galerie Berith to fight back. And what's the best way we have to fight Moujuu?"

"Wait. You're saying that attack was a trap to lure out Yahiro Narusawa?" Akulina said as she leaned forward, unsettled by the implications.

Rosé shook her head slightly. "It's just a theory. If only they had left some sort of evidence on the ship."

"R-right... But is it possible to use the Moujuu in such a convenient manner?"

"And we know who would be capable of such a thing."

“The dragon mediums...!” Akulina exclaimed, her eyes wide with realization.

It was already a known fact that Sui Narusawa, Superbia’s medium, had summoned Moujuu to destroy Raimat. It could very well be possible for other mediums to summon the beasts to attack the cargo ship.

“Do you have an idea of who’s after Iroha?” Yahiro glared at Rosé.

If their aim was to take a look at Iroha’s Regalia, then it couldn’t have been Sui. She already saw it back during their encounter at the Raimat base.

“Yahiro...you think they want to see Iroha’s Regalia to look for a weakness, don’t you?”

Rosé raised the corners of her mouth. Her expression confounded him.

“That’s not it? Don’t they want to kill her?”

“You’re forgetting one important detail, Yahiro.”

“What is it?”

“Dragon mediums have no reason to kill each other.”

“Ah...” He opened his eyes wide. That had totally escaped him.

He got the wrong idea because Sui was the first medium he’d met.

Iroha and Nina didn’t wish to kill each other. Being dragon mediums was no reason to do so. It was Sui who was the odd one out with her desire to destroy the world.

“All the dragon mediums we know have been Japanese survivors. Shouldn’t the first thought upon coming across each other be to cooperate?” Rosé kindly explained.

“Cooperate...to do what?” Yahiro asked, still confused.

Rosé cracked a smile, as though mocking him for not realizing despite being Japanese himself.

“Reestablish Japan, of course.”

Meanwhile, Giuli was driving an armored car through a national road in Yokohama.

Paola was riding shotgun. Nina, Nuemaru, and Iroha were in the back. It was a rare combination, but there was a reason these four women were traveling on their own. A deeply serious and urgent matter that Iroha had to take care of.

“Thanks, Giuli. I got some really cute ones thanks to you,” Iroha said while holding the tote bag full of new bras.

Indeed. The urgent matter at hand was securing underwear. Iroha joined the Galerie with only the clothes on her back; she had no change of clothes.

They had underwear in stock at the dorms, along with the bulletproof hoodie uniform, but unfortunately, Iroha’s bust size was hardly common. Even Giuli’s barely fit her, so she needed to get some of her own ASAP.

“Going all the way there was worth it, right? That station building’s not very well-known, but it’s great,” Giuli said smugly.

She had taken Iroha outside Fort Yokohama’s walls to get the underwear. The ruins of a department store stood at what used to be a private railway station. Most of the valuables in there had already been taken by the mercenaries, but needless to say, few of them took women’s undergarments. The building was left mostly intact, so Iroha was able to get her hands on a decent amount of loot. She took some for her sisters as well.

“I’m sooo glad I got to see you try them on, too... That beautiful cleavage... The smooth waist... Hee-hee.”

“N-Nina, you’re creeping me out...” Iroha clenched her jaw as she glared at Nina’s grin.

“By the way, was it okay for you to leave Minato behind? Isn’t he like your bodyguard?”

“Nooo problem. Few bandits would dare attack an armored car branded with a PMC’s logo, and I also know a way or two to defend myseeelf.”

Nina smiled suggestively while glancing down at Nuemaru cowering by Iroha’s feet.

“Really?” Iroha exclaimed. “And um...what’s your relationship with him, exactly?”

“Hisakiii? We’re accomplices.”

“Accomplices?”

“Just like how Yahiro wants to kill Sui, there’s a wish Hisaki wants to make. And he wooon’t betray me until it comes true.”

“Until...it comes true...?” Iroha asked back in confusion at her wording.

Nina only replied with a shake of her head and a smile.

“What about youuu?”

“Huh? Me?”

“Yees. What do you think of Yahiro?”

Iroha thought seriously about the strange question. She hadn’t thought about it before, but now she realized their relationship was pretty vague.

It hadn’t been a week since they met, and yet, he was becoming special to her, in many ways.

Which was why she wasn’t happy with how he was now. She strongly felt she had to do something about him.

“I want him to become a brother...” She stated the first thing that came to mind after much thought.

“Your brother...?” Nina blinked and gave her a weird look. She had “Is that your fetish or something?” written all over her face.

“Oh, no, I meant that I want him to be like a brother to my siblings. Not me.” Iroha hurriedly tried to clear up the misunderstanding.

Nina tilted her head, still confused. “Whyyy?”

“Huh? I mean, aren’t the kids adorable? I think his heart might change if he spends time with them,” Iroha said without a trace of doubt.

The vague feeling she’d had since before became clear once she put it into words. She realized the discontent she had with him was that he did not value

his family. He was trying to kill his own sister. And that made Iroha mad.

“A change of heart? What’s he getting wrong?”

“His current objective is killing his own little sister. That’s wrong. I feel bad for both of them!” Iroha hit the car’s door.

“It’s not that unusual for family to kill each other...,” Nina said dryly, not matching her soft smile.

Iroha pouted. Her question about Nina and Hisaki’s relationship had backfired and now she was stuck speaking about herself, but she didn’t yet realize this.

“Yahiro...changed my world...”

“How?” Nina asked with a bright, interested look in her eyes.

“I was living with Nuemaru and the kids in the 23 Wards, but we could only barely survive, and we knew we couldn’t stay there forever but we couldn’t go anywhere else...”

“Come to think of it, you were posting those videos for Japanese survivors the whooole time,” Nina said casually.

Iroha nearly teared up upon remembering her life back then.

“Yes, and it was then that Yahiro and the Galerie found us and took us outside.”

She reminisced about that moment he’d appeared with Giuli and everyone else. The night he countered the Fafnir soldiers’ attack and the two of them ran away across the ruins of the city.

He was the first boy his age she had met since the J-nocide. And the only one who responded to her calls out to the void in her streams. He was precious to her. Perhaps it was because of that...that she felt she’d known him forever. That she had finally met him after waiting her whole life.

“Thanks to him I have hope for the kids’ futures, and I got to meet all of you. But he remains trapped in the past! Haunted by revenge!”

“Iroha...you want to give him a reason to live?” Paola asked softly.

Iroha was taken aback, but then she agreed. “Um... Yes. I think that’s it.”

“Then you should be the reason. Don’t use the kids,” Giuli said bluntly, hands on the wheel.

Iroha froze; she wasn’t expecting that angle.

“...Huh?”

“Yeaah. If you married him, then automatically, he would become the kids’ brother. There, solved!” Nina concluded with satisfaction.

Giuli gave her a thumbs-up through the rearview mirror. “There you go.”

“Congratulations...,” Paola added.

“No, no, no, hold on. Congratulations for what?!” Iroha exclaimed.

Nina grinned smugly at her naive reaction. “So how many children are you haaaving?”

“Ch-children...?!”

“Come to think of it, could they even have children?” Giuli asked without thinking.

“Get your heads out of the gutter!”

“I see what you mean... Couuuld the Lazaruses have offspring? Very interesting topic, for suuure. In nature, you tend to give birth to fewer babies the higher the chances are of them surviving, so it would make sense for the Lazaruses to be bereft of reproductive fuuunctions...” Nina gave a surprisingly thoughtful answer.

Iroha was red in the face and at a loss for words. She had been raised surrounded by children; the topic was too much for her to handle.

“Hmm, I think we should give it a tryyy...”

“A—a try?!”

“Yes, I should try seducing him tonight. No time to looose.”

“Wh-why are *you* seducing him?!” Iroha rebuked with a crack in her voice.

Nina gave her a curious look. “So youuu’ll do it?”

“No, I won’t! Besides, don’t you have Minato for that?!”

“Hisaki? No, we’re not like that.”

“And Yahiro and I aren’t like that, either!”

“Then how about we find common ground and ask Rosy to give it a try?” Giuli proposed nonchalantly.

“Why Rosé?!”

The blue-haired girl’s beautiful face crossed Iroha’s mind, dealing critical damage. Giuli, on the other hand, kept a straight face.

“I mean, she kinda likes him.”

“Huh? Really...? Can you tell?” Iroha asked Paola for confirmation.

Rosé ever only talked about business with Yahiro, and kept conversations as short as possible; Iroha didn’t see how one could reach the conclusion that she liked him. And yet, Paola nodded in affirmation. Strangely enough, Iroha felt she could believe her.

“We should probably take your feelings into consideration, but see, Irohaaa, when we take into account how many Japanese people there are out there, it’d be better for us to have you push out as many babies as pooossible.” Nina dismissed her feelings on the matter.

Iroha tried to argue back on reflex, but then she looked puzzled. Something was wrong about what she’d said.

“Out there...? You mean there’s more Japanese survivors other than us?”

The Japanese had supposedly died out after the J-nocide four years ago. The phrase *out there* wasn’t entirely appropriate if she was working under the assumption the only ones alive were both dragon mediums and Lazaruses, and Iroha’s siblings. She was implying the existence of more survivors. That was a shocking revelation.

“There are...,” Paola answered.

Nina did not deny it, but she shook her head sadly.

“Meeting them wouldn’t necessarily be a happy event for you, just so you knooow...”

“What do you mean...?” Iroha stared at her.

But before Nina could answer, Iroha felt a small vibration in her hoodie’s pocket. Her phone had received a text.

“That yours, Iroha? Who is it?” Giuli asked.

Smartphones still worked in Japan—despite other communications infrastructure collapsing—thanks to their satellite technology. So being able to get a text or email wasn’t strange. The problem was that she had no one to text.

“Um, let’s see... It’s probably a Waon fan or...something...”

Iroha took her phone out and checked her inbox. Communications within Galerie Berith used an exclusive, encrypted path, so it couldn’t be from Yahiro or Rosé. The only other possibility she could think of would be a viewer of her channel. And just as she expected, it came to Iroha Waon’s address.

Still, her jaw dropped when she read the subject title.

“Whaaa...?!”

Her shrill scream echoed inside the armored car.

3

Yahiro returned to the dorm, and, for whatever reason, Iroha was waiting for him with a bag full of underwear. She tackled him as soon as she saw him enter the building.

“Y-you are not gonna believe this!”

“Iroha? What happened?”

“I—I just got a business proposal!” she exclaimed, voice cracking, before pushing her phone into his face.

The screen showed a business email written in English. It seemed to be a business project proposal. It was addressed to Iroha Waon—basically, they wanted Iroha’s streaming persona for a collaboration.

“Who...sent this?”

“Gibeah! Gibeah Environment!”

“I’m asking who the hell that is.” Yahiro tried again, still confused and also worried that the underwear would spill out of the bag in her hands at any moment.

“Gibeah Environment, or GE for short, is a European corporation in the development of water resources. They’re world-famous as sellers of skin lotion and mineral water,” Rosé, standing right beside him, explained, tired of waiting for Iroha to do so.

Yahiro finally remembered. He had seen the logo from the email on mineral water bottles he used to find at convenience stores.

“And why’s such a huge company offering failed streamer Waon a job?” He gave Iroha a suspicious look; it had to be a scam.

Iroha Waon’s views rarely reached three digits, the average being under fifty.

The videos being in Japanese wasn’t working in her favor, but more than anything, the actual content was not interesting. Besides her being a little pretty, there was nothing of note about her—she wasn’t even a good speaker. In that sense, one could probably call her a moderate success for getting that audience while being a complete amateur, but in any case, she was not at the scale to grab the attention of a world-famous company. Yahiro thought it had to be either a joke or a scam.

“That’s just proof that people *are* watching.” Iroha puffed out her chest in pride.

Seriously, what’s the source of such confidence? Yahiro shook his head.

“So you’re not denying you’re a failed streamer,” Rosé retorted, but Iroha didn’t listen.

“Okay, how about you just calm down and we sit down somewhere to talk first?”

Galerie operators were gathering around, thanks to Iroha’s fussing, right by the dorm’s entrance. It was nothing they had to keep secret, but Yahiro just didn’t want any more attention.

“Right. Yes, let’s go to the lounge. I’m thirsty.”

“Yeah, because you just won’t stop shouting...,” Yahiro grumbled as they headed for the lounge on the first floor.

Giuli, Paola, and Nina were already there.

They seemed to be exhausted even though they had gone to the same place as Iroha. It must’ve been because they had to deal with Iroha’s exceedingly high hype levels before Yahiro and Rosé had arrived. Just the thought of it made Yahiro sympathetic.

The three newcomers stopped to grab a drink from the self-serve fountain before grabbing their seats.

Wetting her whistle seemed to have calmed her down—Iroha more quietly handled her phone to show Yahiro the proposal document again.

“It was this person who sent the proposal. Another streamer, Chiruka. She says she’s with Marius Gibeah’s agency, and she’s also Japanese.”

“There’s another Japanese streamer...?”

“I know, right? I had no idea. I mean, I watch her videos since she’s so famous, but she rarely speaks in them, and the subtitles are either English or French.”

“Chiruka... Is this her?” Yahiro looked her videos up on his own phone.

The thumbnails showed a pretty girl with a fairylike aura who would make a great model for impressionist paintings. She seemed to be either their age or a bit younger.

Most of her videos were about makeup and hairdos. The ones with the most views were those in which she used GE-brand cosmetics to teach her viewers how to do makeup. So she was a beauty streamer. Totally outside Yahiro’s interests. It made sense why he didn’t know her.

“Marius is the son of GE’s chairman, right? I believe he’s a filmmaker,” Rosé explained.

“Yah, he’s superrich and famous. He’s started working as a producer for streamers now.” Iroha nodded excitedly. “And he wants me to do a collab with Chiruka. A video sponsored by GE.”

“I’m only more and more confused as to why they’re contacting *you* for that,” Yahiro said with a frown as he sipped his lukewarm coffee.

Iroha gave him a strange look. “Well, because they think I’m great, duh?”

“Where do you get that idea, seriously?”

“I understand, Yahiro. You don’t like the idea of your favorite streamer going mainstream.” She couldn’t contain a smug smile as she overtly slapped his shoulder.

Please shut up. He grimaced.

“What do you think, Nina Himekawa?” Rosé asked the girl at the other table, her expression unchanged.

Nina shrugged as she turned around, clearly annoyed by the attention.

“Weeell... At the very least I’m pretty sure GE wasn’t among the members of Ganzheiiit.”

“Ganzheit? Wait, you mean this might be related to her being a dragon medium?” Yahiro looked at her with a serious expression.

It would make sense why a no-name streamer like her would get this proposal if Marius Gibeah was related to Ganzheit and this was a trap.

“It suuure would’ve been easy to make a decision in that case,” Nina replied vaguely. At least she didn’t seem certain that was it.

“Okay, give us the deets on the video idea, then,” Giuli said after raising only her head; she was lying facedown on the table.

Iroha scrolled down the document and frowned at the hodgepodge of business jargon. Still, she did her best to read through it and informed the group, “It seems they want us to promote GE’s new project.”

“Advertisement, huh...,” Yahiro muttered. One could easily imagine a question mark floating above his head. *What sort of advertisement potential did she have?* Everyone present—save for Iroha herself—had the same question in mind.

“It says they’ll tell me the details when we meet up.”

“Meet up? They want to speak to Iroha Waon?” Yahiro blinked in surprise.

Giuli and Rosé nodded.

“Yeah, that’s sus.”

“It’s a scam.”

“Whaaa?! Why?!” Iroha was baffled by how easily the twins reached a conclusion.

Yahiro was seriously worried about her future; she was too pure for her own good—too naive. The type easily tricked into joining a pyramid scheme.

They didn’t get the time to try and convince her out of it, however. Right then, they heard an aircraft approaching the Galerie base. The rumbling noise of the turboshaft engines shook the lounge’s windows. The rhythm was intermittent, typical of a rotorcraft—a helicopter.

“Princess, Lady, sorry to interrupt you. A chopper’s asking for permission to land on the base. It’s that one visitor.”

Josh’s voice came out of the radio on their collars. He had been assigned as security guard for the day.

“Wait, *that* visitor? It’s already time?” Giuli looked at Rosé, her expression suggesting that she had forgotten all about it.

Rosé nodded in silence. The older sister shrugged while the younger twin stood up with her usual inexpressive face.

“What visitor?” Yahiro asked, wary.

Galerie Berith called itself an arts dealer, but it was, in reality, an arms dealer. It couldn’t be any decent visitor.

“The client for the cargo that arrived the other day,” Rosé answered honestly, going against Yahiro’s expectation of her evading the question.

“You mean the one from the crashed ship?”

“Yes, it was full of autocannon ammo and missiles.”

“Missiles?! Who in the world is buying that?!” Yahiro gasped.

The autocannon ammo he could understand. Such weaponry was needed to go up against many high-Grade Moujuu. Any PMC in Japan would need some of it.

But missiles were useless against Moujuu. Normal ones couldn't seek Moujuu, and there was no reason to use more expensive ones against them. Which meant that whoever this client was, they were thinking of fighting humans.

"The truth is, we're about to go negotiate in order to find out who's paying for it and what they're using it for. They didn't mention they were coming by chopper, though," Giuli answered.

Yahiro wanted to question their business sense if they really didn't even know what their client's objective was, but pausing to think about it, that sounded right for the illegal trade of weaponry. Of course things would be weird.

"We got the chopper's ID code. It's a civil craft, unarmed. Owned by GE—Gibeah Environment. I'll tell them to land at heliport number two."

Josh cut comms right away.

The chopper's noise was getting unbearable. It was already only about ninety-one meters from the ground—they could see it through the windows. It was a small, normal helicopter, with a familiar logo printed on its side.

"Gibeah...?" Iroha opened her eyes wide, looking at her phone, then back at the chopper.

"I see... So that's the play." Rosé sighed with her usual unexpressive face.

Yahiro looked at her with suspicion. "What play?"

"The reason Marius Gibeah took notice of Iroha was simpler than expected. He just wants a Japanese survivor. It doesn't matter that she's a dragon medium, just that she's a pretty Japanese woman."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Oh, I see... Yees, I get it..."

Yahiro's and Nina's reactions overlapped. Nina understood, so it seemed now only Iroha and he were out of the loop.

“Iroha, you should go change now,” Giuli advised the girl, who was looking dumbfounded out the window.

“Huh? Why...?” She realized as she was asking that, and her expression froze. She was staring daggers at the person on the chopper’s passenger seat. “Wha?! No way!” she exclaimed after a couple seconds of her lips trembling.

The passenger cheerily waved at her. It was a tall, thin man in a showy suit. He had a piercing and his short hair was dyed the colors of the rainbow. She recognized his face from the email she’d gotten.

“Wh-what’s Marius Gibeah doing here...?!”

The GE chopper softly landed while Iroha was frozen in place.

No one cared about answering the obvious question.

4

“H-hello. I’m Iroha Waon!” Iroha’s voice cracked as she bowed deeply with an uncomfortable expression on her face.

She had changed into the more revealing *miko*-like outfit she used for streams. She was also wearing the silver wig and animal-ear headband.

The scion of Gibeah Environment’s chairman and young filmmaker held his hand out to her in response.

“I’m Marius Gibeah, nice to meet you. Oh, you’ve changed outfits?”

“Um, yes. The clothes I had on before got all messed up in the gunfight...”

“Gunfight...?” Marius giggled at her explanation.

He must’ve thought it was a joke. After all, it made no sense for an outfit to be destroyed in a gunfight while the person wearing it remained unharmed.

They were at the business meeting room in the Galerie base.

Giuli and Rosé were sitting at a wide table, in the seats closest to the exit, while Yahiro observed grumpily from behind them, standing. Marius and Iroha shook hands, then she hurried back to Yahiro’s side before awkwardly taking a seat.

Marius sat down gracefully across from Iroha. The man's clothes and gestures were androgynous in nature, and it all gave him a very refined aura. While slim, he seemed well-built, though he didn't look like the type to get into a fight. All of this only made Yahiro warier of him.

However, Yahiro's bad mood originated from the other person present in the room: the short old man Marius brought with him.

"...What the hell're you doing here, Ed?" Yahiro growled and glared at the old man who sat across from the twins.

The old man was called Eduardo Valenzuela. He was the owner of a shady imported goods store near the ruins of Matsudo Station.



“Heh. Good to see you’re doing well, Yahiro. You just up and disappeared without notice. Callous feller.”

“No, you sold me out to Galerie Berith, you nasty bastard!” Yahiro yelled back.

He already knew the old Mexican man had business connections with the Galerie, and that it was he who told Giuli and Rosé about him being a Lazarus.

“So what’re you here for?”

“I’m here to do business, what else?”

“Business?”

“I’m the broker for the end user of the goods Galerie Berith brought,” Ed said proudly.

That only made Yahiro glare at him harder.

Everything about this annoyed the living hell out of him—the fact that this shady old man was acting as intermediary for the Galerie’s business, the fact that the client was now connected to Iroha. Everything.

“I heard GE was in the business of water development, though? Why would they want to make a deal with the Galerie? They’re selling weaponry and ammo, aren’t they?” Yahiro questioned Marius.

The tall filmmaker only shrugged awkwardly. His unconcerned attitude further fanned the flames of Yahiro’s indignation. Iroha also looked at Marius in confusion.

“Yahiro, Yahiro. You’ve got it wrong,” Giuli said, much to his surprise.

Yahiro lost his zeal at her usual friendly bearing and sighed. “What have I got wrong?”

“GE and Galerie Berith have no direct business relationship. Our client is the Council for Japanese Independence. Eduardo Valenzuela is the intermediary for *them*.” Rosé finished her twin’s explanation.

Yahiro’s brow furrowed. The Council for Japanese Independence? He hadn’t heard of such an organization. He asked Iroha if she knew about them with a

glance, but she only tilted her head with a raised eyebrow. At the very least, that name was nowhere in the textbooks they used four years back, before the J-nocide.

“It’s no wonder you don’t know about the Council. It was formed after the J-nocide came to a close.”

“No need to worry about your grades! It won’t be on the exam,” Giuli said, more merrily than bitingly.

Yahiro ignored the comment and asked, “And who are the Council for Japanese Independence?”

“It’s a government in exile formed by Japanese survivors. Although no country as of now recognizes it as a legitimate government organization.”

“And there’s enough survivors to form such a thing?” Yahiro looked at Iroha in surprise; she returned the look.

News of more Japanese people alive out there was something to be happy about, but he wasn’t sure how to take the fact that they were stocking themselves with weaponry.

“Where are they?” Iroha asked timidly.

Rosé sighed coldly. “Out at sea.”

“The sea?”

“Do you know how the members of the Council for Japanese Independence, having lost all land and wealth after the J-nocide, are securing food and daily necessities?”

Iroha was at a loss for words. Not because she didn’t know how to answer the question, but because she was able to figure it out.

“...Pillaging?” Yahiro answered in her stead.

“Oooh!” Giuli clapped. “Bingo. But the correct term is *piracy*.”

“Piracy? This government in exile’s really out there sailing the high seas?”

“They began by attacking cargo ships and taking what they need. And this is still happening to this day,” Giuli replied indifferently.

Yahiro frowned.

No Moujuu emerged from the sea, and there were many deserted islands close to Japan. It was the optimal environment for people hiding out in ships. The locational advantage enabled them to commit piracy for close to four years now.

Still, Yahiro didn't find it acceptable. Perhaps he didn't have the right to criticize them, as he, too, was a thief stealing artwork for a living, but he was only taking articles abandoned without owners from deep in the ruins. He fought Moujuu, but he never fought humans of his own volition.

Yahiro couldn't stand behind the Council for Japanese Independence for attacking innocent ships, even if it was for their own survival. They were crossing the line.

"And the Galerie's doing business with pirates?"

"We're only merchants. We don't discriminate between clients, so long as they pay the right price," Rosé answered inexpressively. "Although we have our own questions. It should be impossible to pay for weaponry and support their ship by only piracy. They must have a sponsor." She glanced at Marius.

Giuli continued, "And turns out that sponsor's GE, huh?"

"That's right." Marius raised his eyebrows playfully before smiling.

Yahiro stared at him in bafflement. "What? What's a world-class corporation to gain by supporting pirates?"

"Are you aware of GE's main business?" Marius maintained his expression even when faced with Yahiro's disrespect. He rested his head on his hand gracefully as he asked the question calmly.

"Water resources development...or so I've been told."

"Yes, that's correct. We develop the equipment needed for desalination and wastewater treatment, and manage water purification plants. But we also put as much effort in the securement of water resources."

"What...do you mean?"

"I guess it's no surprise a Japanese boy isn't aware, but the truth is, fresh

water usable for humanity is a very precious resource. Not only for drinking, but also for agriculture and industrial production—high-quality water is essential. In a way, it's as much of a strategic resource as oil."

Marius explained with a sweet but upset tone. He was a remarkable speaker, perhaps thanks to his experience as a famous filmmaker.

"And Japan is particularly blessed with water resources. This is why we support the Council for Japanese Independence. We have a contract stating that, once Japan regains sovereignty, GE will get the right to monopolize seventy percent of its water resources."

"Seventy percent of the whole country? That's quite greedy."

"Oh? Considering Japan's current population, I would say that's pretty generous," Marius responded in kind to Yahiro's derision.

Yahiro had no way to argue that. The only Japanese survivors he knew were both dragon mediums, Hisaki Minato, and Iroha's siblings. He had no idea how many members the Council for Japanese Independence had, but it couldn't be more than a couple hundred if they were able to support themselves on piracy. It couldn't possibly affect them either in livelihood or economically, even if they only got to use 30 percent of Japan's water resources.

"...Okay, I understand why you support that government in exile now," Yahiro said, easing some of his wariness.

Yahiro wasn't involved in this business in the first place. He was in no place to comment on it. So long as the people asking Iroha to work with them weren't directly committing piracy, he had no reason to complain.

However, there was still something he had to ask.

"I don't even care about why Ed's acting as intermediary for them, at least for the time being. But, Mr. Marius, why did you reach out to Iroha?" Yahiro looked him straight in the eye.

Marius stared back, then softly narrowed his eyes.

"Oh, love."

"...Huh?" Yahiro was bewildered. That came out of nowhere.

Marius looked at Yahiro's and Iroha's faces in amusement.

"Yes, I understand you're worried about little Waon. What if she's being tricked?!"

"No, I..."

"Huh? Yahiro, you were?!" Iroha yelled before Yahiro could argue back. Her anxiety was gone like it was never there to begin with, and her eyes gleamed brightly as a smile filled her whole face.

"Heh-heh... You've grown so fast, Yahiro. To think the guy rummaging through the gravure photobooks at shops all over the 23 Wards has now found a real woman..."

"Shut your mouth, Ed! You made me go get those for you!" Yahiro yelled furiously at the old man with the naughty grin.

"Aww, I should've known. You've always been my biggest fan. Hee-hee..."

"You...! Aren't you even worried for yourself?! What if they want you to be an accessory to piracy?!"

"Ouch!"

Yahiro chopped her on the head. Tears welled up in her eyes and she glared resentfully at him, not understanding why she was hit.

"Don't worry, that's not happening," Marius affirmed.

Yahiro shot him an even more suspicious scowl.

"Then why her? She has nothing to do with your goals, does she?"

"Oh, she does. She's Japanese, which automatically makes her a concerned party in Japan's independence. You, too, Yahiro Narusawa."

"...You want us to join the government in exile?"

"That would make things faster, but I won't ask you to do so now," he said with a giggle before winking at Iroha. "What I want you to do is help promote the Council for Japanese Independence. More specifically, I want you to become its mascot."

"Oh... So that's GE's new project..." Iroha's expression became serious.

“Yes.” Marius nodded. “You will be the Council’s PR ambassador. The brave and cute streamer who kept on posting videos for the Japanese all by herself. You’re perfect for the role, don’t you think?”

“Well... When you put it like that, then yeah, maybe.” Iroha bashfully played with her animal ears. Strangely humble reaction for her.

“Why Waon? There’s other more popular streamers under your management, no?” Yahiro asked.

“You mean Chiruka?” Marius grimaced slightly. “Unfortunately, there’s this issue with her. She can’t be the mascot for this project.”

“Why?”

“She’s already a member of the Council for Japanese Independence.”

““...What?!”” Yahiro and Iroha exclaimed in unison.

It makes perfect sense, though.

Marius was a sponsor for the Council and producer for Chiruka. It would be stranger if there was no further connection there.

“She’s in the council’s ship now. And yes, it’s true they’ve been pillaging for survival. We need to clean this bad image in order to reestablish Japan. Otherwise no one will recognize the government in exile as legitimate.”

“I see. So it’s Chiruka Misaki we’re talking about,” Rosé muttered for the first time in a while.

Iroha looked at her in surprise. “Chiruka Misaki? Why do you know her full name?”

“She’s one of the six dragon mediums Ganzheit knows about.”

“Dragon...medium? She is...?” Iroha froze at the shocking revelation.

Rosé continued without concern, “Chiruka Misaki is thought to be the medium of the mountain dragon, Vanagloria. I heard she escaped Ganzheit’s surveillance network, but I didn’t know she was in the care of the Council for Japanese Independence.”

“Vanagloria’s medium...,” Yahiro muttered absentmindedly. His immediate

reaction was irritation.

Thinking more about it, even with the support of GE, it was strange that the Council for Japanese Independence was able to get away with piracy for four years in Japanese waters—where armies from all over the world gathered. But it made sense if they had a dragon medium with them. They were using her Regalia for pillaging.

“I’m going,” Iroha said with a clear, bright look on her face. She shoved peace signs into Yahiro’s grimacing face. “No use thinking about it here. I’ll go speak with them. I just want to meet other Japanese survivors, and, hey, reestablishing Japan is not a bad goal.”

“Yeah, I guess.” He had to concede that.

Setting aside what the Council and GE could be plotting, it was Chiruka who invited her to collab. It should be fine to assume Vanagloria’s dragon medium would be friendly to her. At the very least, it wouldn’t turn to killing right away.

“Either way, we have to meet the Council in order to deliver the goods, so, you could come with us. Then, if you don’t like them, we can just leave.”

“Is that okay, Marius Gibeah?” Rosé asked for confirmation for her twin’s suggestion.

“Yes, of course.” Marius flashed them a beautiful smile.

He seemed satisfied with how the negotiations went. Iroha meeting the Council for Japanese Independence was just what he wanted.

“I’ll be going by helicopter ahead of you. Mr. Valenzuela will show you to our meeting spot.”

“You heard that, Yahiro?” Ed merrily bared his teeth after taking a sip of coffee.

Galerie Berith was not informed of the Council’s current location. Considering their reputation as pirates, they needed an intermediary to get them to a meeting point wherein they would do the trading. An intermediary who just so happened to be Ed this time. Yahiro had mixed feelings about it.

“We can trust you, right, Ed?”

“Of course, of course.” Ed narrowed his eyes gleefully, brushing aside Yahiro’s glare. Then, he looked at Iroha, sitting beside Yahiro. “Right, missy, since we’ll have some time on the way, how about I tell you some old stories about this guy? We’ll begin with the time Yahiro first came to my shop.”

“Whoa! Yes, please!” Iroha’s emerald-green eyes lit up.

“Hey, stop it! Don’t!” Yahiro exclaimed after choking up in distress.

His unease only made her even more intrigued, so she asked Ed to keep going.

“Go die in a ditch, geezer!” Yahiro yelled while the short old man only grinned.

5

The meeting with the Council for Japanese Independence was early in the morning—five AM. The armies’ surveillance was at its lowest, though minimally, just right before dawn.

Yahiro and the others had to leave at midnight. Iroha’s siblings were rubbing their sleepy eyes when they woke up to say good-bye, as did Nina and Hisaki, who were still mooching off the Galerie.

“Take care out theeere!” Nina called and waved.

She was wearing braids and no makeup. Her concept of pajamas seemed to be only a baggy T-shirt and underwear. The girl was clearly drowsy from just getting out of bed.

Hisaki, on the other hand, was wide awake, and making sure she didn’t fall asleep right there on the floor. A very good, loyal dog.

“You were referring to the Council for Japanese Independence when you mentioned other survivors, weren’t you?” Iroha, ready for departure, approached Nina.

It was the first Yahiro had heard about Nina saying such a thing.

Nina smiled childishly and said, “Yeeup. You know now why I said it might be

best if you didn't meet theem?"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha... Yeah, I could've never imagined they were pirates." Iroha glossed over it with a smile.

They might be fellow Japanese, but they were pirates wanted by armies from all over the world. Sure enough, it was a truth perhaps best left unknown.

"You're not going?" Yahiro asked, surprised.

Asking Hisaki wasn't necessary as he didn't care about anything but Nina, but he would've thought she'd be hugely interested in the Council.

However, she sluggishly shook her head. "I meeean, I don't really care about reestablishing Japan, or Vanagloria's medium."

"That's a surprise."

"Is iit? I just think her wishes are booring. Who cares about restoring the country?"

"I'm sure many people would, but I get it. You don't. Figures." Yahiro forced a smile at her bitter opinion.

Hisaki raised his eyebrows at the comment. "Shut up. What would you know about her?"

"That's what annoys you?!" Yahiro sighed at his inability to comprehend the guy.

"Easy, now." Nina smiled. "Anyway, we'll stand guard here in Yokohama. We'll take care of Iroha's kids."

"Um, they're not my kids, they're my siblings," Iroha corrected her; it felt like Nina would seriously take it the wrong way if she didn't. Then, she turned to look at the children, her face scrunched up and trying to hold back tears. "I'll be going now. Be good boys and girls, okay?"

"You be good, too, Mama! Don't cause trouble for the celebrities!"

"Don't cut loose just because we won't be there to keep you in check!"

"Yahiro, please take good care of her."

In stark contrast to Iroha's deeply serious final-farewell-like attitude, the nine-

year-old trio of Kyota, Honoka, and Kiri all seemed like business as usual. If anything, they looked like the guardians in this situation.

Iroha protested, “Hold the phone, am I so untrustworthy? What’s going on here?”

“Nothing’s going on. It’s sound advice.”

“Why?!” she said with a pout.

Who’s the kid, again?

In any case, her concern for their parting was cleared thanks to the silly exchange. Even Rinka, Ren, and the rest of the children seemed calm about it.

They had gotten used to being with Galerie Berith this past week, and even were attached to the operators now. Iroha being away for a day or two shouldn’t be a big problem.

And so long as the children stayed in the base, Iroha couldn’t escape the Galerie. This had to be within Giuli and Rosé’s calculations.

Just as Yahiro was lost in such dry thoughts, he felt someone pull his hoodie’s hem. He turned to find Runa, Nuemaru in her arms, standing right beside him.

“Mmm...” She stared at Iroha in silence, then pushed the white Moujuu into her arms.

Iroha took it with confusion. “What’s wrong, Runa? You want us to take Nuemaru?”

Considering how Hisaki had reacted before, they decided taking a Moujuu to meet another dragon medium would be dangerous. Nuemaru was supposed to stay at the base, with Runa, whom he seemed most attached to other than Iroha. But now she was telling them to take the beast, too, and there was this strange weight in her gaze.

“Yahiro.” Runa, hands free now, hugged him tight.

Rather than wanting affection, she seemed to be wishing him good luck.

Yahiro couldn’t brush the young girl away and turned to look at Iroha.

She clung to him up until right before they left, as Ayaho watched from afar

and with slight jealousy.

+

Three big trucks covered by canvas canopies drove along surrounded by armored escorts.

The trucks were loaded with containers full of ammo and missiles stored in their special canisters. All the cargo the Council for Japanese Independence had ordered from Galerie Berith.

“Are we supposed to fit in here? What do they want this much ammo for anyway?” Yahiro grumbled as he kicked one of the cursed containers—he’d been forced to ride in the back of the truck.

“Three thousand 20mm autocannon shells. Eight vertical-launch cruise missiles. An assortment of missile decoys and machine gun bullets. It’s just the basics for a destroyer,” Rosé replied through the radio from the spacious and pleasant passenger seat.

That’s not the issue here. Yahiro pursed his lips.

“This is too much just for some pirates. Are they trying to attack nuclear-powered aircraft carriers or what?”

“Maybe.”

“Seriously?!”

“No problem either way. They’ve already paid,” the mammonist brazenly said.

Indeed, giant international corporation GE had already processed payment for “arts dealer” Galerie Berith the night before. Yahiro was surprised to find out that not even arms smugglers did business by exchanging suitcases full of money in this day and age.

Advanced payment standards remained, however. If this wasn’t the case, some clients would rather “try out” the newly acquired ammo on the seller.

“Please stop the cars. The meeting spot is right ahead.”

The trucks all decelerated after Rosé’s orders came through the radio.

They were near the root of the Miura Peninsula by the coast between the

former city of Zushi and the former town of Hayama. It was across the water from Mount Takatori from the perspective of the US Navy base in Yokosuka.

It was adjacent to Yokohama, site of the Galerie's HQ, and the US Navy's surveillance wasn't as tight as on the inside of Tokyo Bay. It was a well-thought-out spot.

"Wow! How pretty!" Iroha exclaimed, looking at the ocean before them after getting off the truck with Yahiro.

Some stars were still shining intermittently in the deep blue sky while the white glow of daybreak softly crept up the horizon. The bright gradient was something one couldn't witness in the 23 Wards.

"We're meeting the Council here? It just looks like an ordinary beach," Yahiro said as he looked around.

They needed a huge ship in order to take all the ammo they ordered, but the place they were meeting at was a deserted swimming beach. There was no equipment for anchoring a ship.

"It is here. If your old friend isn't lying to us, at least."

"Ed's not my friend. I've never said I trust that bastard. You just up and made a deal with him without even telling me," Yahiro argued sincerely against Giuli's explanation.

The intermediary had already told them the spot—after taking his commission, of course—and said good-bye. He said his job was only telling them the location, not taking them there.

Although Ed couldn't be trusted personally, his intel was always spot-on. He'd never lied even to the Japanese boy, Yahiro. He couldn't imagine Ed would trick Galerie Berith and risk getting on their bad side.

While Yahiro was lost in his thoughts, Iroha stared curiously at the ocean. She walked up to the edge of the water and fearfully reached out for it.

"The water's so nice. I should've brought my swimsuit."

"Yeah." Yahiro cracked a smile in reaction to her beaming, and the thought of her playing around in a swimsuit, completely forgetting that this was to be the

site of an arms trade.

Rosé glared at him with narrowed eyes. “Perv.”

“Why?!”

“Ah-ha-ha. Hey, there’s no need for swimsuits! Just go flirt with Iroha by the water. Splash each other, play tag, that sort of stuff,” Giuli jested.

“Good idea.” Rosé nodded. “Perhaps her dragon powers will increase if you two become closer.”

“What? Who told you that? No way that’s true.”

“I told you that the dragon only grants the Regalia to the one its medium falls in love with.”

“You weren’t joking?” Yahiro was bewildered.

Everything about the Regalia sounded made up, and this bit of information was the most unbelievable of it. Anyone would think they were being mocked upon hearing that.

“Hey, Nuemaru! Wait! Whoa?!” Iroha screamed, covered in sand.

Nuemaru had forced its way out of Iroha’s grip to escape the coast, thus pushing her to the ground.

Good thing she’s having fun. A smile escaped him. Rosé observed inexpressively.

Then—

“They’re here,” Giuli said, staring into the horizon.

Yahiro followed her gaze.

There, he saw small black dots, like poppy seeds, crossing the dark ocean. The water splashed around with their approach, but their motion did not match that of ships. Then the wind brought in the sound of a rumble similar to a helicopter’s.

“Hovercrafts?”

“LCACs... Landing Craft Air Cushions. I see, they wouldn’t need a pier in order

to land with those,” Rosé explained to the boy, who was ignorant of military watercraft.

LCACs were developed for transporting troops to enemy territory—being able to land without docking facilities was important. Also the perfect vessels to use in this situation, in which they had to avoid military surveillance to transport goods.

The issue with LCACs was that they were loud. The propellers roared like a fierce storm, making Nuemaru posture defensively in Iroha’s arms.

“Nuemaru, easy. They’re not enemies.”

Iroha hurriedly soothed the beast by patting its back, but it didn’t calm down. Its pure-white fur stood on end, and bluish sparks went off around it.

“Nuemaru?!”

The white Moujuu jumped out of Iroha’s hold and let out a roar alongside wild thunder.

Blue lightning illuminated the sky, and the electrified air began to smell of ozone.

Nuemaru wasn’t attacking the LCAC approaching from the sea. The electric shocks were aimed at someone hiding behind the loaded trucks.

“A spy?! Giuli!”

“I’m on it!” The orange-haired girl ran like a predator.

The blue-haired twin already held a gun in hand. Yahiro didn’t catch the moment she’d unholstered it. Her quick draw was like a sleight of hand.

The person Nuemaru uncovered was wearing all black, as if they were a living shadow. A black, tight jumpsuit and a similarly pitch-black helmet. No armor that could make any sound. Their clothing was tailored to secrecy.

The only thing not black was the weapon in their left hand—an ornamental sword shining gold.

Giuli’s profile tensed as soon as she noticed that.

“Rosy, watch out! She’s got a Regalia!”

A silver light shot in front of the orange-haired girl.

Metal crystals grew like giant blades from the ground, cracking the asphalt.

The crystal blades cut Giuli's steel wire and intercepted Rosé's bullets.

"Giuli?!"

"Agh!"

Giuli dodged blade after blade as Yahiro screamed her name. The feat couldn't be achieved by reacting on sight—she predicted the timing of each crystal with almost feral intuition. Any regular human would've been skewered by now.

The Galerie operators finally realized what was going on and began shooting at the black shadow, but the metallic crystal blades growing from the ground blocked all bullets, reflecting them right back at the operators. The operators had to stop the attack to avoid being hit by their own bullets in addition to the blades.

"Cease fire. Everyone stand back. That's a Lazarus." Rosé calmly gave orders to her subordinates.

It was then that Yahiro finally understood. Nuemaru hadn't found a spy.

"Are they here to mess with the trade?"

Yahiro drew the Kuyo Masakane from the case on his back.

He could think of a few reasons why a Lazarus would attack. One would be that they were here to stop the deal with the Council for Japanese Independence from taking place.

There had to be other Japanese people who weren't happy with the Council's piracy and didn't care for them, just like Nina. Naturally, they would want to prevent them from getting their hands on the weaponry.

There was one other possible reason, though...

"Saber Hills and Blade Groves," the shadow said quietly from under the helmet.

The murderous aura emanating from them gave Yahiro chills.

The sand at his feet swelled up, then saber hills projected upward.

The attack came from a blind spot—he was barely able to dodge it.

“They’re after us?!” Yahiro growled.

Exactly. The Council for Japanese Independence wasn’t the only possible target. The Moujuu attack at Yamashita Pier already foreshadowed they were being targeted. He was already expecting a faction looking to get rid of the Lazaruses newly arrived at Yokohama.

“Die, Lazarus,” the shadow said as it stabbed the ornamental katana into the ground.

The ground at Yahiro’s feet swelled up explosively, across an area too big to escape from. Countless blades rose, bursting open the surroundings.

Each blade was over 183 centimeters long. The Lazarus’s healing power would mean nothing if he got hit by that. And this power to create mountains of swords from the ground was the shadow’s Regalia.

“Yahiro, are you alive?!” Iroha’s voice echoed from beyond his view obstructed by the saber hills.

Then, the pure-white Moujuu appeared with a bluish glow. Nuemaru recovered its true size and form—the seven-meter-tall Raiju was a beast like a mix between a wolf, a fox, and a tiger, as fierce as it was beautiful.

On its back was Iroha, her hair flowing in the wind. In its mouth, it held Yahiro’s hoodie, pulling him up. Nuemaru had saved him by a hair from being skewered.

“Thank you, furball!”

Nuemaru answered Yahiro’s gratitude with a grumpy growl. Perhaps it didn’t like being called a furball. It tossed the boy away like it was attempting a long throw.

“A Lazarus...fighting alongside a Moujuu?!” The shadow stopped in its tracks for a moment.

Yahiro closed in on the enemy thanks to Nuemaru’s throw.

The shadowy figure clicked its tongue and activated the Regalia once more, but this time for defense. Metallic crystal blades rose from the ground, forming a wall and concealing the shadowy figure from Yahiro's sight.

The blades could repel bullets; Yahiro's katana couldn't possibly cut through them. But perhaps the power of the Regalia could purge something created by something of the same power.

"Burn to ash... Blaze!"

Yahiro's blade let off scorching flames and the metallic crystal barrier easily melted down.

The shadow stood in shock at the sight of this. They tried using their Regalia once again, but Yahiro was faster to attack. He raised his sword from a horizontal sweep, then slashed downward.

He slashed the resin helmet and cracked the opponent's collarbone and some ribs. The shock sent the shadowy figure flying away while the sensation of cutting through flesh and bone remained in Yahiro's hands.

There was less resistance than he'd expected. The enemy was lightweight. Their height was shorter than his, and their shoulders were narrower, too. The weight difference had to be over forty pounds.

Their figure covered in the tight jumpsuit was slim—especially around the waist. Clearly it wasn't a man. It took Yahiro's slash to her body for him to realize the truth.

"It's a woman?!" Yahiro exclaimed absentmindedly as he looked down at the shadowy figure.

She wouldn't die from the slash if she was a Lazarus. He had to capture her before she was finished healing, but he was frozen in place. Then, the cracked helmet fell off, revealing her face beneath it.

She was young, with a graceful appearance. About in her midtwenties. Her face was scrunched up from the pain, but even so, he could tell she was pretty.

"...What... You didn't realize?" She cracked a smile after wiping the blood from her mouth. "Nice strike, I'll admit. I hope you hold back next time."

“Wait, don’t move yet!” Yahiro said desperately as she tried to stand up.

The woman burst out in laughter at how considerate the guy who just tried to kill her was.

“What’re you worried about? I’m immortal, remember?”

“I mean... Yeah, but...”

“I apologize for attacking you out of nowhere, Lazarus kid. I was testing you. I just had to, due to some circumstances.”

Her body gave off a hazy steam as it regenerated. It was the first time Yahiro witnessed another Lazarus healing.

The gouge wounds closed up, reverting to white skin. The eerie sight looked beautiful just this once. It wasn’t only Yahiro entranced by it—Iroha and even Giuli and Rosé stared in amazement.

“Amaha!”

A voice came from the shadows of the bank, and an unknown girl came out from hiding. She was short and looked to be around Yahiro’s age. A stunningly beautiful girl who looked like she came out of an impressionist painting.

“Chiruka?!” Iroha exclaimed in shock as soon as she saw the girl.

The little girl’s shoulders jolted up upon hearing her name. Although her face was terribly scrunched up in fear, she made up her mind and approached the woman on the ground.

“Chiruka? Oh, so you’re Vanagloria’s medium and her Lazarus?”

“My name is Amaha Kamikita, chairperson of the Council for Japanese Independence. It is a pleasure to meet you, Galerie Berith.”

She nodded to Yahiro’s question before standing up, her wounds mostly healed now. She reached out her hand to him, but then...

“N-no, Amaha...!”

...Chiruka Misaki yelled desperately. Amaha tilted her head in puzzlement at her reaction.

Then, the clothing by her chest rustled.

Yahiro had slashed her torso almost halfway through. The impressive wound proved nonlethal to her body thanks to the Lazarus's regeneration, but that power didn't extend to her clothes. Indeed, her clothes, slashed smack down the middle, burst like ripe fruit.

"Oh my," Amaha said impassively as she bared her white skin in vivid contrast to the dark of the night.

Chiruka stared in absolute despair.

Oh, so that's why she tried to stop her, Yahiro thought in a daze.

"D-don't loook!" Iroha covered his eyes with both hands.

Act 3 Government in Exile

1

The mood was palpably awkward inside the LCAC's cockpit.

The origin? Iroha. Her expression was disgruntled as she and Yahiro were shoved into the cramped space. Nuemaru had shrunk down to medium-size-dog volume again, and she played with his tail to vent before he couldn't take it anymore and escaped to Giuli and Rosé's side. Why? She wasn't pleased with Yahiro having seen Amaha's naked body.

Yahiro didn't mind her prickly aura at first. That was an accident to begin with, and Amaha herself didn't even seem to mind being looked at. In fact, not even her friend Chiruka reproached him any further.

So for Iroha, a complete stranger, to be the supposed victim and be that irritated by it was entirely incomprehensible. The worst part was, she didn't even seem aware of the core reason why she was sulking. Yahiro didn't give much thought to it, though—he simply chalked it up to girls her age being prudish.

"It's getting foggy," Yahiro said while looking at the view through the cockpit's window.

The loaded LCAC had left the Zushi coast almost an hour prior. It should've been past dawn already, but a thick fog covered the sea's surface. Thick enough to make him worry about crashing into something all of a sudden.

"This is Untrodden Abyss—Vanagloria's power. No one can find these waters while it's active, no matter how sophisticated their radars or satellites," Amaha responded.

The girl with the black ponytail sitting in the front row turned her head and smiled.

She had changed immediately after the accident, and was wearing a full pantsuit with matching vest and trousers—a luxury outfit with a black base and golden embroidery that gave her the appearance of a competent politician or noble, or perhaps that of a military commander or despotic ruler.

“This fog is all part of her Regalia?”

“Is there anything surprising about it? May I remind you it was a dragon medium’s powers that opened the miles-deep hole connected to another world in the middle of Tokyo?”

“Right... Yeah, I guess it’s nothing shocking...” Yahiro nodded.

Yahiro knew better than anyone else about said hole—the Ploutonion. He’d witnessed the very moment she’d opened it, after all.

Chiruka’s Untrodden Abyss had an area of effect far greater than Sui’s Hollow. It may not have direct attack power, but it was far more useful. As proof, the Council for Japanese Independence stayed uncaught by the many armies going after them for piracy thanks to it.

With that in mind, Nina and Iroha should have a power as great as these, too. Yahiro glanced at Iroha while thinking about it, and their eyes met.

Iroha hurriedly shook her head as though she had read his mind.

“Huh? No, no, no. I can’t do that sort of thing. Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses, yeah? As they say, don’t compare yourself with others!”

“Yeah... I know.” Yahiro nodded in relief at her characteristic answer.

She pouted in reaction, though.

“Now you’re making me feel like you weren’t expecting anything from me! No, no, I can’t have that. Maybe I do have some sort of hidden power!”

“For crying out loud. Make up your mind.” Yahiro sighed.

He knew how she felt, though. Clearly she wasn’t mad about being asked for strong superpowers, but about the possibility that Yahiro found her useless. Or, rather than mad...afraid.

“Heh. You’re a funny duo. No need to force a show of humility; it’s only

reasonable not to want a fellow Lazarus to know your true power.” Amaha chuckled at their exchange.

“No, it’s not humility or anything.”

“I understand, and don’t worry. I will not underestimate you.” Amaha touched her shoulder—the same spot Yahiro had slashed before—and nodded, interpreting Yahiro’s correction in a way not intended. “I’ve been made aware of your power. Never could I have expected you to employ Moujuu that way. I’m impressed, Yahiro Narusawa. You hid the true extent of your abilities during the cargo ship incident because you knew we were observing, didn’t you?”

“The cargo ship...? Wait, it was you who summoned those Moujuu?!” Yahiro shot her a reproachful glare as he remembered all who were injured during the event.

Amaha didn’t seem affected by it.

“We’re aware of the trouble we’ve caused the Guild’s members and feel bad about it, but I had to confirm you were a trustworthy Lazarus. Too bad Luxuria’s medium got in the way.”

“You know Nina?”

“Of course—the treacherous Ganzheit supporter. I invited her to the Council before, but she shot me down. Said she wasn’t interested in bringing back Japan.” Amaha shook her head in annoyance. “In stark contrast, however, we have you, Iroha Mamana. I heard you took care of a few orphans left behind in the quarantine zone, and raised them as your own family. Now that is praiseworthy. As a fellow Japanese citizen, your generous spirit makes me proud.”

“Oh, I only did what I had to. They’re the cutest kids in the whole world.”

Iroha gave a slightly off-the-mark response to the sudden praise, but Amaha nodded softly in response.

“Then I would very much like to meet them. They’re part of our few remaining brethren, after all.”

“Brethren... Yeah, I suppose.” Iroha opened her eyes wide; Amaha had said

that last line in Japanese. It was then that she remembered they were heading to a community of fellow Japanese people, who she'd thought were extinct up until recently.

"You said you're the chairperson of the Council for Japanese Independence, right? Should I take it you're the whole group's leader, then?" Yahiro asked for confirmation.

Amaha was only twenty years old when the J-nocide took place; that put her at twenty-four now. She was considerably older than Yahiro and Iroha, but she was still young. Too young to call herself the head of a government in exile.

"My father was a member of the Diet, so they propped me up as figurehead. And I reckon I make a good symbolic leader as I can't die in battle." Amaha chuckled, realizing Yahiro's suspicion.

The reason sounded convincing to him. With her pedigree and elegant appearance, she was indeed fit to be the face of the government in exile. And she was a Lazarus. The head of the Council had to actually lead in battle to steal the necessary resources, so there was no better person for the job.

"How many Japanese people are still alive in the council?"

"Six hundred seventy-nine, including Chiruka and me," she answered right away.



More than I expected, Yahiro thought.

“And all of those people live out at sea?”

“In general, yes. Some of them are on land for gathering intel and resources, but they’re few.”

“Um... Should you be telling us all that?” Iroha raised her hand timidly.

Revealing the total population was equal to revealing the total forces of the Council for Japanese Independence. And they weren’t alone—Giuli and Rosé were also in the cockpit.

“There is no better way to gain someone’s trust than showing them you trust them first,” Amaha responded seriously and magnanimously, befitting a government leader. “And I believe I have a good eye for people. At the very least, you should have no reason to oppose us, am I wrong?”

“I don’t think anyone with a good eye for people would ever do business with Ed or the Galerie,” Yahiro retorted sarcastically.

Amaha shook her head with a smile.

“I don’t trust them, but that’s okay. At the very least I think they won’t betray us so long as we offer them some sort of profit. And that’s enough.”

“What’s that? Let us in on the conversation, why don’t you?” Giuli said upon hearing the topic turn to them.

Amaha turned to look at the girl without changing her expression.

“Oh, thank you all for waiting. We’ve almost arrived.”

“You can tell?”

“Yes.”

“Huuuh... Funny how you don’t get lost.”

“I have Vanagloria’s blessings to thank for that. We’re here.”

It was as though she had taken off their blindfold. The view cleared up just as Amaha said the last word, and there was the Pacific Ocean, extending endlessly in every direction.

A ship glowed under the sunlight among the waves. The giant silhouette was colored in inorganic gray. The deck stretched across its entire length, giving it the appearance of an aircraft carrier. It was a beautiful vessel, but oddly intimidating.

“So that’s...the Council for Japanese Independence’s ship...,” Iroha muttered in awe of the watercraft.

She stared directly at the flag high on the bow. The outline of the sun.

“Yes. This used to be the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force’s guardian—the *Hikata*. The only territory we have real control over,” Amaha said, looking up with pride at the approaching ship.

Chiruka looked at Amaha’s profile silently with a stiff expression.

2

The LCAC carrying Yahiro and the rest docked at the *Hikata*’s stern, and remained stowed in the hangar. The amphibious assault ship’s storage was still largely vacant—since the space usually reserved for armored vehicles and such was now used to store daily necessities—and had been remodeled to be more comfortable for people living in there. Such repurposing was essential for nearly seven hundred people to be able to live on a ship for four years.

First thing after boarding the ship, Yahiro and the others headed to the remodeled living quarters. They were shown to a room furnished like a broadcasting studio, where a certain tall filmmaker awaited.

“You’re here, Waon!”

“Mr. Marius!”

The man who had arrived by helicopter in advance welcomed Iroha with a broad smile. The luxurious onboard studio was the room where Marius was allowed to film Chiruka’s videos.

“And welcome back, Chiruka. So, you friends with Waon yet?”

“Ah... Hi... No... Not yet.” Chiruka shook her head after glancing at Iroha.

Iroha, on the other hand, was supremely shocked after being denied friendship.

“Sorry, she’s just a little shy,” Amaha coolly covered for her.

Sure enough, Chiruka hadn’t spoken to Giuli or Rosé, either. Yahiro figured she was wary of them, but it turned out that wasn’t the case. A little strange to think of such a powerful *dragon medium*—and *streamer*—being shy. *How’s she do her job, then?*

“Yeah, I suppose. I’m sorry. I tend to be a bit too peppy... And I guess I went overboard now; it didn’t feel like the first time we’ve met, since I watch your videos all the time,” Iroha reflected while drooping a bit.

Amaha nodded in encouragement.

“You’ve been doing fine. She’s just nervous because it’s her first time in a while communicating with someone from the outside.”

“Thank you.” Iroha smiled weakly while glancing at Chiruka, who was standing uneasily by the wall. She sighed. “I’ve got to say, she’s even cuter in real life. I’m impressed.”

“Oh, and you’re not too far behind, darling. Wanna see what a bit of work can do?” Marius said, peering into her face.

Iroha blinked a couple times. “Work?”

“We could test out some outfits and makeup. Like a sort of trial for the collab video. Don’t you want to see Chiruka’s equipment?”

“Oh yes, I do! Ah... But...” She looked at the Berith twins.

The visit was mainly to seal the deal with the Galerie. Meeting Chiruka was only a bonus. Giuli and Rosé’s plans could be affected if she made decisions on her own.

“It’s fine. Besides, I’m also interested in Chiruka,” Giuli said with a bright smile.

She wasn’t lying, but clearly her interest wasn’t in her as a streamer, but rather as a dragon medium.

“You take care of this, Giuli. Yahiro and I will go deliver the goods. Right?” Rosé said while glancing at him. He nodded.

Yahiro would have an easier time checking out just how armed the Council for Japanese Independence was, rather than watching Iroha and Chiruka change clothes and get their makeup done. Having Giuli and Nuemaru with her was more than enough protection.

“I will show you to the VLS,” Amaha said before heading off toward the *Hikata*’s flight deck.

The *Hikata* was about two hundred meters long. It was equipped with a 20mm autocannon at the bow and the stern for close-quarters defense. The end of the flight deck, wide enough to allow the simultaneous takeoff and landing of four helicopters, was equipped with sixteen Vertical Launching System missile cells. Galerie Berith’s shipment was ammo for this weaponry.

“Tungsten armor-piercing shells for 20mm autocannons. Just as we ordered. Thank you,” Amaha said with satisfaction after checking the ammo brought in by the ammunition elevator.

“You knew we would be able to get them for you, right?” Rosé replied without relaxing her expression.

The Council for Japanese Independence had ordered special shells, more powerful than usual armor-piercing ammo. These were meant to shoot down anti-ship missiles. Obvious overkill for piracy against simple cargo ships.

One could easily infer they were preparing for battle against an army, but Rosé did not point it out, and Amaha didn’t explain herself.

“What kind of people are on this ship?” Yahiro asked while looking at the crew beginning to load the missiles.

She said the *Hikata* used to be a JMSDF ship, but the people onboard didn’t look the part. Actually, some of them did, but that was an obvious minority. Most people were women and elders. Even half of the crew loading the missiles looked like regular civilians.

“Four years ago, when the J-nocide began, the *Hikata* was docked in Yokohama for repairs. So it got spared from Superbia’s pandemonium by mere

chance. It was miraculously unharmed.” Amaha crouched down and stroked the deck, eyes becoming heavy-lidded in nostalgia. “Cabinet ministers and high-ranking bureaucrats took notice of this and decided to escape on it. They already had intel on foreign armies approaching Japan, too.”

Amaha lifted her head, pursing her lips wryly. Perhaps ironically, for her father was among the ministers who tried to run away as soon as possible.

“Anyway, to make a long story short, they couldn’t board the ship.”

“...Moujuu?”

Amaha nodded. “Yes. Superbia’s Moujuu attacked in herds and all government officials perished in the blink of an eye. Those left behind were the few JMSDF members preparing the ship for departure, local refugees, and the officials’ families who’d gotten to it in advance. Including me. We were lucky to have Chiruka among those local refugees. Allowing them on the ship ended up saving our lives. I received her blessing and got the Lazarus’s power by mere chance.”

“I see... So that’s why there are so many women and elders on this ship.”

“Indeed. Truth be told, just the JMSDF members here wouldn’t be enough to operate the *Hikata*. That’s only possible thanks to some of the civilians stepping up.” Amaha shook her head in self-derision. “But hey, four years of work is plenty of experience. The crew is as good at their job as any real soldier.”

“And that’s how you attack innocent cargo ships?”

“Did Marius tell you?” Amaha sighed at Yahiro’s glare. “I don’t mean to make excuses for our piracy. We did what we had to do to survive.”

“Really?”

“Yes, and let me correct you on something. We’ve only attacked cargo ships meant for the armies occupying Japan. They aren’t exactly innocents. They’re invaders.”

“The J-nocide is over,” Yahiro replied, repulsed.

The armies who’d attacked Japan during the J-nocide might have been invaders, but now Japan no longer existed, and the Japanese Hunt had naturally

come to an end. The people of the world had woken up from the nightmare and no longer had any hostility toward the Japanese.

“That’s right. The J-nocide has ended. The lives we lost cannot be returned, but we can take back sovereignty for the Japanese nation. This is why we founded the Council for Japanese Independence,” Amaha said without hesitation.

Even with the J-nocide being over, the survivors hadn’t forgotten the fear, the despair. The nightmare wasn’t over until they reclaimed what had been taken from them. It wasn’t over for her.

“Am I wrong, Yahiro Narusawa?”

“Who knows?” Yahiro shook his head weakly.

“Yes. You don’t have to give me an answer right now.” Amaha looked at him with a gentle gaze. “But don’t forget. We don’t want war. We want our land. And I have my hopes set on Iroha Mamana in that regard, though don’t think we’re being coaxed by Marius.”

“Iroha...?” Yahiro was confused by the statement. He didn’t think even Amaha had expectations for Iroha.

“Unlike Chiruka and I, her hands are not dirtied with blood. The international community can’t criticize her for wishing for the reestablishment of Japan. She’s perfect for being the new symbol of our nation,” she said with an icy tone, devoid of any emotion.

Yahiro was taken aback by her utilitarian, politician-like ideas.

“You’re just trying to use her?”

“She came here well aware of the fact, didn’t she?”

“No way. She doesn’t think about anything complicated.”

“How rude. Isn’t she your girlfriend?” Amaha said, sincerely shocked.

Yahiro was more surprised than confused by her response. He wanted to ask how exactly she’d come to that conclusion.

“I don’t think I ever agreed to something that bothersome.” Yahiro glossed

over it, thinking it'd be even more bothersome trying to convince her otherwise.

Amaha raised a brow in interest. "Was I wrong? Oh, good news for me, then."

"Good how?"

"Would you be offended if I said I was happy to meet a fellow loner?"

"You? A loner? No way." Yahiro discarded the self-derisive assertion with a baffled expression.

Amaha blinked a couple times in surprise. "What makes you say that?"

"Well, for starters, you're pretty, and you're also easy to approach, and you're brave... You seem to be well-renowned."

"Y-you're slicker than I thought." She was clearly flustered.

That didn't look like acting—she really was being bashful. Thinking about it more carefully, that was no surprise. It didn't seem like anyone on this ship approached the Lazarus like a normal woman. It wasn't unreasonable to think this woman, appointed chairperson of the Council from the age of twenty, was more naive than expected.

"...I understand. So you like women well-endowed," Rosé interjected for the first time, with a hurt expression.

"I said renowned, not endowed!" Yahiro rebuked, irritated.

His conversation with Amaha had been in Japanese, but Rosé was fluent. She wouldn't misunderstand it that badly; it was obvious she'd said it on purpose.

"May I ask a question, too?" Rosé said, ignoring Yahiro's rebuttal.

Amaha nodded. "What is it?"

"Even if they recognize Japan's independence, just the people on this ship can't possibly sustain a whole country. I doubt there's even enough people to ensure the survival of the ethnic group. So why fixate on independence?"

"Isn't it natural for a human to want to take back what was taken from them?" Amaha's expression stiffened in response.

The comment touched on a delicate subject for the Council, and still Amaha

put on a strong smile and shook her head.

“Don’t you worry. I believe you’re correct, Miss Rosetta, but we already have things in mind to address the issues. If Marius’s plan goes well, some Japanese people overseas might return to the country,” she said brimming with confidence before glancing back at Yahiro; there was a passionate fire burning in her eyes. “And I also have high hopes for you, Yahiro Narusawa. In fact, I believe it won’t be Iroha Mamana, but you who becomes the Council’s savior.”

“Sorry, but I have no plans of backing you up. I’ve got other stuff to do.” Yahiro showed no hesitation this time.

Just as Amaha had her own goals to take back what was hers, Yahiro had his own—revenge. He didn’t have the mental space or time to carry any other burden.

Amaha didn’t respond.

“Let’s go back, then. The girls must be ready by now,” Amaha said merrily upon seeing that the crew had finished loading the missile canisters.

3

“Hiya! Chiruka here! Today I want to show you this new limited-edition makeup box from Gibeah. Did you know they also call these coffrets? As in, small treasure chests! And look at these three-color varieties of lipstick and blush! Now isn’t that a cute treasure!”

Chiruka Misaki spoke to the camera while illuminated by the lights in the ship studio. Her face still looked adorably fairylike, but even more charming thanks to the makeup. On top of that was her incredible range of facial expressions. The roller coaster of emotions made even Yahiro captivated by the makeup talk he wouldn’t otherwise be interested in.

“Didn’t you say she was shy? Is that really the same girl we met a bit ago?”

“Chiruka’s a pro when the camera’s on, and she’s always been very chatty when it comes to topics she likes. Isn’t she adorable?” Amaha answered.

I guess. Yahiro sighed in admiration. “No wonder she’s popular as a

streamer.”

“Mmm... Should I take that as you dissing me for not being like that?” Iroha appeared from the other side of the partition screen with a pout.

She was totally right, but Yahiro couldn’t admit it. Yet just as he was about to say something to deny it, he went speechless upon seeing her.

She was wearing her usual Iroha Waon outfit. Her hair was silver, her eyes emerald, and she was wearing a headband with animal ears.

And yet she looked entirely different from usual. Marius’s staff had given her a complete makeover. Her once fake-looking wig now fit more naturally, and the animal ears really looked like they were coming out of her head.

More than anything, though, her own innate pureness was maxed out. She felt beautiful in an almost mythical way, making her hard to approach.

“Iroha... Is that you?”

“I’m Waon right now. Chiruka did my makeup. How do I look? Cute?”

“Y-yeah... How do these work?”

Yahiro tried glossing over his captivation and pretended to be more interested in her animal ears. Iroha grabbed his hand halfway, annoyed that he’d mess it up.

“Hey, stop! No touching!”

“You two sure are close,” Amaha said, astounded as she stared at both of them holding hands.

Iroha showed no shame, and affirmed the accusation.

“Yes, he’s my biggest fan.”

“...Her biggest indeed. She had to have at least *one* fan, y’know?” Yahiro smoothed over his embarrassment.

“Y-you’re not the only one! Probably!” Iroha rebuked angrily.

Amaha observed their bantering with strangely serious eyes.

“But you’re not in love?”

“In love? Huh? Wait, Yahiro? So you’re the kind to fall in real love with your idols?” Iroha spoke with a rising intonation as she opened her eyes so wide they could fall out at any moment.

Apparently, having such serious feelings for your favorite pop star or streamer wasn’t that unheard of among fans, but Yahiro, of course, wasn’t like that.

“Don’t worry, I already said that’s not true.” Yahiro stated the facts.

Iroha looked obviously irritated by his curt attitude. She pouted and puffed out her cheeks as Amaha watched with interest.

“Amaha...” Chiruka, having ended filming her video and hesitant to join the conversation, called the young woman’s name anxiously. Her persona had changed entirely from that when filming.

Amaha grabbed her hand and invited her to her side.

Their height difference was nearly eight inches. Together, the beautiful duo looked like a princess and her prince at a ball.

“Hey, Chiruka. Are you done filming for the day?”

“...Yes.”

“Then let’s eat. I want you to be present, too. It’s not much but we’ve prepared a welcome meal.” Amaha turned to ask Yahiro and the rest.

“Whoa! Thank you. I was getting hungry, actually,” Iroha said in honest delight.

They hadn’t had anything to eat since they left the Galerie base at midnight, so it was only natural her stomach would be empty.

“Is that okay, though? I wouldn’t think you’d have the food to spare,” Yahiro said hesitantly.

Yahiro and his small group could simply go get preserved foods from the ruins to fill their bellies, but feeding nearly seven hundred people wasn’t as easy. Especially considering they were out in the middle of the sea. He couldn’t believe they’d have enough to hand out to guests.

Amaha, however, smiled proudly.

“Yes, no problem. Gibeah is taking care of the food. None of it is stolen, so don’t worry. Please show them the way,” she said to her young attendant.

“As you say. Everyone, please follow me.” The woman walked ahead.

But the moment she took her first step, there was a thunderous sound and the *Hikata* swayed.

The attendant was thrown and was about to smash into the wall, but Yahiro grabbed her in a heartbeat. Iroha had good enough reflexes to soften her fall, while Giuli and Rosé didn’t even lose balance. Chiruka did, though, but Amaha supported her.

The ship didn’t stop shaking. What could possibly be rocking such a large ship like this?

“What happened, Captain?” Amaha called the bridge from the ship’s mobile comms device. The captain immediately responded among all the yelling at the bridge:

“Torpedoes. We got hit by two torpedoes.”

“What’s the damage?”

“No damage to the ship. They exploded after crashing into Vanagloria’s thorns.”

“I see. Chiruka’s powers saved us again,” she muttered calmly.

Her expression didn’t change despite the emergency situation. She was confident this power could protect the *Hikata*, though it was completely new to Yahiro and his group.

“And we’ve caught the enemy vessel?”

“We haven’t confirmed their soundprint, but we think it’s an American attack submarine.”

“Got it. Chiruka and I will go up to the deck immediately. Keep tracking the enemy.”

Amaha cut the transmission, then turned around to Yahiro with a dramatic flourish.

“You heard it. Seems like we have unwanted company. I’ll go deal with them. Sorry, but you’ll have to wait a bit longer for lunch.”

“Deal with...the US Navy?”

“Don’t worry, this always happens. Right, Chiruka?” she asked.

Chiruka’s expression was stiff, but she nodded immediately.

“Would you mind if we followed you?” Rosé asked.

Yahiro was sure Amaha would say no, but she nodded with a generous smile.

“Come with us. After all, the safest place on this ship is by Chiruka’s side. Take a good look at the power of the Council for Japanese Independence.”

Another thunderous roar rocked the ship as soon as she finished her sentence. The torpedoes kept on coming.

“Shooting torpedoes with no warning? The US Navy sure is rough. Did you do anything to rile them up?” Giuli asked nonchalantly, though she seemed to be implying something.

Amaha shook her head faintly.

“It is sudden, but this always happens. They can’t send scouts or use satellites, so they’re desperate. They have no choice but to scrutinize every corner of the Pacific Ocean with their submarines if they want to find the *Hikata*.”

“I see, so Vanagloria’s power doesn’t extend underwater,” Rosé said.

“It’s not nullified entirely, but it is true its effects aren’t as good as on the surface.”

“Is that because fog doesn’t form underwater?”

“As we understand it, Chiruka’s Untrodden Abyss mainly obstructs vision. It also messes with radar waves to an extent, but it doesn’t seem to have much effect on sound waves.”

Rosé nodded in understanding.

Submarines used sound echo to determine the location of enemy vessels, so they were the least affected by the mountain dragon’s power. And so it was possible for the *Hikata* to be attacked like just now.

“We can assume they’ve already discovered our location, going by the torpedoes.”

“Yes. Losing them might be difficult.” Amaha agreed with Rosé’s assertion.

Chiruka’s face scrunched in fear. “I’m sorry, Amaha... Sorry my power wasn’t enough...”

“There’s nothing you need to apologize for. It’s all their fault for attacking us out of the blue,” she said before opening the door at the top of the stairs.

A strong, salty wind blew in from the deck, blowing her long hair back. She grabbed Chiruka’s hand and raised the corner of her mouth unconsciously.

“Besides, what’s one or two submarines? Nothing.”

“...Yeah.” Chiruka lifted her head with determination.

Then, Yahiro thought he saw her entire body enveloped in faint light. As though an invisible current of great strength, hot as lava, flowed from her to Amaha.

“Captain! Let’s smoke out the enemy. Tell all onboard to hang on to something,” Amaha said to the radio.

“*R-roger!*” the captain replied shrilly.

A moment later, the *Hikata* rocked tremendously again. The giant ship was defenseless against the scale of this shock, far greater than the torpedoes. Yahiro and the girls all fell to their hands and knees and held onto the deck for dear life.

“What?! What’s going on?!” Yahiro yelled as he looked up at Amaha.

She kept her stare glued to the sea as she spoke extremely calmly:

“Do you know what the tallest mountain in the world is, Yahiro Narusawa?”

“...Everest? Y’know, in the Himalayas,” he answered, baffled. He had gone through a fair bit of compulsory education; of course he knew the answer.

“If you’re counting above sea level, then yes, that’s right,” Amaha said overdramatically. “But there are volcanoes rising directly from the bottom of the sea that are over nine thousand meters tall in total. For example, Mauna

Kea in Hawaii. Though most of it is underwater, so its elevation above sea level is under four thousand.”

“That’s impressive... But why the fun fact?” Yahiro asked, irritated.

Amaha smiled sarcastically. “Oh, sorry for being so roundabout. What I mean is that the mountain dragon’s power isn’t limited to the surface. As you’ll see.”

She pointed forward at the sea. Now Yahiro finally understood what was going on.

The ground at the bottom of the sea was writhing. The bedrock itself crept like a giant worm, changing form by the second. The bottom of the sea rose to the surface, then sank back down in the next moment, taking with it the surrounding seawater. It was as though an invisible giant dragon was storming about underground.

“We call this one of Chiruka’s powers Prominence Capsize,” she said, unflappable.

The Regalia allowed her to freely raise the ground within a radius of a couple miles. That was not only powerful—it was godly.

Chiruka’s power allowed her to create a myriad of thorns from the bottom of the sea, with which she protected the *Hikata* from the torpedoes. It was this same power, now used for offense instead, that Yahiro was witnessing.

“The *Hikata*, floating on the surface, only rocks this much as a consequence, but what about the submarine trapped underwater? Will it be able to resist the sudden changes in depth and pressure?” Amaha’s lips had stretched into a wide smile. An expression of joyous cruelty as she trampled on the weak with her absolute power.

The submarine, hundreds of meters underwater, wasn’t visible from the surface, but it was easy to imagine what they were going through. Even if the outer hull endured the sudden change in pressure, it couldn’t possibly withstand the internal waves—the water blows—forming underwater.

Their only choice for avoiding that was escaping to where pressure was the lowest: the surface. An attack submarine doing such a thing was tantamount to a dog showing its belly in submission.

However...

“I won’t let you rise!”

Amaha drew her sword and pointed it at the submarine urgently rising—defenseless—to flee from the giant monster. Iroha’s face twisted in reaction.

“Wait, don’t...!” she screamed just as a silver sword rose from the bottom of the sea and pierced the upright submarine.

Vanagloria’s other skills—Saber Hills and Blade Groves. The giant metallic crystal blade opened a small, yet fatal, crack on the submarine’s outer hull.

Air bubbles spurted out of the submarine just as it was going to reach the surface. These were the vessel’s last cries. It sank right back down, pulled by the cruel monster’s claws into the violent whirlpools among the raging waves.

Yahiro observed in silence, aghast.

Finally, the mountain dragon’s power let up, and the sea regained its calm. The submarine did not rise again.

“You sank it...? They couldn’t do anything anymore...,” Yahiro muttered as he placed a hand on Iroha’s back. Her face was devoid of color. He was talking to himself, but the condemnation of Amaha’s actions was clear in his tone.

“The water around here is not even three hundred meters deep. Help might get here in time if they’re lucky,” she replied indifferently.

Yahiro wasn’t able to make out Chiruka’s expression, as she kept facing down until the end.

4

Yahiro, Iroha, and the twins were asked to stay the night on the *Hikata*. Not that they had much of a choice. They had no means of getting back to Yokohama.

The *Hikata* was distancing itself from the coastal waters of Japan at full speed, because the US Navy had found their location through the encounter with the submarine. Thanks to Vanagloria’s Untrodden Abyss, the US Navy couldn’t

predict the *Hikata's* path even with satellite tracking.

Unfortunately, this also meant allies had no means of finding them, either. They couldn't call for a Galerie Berith chopper to come pick them up, and they couldn't use Marius's. They would have to wait until the *Hikata* lost the US Navy before deciding a new meeting point to call the chopper to.

“...”

Yahiro was bored out of his mind after dinner, so he decided to go out on the *Hikata's* deck.

Amaha hadn't joined them, aware that she was making the mood awkward after sinking the submarine. Marius did show up, however, and dinnertime was fun enough thanks to his conversation skills. Even shy Chiruka had a smile on her face, so it was all good.

Yahiro, however, felt disappointed. He was hoping meeting the Council for Japanese Independence could get him a lead on Sui Narusawa's whereabouts.

Sui hated the world—especially Japan. This Council was unequivocally her enemy. And the easiest way to destroy them would be to kill Chiruka Misaki, something Sui wouldn't be afraid to consider.

However, Vanagloria's powers were far stronger than Yahiro had expected. Even with Ganzheit's support, Sui couldn't lay a finger on Chiruka so easily. In fact, Chiruka barely knew about her. And Yahiro felt coming to the *Hikata* was pointless the second he'd heard that.

“What in the world are Giuli and Rosé thinking?”

Yahiro wandered around the ship in search of the Berith twins. They'd vanished after dinner ended.

Obviously they had to be snooping into the Council's secrets, but he had no idea what was on their minds. Their contract had ended the moment they delivered the weapons and received the money. He couldn't imagine any secret they could be interested in would be lying around on this pirate ship.

“...Iroha?” He called her name upon seeing the girl crouching down at a corner of the deck.

She looked away from the sea and lifted her head; Nuemaru was sitting on her lap.

“Yahiro...”

“You finished recording?”

“...Yeah. I came here to meet Chiruka, and I think we ended up getting along. She also loved Nuemaru.” She smiled stiffly.

The sun had already set, but there was still some light in the sky. The sea breeze blew Iroha’s hair, and the glow dying on the horizon painted her cheeks red. Her profile was beautiful enough to leave Yahiro speechless, which is how he knew something was wrong. She was down for some reason.

“I wonder how many people were in the submarine,” she said, staring into the dark ocean.

“Rosé said an attack sub around these parts would have about a hundred twenty people,” he said with a deliberately blunt tone.

“I see.” Iroha hugged her knees and sighed.

“And all of them are at the bottom of the sea now.”

“Yeah.”

“...I know. I know they attacked first. I know the ship would’ve gone down if Chiruka didn’t sink them first. But still...”

“Yeah.” Yahiro nodded in agreement with the words she left unsaid. He knew what she meant; he felt the same.

“If the dragons really have the power to remake the world, then it doesn’t make sense for all of them to be used to destroy.”

“Yeah.”

Iroha clenched her fists and looked up at Yahiro.

“Hey... Do you think Chiruka really wanted that?”

“You mean Amaha sinking the submarine?”

“Yeah, but she didn’t do it on her own. It was Chiruka who gave her the

power, so in the end it was Chiruka who did this.” Iroha’s shoulders trembled in fear of her own words. “...Sui brought about the J-nocide because she hated the whole world and wished to destroy Japan. But I can’t think of Chiruka wishing for war. If the dragon’s powers cause destruction even then, then I...”

“Iroha...?” Yahiro frowned and crouched down beside her, then heaved a heavy sigh. “Are you worried about your own powers harming people?”

“Yeah... It wouldn’t be strange for that to happen if I’m really one of these dragon mediums. And maybe you’ll even end up becoming like Amaha one day under my influence...”

“No. That’s not happening.” Yahiro shook his head firmly.

Iroha looked at him with a puzzled expression. “How come you’re so sure?”

“Uh... Well...” Yahiro tried to remember why he was so certain she would be fine, and another woman crossed his mind, a woman with curly hair and an elusive smile. “Nina Himekawa said you’re incomplete as a dragon medium. That you’re missing something.”

“She did?” Iroha blinked in confusion before frowning and glaring back at him. “*Incomplete* can’t possibly be a compliment, can it?”

“I don’t think it is, and I have no idea how she came to that conclusion. Maybe that’s why your Regalia’s so shoddy compared to Sui’s or Chiruka’s.”

“Shoddy?!” Now she was being outright disparaged.

She couldn’t deny her powers were lacking in comparison to Chiruka’s colossal Regalia, however. Iroha could never protect nearly seven hundred people from a military attack, nor could Yahiro by just borrowing her powers.

“But if this means no harm is done, then that fits you better, right? Though, well, who knows how much of what Nina says we can trust.”

“Awww... But what if something happens and I turn into a dangerous dragon? An even worse one than Sui.” The anxiety didn’t leave her face.

Yahiro softly placed his hand on her head, then roughly ruffled her hair like he’d do with a young child.

“I’ll kill you, then. I promised Giuli and Rosé, after all.”

“I see. Yeah, I wouldn’t mind you doing it to me.”

“Are you serious?!”

“I mean, I can trust you’ll take care of the kids even after I’m gone,” she said with full confidence before resting her head on his shoulder. “...But I want you to do it gently. Make sure it doesn’t hurt.”

“I’ll try my best... But either way—” *I won’t let you turn into a dragon*, he was about to say, when the sudden appearance of someone else behind them cut him off.

They turned around and saw Chiruka there. Yahiro couldn’t hear her approaching since she came from downwind. Which also meant that she had to have heard their conversation. Perhaps that was why her cheeks were red despite the sunset being long gone.

“Chiruka?”

““How long have you been there?”” Iroha and Yahiro asked simultaneously. Chiruka straightened her posture as if she had been struck by lightning.

“Sorry... I, um, I didn’t mean to eavesdrop. I was just looking for Iroha and Nuemaru to tell them the bath is ready... I...”

“So you heard us?”

“Just a little bit. I heard her say she wouldn’t mind you doing it to her, and that you have to make sure it doesn’t hurt... So, um, I think I should leave you two alone...”

“Hold on! I think you’re missing the context!”

“You got it wrong! I wasn’t...!”

Yahiro and Iroha tried to stop Chiruka from backing away. She didn’t mishear any of the words, yet she reached a very different conclusion.

“S-sorry... I won’t tell anyone... H-have fun!” Chiruka turned around and ran away, fully embarrassed.

“Waiiit!” Iroha screamed, reaching out to the girl’s fleeing back.

Nuemaru fell from her lap and looked up at his noisy master with annoyance.

“This is a nice room. A bit small for three people, though.”

Giuli looked around the guest bedroom they were shown to before hopping onto the middle bunk bed.

Accompanying her were Rosé and Iroha. The latter had run after Chiruka and, after desperate persuasion, cleared up the misunderstanding. They had a pleasant bath right after, and then she was reunited with the Berith twins; it was then that they were shown to the guest room.

“Well, it is a guardian ship. Their guest room couldn’t be that luxurious,” Rosé said indifferently as she checked the bedsheets.

“They got a wide selection of liquor, though. Marius’s gifts, you think?” Giuli checked the contents of all the cupboards and lockers.

Giuli acting whimsically curious was nothing new, but Iroha was at a loss for words once she saw the girl’s little sister do the same. She thought of how to scold her for her lack of manners after thinking she was a decent girl with common sense, but then she realized—the twins were looking for bugs.

“Out in the hallway...there’s someone on the lookout. What about the ventilation duct?” Giuli asked with an unfazed expression after quickly destroying the bugs.

“Wide enough, but we’d have to leave our equipment behind.”

“I’ll go, then. You stay here and guard Iroha, Rosy.”

“Got it, Giuli.”

“W-wait, hold on, go where? Shouldn’t we ask Amaha for permission?” Iroha hurriedly tried to stop their plans from moving along any further.

“Don’t worry, I’m just doing some sightseeing.”

“Giuli...?!”

Iroha stood astonished as Giuli took off her jacket. Left only with light innerwear on her, she clung to the ventilation duct near the ceiling and crawled into it like a cat.

“You sure we should let her go?” Iroha asked Rosé, fully aware protest was useless.

Rosé’s expression didn’t change as she glanced back at her. “Did you feel anything was off after looking around the ship, Iroha?”

“...Off? I mean, it’s my first time on a guardian ship. I found it very commendable to see the whole crew work in earnest,” she answered sincerely, though confused.

Rosé nodded. “Yes, I think the crew is strangely on edge. As though the ship were in the middle of military operations.”

“Military...operations?”

“There’s one other strange factor. Why did the submarine attack the *Hikata* earlier at noon?”

“...Because of the Council’s piracy?” Iroha asked back, puzzled.

The Council for Japanese Independence called itself a government in exile, but they were no more than pirates attacking cargo ships indiscriminately. It was nothing strange for the US Navy to try to get rid of them.

Rosé, however, shook her head.

“If they really wanted to put an end to their piracy, they would’ve acted earlier. The *Hikata* has been doing this for four years.”

“But they couldn’t find them due to Chiruka’s powers...”

“Vanagloria’s power is immense, but it shouldn’t be that difficult for the Navy to find the *Hikata*’s location if they put their all into it. They would simply have to scrutinize the areas the satellites don’t show.”

“Ah...” Iroha was taken aback.

The US Navy attack submarine had found the *Hikata* and fired on it, which meant they thought the Council for Japanese Independence, though protected by a dragon, could be defeated. They only didn’t do so sooner because it was too much trouble, but something had changed. Right after Iroha and the rest arrived on the ship.

“Something happened that pushed the US Navy to put their all into it?”

“...Do you remember the type of missiles the Council ordered from the Galerie?”

“Hmm... Nope, sorry... What type?” She stared at Rosé with a look on her face asking, *There’s more than one type of missile?*

“They’re cluster munition cruise missiles. Weapons with a large area of effect for ground attack.”

“For ground attack? You mean, for targeting buildings and the like? Why...?” Her voice trembled in fear.

The Council for Japanese Independence needed weapons to protect themselves. That, she could understand. But they didn’t need cruise missiles to protect the *Hikata*. Much less if they were used for attacking land.

The only reason they could need ground attack cruise missiles would be for instigating an attack. But against whom?

The submarine attack would make sense if the US Navy knew they were being targeted. It would be an attempt to sink the *Hikata* before they could attack, in that case.

Iroha froze upon realizing the possibility. Then, something vibrated in Rosé’s breast pocket—a radio the size of a smartphone. Iroha had seen one of those before; it was Galerie Berith’s special encrypted radio.

“You’ve made us wait long enough, Eduardo Valenzuela,” Rosé said coldly into the radio.

The old man’s hoarse voice came in after a short lag from the LEO satellite comms.

“As harsh as ever, huh, lady? You should be thanking me. I even accepted your ridiculous request of getting intel from the US Navy while in operation.”

“We paid you enough. So what’s the deal?”

“Just as you thought. The stationed forces received a letter of negotiations from the Council for Japanese Independence,” said Eduardo Valenzuela—Ed—nonchalantly.

The grimness in Rosé's eyes intensified minimally.

"Negotiations, hmm? What exactly are they looking for?"

"They're asking the US Navy to hand over the territory they have de facto control over, the east side of Kanagawa Prefecture—from the Miura Peninsula all the way to the Yokohama-Kawasaki area. Offering nothing in return."

"...?!" Iroha gasped.

Rosé breathed out a short sigh.

"Demanding territorial rights, eh? They sure are coming out swinging."

"And you should know how they get to do it."

"Amaha Kamikita revealed their dragon medium to the US Navy?"

"Superbia already proved a dragon medium's Regalia's strategic value after destroying the country's capital. It's no surprise the US Navy would become restless after the Council revealed they've got a medium of their own." Ed snickered lowly, as though welcoming the chaos. "There are many important ports in the territory under the US Navy's control. The Council would definitely want these to reestablish Japan. And with their dragon's powers, perhaps taking back the 23 Wards isn't too farfetched."

"...Did the Council give a deadline?"

"They got until noon the day after tomorrow, Japan time. So about thirty-eight hours left."

"And they got us caught up in the middle of the strife while keeping us in the dark." Rosé uncharacteristically showed indignation.

Ordering the cruise missiles from Galerie Berith and inviting Iroha on to the *Hikata* by using streamer Chiruka as bait... It was too much to be a coincidence.

The Galerie's base, Yokohama, was an autonomous zone by and for PMCs, but in the eyes of the international community, it was under the rule of the US military. If the Council for Japanese Independence attacked Yokosuka, the site of the US Navy, Yokohama was also bound to be affected.

Amaha feared that, if that happened and Avaritia's medium—Iroha—was

caught in the fire, she would oppose them. So instead, she summoned her to the *Hikata*, hoping she would also take their side. Everything was going according to their plan.

“So what’re you going to do now?” Ed asked gleefully.

Rosé continued to grimace as she replied with an even flatter voice:

“Our objective remains the same. We’ll make use of the situation, if possible.”

“All right... I’ll pray we get a chance to meet again.”

“Hope you don’t get caught in the cross fire, Eduardo Valenzuela,” she said without really meaning it and tried to hang up, but Ed noticed and stopped her.

He exaggerated his tone as if he had just remembered the fact. *“Right, I’ll give you a freebie. It seems there’s been activity in Kyoto in reaction to this mess. Apparently, the Myoujiin princess got in contact with Kashima.”*

“...The Kashima?”

“That’s all I’ve got. Take care of Yahiro,” he said in a whimsical tone before cutting the connection.

Rosé glared at the radio with narrowed eyes before heaving a heavy sigh. The expression was surprisingly human for her.

“Rosé... What did all that...?” Iroha asked with a low voice.

Rosé nodded to regain her cool.

“Yes, we’ve solved most of the mysteries now. Amaha Kamikita plans on fighting the US Navy on the Miura Peninsula.”

“No way...!”

“Nina Himekawa must’ve visited Yokohama because she foresaw this. It makes sense why she remained on land now.”

“Ah...”

Nina Himekawa had appeared at the same time the Council contacted them; this couldn’t be a coincidence, either.

It wouldn’t be strange for curious Nina to stay at Yokohama simply because

she wanted a front-row seat for the coming chaos. In fact, her actions didn't make sense if that wasn't her aim.

"What're the chances the US Navy accepts the Council's demands?" Iroha asked with a gleam of hope.

The Miura Peninsula's wasn't the only base the US military had in Japan. Iroha didn't know them all, but she remembered there being other big ones in Okinawa, northwest Kyushu, Kyoto, and Tohoku. She imagined Amaha might be banking on them being generous and handing over just the one from many they had.

The blue-haired girl's answer, however, was merciless.

"Zero. Otherwise, they wouldn't have launched the first attack."

"Oh no... Then how can we stop the fight, Rosé?" She looked at her with sincerity in her face.

The situation was not like the J-nocide, where people were being killed all around the world. Iroha was at the epicenter of the strife now. The ringleader was within her reach. And the war hadn't yet begun. It could still be stopped. It *had* to be stopped. Her siblings, her precious family, were still in Yokohama.

"How can we stop it, hmm? That's..."

Rosé cut herself off halfway through and pushed Iroha behind cover. She drew her gun with a fluid motion. Someone knocked at the door.

"Who is it?" she asked, her back to the wall.

The voice that came back was barely audible.

"It's me... Chiruka... I wanted to speak with Iroha..."

"Chiruka...?" Iroha raised her head in surprise.

Rosé put the gun down and opened the door.

The short girl was standing uneasily in the dark hallway. No one else seemed to be around.

"Why're you here so late at night? Are you alone?"

"Iroha... Um, what about Yahiro? He isn't with you?"

Chiruka showed relief upon seeing Iroha answer her kindly, but then she nervously looked around the room.

“Yahiro should be sleeping at the male officers’ quarters...,” Iroha replied, puzzled. She found it strange that the other dragon medium would be interested in Yahiro.

Chiruka’s face paled in despair upon hearing the Lazarus wasn’t nearby.

“No...”

“Chiruka?”

“Iroha, please... I need your help.” She weakly clung to her with teary eyes and pleaded. “I want you... I want you to stop Amaha...!”

Iroha nodded in amazement.

6

Yahiro had been shown to a spare wardroom in the *Hikata’s* living quarters. Put positively, it was a fully functional room; put negatively, it was drab—it had only a bed, a locker, and a small desk.

It was no five-star hotel, but he felt no discomfort getting to use a double room all by himself. And it was plenty cozy compared to the ruins in the 23 Wards he had stayed in for so long.

The downside was that, as expected from a room on a guardian ship, it had no windows. And no TV or anything of the sort. So it was boring.

Yahiro lay down on the bed while thinking he should’ve taken Nuemaru with him, at least. But his boredom didn’t last long before someone knocked on his door.

“It’s me. I want to talk. Do you mind?”

“Amaha?” Yahiro sat up in confusion at hearing her voice from outside.

It was already past eleven. Too late for a woman to come to a man’s room on a whim. He opened the door without much wariness, assuming it had to be something important.

“Sorry for showing up out of the blue. Good thing you were still awake.”

Amaha entered the room. She was wearing plain clothes: a loose tank top and denim. The simplicity of her outfit further emphasized her body, and she had her hair down—she looked more feminine than usual.

“I’m more sensitive than you think. I can’t sleep without my own pillow.” Yahiro put on a calm front while feeling antsy at the whiff of her perfume.

Amaha smiled sympathetically.

“And a Lazarus doesn’t really need sleep. I know how you feel. I also struggle on long, sleepless nights. Though I am grateful this allows me to keep up with my work as chairperson. Want a drink?”

She threw him an aluminum bottle before he could answer. He caught it on reflex, but frowned upon reading the label. It was a foreign beer that used to be popular in Japan.

“I’m still underage.”

“No problem, that’s water. It’s just a bit foamy.”

“No, I can read the part where it states the alcohol content.”

“I’ve now decided Council law states that the Lazaruses can drink without age restriction.”

“Tyrant!”

“How uptight. I heard you lived in the quarantine zone for four years, but hey, you’re not bad.”

Amaha smiled contentedly before opening her own bottle and gulping its contents down. Yahiro wondered if she was testing him while watching her wipe the foam from her lips. He had no idea what the point of that would be, though.

“So what brings you here this late at night?”

“I wanted to ask you more about what we talked about this afternoon.”

“...More?”

“Yes.”

She sat down on the bed, beside him. He felt she was too close, but there was nowhere else to sit, so there was no blaming her.

Amaha took another sip of beer before asking him, cheeks red:

“I want you to reaffirm this for me. Iroha Mamana’s not your girlfriend, correct?”

“Why’re you so particular about this?” He furrowed his brow.

Did she really come here for romance talk?

Amaha shook her head with a serious expression. “I simply want to avoid infuriating a dragon medium.”

“Why would you?”

“I’d have to be careful if you’re her boyfriend.” Amaha swayed the bottle as she stared at him with watery eyes. “I’ll cut to the chase. Yahiro, I want you to make love to me.”

“...Huh?”

“I want to have your babies.”

“WHAT?!” Yahiro had a coughing fit.

It had to be a joke, but her face was completely serious.

“How do you reach that conclusion?” Yahiro asked after a deep breath.

Amaha placed a finger on her lips as though pondering something.

“Why? Well, do you remember what Rosetta Berith said? The issue about our population.”

“...That the people on this ship aren’t enough to sustain a country?”

“Exactly. The J-nocide left us with too few Japanese people. The smallest thing could wipe out the entire Japanese community. For example, if the *Hikata* sank, that would be it.”

Yahiro nodded. Most Japanese survivors Yahiro knew were aboard the ship. Something as small as that could exterminate their entire people.

“So we need to increase the Japanese population as soon as possible.

Fortunately, there are about two hundred women on the *Hikata*. This is just barely above the minimum viable population.”

“You say that as though we’re an endangered species.”

“Unfortunately, we weren’t included in the Washington Convention.” Amaha replied to Yahiro’s sarcasm with some of her own. “But anyway, if they can link us to the next generation, the Council for Japanese Independence—the Japanese will avoid extinction. But for that to happen, we might need a bit of pushy reproduction.”

“...You want people who’re not even in love to breed like livestock?”

“I’m not going to allow rape. We have artificial insemination,” she explained matter-of-factly. “But I understand the psychological barrier remains. So, as chairperson, I want to lead the way in the growth of our population.”

“...Bwoah?!” Yahiro screeched as she speedily removed her pants.

The bright sight of Amaha’s thighs in the dimly lit quarters was dazzling. Her build was slim and sturdy, but her legs were smooth with no sign of boniness.

“Whoa—! What’re you doing?!”

“Why are you mad? Perhaps I’m not as charming as Chiruka or Iroha Mamana, but I take care of myself. Or were you lying when you called me pretty back then?”

“That’s not the problem here!” Yahiro’s voice cracked. “Putting your money where your mouth is is admirable and all, but why’s it have to be me?!”

“No need to put it like I’m not some sort of martyr. I too want to be one with the person I love.” Amaha blinked, taken aback by his scolding stare.

“Then all the more, I can’t be the one, right?”

“Wrong. You are the only one worthy of me, Yahiro Narusawa.”

“Because I’m a Lazarus or what?” His expression sobered up.

Amaha nodded. “Yes. No point in making excuses, so I’ll be frank. I want your Lazarus baby. There is a very high chance a child born between two Lazaruses will inherit their nature.”

“That’s why you fought me when we met?”

“Yes, so I could gauge your abilities. To check whether you were worthy of fathering my babies.”

“You’re out of your mind!”

“I am only being rational. Wouldn’t any mother want their child to live as long as possible?”

Amaha grabbed the hem of her tank top and took it off without any shame. Her underwear was quite simple, no embellishment. Which also served to further accentuate her figure.

“If you really don’t want to make love to me, then fine. But at least allow me your genes for artificial insemination, as compensation for humiliating me like this.”

“Hey, you’re the one who took her clothes off unsolicited!”

Yahiro grimaced at the recklessness, while Amaha smiled mischievously.

“True, but I wonder if the people on this ship, and Iroha Mamana, will believe you.”

“You’re blackmailing me?!”

Yahiro clenched his jaw as Amaha drew closer. Trying to escape was useless, and soon he was pushed down on the bed. He couldn’t put a finger on the half-naked woman, making shoving her aside impossible.

“I’m not asking you to do anything unreasonable. I won’t tell anyone about what happens tonight. Not even Iroha Mamana. Unleash your desires without reservation,” she whispered right into his ear.

Their lips were so close they’d touch if he moved at all. She paused there for ten seconds before slowly getting up, and abruptly let him go.

“I understand. I was too hasty. I will change my approach.”



“What...?” He stared at her in suspicion.

She said nothing more and put her clothes back on. She allowed her hair to stay disheveled, perhaps to make it seem like something had happened.

She then clapped loudly, confirming Yahiro’s fear. The door opened at the signal and people entered the room.

Four women around Amaha’s age. All different heights and apparent personalities, but they were all good-looking. They wore straight skirts and blouses, giving them an air of competent office workers.

Despite them all being women, having so many people gathered in such a small room was intimidating. Especially when Yahiro was pushed all the way to the corner of the bed, without escape.

“You called for us, ma’am?” the woman at the front asked with a slightly stiff expression.

Amaha nodded coldly. “I will be away for about two hours. Entertain him in the meantime.”

“Understood.”

The women bowed courteously, and Amaha left the room. Everyone remaining there had the same kind of smile on their face.

“Hey, I met you this afternoon...” Yahiro glanced at one of them.

She was the woman he’d saved from the shock of the torpedo hitting the Hikata.

“I’m glad you remember me.” She beamed.

His comment was nothing special, but it seemed to have improved her impression of him a fair bit. She gave him a friendly glance and cleared her throat.

“First, I must apologize for the chairperson’s ill manners, Mr. Narusawa.”

“Ah... No, you don’t need to apologize.” *So you can leave now*, he tried to say, but he was too fatigued from the whole ordeal to speak any further before she replied again.

“May we ask you a favor?”

“...Me? What is it?”

“Could you please allow us to service you for the night?”

“Huh? Service?” He didn’t get the meaning right away, but then he caught the nuance from their expressions. It was nothing good.

“You could choose any of us to your liking, or you could take all of us, as you please. It will only be for tonight, so please, allow us...”

“Hold on! For crying out loud! That’s what she meant by changing her approach?!” He interrupted her. “So you’re asking me to sleep with you instead of her?!”

“...Do you not fancy any of us?” A woman at the back frowned.

“It’s not about fancying or whatever the hell; why’re you doing this all of a sudden?” he asked with a desperate look on his face.

He could kind of, sort of understand why Amaha wanted his babies—because they were both Lazaruses. But these women were not. They had no reason to seduce him.

They all looked at each other in silence.

Then began taking their clothes off.

They unbuttoned their blouses, revealing provocative underwear. The bashfulness in their expressions made them leagues more alluring than Amaha.

“Why’re you undressing?!”

“Please, Mr. Narusawa. Say nothing and have your way with us, otherwise...”

They pleaded with urging eyes.

It was then that he realized their position. The Council for Japanese Independence was small but still a country. One in the middle of the ocean, with no escape. And Amaha was its ruler. They had no choice but to follow her word, no matter how unreasonable.

“Are you being forced into seducing me?”

“W-we...” The woman at the front looked away.

“Who cares?!”

“Just do it, please!”

““Let us take care of it, we’ll be done in a flash!”” the other three exclaimed in her stead.

The half-naked women swarmed him on the bed. He was once again helpless. They began taking his clothes off.

“Hey, stop it! Get away, all of you!”

“Oh my... Don’t be shy.”

“Hee-hee, how cute!”

His reaction only fanned their sadism, and they took it up a notch. They weren’t stopping until their task was fulfilled.

Should I just knock them out? Yahiro began considering violence.

The voice of a new guest stopped that from happening.

“Stop it right there.”

They all looked up in reaction to the sudden, cheery voice, but before they could entirely turn around, they fell unconscious. A nigh-invisibly thin steel wire had wrapped around their necks and stopped the flow of blood to their brains, knocking them out.

“Sorry to ruin your fun, but Rosy can get really jealous.”

“Giuli...!”

The girl with the orange highlights looked down at the unconscious women and smiled apologetically. Yahiro stared dumbfounded at her; the support was entirely out of left field, but it felt like heavenly salvation, and she was his goddess.

“Saved your hide, eh? Or did I just get in the way?”

“No, you really saved me.” Yahiro sat up with a weak sigh.

The unconscious women were heavier than expected; it took him a fair bit of

struggle to push them away and get off the bed.

“I mean, I could’ve just let you finish the deed. You’d lose nothing by sleeping with them.”

“Of course I would. My dignity. They just want me as some sort of breeding machine.”

Yahiro fixed his clothing and finally felt at ease again. He gave the women a suspicious glance.

“Why’re they so desperate anyway? Wanting to increase the Japanese population is fine and all, but to take it to this extreme...?”

“Wanna know? C’mere, it’ll be faster if you just see it with your own eyes.” Giuli put on a mischievous smile, but her eyes were somber.

Yahiro realized why she had appeared at such a convenient time, then. She was snooping around the *Hikata*.

“Let’s go shine a light on the Council’s dark secrets,” she said before tossing him something.

Yahiro caught it and narrowed his eyes at its weight. It was a katana in a fiber-reinforced plastic sheath. The Kuyo Masakane. Yahiro had left it in his locker.

Then he noticed she was wearing metal gauntlets, their silver shine foreshadowing the dangers of the secrets that awaited them.

Act 4 War Begins

1

There was a garden at the end of the stepstone path—a beautiful water garden. A waterfall flowed from the stone wall to a streamlet throughout the garden full of seasonal blossoms. It was a tasteful garden, with shocking depth for its small area.

A woman stood in a corner of the garden, staring into the water. A young maiden aged seventeen or eighteen wearing a dark-blue kimono. She was good-looking, but the shortness of her hair gave her an even more youthful appearance. Still, her slender figure and graceful posture was enough to prove she was of good lineage.

The girl turned around in slight surprise at the sound of footsteps. No one but her ever entered the garden.

“It’s a beautiful sight, Kaname.”

The unexpected visitor was a woman wearing luxurious Japanese clothing reminiscent of the Heian period. A crimson jewel decorated her bosom, and she held a narrow, long bundle of purple fabric.

She looked to be over twenty years old. She had a flawlessly handsome visage, but her expression was soft and mischievous like a kitten’s.

“Karura-sama?” the girl in the kimono, Kaname, whispered in shock.

The long, black-haired visitor looked at her with delight.

“Are you taking care of all this by yourself? I see lacecap hydrangeas, stewartias, shrub altheas... And what’s this?”

“That is the nerium oleander.”

“Ah, the nerium... If I recall correctly, this one is...”

“Yes, though it is used for gardening, it is poisonous,” Kaname spoke formally.

Her eyes as she looked at Karura were that of a girl meeting her favorite celebrity, full of passion.

“Its poison remains even when burned. And it seeps into the ground where its leaves fall.”

“I see. What a frightening plant, despite having such beautiful flowers...” Karura smiled sadly in admiration of the sweet flower.

Kaname lost herself in contemplation of the woman’s profile, but after a second she remembered she ought to get something for her guest.

“I will pour some tea right away. Please wait for me at the gazebo north of here.”

“Thank you, Kaname, but it’ll be fine.”

“Did I...offend you in any way?” Her eyes wavered in fear.

Karura shook her head with a smile.

“By no means. I’m simply short on time. I’ll visit you again later for a more relaxed chat.”

“Did something happen outside?” Kaname’s expression stiffened.

She should have noticed earlier. There was no other reason why Karura would visit this place, this area meant to seal sinners away.

“The mountain dragon, Vanagloria, has made her move.”

“Vanagloria?” Kaname’s eyebrows twitched at the name; she couldn’t hide her loathing.

“Yes. The Lazarus bestowed with her blessing, Amaha Kamikita, calls herself the chairperson of a government in exile and is demanding the US Navy in the Miura Peninsula hand over the territory,” Karura continued plainly.

Kaname’s anger burst to the surface.

“Amaha Kamikita... That shameless, nefarious pirate intends to call herself ruler of Nippon?” Kaname’s voice trembled, and her cheeks turned red.

News of the Council for Japanese Independence's existence had reached even her ears despite her captivity. She could not believe the daughter of a mere politician would dare call herself leader of the nation without consideration of the Heavenly Imperial House.

"The Myoujiin clan pardons the behavior of the Council for Japanese Independence," Karura said with contrasting calm; her eyes grieved. "But if we allow the dragon to clash with the US Navy, harm will befall the land. That is what I fear."

Karura then glanced down to the bundle at her chest. She unraveled the many layers of purple cloth and, from inside, a rusty metallic glow revealed itself. A sword.

The metallic sheath was worn with age, and had lost most of its luxurious ornamentation. And yet the divine aura of the mystical blade remained imposing.

"Koto-Futsu-no-Mitama...!" Kaname exclaimed its name.

Her voice trembled both in fear and untamed excitement. She knew better than anyone else why Karura would bring the sword here.

"Kaname, I entrust it to you," Karura said solemnly.

"We're removing Natazuka's seal?" Kaname's eyes widened in shock.

Questioning her monarch's intention was unforgivable irreverence, but Karura took no offense and nodded generously.

"I am tied to this land, so in my stead, I want you to check whether the Council for Japanese Independence is worth trusting."

"As you command, Karura-sama." Kaname accepted the mystical sword and grinned fiercely. "As the descendant of the Kashima, pillar of the Heavenly Imperial House, I will burn to the ground anything that threatens our motherland. I vow it on the Kashima thunder and on this godly sword."

Blue sparks flew around the sword in Kaname's hands.

Karura smiled serenely as she looked on.

“Hello. Marius called me, is this the place?”

It was midnight at the *Hikata*. Giuli was walking around openly through the ship’s hallways, and inquired with a friendly smile of a guard armed with a handgun.

“Mr. Gibeah? I think he should be in the first plant. At the bow side of the hangar,” the guard answered without a hint of suspicion.

“Thanks.”

Giuli waved and Yahiro bowed. They passed right by the guard, and the orange-haired girl smiled up at the Lazarus.

“See? No one suspects you if you don’t act suspicious.”

“...They should train their guards better.” Yahiro frowned dramatically.

It was fortunate for their snooping around that security was so lax, but he was worried about them being like that when they had the US Navy on their tails.

“Well, what do you expect? They were never soldiers. And most people on the boat are your fellow Japanese, so they’d naturally let their guard down.” Giuli shrugged in defense of the guy.

She was totally right, but that didn’t ease Yahiro’s concerns. The US Navy wouldn’t go easy on them for being so lax.

I really think Amaha’s demand was too reckless...

“He said *plant*, right? Are they manufacturing stuff on the ship or something?” Yahiro shook his head and changed the subject.

Giuli walked in silence for a few more seconds. Strange behavior for the usually chatty girl. She finally raised her head once they were past that block.

“Do you know what the aim of alchemy is?”

“Alchemy? You mean, like, making gold out of cheaper metals like iron?” Yahiro replied in confusion.

His knowledge came from games and manga, but the basics should be fairly

accurate.

“Ooh, close.” Giuli shook her head. “That’s also true, but the ultimate goal of alchemists from ancient times to around the Middle Ages was obtaining immortality. Transforming an imperfect being and elevating it to completion. In that sense, transforming base metals into gold, at its core, is the same as converting the mortal into immortal.”

“Immortality...” Yahiro felt uneasy.

He was close to the concept, being a Lazarus. Giuli bringing the topic of alchemy up all of a sudden only gave him a bad feeling.

Giuli shot him a probing stare.

“And among their research was trying to give life, soul to inanimate objects. They created dolls named homunculi. You could say modern genetic manipulation and cloning technology comes from that.”

“Are you implying the plant here’s making homunculi?”

“Just so you know, the Beriths are an old family of alchemists. We’ve got a nose for these things.” Giuli puffed out her chest in pride as they went down the stairs to the hangar. “Even if they get their land and independence, the Council doesn’t have enough people to support a country. How’d you think Amaha’s gonna make up for it?”

“Uh...”

“I think we’ll find the answer here.”

Giuli didn’t wait for him to answer before approaching the door, which was locked with a sturdy electronic lock. But it opened right away with the key card she took from her chest. Yahiro stared at her in confusion.

“Where did you get that?”

“Hmm? I took it from that guard just now.”

“You pickpocketed the guy?!”

Giuli ignored Yahiro’s shock and placed a hand on the door.

The thick metal door opened slowly with a creak.

The hallway seemed to have been decompressed; air rushed inside.

A strong chemical smell assaulted their senses once they opened the other door inside.

The room was dark; the only lights were those of the various displays and indicators blinking like a sea of stars.

The low hum of the machines pumping liquids echoed throughout the plant. Fluids of all colors coursed through thin, transparent, IV-like tubes. They ultimately converged into the tank at the center of the plant. An oval tub reminiscent of a giant egg.

There was a girl curled up inside it, nude, like a fetus. She looked to be about twelve or thirteen, with black hair.

She noticed them approaching and slowly turned to look at them.

“Wha...?” Yahiro felt like throwing up as his eyes met hers.

Not because she was unsightly—quite the opposite. The girl inside the water tank had a graceful beauty about her, but her eyes lacked the light of intellect. The girl floating in the culture fluid had no sense of self. She only reacted to outside stimuli. A living creature without will.

Yahiro was perturbed because he felt déjà vu at the sight of her face. He knew someone else with her same features. He had just spoken to them.

“Huh? What’re you two doing in here?”

Yahiro raised his head at the voice coming from the other side of the tank.

Marius Gibeah was standing in the dark hallway, illuminated only by the emergency lights. Behind him were a few people wearing white coats, on whose chests was embroidered the logo of Gibeah Environment.

“Marius Gibeah... What is this plant? What are you doing in here?” Yahiro glared at him.

“From what I can see, you weren’t shown by Amaha, then.” Marius brushed aside the boy’s hostility.

His face showed no worry. He felt no guilt over the girl in the tub being discovered.

“I imagine this is a clone factory. Gibeah Environment has a medicine division, and operates one of the biggest lab-grown meat plants in the world. They can’t make this public for fear of bad PR, but they’re perfectly capable of building such facilities,” Giuli said as she leaned against a nearby control panel.

Yahiro understood everything once he heard the word *clone*. Giuli was telling the truth from the very beginning—they were making homunculi in here.

“Did you take Amaha’s cells as a base for her?” Yahiro asked, pointing at the girl in the water tank.

The girl was much younger, but her face was clearly Amaha Kamikita’s. Marius and his team took the Lazarus woman’s genes to create that girl.

“Well, there’s still many technological hurdles to overcome to produce a somatic clone of a human. The biggest and simplest problem of all being that the cost doesn’t correspond to the utility.” Marius darkly glossed over Yahiro’s answer.

Raising a cloned human cost as much as raising a normal one. An obvious fact, but often overlooked.

Human talent was based not only on genes, but the effects of the environment they were raised in. In order to copy a genius, one would have to raise them replicating the environment they’d grown up in.

“But Amaha, a Lazarus, can regenerate from even one slice of a cell. All her memories, her trained skills, everything is inherited... And she grows at a rate far greater than regular humans.”

“...!” Yahiro looked up again at the girl in the tub.

The clone looked twelve or thirteen. But that couldn’t be. It had only been four years since the J-nocide.

Gibeah Environment couldn’t have come in contact with the Council for Japanese Independence more than two years back. A clone couldn’t be this far in development even if they began acting as soon as they met. Her growth was

too fast. And the cause couldn't be anything but Amaha's influence.

"So she's also a Lazarus, like Amaha?"

"Correct. If we can figure out the secrets behind her immortality, then we could turn even regular humans into Lazaruses. The ultimate in antiaging, don't you think? As a preacher of beauty, I can't ignore this possibility for perpetual youth without the need for makeup."

Marius looked possessed.

Yahiro felt chills at the sight of the man's obsession.

GE had asked the Council for 70 percent of Japan's water resources in exchange for helping them out. That was most likely true. But this wasn't Marius Gibeah's personal goal. What he wanted was the secret behind Amaha Kamikita's regenerative powers.

Yahiro had felt that something was off from the very beginning. It was too bizarre for a beauty stream producer to support a government in exile. But now that the cat was out of the bag, it was nothing strange. He simply acted according to his own desires. Out of his fixation on youth and beauty.

"And that's why you made her? For your twisted experiments?" Yahiro's reproach echoed.

"You wouldn't understand, Lazarus boy. You don't understand how harsh aging is. How dreadful it is to see your once-beautiful body decay by the day."

Marius did not avoid Yahiro's hostile glare. He glared back, unrelenting.

"But her cells should lose the Lazarus's powers once they leave her body," Giuli interjected, her carefree tone slashing through the tension in the air.

She's right, Yahiro thought. Whenever parts of his own body were cut off in battle, they only turned to ash. Hundreds if not thousands of his clones would be swarming the 23 Wards by now if that wasn't the case.

He figured there had to be a sort of core that made a Lazarus what they were and controlled their regeneration. He'd never seen it, but he couldn't think of anything else. Perhaps it was what people called the soul.

"Yes. My abilities wouldn't have been enough to bring this plan to fruition."

It wasn't Marius who replied, but a new voice coming from behind the pair.

They turned around and found Amaha there.

She wasn't in that tank top anymore; she was wearing her chairperson suit, and holding her golden ornamental sword in her left hand.

"I guess you've seen it now. Yahiro, you should be more careful around a woman's secrets. Anyway, I didn't plan on hiding it; we would've told you sooner or later."

Amaha smiled wryly after glancing at the tank behind Yahiro. There was no anger in her eyes. In fact, she seemed relieved, as though freed from a burden.

"Mountains have been since ancient times holy land where the gods live in hiding—we called them the *Kannabi*. The *sanchuu ta-kai*—the otherworld in the mountains. The belief that in our nearby mountains lies the frontier between this world and the next. They're barriers."

"You mean Vanagloria's barrier is having an effect in the tub? And that's why your Lazarus cells don't turn to dust?" Giuli asked.

Amaha nodded solemnly.

"The clones are protected by Chiruka's blessing, just like me. The liquid in the tank includes her Ichor."

"Ichor?" Yahiro's eyes widened at the unknown term.

"It's something you know very well, Yahiro. Dragon blood. Their bodies don't crumble because of the blood in that tank."

"Aren't Vanagloria's powers a bit too convenient?" Giuli said with a sigh.

Yahiro agreed. It could conceal the *Hikata*, shape the land to stir the sea, and create metallic crystals from the ground at will. Now it also had an Ichor barrier. Chiruka's powers were too varied. Iroha could only control purging flames, but not even Nina's or Sui's Regalia were this handy.

"Many dragons from mythology bring about disaster to people, but some of them also give grace. Vanagloria must reflect the latter. Though I don't know if this is the mountain dragon's nature, or if it's being affected by Chiruka's personality," Amaha stated.

“Is that how it works?”

“No, I’m only guessing. I don’t know much about other dragon mediums, either.” Amaha shook her head bluntly at Giuli’s suspicious question.

She didn’t seem to be lying. She must’ve judged it was no use hiding anything now that they had found out the biggest taboo.

“Is this the plan for solving the population problem you were talking about?” Yahiro asked with contained anger.

The sight of the beast-like eyes of the girl trapped in the tub was burned into his mind.

He couldn’t understand why she would be so desperate to increase the Japanese population that she had to create such a poor creature. He felt even Marius’s purpose, using them only as guinea pigs for their experiments, was less objectionable.

“It is a desperate measure that won’t last, I know. And that subject you see there is a failed one.” Amaha pursed her lips in self-derision.

“Failed...?”

“Unfortunately, we couldn’t get her to inherit my memories. And since she grows so fast due to my Lazarus cells, we don’t get the time to raise her as a person. So she’s only a doll. A homunculus, like those of legend. She will die the moment she exits the tank.”

Amaha gave the girl an indifferent glance and sighed. Then, she faced Yahiro and reached out, as though she didn’t care about Giuli, Marius, or anyone else present.

“Which is why I want you to help me out, Yahiro.”

“Help you out how?”

“With your reproductive cells, we could mass-produce Lazaruses without relying on cloning technology. Just a second generation of them born from Lazarus parents.”

“...And are you planning on using that second generation as soldiers to wage war against the international armies?” he asked coldly.

Amaha's voice was firm. "We need to protect our country. I will never let anyone trample over our nation ever again."

"...Since when did people become tools for protecting a country?"

"What?"

"You're putting the cart before the horse, Amaha. Soldiers protect their country because their loved ones live there. Build a nation worth protecting before asking anyone to fight for it." He turned a blind eye to her stretched-out hand. "Don't create life for the purpose of fighting. The Lazaruses...we...are not weapons. If your country can't survive without using people as weapons, then it deserves to die off."

"You say our country should die off...? And you call yourself Japanese?!" Amaha yelled.

Her hand reached out for the ornament sword's hilt reflexively, subconsciously, but Yahiro reacted immediately by grabbing his own.

They were both already within reach. Neither could let the other be the first to desist.

Yahiro prepared himself to fight to the death, when...

"Stop! Both of you, stop!"

...a girl's clear yell echoed throughout the space, and a white flash illuminated the plant.

4

The flash cutting through the darkness ran up to Yahiro's and Amaha's noses while giving off blue sparks. The air around them shivered, electrified, and gave off the smell of ozone.

The source of the flash was a Moujuu entering the plant—a white electric beast the size of a dog. Nuemaru.

"...Iroha?" Yahiro muttered, aghast, his eyes set on the girl standing behind the Moujuu.

Amaha was frozen in place, too. Neither of them imagined she would show up here at this moment.

Yahiro and Amaha put their weapons down awkwardly, pressured by Iroha's shivering glare.

They never intended to kill each other for real. They only took fighting stances in the heat of the moment.

To top it all off, things got this bad between them because Yahiro turned down Amaha's request to make her a baby. It was hard for him to look Iroha in the face, and the same likely applied to Amaha. Not that Iroha herself would have any way of knowing.

"What in the world are you doing in here?!" Iroha picked Nuemaru up from the floor and walked up to them.

Yahiro and Amaha looked at each other, trying to figure out what to say. It was too late for excuses, though. Iroha had already come up to the water tank behind them.

"What's with this smaller Amaha?! She's so cute?! Wait! Why's she naked?!"

"That's the first thing that comes to mind...?" Yahiro looked at her with a frown.

It appeared she hadn't come guns blazing into the plant aware of what it was.

Yahiro looked farther behind her and found Chiruka, Misaki, and Rosé. Then he understood how she had come here out of the blue.

"Chiruka... I see, so you brought her here," Amaha muttered with a puzzled look.

This was clearly betrayal on her part, but Chiruka didn't step back even in the face of Amaha's reproachful glare.

"Please... Stop, Amaha. I don't want you to sacrifice yourself any further for the Council..."

"I...I don't see myself as a sacrifice!" Amaha didn't look her in the eye.

"Amaha!" Chiruka pled with all her strength, though her voice remained

weak.

Yahiro watched inexpressively. It wasn't that he had nothing to say, but he knew Amaha would only dig her heels in further if he interjected.

Iroha, on the other hand, stared at the two, confused by the heavy mood and what was happening.

"Hey, Galerie Berith girls. How about we have a talk, as fellow businesspeople?" Marius called the twins from a spot far from the deadlock.

"Sure. So we're talking business?"

"Something lucrative, I expect."

The twins replied immediately. Marius nodded playfully.

"Yes, and it's nothing too troublesome. I think this can be solved with money."

"You want us to sell Yahiro as a stallion?" Giuli asked.

"Yes. If he agrees to help Amaha out, then we'll pay you for his seed by the event. We can talk rates later more carefully, but I promise a decent amount." Marius confirmed Giuli's half joke.

Yahiro was about to yell at him to buzz off, when Iroha interjected with a quirk of her head.

"Stallion? What's this about seeds?"

"Uh... They, um..." Yahiro looked for a way to gloss over it.

"Basically, Marius wants us to sell them Yahiro's sperm," Rosé explained succinctly.

"Oh... Wait, his SPERM?!" Iroha nodded in understanding before her eyes widened at the full realization. "Does that mean they want Yahiro and Amaha to have a baby?! No! No way! Not happening!"

"Why, Iroha Mamana? I was told you two were not involved," Amaha asked with a puzzled expression in reaction to the dragon medium's shrill screeching.

Iroha gulped. "Wh-why? That much is obvious! Yahiro's already busy taking care of my siblings!"

“...Wait, when did I agree to that?” Yahiro questioned her in a fluster.

Iroha glared at him. “You said you’d be by my side! That means you’ll be their brother!”

“The logic’s a bit forced...”

“Sh-shaddup! What, so you don’t want to?!”

“I... I didn’t...” Yahiro looked away, at a loss for words.

He himself was shocked at the fact that he couldn’t say he didn’t want to right away. Iroha, on the other hand, had this confident look on her face as though she knew it from the beginning.

“I don’t intend to take him away from you. I only need his Lazarus genes,” Amaha pointed out with a sour look on her face.

“Th-that’s even worse. Children aren’t meant to be tools for furthering your goals!” Iroha rebuked firmly.

That got a smile out of Yahiro. He had just told Amaha the same thing.

“Negotiations are over, Amaha. Go somewhere else if you want a stallion. There’s other male Lazaruses out there, right?” Yahiro said, Hisaki Minato’s face coming to mind.

He wasn’t sure about the quality of his fondness for Nina, but if Amaha told her about her experiments in making a second generation of Lazaruses, she might just say yes. Not that Amaha could possibly know this.

“I could also make you submit by force.” Amaha placed a hand on her ornament sword’s hilt.

This time it was no reflex—she clearly had the intention of fighting.

“Are you for real?”

““Amaha! Amaha...!”” Yahiro, Iroha, and Chiruka all exclaimed at the same time.

Immediately after, an emergency alarm rang throughout the plant.

Amaha took out her comms device and sighed at what appeared on the screen.

“We’ll have to continue this conversation later.”

“...What happened?” Yahiro asked, a bad feeling creeping up his spine, while also sighing at her self-serving attitude.

Her beautiful face twisted into an atrocious smile, free from all hesitation.

“Rejoice, Yahiro. The fight to reclaim our motherland begins now.”

5

Amaha went up to the *Hikata*’s bridge right after, and the others followed. Nobody condemned her; there was no time to lose on such things.

“The scouts we sent to land reported two American guided-missile destroyers leaving the Uraga Channel two hours ago. Now they report multiple fighter planes taking off,” the man in the bridge—who appeared to be the captain—explained to Amaha.

He wore a JMSDF uniform, but he was still young, and without much of an officer aura about him. He was appointed as captain only due to his high rank, but he wasn’t really the type to occupy that seat. Because of this, he looked at the younger Amaha with strong confidence—or perhaps even dependency.

“Fighter planes?”

“Yes, they saw them loaded with anti-ship missiles.”

“Chiruka’s barrier is concealing the *Hikata*. The enemy should know that... Are they getting desperate now that the deadline is near?”

Amaha furrowed her brow, but confidence remained on her face. Vanagloria’s Untrodden Abyss completely hid the *Hikata*. They couldn’t hit it with anti-ship missiles, which required precise guidance. The fighter planes couldn’t even cross the fog to approach the ship—or so she thought.

“Amaha, move the ship, quick!” Iroha screamed, her cheeks twitching as she looked up at the sky.

The bridge crew looked confused.

“Iroha Mamana? There’s still time before the deadline. There’s no need for us

to make a move,” Amaha explained calmly.

Iroha kept her eyes on the sky, then muttered in weak despair:

“No... It’s coming...!”

“What’s coming? What in the world are you...?”

Amaha got anxious at the girl’s ghastly expression, and then the emergency alarm rang in the bridge again.

“There’s something on the radar! Missiles! They’re coming!”

“What?!”

“Get the CIWS to shoot them down!”

The crew members yelled at each other.

The steel projectiles flew slashing through the white, thick fog. Immediately, thunderous roaring echoed and cannon fire sliced the darkness. The autocannons on the *Hikata*’s bow spat three thousand bullets per minute in fiery reception for the oncoming anti-ship missiles.

Fireballs scattered all around before Yahiro’s eyes. Then, another explosion.

There was no flashy glow like there was in fireworks. The grisly view induced nothing but fear. The missiles got smashed in the air and their bits and pieces rained over the *Hikata*.

The blast shook the ship, but the shock in Amaha’s and everyone else’s mind was far greater.

“How did you know the *Hikata* was under attack, Iroha Mamana?!”

“...I don’t know. I just... The fire...” Iroha shook her head weakly.

“Fire? You somehow felt the missiles’ presence?” Amaha stared at her, mouth agape.

Iroha had detected the approaching missiles faster than the *Hikata*’s radars. That could be no coincidence. Perhaps she, as medium of the fire dragon, could feel the course of the missiles’ flames.

“What now, Amaha Kamikita? The next missile should be coming soon,” Rosé

told the woman, who was paralyzed in shock.

The first round was comprised of two missiles, but this couldn't be the last of it. The second round was sure to come soon.

"Chiruka's barrier is working. How can their fighters know our location?" Amaha asked herself in confusion.

Chiruka didn't reply; she only shook her head, afraid.

"Second round, incoming!"

The alarms rang again, and Iroha immediately looked at the back of the ship. She couldn't see the missiles, though. The thick fog over the ocean covered the view.

"Chiruka, deactivate Untrodden Abyss! The cannons can't aim like this!"

"G-got it!" Chiruka nodded shakily to Amaha's fervent request.

She stretched her arms wide as if about to dance, and the fog cleared up in synchrony. However, the high-speed missiles were already right up to the *Hikata*. The autocannons immediately spewed fire against them, but they were too close to make it in time.

"W-we're getting hit!"

"Everyone hold on to something!"

Everyone crouched down at the sound of the captain's shout. Everyone except Iroha—she kept glaring at the missiles.

The anti-ship missiles flew at subsonic speed, loaded with over two hundred pounds of powder—one hit to a ship the size of the *Hikata* would be lethal. It could sink right away depending on where it got hit.

And the Council for Japanese Independence was considered a pirate group. They couldn't hope for rescue. Just two missiles would end the lives of the nearly seven hundred Japanese survivors.

Iroha knew all this by instinct and roughly shook her head and screamed.

"Nooo!"

Then, for just a moment, a strong dragon aura was released from her whole

body.

The *Hikata* swayed with a strong impact—the missiles had hit it one after the other.

“Iroha!”

Yahiro barely got up in time to catch her before she was blown away. She was limp, exhausted, as though anemic. Was it because of that dragon aura?

The *Hikata* kept on shaking and creaking loudly, but no explosion like they had feared happened.

“Duds...? No, did she stop the missiles from exploding?!” Amaha looked at the unconscious Iroha with awe.

A missile’s warhead was immensely lighter than the cannonballs old battleships used to shoot at each other. Without the powder inside exploding, it lacked the power to sink a ship.

However, having both missiles turn out to be duds couldn’t be a coincidence. There had to be something else at play—something like the fire dragon medium’s supernatural powers.

“Report the damages,” the captain, recovered from the shock, ordered his subordinates.

“They hit portside. Near the chopper hangar!”

“Will it hinder navigation?”

“The effects are minor...but there are many wounded!”

“Wounded...?!” Amaha hit the wall hard.

Part of the *Hikata*’s hangar was used as living quarters for the civilians. A necessary remodeling in order to allow nearly seven hundred people to live on the ship. But the decision had backfired.

Even without explosions, the missiles weighed over four hundred pounds and flew at subsonic speed. Obviously the *Hikata* wouldn’t be unaffected, nor the people within unharmed.

Vanagloria’s supposedly impenetrable powers couldn’t stop the missiles,

couldn't protect the people. Amaha was outraged.

"The chopper hangar? Wasn't GE's in maintenance there?" Rosé asked Marius.

He was still down on the floor due to the shock of the impact. He nodded, his face pale.

"Y-yes... I won't be able to escape if they got my chopper."

"That's bad news, too, but only secondary."

"What do you mean?"

"Modern anti-ship missiles have pinpoint precision. Why do you think they attacked the hangar instead of going for a more vital part, like the bridge or engine?"

"Either they were aiming for the hangar, or something was impeding them from attacking elsewhere," Giuli added.

Marius looked up with a question in his eyes.

"You mean whatever they were using as a guide was there?"

"Exactly. Next question: Where was your chopper before it arrived on this ship?"

"No... Yokohama... You mean they planted a transmitter when I landed at Fort Yokohama?" Marius's face froze in shock.

Although the PMCs' autonomy was recognized, Yokohama was still US military territory. There were plenty of mercenaries in the Guild siding with the US Navy. Planting a transmitter on a helicopter while it was serviced and refueled was no hard task.

Vanagloria's power concealed the *Hikata* from scouts and satellites, but it didn't hide it entirely. That much was made clear by the earlier submarine's sonar. They installed a device transmitting a special signal that could go through Chiruka's fog on to the chopper that was bound for the ship, and then used it to guide the missiles.

"It's only conjecture. I have no proof. But if the US Navy knew GE is backing

up the Council, then it wouldn't be out of the question for them to try to mess with the chopper," Rosé explained.

She didn't blame Marius. She wasn't very interested in where the fight between the US Navy and the Council would end, as she wasn't Japanese. But her coolheaded words gouged someone else's heart.

"It's my fault..." Her weak whisper echoed throughout the bridge.

Chiruka looked at Amaha in shock. The young woman was staring into space with wide eyes, a vacant gaze, and trembling lips.

"Amaha?"

"I asked Marius to take us to Yokohama... Because I had to check Yahiro's skills beforehand...!" Amaha voice cracked with regret for her thoughtless actions.

Ghostly dread came out her every pore, freezing over the stressful atmosphere in the bridge. The *Hikata* had been hit because of her, and Council civilians were injured. The mere thought lit a raging fire inside her. She was at her wit's end, and everyone present felt this would lead to further danger.

Yet no one could stop her. The Council for Japanese Independence was barely hanging on to life thanks to the Lazarus blessed by the mountain dragon—they depended entirely on Amaha Kamikita.

"Ma'am, our drones have caught the presence of two enemy destroyers," the captain said robotically, suppressing his unrest.

"Where?"

"Northwest of the ship, about fourteen miles. They will reach us in under thirty minutes."

"Propel the *Hikata* straight ahead. We're countering."

"Counter...ing?" The captain showed hesitation; he knew what would happen if they followed her order.

Amaha left no room for opposition, however.

"Yes. Negotiations with the US Navy have fallen through. The Council for

Japanese Independence will now annihilate them by force. Got that, Captain?"

"...Roger. The *Hikata* will launch a counterattack against the enemy ships," he repeated gravely.

Amaha nodded. She glared into the night and the shadowy ocean, a dark light of revenge in her eyes.

6

"Chiruka, come with me."

Amaha gripped her sword tightly and called the dragon medium out of the bridge, intent on going out to the deck to fight the enemy.

"Amaha...!" Chiruka tried to stop her, but she wouldn't turn back.

It was Yahiro who stepped into her path.

"Hold on, Amaha. You're going up against the US Navy with the ship in this bad a state?" he asked, extending his arms to block her way to the exit.

Although they hadn't exploded, two missiles had crashed into the ship's side. The damages to the *Hikata* weren't negligible. Another similar hit and it could really go down.

"Can't we...escape? We should prioritize hiding and treating the wounded..." Chiruka added to his plea.

The usually dubious girl now armed herself with courage to try and convince her Lazarus.

"Escape, and then what?" Amaha asked, her voice soft. "We have no port to go to for ship repair. We have no hospital to send our wounded. Our damages are exactly the reason why we can't run away. Step aside," she said as she calmly shoved Yahiro away.

She walked out to the dark corridor with firm and loud footsteps.

"We will counter the enemy destroyers, then keep up until we've wiped out the US Navy in the Miura Peninsula. We're taking back our land. This was always the plan; we only have to begin earlier than scheduled. No problem."

“Amaha!” Chiruka chased after her in a hurry.

Yahiro didn’t know what to do with the ire within him as he watched them both go. He couldn’t stop her. War between the US Navy and the *Hikata* had already begun. And setting aside what was wrong or right, only their Regalia could stand against the enemy.

“So, Yahiro, what about us?” Giuli asked with a clashing relaxed tone.

Yahiro turned around in confusion and looked her in the eye.

“What do you mean?”

“We’ve got two choices. We either help the Council fight the US Navy, or we defect and run.” Rosé stated the facts.

Yahiro raised a brow. “Run how?”

“We got Josh on standby in a tilt-rotor. Now that Vanagloria’s power has been cleared, he should reach us in under thirty minutes.”

“...Any other choices?”

“Perhaps convincing Amaha Kamikita to surrender?”

“No way we could do that.” Yahiro laughed the idea off.

Rosé didn’t suggest it in earnest, either. She knew there was no talking the young woman out of this.

“We could convince her by force. Or...well, it might be too late for that.” Giuli shrugged.

“Why’s it too late?” Yahiro asked.

Before he could get any reply, a new thunderous roar shook the bridge. The *Hikata* was shooting its autocannons to take down incoming missiles.

“They’re coming!” Yahiro looked at the front of the ship.

He could see nothing in the night save for the flames scattered by the shot-down missiles.

But he knew what awaited beyond. The US Navy destroyers were approaching and already on the offensive to sink the *Hikata*.

The ship's chaff launchers scattered aluminum pieces to obstruct the missiles' guidance at the same time the autocannons fired.

Vanagloria's powers were off, and no longer did fog conceal the *Hikata*, but at the same time, this meant the ship's original defensive capabilities were unleashed.

Anti-ship missiles fell one after the other, raining flames and steel on the sea.

Amaha observed the frightful scene with a savage smile.

The *Hikata* was designed as an amphibious assault ship, which meant its aptitude in fighting other ships was not high. It could shoot missiles down in defense, but it had no weapons to attack the enemy.

Meanwhile, the enemy destroyers had not only anti-ship missiles, but five-inch naval artillery guns. The Council had no hope in a fair head-to-head. And she knew that. She knew they were defenseless as they approached the enemy.

This was all within her strategy.

"No holds barred, Chiruka! Let's show them what we've got!"

The enemy ships appeared on the horizon. They couldn't be farther than six miles. Already within range of the enemy cannons.

Bullets flew with precision toward the *Hikata* before being intercepted by metallic crystal blades coming out of the water.

"Yes. Things're finally getting interesting!" Amaha howled at the sight of the shattering blades.

Perhaps battleship-class artillery like that used during World War II would've been effective, but mere five-inch shells couldn't fly through Vanagloria's Regalia. She kept on knocking down the shots as the *Hikata* accelerated. It was something out of a nightmare for the crew on the enemy destroyers.

"Saber Hills and Blade Groves!" Amaha activated the Regalia just as they were close enough.

The laws of physics didn't matter to the Regalia in the first place—they had no effective range. So long as Amaha believed the attack would hit, then it would.

Giant blades projected themselves from the bottom of the sea and pierced both destroyers. No ship could possibly resist getting skewered all over from bottom to deck. Both ships immediately blew up in flames and sank. None of the crew could've had any idea what happened to them.

Amaha didn't bother seeing her achievement through to the end; she looked up right away. Although she couldn't see them, she knew the fighters were flying above them. It was those that first attacked the *Hikata*, and they were circling the area to see the battle to the end.

"Fighters out of missiles are nothing but pesky flies now... But there is no reason to let them go, Chiruka!"

"Yes." She activated the fog on the Lazarus's order—Untrodden Abyss.

Even with their sight hindered, the pilots could simply follow their meters to continue flying—but Chiruka's fog also blocked radio waves, and confused the orientation senses of those who wandered within its reach. Even the most experienced pilot could not properly fly their aircraft in this state. They all fell victim to vertigo and crashed their planes into the sea.

"Ha-ha! It's like I'm fighting babies. I should've done this much sooner!" Amaha curved her lips in a brutal smile.

Amaha lit the fuel that leaked from the heavily damaged destroyers and the sea turned to flames. She basked in the burning glow and kept on laughing, drunk on the immense power at her hands and rejoicing in the massacre.

And so long as her protector, Chiruka, obeyed her, no one could stop her rampage. No one but others with the same power—another dragon medium and her Lazarus.

"Amaha! Chiruka! Please, stop already!" Iroha screamed as she got to the deck, her face pale not only because of her recent collapse.

"You're not rescuing the people that fell into the sea? They're all gonna die." Yahiro glared at Amaha as he helped Iroha stand.

Many sailors were floating in the waters, thrown off the destroyers. The sinking was too sudden, so most of them had no time to put on life vests. There were not enough lifeboats, either. Yahiro wasn't exaggerating when he said

they would *all* die.

Yet Amaha only shook her head with an icy smile.

“Why should I rescue those who took part in the J-nocide? Have you forgotten what they did to us four years ago?”

“Amaha...!” Iroha screamed in despair; she realized there was no reasoning with the young woman now. She was taken over by her anger.

“Captain, we’ve taken care of the destroyers, as you can see. Next up is Yokosuka. Take aim and shoot all cruise missiles,” Amaha said into the radio.

Yahiro stiffened upon hearing that.

“You’re targeting land? There’s civilians around the base!”

“There were also civilians here on the *Hikata*.” She shot him a chilling glare. “It was them who unilaterally broke negotiations and attacked us first. We have the right to counterattack.”

“No...!” Yahiro bit his lip, overpowered by her glare.

“Hopefully it only affects the base’s surroundings,” Giuli said laxly, finally catching up to them. “The cruise missiles on this ship are cluster munition—they scatter a hundred and sixty-six small bombs over the target. And there’s eight of them. It’ll literally rain bombs all over Yokosuka.”

“Not to mention this ship has no fleet-class data support system, which is needed for precise guidance of the cruise missiles. There will be a big variation in the spot where they actually hit. Worst-case scenario, it turns Fort Yokohama into a sea of flames.” Rosé supplemented her sister’s explanation.

Yet Amaha only nodded, as though she knew all this from the beginning.

In her eyes, the mercenaries in Fort Yokohama were nothing but the very same foreigners who were occupying her motherland. She felt not the slightest need to worry about their well-being.

“Yahiro...” Iroha looked at him with teary eyes, appearing younger than usual. Something blew up inside him the moment their eyes met.

He didn’t hate Amaha. He liked her earnestness and genuineness, and she

seemed fond of him, despite her pushy methods. To be quite honest, he found her goal of reestablishing Japan moving. He could sympathize with her anger. Her indignation at having her comrades hurt was only natural.

He couldn't stop her. Yahiro's hands were already sullied; he had killed many people to survive in the 23 Wards. He didn't have the right to stop her.

Which is why he asked Iroha, "What do you want to do?"

"I...want to stop her," she said without hesitation, so quickly it felt like she had seen through his inner conflict.

"I don't want anyone else to die. People shouldn't be fighting each other. Even if they're the same people who took our country, I don't want them to die. I don't want her to kill them."

"I see... Very well."

"Huh?" Iroha's eyes widened as Yahiro smiled.

He had no right to stop Amaha, but if this was what Iroha wished for, then so be it.

"I promised you. I will make your wishes come true. I will take care of any other dragon that tries to get in the way of your desires. I will protect you."

"Yahiro!" she screamed, her face scrunching up.

The VLS hatch at the stern of the *Hikata* opened up and smoke came out. One of the cruise missiles had been fired.

There was no human way of stopping the missile flying at subsonic speed. No Lazarus way, either. But so long as it hadn't started accelerating yet...

"Blaze!"

Yahiro let the dragon aura flow from Iroha to his katana. He swung the sword, and it unleashed a flaming blade nearly thirty meters long, then slashed the missile.

"He...cut down the missile?!" Amaha exclaimed in shock.

The cruise missile kept on rising even after being cut in half until it finally lost control at about three hundred meters above the *Hikata*, then fell apart into

the ocean.

“You used the fire dragon’s—Avaritia’s Regalia?! Why, Yahiro?! Why would a fellow Japanese get in my way?!” She shook her head vigorously.

Chiruka, too, stared at him in confusion.

They still had seven more cruise missiles, and they weren’t getting launched. The bridge crew of the *Hikata* was too confused to do so.

“Don’t mistake your personal revenge for the wishes of all the Japanese, Amaha.”

Yahiro turned to her, sword in hand, and shielded Iroha behind his back.

He wasn’t so different from her, in the sense that they were both murderers. Yahiro had killed many people who attacked him back in the 23 Wards. He wasn’t so strong as to forgive with a smile those who’d tried to kill him, even if he was a Lazarus.

But that was his own revenge. He never thought to discriminately kill people of the same nationality as his enemies. And on the same note, he had no intention of aiding other people’s quests for revenge just because they were fellow Japanese.

“You’re doing the same thing Sui did... And I will not allow anyone to continue any sort of genocide. It’s my duty as a fellow Lazarus.”

Yahiro’s whole body was engulfed in flames, and they then took the form of armor. Fresh-blood armor reminiscent of a dragon’s scales. The Goreclad.

“Very well... It’s a shame, Yahiro. I really wanted you to be my husband.”

Hard scales covered Amaha’s skin as well. Her Goreclad was the color of amber, like scorching lava.

“Come, Yahiro Narusawa. I’ll prove to you what you call revenge...is in truth justice.”

Amaha drew her ornamental sword from its golden sheath, signaling the start of the mortal combat between Lazaruses.

Giuli and Rosé retreated as soon as they saw Amaha stand ready with sword in hand.

The twins were more skilled in combat than Yahiro, but mere humans could not get in the way of a battle between Lazaruses. They had no way of killing one of the immortals, and who knew what could happen were they to kill a dragon medium.

“Amaha, please! Chiruka, help us stop her! I’m begging you!” Iroha’s desperate screaming echoed all over the deck.

Chiruka, however, only shook her head sadly. Then she stretched her hand out toward Yahiro, defending Amaha. A thick fog covered his eyes the following moment.

“Chiruka?!”

“That fog again!” Yahiro held his sword up to his chest in preparation for Amaha’s attack.

Iroha’s flames likely could also clear out Vanagloria’s fog, but she couldn’t control her powers the same way Chiruka could. The idea probably didn’t even come to her mind.

In any case, Yahiro had no time to nitpick. Amaha came slashing through the fog all of a sudden.

“Vanagloria’s Regalia may be specialized in the area of effect attacks, but don’t think I can’t fight one-on-one, Yahiro!”

“Guh!”

Yahiro blocked the sword with his left arm, covered in flaming armor. It was too sudden for him to block with the katana. Her sword sliced through the armor and into his arm, but he didn’t flinch and launched a counterattack, making full use of his immortality.

Amaha read the counter.

“It’s useless, Yahiro! Saber Hills and Blade Groves!”

“Egh?!”

Yahiro dodged the metallic crystal blades shooting out from beneath his feet by mere chance. Amaha dodging his counter and making him lose balance turned out to be in his favor.

Still, he was not unharmed. He got a large slash wound from his left calf to his thigh. Better than getting absolutely skewered, but his movement would be limited until it healed. A fatal situation when facing Amaha’s wide reach.

“I didn’t know you could do that on the ship, too!” Yahiro muttered in revulsion.

“If we go all the way back to its origins, iron ore was taken from mountains, yes? It shouldn’t be a surprise to see that the steel giving form to this ship is also under the influence of my mountain dragon.”

“I find that logic a bit forced!”

“I know how you fight, Yahiro.”

Amaha disappeared into the fog again, worrying him.

His specialty was countering—Amaha’s style was totally incompatible for him. He had no way of knowing where her attacks would come from, which meant he had a shorter window to counter her attacks.

Not to mention she was also a Lazarus. Even if his counter succeeded, she could unleash an additional attack.

“It seems you’ve studied the sword, but your skills are very much amateurish. Although I can’t make light of your personal style built on fighting Moujuu. I wonder how many times you’ve died to acquire this technique that relies so much on your immortality.”

Amaha spoke gleefully, but Yahiro knew she wasn’t merely chatting for no reason. She was playing mind games.

Just trying to kill each other wouldn’t put an end to this fight between Lazaruses. One had to break the other’s spirit, and make them admit defeat. Make them accept they could never overcome the other. There was no other way.

“But you know that won’t work against me. We’re both Lazaruses—I can do the same things you do. Saber Hills and Blade Groves!”

Yahiro dodged all the crystal blades without giving thought to anything else.

The fog was getting thicker and thicker; he could barely see anymore. If not for the beacon lights and markers of the ship, he wouldn’t even know where he was standing.

Yet, even amid all this, he could feel Iroha’s presence clearly.

He could tell what she was thinking, instinctually.

Iroha could also tell he was having a hard time, but she was certain of his victory. How? Because she knew his strategy. The bulking dragon aura flowing from her was proof of this.

Sure, his fighting style wasn’t compatible with Amaha’s. But that was precisely what she was overlooking. That he wasn’t fighting a thoughtless Moujuu. That there was a reason behind their fight.

“Blaze!”

Yahiro’s katana, drenched in his blood, spat crimson flames that swirled all around him.

The whirl was over three hundred meters in diameter. Its heat immediately evaporated Chiruka’s fog and melted the metallic crystal blades covering the decks.

“Iroha Mamana’s purging flames! So they nullify other Regalia!” Amaha smiled fiercely among the flames; her amber-colored armor protected her from them. “It’s no use. This fire won’t stop a Lazarus!”

Amaha stabbed her sword into the deck. The floor bulged without delay as it spewed countless crystal blades—actual saber hills.

Yahiro couldn’t dodge all of the dozen or so blades. The crystal mercilessly pierced his whole body.

“Maybe so...,” he muttered weakly after throwing up blood.

He didn’t think he could defeat her with an aimless fire vortex. But that

wasn't his intention. His real objective had already been achieved.

"...but now you can't shoot any more missiles." Yahiro grinned, looking at the deck covered in flames.

Avaritia's fire burned all around, and not mainly around Amaha, but around the desolate ship's stern. His attack was never after her in the first place.

"You got the VLS cells?! That was your aim all along?!"

Amaha clenched her jaw once she saw the hatches melted by the fire. There was no launching the missiles if the hatches wouldn't open.

Yahiro's aim, from the very beginning, was stopping the cruise missiles from being launched. That was what Iroha asked for. There was no need to defeat Amaha, and he had no desire to do so. She misjudged the situation when her attention got diverted to the battle between Lazaruses.

"You... You will pay for this...!" Amaha was frozen in anger.

The cruise missiles were the Council for Japanese Independence's trump card, as the weaker side, as well as being Amaha's tool for the consummation of her revenge. And this was gone in the blink of an eye, thanks to defiance from a fellow Japanese and her own negligence.

It was no wonder she was lost in thought for a moment. Or that she gave in to the rage and attacked him. But this was the first fatal opening the veteran showed.

"It's time for revenge..." Yahiro muttered to himself, his whole body torn to shreds.

His fresh blood turned into purging flames and melted down the metallic crystal blades. He recovered his freedom and gripped his sword tight while glaring at Amaha.

Her posture was full of openings, for she was banking on his movement being limited. Even then, she immediately stopped her attack and took on a defensive posture. But it was too late.

Dazzling, scorching flames engulfed Yahiro's bloody figure.

The next moment, he ran at flashing speed, leaving a flaming trail behind.

“Huh?!”

“Amaha!”

Thunder ripped through the air around them.

Nearly 40 percent of Amaha’s body was carbonized. Chiruka covered her mouth and screamed as she saw her Lazarus fall to the ground. Over half of her katana was melted beyond recognition.

“...You charged at me...and transformed your own body into a burst of flames...?” Amaha asked in pain as Chiruka lifted her in her arms.

Not spreading flames—transforming himself into flames. This was the Blaze’s true nature. The Regalia Yahiro first used in his combat against Firman La Hire.

He couldn’t control it properly, and was basically useless in anything but battle. Not a very convenient power, but a mighty one all the same. Strong enough to incapacitate another Lazarus in the blink of an eye.

“To think you could use your Regalia like that... I suppose the unskilled one was me...” Amaha forced a smile as she sat up.

Her carbonized body’s healing was slow. Avaritia’s power was holding down Vanagloria’s.

“Wanna keep going, Amaha?” Yahiro looked her straight in the eye, asking listlessly but with his guard still up.

He might have knocked her down, but it had only been one hit that landed. He didn’t believe she would lose her fighting spirit after just that. What happened next, though...

“Chiruka?!” Iroha screamed.

Yahiro also furrowed his brow in confusion.

Chiruka stood before him, stretching both arms as she shielded Amaha. Yahiro could easily cut her down, and she was aware of this, yet she set her eyes firmly on his as if to say she wouldn’t allow him to hurt Amaha any further.

“Chiruka...,” Amaha muttered, dumbfounded.

The will to fight was draining away from her eyes, alongside the wrath that

had taken over them.

She was drunk on the Regalia's immense power and tried to use it to trample the weak. She would slay any who opposed her desires without mercy. But as a result, she was now placing in danger those she wanted to protect. It was only now that she realized.

"Amaha... Bad news." Marius slowly approached; he had been observing the battle at a distance.

Clearly he didn't want to barge into the battle between Lazaruses—his voice trembled. He only did so because he had to tell her about this.

"Four American warships left Yokosuka toward us. They also have reinforcement fighters. They'll surround the *Hikata*."

"I see..." Amaha nodded quietly.

Her legs finally finished healing, and she slowly stood up.

Marius took off his coat and gave it to her. Amaha's clothes no longer served their function properly, as most of them were burned away by Yahiro's flames.

"Get me in contact with the US Navy. The Council for Japanese Independence will surrender."

"Amaha?!" Chiruka looked at her in shock.

Yahiro was also astonished. After how hard she'd clung to her revenge and the reestablishment of Japan, he couldn't believe she would surrender so easily.

"Don't worry, Chiruka. I will protect the people on the *Hikata*. I'm sure we can negotiate with them to let go a few hundred Japanese in exchange for a dragon medium and her Lazarus."

Amaha softly placed a hand on Chiruka's stiffened head. Then, she turned to look at Giuli and Rosé, also observing from afar.

"What about you, Galerie Berith? I won't stop you if you want to run, but if possible, I'd like you to stay here as witnesses for our negotiations with the US..."

"No need for that."

“What...?” Amaha turned around in confusion at the voice interrupting her from behind.

Yahiro and Iroha were similarly puzzled.

Standing in stark contrast to the flaming deck was a girl in tidy *hakama*. The traditional Japanese clothing was the color of a red-to-purple gradation, like a sunrise sky. Its long sleeves were glossy and dyed with an intricate lightning pattern.

She had short hair in a bob cut, giving her a youthful appearance. However, her eyes, set on Amaha, were cold and scornful.

“Pathetic, Amaha Kamikita. You appoint yourself leader of a government in exile and wage war only to fail so easily and hope for kindness on the enemy’s part. Pitiful. Comical, even.”

“Who...are you?” Amaha glared at the girl.

She did not answer the question. Instead, she smiled grimly and said:

“You think Ganzheit would allow a dragon medium to fall into the hands of the US military?”

“Ganzheit...!” Amaha braced herself, her face stiffening at the sight of an unfamiliar man standing before the girl. He’d appeared out of nowhere.

It was a young man with no light in his eyes. His hair was a pale ash gray, medium length. He wore a cheap-looking long-sleeved T-shirt that was too big for him. He was about as tall as Amaha, not even 170 centimeters. He was unhealthily thin, lacking strength.

Yet no one could react to him before he stabbed his right hand through Amaha’s heart. Not even Yahiro, Giuli, Rosé, or, of course, Amaha.

“Gah...!” She spat out blood.

His hand pierced her chest all the way, coming right out her back. She couldn’t dodge or block it. He was simply too fast.

“Amaha!”

““Who are you?! Where did you come from?!”” Iroha and Yahiro yelled in

unison.

Simply piercing her chest was not enough to kill the Lazarus. They knew that. Still, they couldn't possibly keep calm as they saw an acquaintance getting killed right before their eyes.

“Yahiro, no!”

“Giuli?!”

She tackled him before he could punch the man.

Rosé, too, stopped Iroha from letting Nuemaru attack him.

Yahiro was confused; why would the twins stop them?

Meanwhile, the *hakama*-wearing girl watched with a satisfied grin.



“A-ah...” Chiruka fell to her knees, her whole body curling up in fear.

She wasn’t looking at Amaha’s wounds. The powerful dragon medium was staring in fright at the small, unarmed, *hakama*-wearing girl.

“I apologize for coming uninvited and taking so long to introduce myself.” The *hakama*-wearing girl bowed cutely and politely, her bizarrely tranquil attitude completely ignoring Amaha’s killing. “My name is Kaname Kashima, and I am Tristitia’s—the thunder dragon’s—medium. It’s a pleasure to meet you all.”

The girl looked up again, slowly glancing at every one of them.

Chiruka shivered at the sight of her nonchalance.

“Tristitia...?”

“A dragon medium?! Why?!”

Yahiro and Iroha glared at Kaname. Their hostile sentiment wasn’t gone even if the Galerie twins were keeping them in check.

The girl, however, kept smiling despite the animosity.

“Well, obviously, I’m here to end them. The Council for Japanese Independence.” She stared at Chiruka while pointing with her right index finger above her head.

An earthquake-like rumble shook the sky, and bolts illuminated rifts among the dark clouds.

Yahiro looked up in stupefaction. Nuemaru squirmed fearfully in Iroha’s arms.

Kaname’s whole body was emitting an immense dragon aura like Yahiro had never felt before.

“Begone, Vanagloria,” Kaname whispered as she softly swung her right hand down.

Immediately, a flash dyed their vision white as a flurry of lightning bolts stormed down upon Chiruka.

Act 5 Vanagloria

1

The ringing in his ears made it feel like his head was splitting open.

The wind carried the lingering smell of the lightning strike. Lightning born from a dragon's powers. A Regalia mighty beyond belief. He hadn't been hit himself, and his body was still convulsing in reaction.

"You okay, Iroha?"

"I-I'm fine! What about Chiruka?!" Iroha popped her head out from behind the giant, white Moujuu.

Nuemaru had temporarily gone back to his usual size to protect her from the shock wave. Giuli and Rosé also hid behind her.

"...So this is Vanagloria's power?"

The one responsible for the lightning strike—Kaname Kashima—stared at Chiruka down on the floor and sighed in annoyance.

Metallic crystal blades had sprouted all around Chiruka, as if locking her inside a birdcage. They served as lightning rods to protect her from the strike.

Her body was unharmed, but nothing protected her from the fear. She was shivering on the floor, her face pale.

"Kaname... She's tough," the gray-haired man said in a sulky tone. His right arm was drenched in blood, but not his.

"It seems so." Kaname nodded curtly. She was looking at the woman who'd had her chest pierced.

Amaha would obviously not die by having her heart crushed, since she was a Lazarus; that much wasn't surprising. But the metallic crystal blades coming out of the deck were skewering her whole body. She had used Saber Hills and Blade

Groves on herself to take the man down with her.

The young man dodged the attack, but this ultimately led to him releasing her.

Amaha was exhausted, though. The accumulated damage and intense blood loss had her on the brink of the death slumber.

“Gah...!”

“Amaha!”

Iroha tried running up to the young woman brutally coughing up blood, but a small lightning strike ran by her feet, coming from Kaname Kashima.

“You two don’t move, please.”

Kaname spoke gently to Yahiro, who immediately reached for his sword. For whatever reason, she had this friendly look in her eyes as she looked at them. As though they were old friends.

“Ganzheit said not to lay a finger on you. I won’t do anything to you so long as you stay away. And we’re not complete strangers, so all the more so.”

“What...?”

“You are Sui’s brother, aren’t you?” Kaname gave him a kind smile in reaction to his puzzled expression. A provocative smile—as if she knew it all.

Yahiro clenched his jaw in anger.

It wouldn’t be strange for her to know Sui if she was with Ganzheit. But having his sister’s name brought up made him lose his temper. Still, he couldn’t move, not after she glanced at Iroha instead.

Tristitia’s power was simple, but strong and fast. Yahiro wouldn’t be able to protect Iroha if she went after her. Neither could Nuemaru. The thunder beast could also fire lightning strikes, but her Regalia was far superior.

“Kaname Kashima... I see... So you are the thunder dragon’s medium...” Amaha spoke painfully, her lips drenched in blood. She glared wrathfully at the gray-haired man. “Which means you’re Toru Natazuka. Tristitia’s Lazarus... Didn’t Ganzheit lock you up?!”

“I’m not out by my own choice. Kaname asked me to,” Natazuka answered weakly. He gave the wounded Amaha a languid glance before losing interest and sighing. “Kaname, can I just kill her already?”

“Yes, I think it’s about time.” Kaname agreed with the bored man.

“Let’s see you try!”

Amaha pulled one of the metallic crystal blades from her body and held it tight like a sword.

Vanagloria’s Saber Hills and Blade Groves was effective against Tristitia’s lightning strike. It limited the opponent Lazarus’s movements and served as lightning rods to redirect her attacks. Kaname’s lightning was of no use against Amaha.

And yet, Kaname looked at her with absolute confidence in her face. Her posture said she didn’t see Amaha as a threat.

“This chance is about as good as any. Let us show you how to kill a Lazarus,” Kaname said, glancing at Yahiro and Iroha.

Yahiro felt suspicion and doubt at her wild suggestion, but it got him interested. Any method to kill a Lazarus was also a way to kill him.

“It is a Dragon Slayer who slays a dragon... But then, who slays the heroic Slayer?” Kaname spoke as though asking a riddle.

Yahiro had no idea of the answer, and it was a rhetorical question to begin with; she didn’t wait before saying it:

“The oath. When the hero breaks their oath, it turns into a curse.” Kaname slowly moved her gaze toward Chiruka, sitting on the deck. “Tell me, Chiruka Misaki. What did Amaha Kamikita promise you? What was her oath to you?”

“Huh...?” Chiruka muttered feebly.

Their conversation before Kaname had arrived crossed Yahiro’s mind.

When Amaha said she would surrender to the US Navy—when she gave up on her will to reestablish Japan—Chiruka looked more shaken than anyone else.

“Is she still making good on it? I can tell your blessing on her is wavering.”

Kaname spoke to the other dragon medium with a gentle voice.

Chiruka's eyes widened and she trembled. She turned to look at Amaha. At the woman who was heavily injured and drenched in blood. Her wounds hadn't finished healing. The speed of her regenerative powers had clearly diminished.

"It can't...be..." Chiruka clutched her head and groaned.

The more she tried to deny Kaname's words, the more the suspicion within her grew. She couldn't resist the doubt—had Amaha betrayed her?

"No, Chiruka! Don't listen to her!" Iroha shouted, furrowing her brow in frustration.

She wanted to run over to the other girl, but the crystal swords covering the area wouldn't allow it.

Iroha's voice wasn't reaching her. Distrust had already taken over her. And it kept on growing—who could she even trust?

The fear that she had been betrayed. The hope and trust she wanted to have in her Lazarus. The terror that Amaha might die because of her. All kinds of emotions swirled violently inside her.

"I think it's time."

Toru Natazuka walked toward Amaha. Slowly, but surely.

Amaha pointed her crystal blade at him. She tried using Saber Hills and Blade Groves again...but nothing happened. Natazuka kept walking, unobstructed.

"What...?!" Anxiety took over her expression, and the crystal blade collapsed in her hands. The blade born out of Vanagloria's Regalia. "Chiruka?!"

"N-no... No, Amaha... I... I...!" She shook her head desperately.

But in opposition to her own feelings, the crystals all around her crumbled loudly. Amaha could not keep the Regalia up any longer.

"...Got it."

Natazuka got right up to Amaha and, once again, pierced her chest with his arm. Yahiro wasn't able to see the motion. It truly happened with lightning speed.

His attack had been exactly the same as before, but there was a decisive difference now.

Amaha had lost her status as a Lazarus this time.

“Chiru...ka...” *I’m sorry*, the movement of her lips said; she no longer had any strength to use her voice.

Natazuka pulled his right arm out of her chest.

Not much blood came gushing out, for she had already lost her heart. It was now in Natazuka’s hand. No longer truly hers.

“Noooooooo, Amaha!”

Amaha’s tall body collapsed, crashing limply on the deck.

Chiruka screamed in hysteria.

“Yahiro!” Iroha yelled while glaring at Natazuka with teary eyes.

“Uooooooooh!”

Her flames engulfed his body, transforming him into fire as he drew his sword.

“Huh...?” Natazuka turned around in shock.

He blocked Yahiro’s scorching, flaring body with his bare arm. A blue, sparking blood armor covered his left arm.

“Nathan...? No, this is...different. What’s this...?”

Yahiro’s crimson flaming sword dug into Natazuka’s armor, but the other Lazarus showed no concern. He only narrowed his eyes as he looked Yahiro up and down, suspicion in his eyes.

“Oh, I see... You’re the mixed one... Would you mind letting go now? This is a bother.”

Natazuka’s lightning armor upped its power.

The dazzling flash blew Yahiro away. An electromagnetic pulse far stronger than something like a microwave oven. This would have boiled a normal human’s cells, killing them instantly.

“Yahiro?!”

Iroha ran anxiously to where he convulsed on the floor. She wasn't thinking about his immortality, and that didn't matter any longer after seeing Amaha killed right before their eyes.

Natazuka's expressionless face didn't change after getting rid of Yahiro in one strike.

“Yahiro, hmm? You're an interesting guy.” He stared at him with surprise, as though he didn't care about anything else.

Fresh blood dripped from Natazuka's right wrist, his wound emitting white smoke. And Amaha's heart was gone from his grasp.

“You took Amaha Kamikita's heart from Toru's hands? In that instant?” Kaname's eyes widened in surprise.

Yahiro didn't run away when Natazuka attacked with lightning—he pushed forward. He changed his body into flames again to attack him.

He didn't do so thinking he could defeat him. His aim was taking Amaha's heart back. If this was Amaha's Core, then perhaps she could come back by returning it to her body. He reached that conclusion subconsciously.

“I see. He's better than I expected, Avaritia...that Lazarus of yours,” Kaname said to Iroha.

Her tone was arrogant, but it was clear she was truly impressed. Not that either of them were happy about it.

Natazuka's lightning had burned Yahiro's body, but it was already nearly healed. However, his muscles were still numb. Natazuka could easily steal back Amaha's Core.

And yet, Kaname didn't instruct him to do so.

“I said I wouldn't harm you so long as you stayed back, but I'll let you off this once, out of respect for your shrewdness. It seems you're about to get some very rude guests, in any case.”

Kaname stretched her hand out toward the horizon. Then, a flurry of lightning rained down about a couple miles in front of the *Hikata*, illuminating the night

sky with a beautiful aurora.

Huge explosions followed the rain of lightning. Kaname had struck down missiles flying toward the ship.

Although she only did so to protect herself, this ultimately ended up saving the Japanese people on the *Hikata*. Yahiro was confused by that, as was Iroha.

“Let’s go, Toru. Our job here is done.”

“We can go? Yay!” Natazuka said with glee. One could almost forget he had just killed Amaha after hearing his innocent, childlike voice.

Kaname softly clapped, and the sound was followed by a giant figure descending onto the *Hikata*’s decks. A bird—a massive bird of prey with wings over nine meters long.

Its eyes burned like flames, and its golden wings were engulfed in a blue blaze. Clearly it was no regular bird. It was a Moujuu referred to as the spirit of thunder—the Thunderbird.

Kaname jumped deftly onto the Moujuu’s back once it landed on the deck. Natazuka followed, climbing the beast as if it were tedious. This was the transport method that had allowed them to appear on the *Hikata* out of the blue.

“Wait...! Who are you?! Why do something so cruel?!” Iroha asked them.

Kaname didn’t answer the question; she merely smiled sweetly and graciously.

“You can have Vanagloria’s Regalia. Let us meet again, Avaritia’s medium...”

The Thunderbird blew up a gust of wind as it lifted its giant body up into the skies.

Yahiro and Iroha merely stared in astonishment, the bitter taste of defeat in their mouths.

Silence returned to the *Hikata* once Kaname and Natazuka were gone.

However, the damage didn't go away. The ship was in a terrible state. Two missiles, though duds, had hit the hull directly. It wouldn't sink right away, but it couldn't sail at full speed anymore.

The battle between Yahiro and Amaha left the decks bulged abnormally. Undistorted spots were burned. Its main weaponry, the VLS missiles, were no longer usable.

The *Hikata* had been built to resist lightning, so Kaname's attacks didn't destroy it, but the electromagnetic pulses rendered the radar and other electronics unusable.

And more importantly, the *Hikata* had lost its biggest strength and leader—Amaha.

"Yahiro, should you be moving already?!" Iroha said worriedly, as he tried to pull himself up using the Kuyo Masakane as a staff.

"Don't worry about me. How's Amaha?" He looked around for the woman Natazuka had killed.

Chiruka and Marius were crouched down by her side. They were terribly uneasy. They had hoped for her to come back, but she wasn't reviving.

"Why? Why won't she heal?" Marius asked Chiruka accusatorily.

Chiruka shook her head weakly, clinging to Amaha.

"I'm sorry... Amaha... I'm so sorry... It's all my fault..."

Chiruka's tears soaked Amaha's cheeks.

Amaha's eyes wouldn't open. The hole Natazuka had opened in her chest remained, showing no sign of healing.

"Step aside, both of you." Yahiro dragged himself between Chiruka and Marius.

Marius looked up in confusion, and Yahiro showed him his right hand. In it was a crimson crystal—a lustrous jewel.

"What's this?"

"What used to be her heart. I stole it from Natazuka. But..." Yahiro answered

Marius's question hesitantly.

When he took Amaha's heart from Natazuka, it had already turned to dust. Only the crimson crystal remained.

"Could it be...this is...?" Iroha, helping him stand, gasped as she realized.

"Dragon blood, yeah... Probably." Yahiro nodded feebly.

Amaha had to have bathed in dragon blood at some point to become a Lazarus. Yahiro knew instinctively that the jewel was the crystallization of the blood that had entered her body. But he couldn't say so definitely because he could feel it had no more Ichor power left in it now that it was crystalized. This wouldn't have any effect on giving her back her Lazarus status.

He still placed it back into her body, but proving him right, she showed no change.

Despite this, however, through her sheer will, Amaha regained consciousness for a miraculous moment.

"Chiru...ka..."

"Amaha...!"

Chiruka's teary eyes widened, while Amaha reached out for her, trembling.

"It's fine, Chiruka... You did nothing wrong... Kaname Kashima was right. I couldn't keep our promise... Forgive me."

"No... That's not it... Amaha..."

Amaha caressed her dragon medium's cheek weakly. Chiruka held her hand and sobbed.

The last vestiges of her life were leaving her body. Chiruka could tell by her touch.

"Sorry you had to see me like this, Yahiro..."

Amaha stared into the void as she spoke. She could no longer see him, but still, she kept a graceful smile on her face, as she always did.

"I know I'm in no position to ask you any favors, but please, take care of the people on the *Hikata*... And one day, please...take back...our..." Her voice trailed

off before she could finish.

Chiruka held her tight as she crumbled to fine dust. Her body was paying its debt after opposing the death that should've come much earlier.

“Amaha! Don't leave me, Amaha!”

Chiruka desperately scooped up Amaha's ashes, but most of it slipped through her fingers, blown away mercilessly by the strong ocean wind.

The only thing that remained was the crimson crystal in Yahiro's hand.

“It's over,” Marius said with a weak voice after slowly standing.

“Where are you going, Marius Gibeah?” Rosé asked impassively.

Marius's lips curved in a wry smile.

“Where else? I'm running for it. I don't know if my chopper can still fly, but I could use the LCAC. If you like, then you could come wi—”

“...No...”

“Huh?” Marius stopped all of a sudden and looked down at his feet in shock.

A metallic crystal blade shot out from the floor and pierced his stomach like a spear.

“Marius?!”

“Marius!”

Yahiro's and Iroha's jaws dropped.

Vanagloria's Saber Hills and Blade Groves. Amaha was no longer there to use it, but the power had one more user. Its original owner, in fact.

“A-ah...”

Marius let out a quiet scream, his hands drenched in crimson blood as he tried to put pressure on his wound.

“Chiruka... Why...?” Marius turned to her.

Vanagloria's medium gripped Amaha's ashes tightly in her fist as she slowly raised her head. Her tears had dried, and her eyes were devoid of any emotion. But the absence only made her wrath more evident. The fury had completely

consumed her.

“No... No... No, no, no, no, no...! I won’t let those who killed her get away!”

“Chiruka?!” Iroha tried to reach out for her in confusion.

Chiruka, however, did not turn to look at her. A torrent of dragon aura surged from every pore of her body, and the *Hikata*’s decks began to twist and turn as though they were part of a living creature.

“Shoot! Everyone, retreat!” Giuli warned, grasping Marius’s wounded body and jumping back.

Immediately, Chiruka’s power covered her surroundings in blade hills.

Nuemaru, back to giant size, picked Iroha up in its mouth and took her away from Chiruka.

Yahiro drew his sword with his left hand. Chiruka was still barely within reach; he could shoot for a draw. Take her down with him.

However, he hesitated to attack, even if for a moment. Her dark, empty eyes filled him with doubt and, the following moment, she raised a new grove of sabers against him.

“Crap...!” Yahiro grunted as he was surrounded by the waves of metallic crystal blades.

He might have been a Lazarus, but getting skewered by all that would leave him without escape. He gritted his teeth at his own carelessness, just before he saw a hole open in Chiruka’s forehead.

The sound of the gunshot came afterward. The blades stopped rising and Chiruka’s small body flew up in the air like a doll made of feathers.

Further gunshots echoed. The flurry of bullets struck her ruthlessly until her body was pushed into the sea.

The shooter was Rosé. Smoke came out of her handgun as she sighed expressionlessly.

Yahiro stared at her, dumbfounded. He didn’t think of condemning her. If it weren’t for her, he would have met a fate far more gruesome than death.

“Chiruka... Why...?” Iroha muttered weakly, sitting down by Nuemaru’s feet.

“Did you kill her, Rosé?” Yahiro asked while removing the blades piercing his whole body.

Rosé shook her head calmly. “No. I only knocked her out to stop her powers from running amok. I don’t have the ability to kill a dragon medium.”

“But...how can she not die after all that?” Yahiro’s head shook in mystification as he stared at the edge she’d fallen off.

Rosé’s military-grade automatic handgun held fifteen bullets, and she had emptied the whole thing on Chiruka. That was enough damage to paralyze even a Lazarus for a good while. And she wasn’t one—how could she still be alive?

Yahiro immediately clenched his jaw when the *Hikata* suddenly began to sway.

Fierce waves formed on the sea, creating a whirlpool. It looked like a giant creature rampaging at the bottom of the ocean. It looked like Vanagloria’s Untrodden Abyss. Except for one big difference—this time the monster rose to the surface of its own accord.

“What the...?!”

A mountainous form parted the seas. Just the portion breaking the surface was far over a kilometer tall. The two-hundred-meter-long *Hikata* looked like a tiny boat in comparison. Its amber-colored scaled body undulated as it swam past the *Hikata*. It was then that they realized the monster had a will of its own.

“Is this what you meant when you said your job here was done, Kaname Kashima?!”

Yahiro’s fists shook as he fell to his knees on the swaying deck.

A new US Navy fleet approached, but the *Hikata* was no longer capable of combat. Yahiro had rendered the cruise missiles unusable, and Amaha had lost her will to fight.

There was only one way for Chiruka to protect the ship from the Navy in that situation—have Vanagloria itself destroy them.

This was why Kaname had killed Amaha. To fill Chiruka’s heart with hatred

and despair.

“This was your real aim?! Summoning the dragon?!”

Yahiro’s screams were drowned out by the monster’s earth-shattering bellow.

The amber dragon’s eyes burned like scorching lava, burned with the fire of revenge as it swam toward the US Navy in Yokosuka. Toward the land of Japan.

3

“So this is the mountain dragon...,” Rosé said blankly as she peered through a sniper scope.

“Whew... It’s humongous...” Giuli exhaled dramatically, in stark contrast to her sister’s tone.

This was their first time seeing a summoned dragon.

It was Yahiro’s second, but that did not ease the fear and dread.

Facing one again made him remember. Realize once again that no human could stand up against that. This was no simple monster—it was a god.

“Have you no sense of urgency?! Hold on to something! It’s gonna blow us away!” Yahiro yelled at himself as much as them.

The amber dragon swung its giant tail and shook the *Hikata* like a leaf on the water with such a simple motion. Yahiro and everyone else fell to the floor, faces twitching in pain.



“That’s...Chiruka...?” Iroha asked in a teary voice from where she lay.

Yahiro nodded.

He had no idea how Chiruka had summoned and turned into the dragon, but the aura it was radiating let him know that it was, in fact, her. The dragon medium’s rage and hatred had brought forth the monster.

Vanagloria continued moving toward the Japanese mainland as the humans on the ship could only watch.

Suddenly, its back was engulfed in an explosion. American destroyers emerged on the horizon. The fleet approaching to attack the *Hikata* had caught sight of the mountain dragon and decided to shoot first.

“It’s just like in my *kaiju* movies,” Giuli said, unconcerned, as she sat cross-legged on the deck.

“Yes. If only it were just a *kaiju*,” Rosé replied.

Yahiro shot them a disapproving glare. “What do you mean by that?”

“No matter how big, some sort of weapon ultimately kills a giant monster,” Rosé answered, as if what she said was obvious.

“You mean that’s not the case for a dragon?”

“Indeed. Dragons are denizens of a dimension that is fundamentally different from our world. Not even nuclear weapons can hurt them. Just like how my bullets couldn’t kill the medium.”

Rosé’s explanation shut him up. Chiruka didn’t die after being shot in the head—she turned into a dragon. He couldn’t argue further against what he witnessed with his own eyes.

“How can we stop the dragon?” Yahiro asked Iroha.

She was a dragon medium as well; perhaps she could try communicating with Vanagloria. Her response, however, was to shake her head in frustration.

“I don’t know... But I think Chiruka’s trying to make Amaha’s wish come true.”

“Amaha’s wish? You mean destroying the American base?”

Yahiro stared at its amber back as chills ran down his spine.

He couldn't get a good look at the ongoing battle between Vanagloria and the American fleet, but there was no way some regular destroyers could stand against its unlimited Regalia.

The glow of flames dyed the horizon red. There was only one explanation—the dragon had sunk the fleet.

"Hmm... Well, I sure hope she stops at that," Giuli said, resting her head on her hand. Yahiro shot her a sideways glance that asked for clarification. "She no longer has her mind from when she was human. We can't hope for her to use fair judgment or go easy on anyone. She won't stop her attack until everything in her path is eradicated. You should know this, Yahiro."

"Everything in her path..." Yahiro got a terrible feeling.

Giuli nodded. "Yeah. Yokohama might be in danger. Fort Yokohama as a whole, including our base."

"No! The kids are still there!" Iroha screamed and clung to Yahiro's shoulders with trembling hands.

"Paola and the rest are over there. They're not sitting on their hands," Rosé said with confidence.

Perhaps they wouldn't leave the kids behind, but there was a chance they might not be able to protect them if Vanagloria continued her indiscriminate rampage. She was still worried.

"Yahiro...what should we do...?" She looked up at him with a fragility in her eyes he'd never seen before.

They couldn't let the dragon be. But stopping Vanagloria meant killing Chiruka. This was at the core of Iroha's conflict, and why Yahiro couldn't just say to do as she wanted. Either choice would hurt her, so it was his responsibility to make the decision.

"Giuli, Rosé, my contract with Galerie Berith still stands, right?" Yahiro asked the twins.

"Yes." Giuli nodded with a grin—a beautiful smile, like that of a bewitching

demon.

Yahiro pushed down the vague fear welling up inside him and exhaled.

“I’ll fulfill it now. Lend me a hand.”

“Sure.”

“We knew you would say this, so we already have our transportation ready.”
Rosé took out a radio from her pocket.

They had called for an aircraft to come pick them up using LEO satellite comms.

“Yahiro...” Iroha looked at him with fear in her eyes.

He looked back at her with determination in his.

“Iroha, we will stop Chiruka.”

“But...”

“I already know of a medium who turned back into a human after summoning the dragon.”

“Ah...” Iroha gasped in understanding.

Four years ago, a rainbow-colored dragon appeared in the skies of Tokyo. The first dragon, who connected the center of the 23 Wards to another realm through the Ploutonion and triggered the J-nocide.

Superbia—Sui Narusawa.

Yet she was now back in human form. Yahiro failed to kill Superbia, and Sui turned back.

“Let’s rescue Chiruka. Though, honestly, I’m not sure we can do this.”

“No, I know we can. Together, you and I can do anything,” Iroha answered in her usual baselessly confident tone.

The white Moujuu at her feet grunted in censure. Nuemaru was back to his dog-size form.

“Oh, of course. I mean all three of us together.” Iroha petted the white furball.

A smile escaped Yahiro at the sight of her strength. She was so simple and straightforward, but he didn't mind it. Better than having her worry incessantly.

"How's Marius?" Yahiro looked at the man lying drenched in blood.

"Not good. He needs a transfusion and surgery ASAP," Rosé said clinically. He was listening, but she knew it was no use hiding it from him.

"Don't worry about me... Actually, would you mind just putting an end to my suffering?" Marius said with a faint smile, holding his stomach.

Iroha yelled in indignation, "Don't be so irresponsible!"

"...Waon?" He looked at her in surprise; he couldn't imagine, being fatally wounded, he would get scolded, much less by an amateur streamer.

Iroha didn't stop at that. She crouched down and pulled him up by the collar.

"You started all this! You lit the fire of desire in Amaha and made her start this war! It's partly your fault Chiruka ended up like this. You have to see it to the end!" She grunted feebly and tears poured from her eyes. "So please...live!"

"Waon..." Marius looked confused as she sobbed. The slightest shred of vigor returned to his pale face. "Yes... You're right..." He nodded with a faint smile.

It looked more like he was getting carried away by her energy rather than being truly moved, but it didn't change the fact that he had recovered some strength.

The problem was they had no time or tools to give him proper treatment. But then...

"Leave him to us."

...they heard the voice of salvation from an unexpected direction.

Men wearing JSDF uniforms were staring at them. The bridge crew, led by the captain.

"We are responsible for this as well. We were beguiled by the dragon's powers and left all decisions up to them. This is what we got out of it." The captain looked around the *Hikata* with a self-deprecating smile.

The ship could no longer fight and could barely sail. Such was the Council for

Japanese Independence's fate after indulging in the dragon's powers and taking on a reckless battle.

However, behind the captain and his crew were all the women and elders, running to and fro. The Council's civilians. They had been helping the wounded and putting out the fires, while Yahiro's and his companions' attention was on the dragon.

"Fortunately, the *Hikata* has medical facilities where we can operate. As well as medicine Mr. Gibeah himself brought us. Whatever his intentions might've been, we can't deny everyone on the ship is indebted to him."

"Capitan..." Yahiro nodded, feeling saved.

Even now, he felt the captain's expression and bearing were too lacking in confidence for someone of such a title, and yet, his words were firm. Strong. He was ready to take responsibility for the lives of the seven hundred Japanese people on this ship now that Amaha was gone.

Yahiro heard an aircraft's engine overhead. A tilt-rotor—the vertical takeoff and landing aircraft that Rosé had called for.

"Take care of Chiruka, Waon. Let's get our collab video done for sure next time," Marius said as he was carried up on a stretcher.

Iroha nodded firmly at his smile twisted in pain.

"Yes. Next time, for sure!"

4

A second Galerie Berith tilt-rotor arrived. Giuli stayed back at the *Hikata*, saying she still had things to do, while the rest got on the first vehicle.

Josh was piloting the aircraft. Rosé sat in the cockpit's copilot seat, while Yahiro and Iroha went to the luggage space in the back. This wasn't empty—there were two people already there, waving at them. Nina Himekawa and Hisaki Minato.

"Sorry we made you wait! Things got reeeal hairy, huh?"

“Nina?!”

““What’re you two doing here?”” Iroha and Yahiro exclaimed in surprise.

Nina smiled in delight at Yahiro’s shock.

“We’re here to help you out, duuuh! I think you’ll reeeally appreciate the extra hands.”

“...Did you know this would happen all along?”

The aircraft was meant for troop transport, so the luggage space had two sets of seats facing each other, reminiscent of the old commuter trains. Yahiro stared at Nina with narrowed eyes as he and Iroha sat down opposite them.

Rosé had called for the plane before Chiruka summoned the dragon. It had already taken off by the time Vanagloria appeared. Which meant Nina already foresaw this happening.

“We knew the Council was negotiating with the US Naaavy. We came here for your safety, juuust in case.”

“Just in case?”

“We anticipated Amaha Kamikita attacking the US Navy with her Regalia. So, Ganzheit asked us to keep the damage area as limited as possible,” Hisaki grumpily added to Nina’s brief answer.

“Oh,” Yahiro said and accepted the explanation.

Then, Nina smiled childishly. “Although, I’ll saaay, I was just interested in Vanagloria’s Regalia.”

“...We certainly didn’t expect Amaha Kamikita to be killed and Chiruka Misaki to go on a rampage. To let Toru Natazuka free... Kyoto’s not holding back.”

The way Hisaki spoke contrasted with his medium’s imprudent nonchalance.

“Toru Natazuka... Who is he?” Yahiro asked with a frown.

The fifth Lazarus had appeared on the *Hikata* all of a sudden and killed Amaha. He didn’t seem to have any goal in particular, but he was strong. Yahiro couldn’t understand anything about this bizarre young man.

“We don’t know the details, eeeither. Just that, during the J-nocide, he went

berserk, and the Heavenly Imperial House sealed him away.”

“...The Imperial House? You mean where the imperial family lives?” Yahiro’s eyes widened at her statement.

The Heavenly Imperial House was a clan of rulers with a long history in Japan. They relinquished political power in modern times but were still recognized as symbolic heads of state due to their lineage.

“I wonder. Either way, Kyoto’s Holy Court is still in operation. I imagine they weren’t keen on the Council for Japanese Independence calling itself the provisional government,” Nina muttered with her brow furrowed.

Yahiro felt more suspicion than anger. “They killed her because of that?”

“Weeell, at the very least, I want to think their aim wasn’t actually unleashing Vanagloria. But whooo knows.” Nina shook her head.

Yahiro grimaced and sighed. Regardless of what the people behind Natazuka intended, Chiruka had summoned the dragon. This had to be taken care of before thinking about the Heavenly Imperial House’s plots.

“Do you know how we can stop her rampage? I want to save her.” Iroha asked what Yahiro had been thinking.

Nina blinked in wonder.

“You mean you want to turn Chiruka Misaki back into a human? That sounds difficult... She’s already crossed the line, you know?”

“The line?”

“She’s on the other side now. She’s a monster bringing calamity to the world.” Nina curved her lips in a thin smile.

Yahiro and Iroha gasped. They couldn’t deny that she was a monster after seeing her with their own eyes. She’d parted the seas and wiped out a whole American fleet with ease. The label fit like a glove.

“The only thing we can do is kill it. That’s how you save a dragon medium,” Hisaki said in a serious tone.

“No... I don’t want that...” Iroha was downcast, biting her lips to stop the tears

from flowing.

“If only we had a window of some sort. Something that could give us the chance to recover her human heart.” Nina placed a finger on her lip in thought before glancing at Yahiro’s right hand. “By the way, I’ve been woondering, what’s that?”

“Oh, this?” Yahiro had been gripping it subconsciously; he opened his hand and raised the crimson crystal to eye level. Amaha’s body had turned to ash, but the crystal remained. “It’s a crystal that came from Amaha’s heart. Toru Natazuka ripped it out, and I took it off his hands. In the end, I couldn’t get it back to her, though...”

“The Regalia...,” Nina muttered in a daze. Hisaki frowned. “Toru Natazuka really let you grab that? Seriously?”

“Is this valuable or something? It’s pretty much a rock...,” Yahiro asked as she leaned forward in interest.

Nina yelled, “That’s the vessel for Vanagloria’s powers! The treasure one obtains for killing a dragon! That’s the Regalia itself!”

“This is the Regalia?” Yahiro raised the crystal above his head with a stupefied expression.

Sure, it was a pretty crystal, but he felt no power coming from it. At most it seemed like it could be used to produce an expensive jewel.

Nina realized she was getting overly excited and breathed deeply in and out with exaggerated motion.

“Of course, it’s only a rock right now, because Vanagloria hasn’t vanished. But her powers have to be flowing into it. And if she dies...”

“Its powers will stay within it...?”

“He ripped this out of Amaha Kamikita, right? This is the heart Chiruka Misaki left in her hands... This is how she lost her Lazarus powers and died...,” Nina said to herself.

One sentence there seemed too poetic, but it didn’t sound ridiculous to Yahiro, who saw things play out. She had stolen the medium’s trust. That was

exactly how Kaname Kashima killed Amaha.

“Don’t forget, Yahiro. The Lazarus power the dragon has given you isn’t eternal. It’s very, very unstable. Once your bond with the medium has been cut off, you will lose it.”

Nina warned him with a serious look in her eyes, while Hisaki closed his.

Yahiro glanced at Iroha in confusion. She felt his gaze and stared back at him with full confidence and a V-sign. However, Yahiro wasn’t thinking about her, but the other dragon medium—Sui Narusawa.

Yahiro had met Iroha only ten days back. What made him a Lazarus for the past four years had been Sui’s blood.

It was Sui who gave him immortality, and this meant that, even when they were far apart, she hadn’t lost her trust in him. She cared for him all the while he was looking to kill her. The emotion this made him feel was hard to describe. A complex mix of fear, suspicion, and guilt. It tormented him.

Iroha noticed he was thinking about Sui and immediately stuck her tongue out in annoyance. *She can’t keep one expression for more than five seconds, huh?* Yahiro was more impressed than irked.

Nina looked at them with deep curiosity.

“Put another way, the stronger your bond with the medium, the stronger your powers become.” She smiled suggestively before clapping. “Sooo! You two, get to flirting while we reach Vanagloria. Just pretend we’re not here!”

“F-flirting?! What’re you saying all of a sudden?!”

“Just do as you’re told,” Hisaki replied forcefully to Yahiro’s befuddled question.

“Hah?! ”

“You should realize your stamina’s low after fighting Amaha Kamikita and Natazuka. And you should know what to do to accelerate the healing.”

Yahiro couldn’t say anything in response to his well-reasoned logic.

He had lost too much blood after all the battles on the *Hikata*. A few more

similar wounds and the backlash to his Lazarus powers would show itself—the death slumber. He knew only of one way to prevent this.

However, doing so in the current situation was too much to ask of him.

He glanced sideways at Iroha, looking for what to do.

She smiled with ample confidence, well aware of his inner conflict. He dropped his shoulders in defeat.

5

“Mhmm...!”

The luggage compartment wasn’t very spacious. Nina and Hisaki moved the farthest away they could, while Iroha proudly slapped her legs. Her thighs were so robust and supple despite her otherwise slender build.

“What’re you so smug about?” Yahiro raised a brow.

Iroha sighed. “Just lie down here already. Borrow my lap.”

“But they’re watching.”

“Huh? So what? You’re just resting your head on my lap. Kiri and Kyota do this all the time when I clean their ears. Ren hasn’t been liking it recently, though. He gets shy.”

“You’re treating me like one of your kids...?”

“Do I have to tell you every time that they’re my siblings?” Iroha cheeks puffed out as she pouted.

Desperation took over Yahiro and he lay down on the uncomfortable seat.

Iroha hadn’t suggested this on a whim. She remembered the time the death slumber hit him back in the 23 Wards. That usually lasted multiple days, but back then, he woke up in under three hours. He couldn’t believe the act of resting on her lap had any effect, but since they didn’t know the exact reason, naturally, the best course of action was reenacting that situation.

Yahiro resigned himself to do as requested while Nina stared curiously. Iroha didn’t mind, though, so he decided to ignore it as well.

Still, it was hard to keep calm with that soft sensation on the back of his head and the voluptuous shadow covering half of his field of view above.

Iroha, on the other hand, seemed to be enjoying it. She combed his hair with her fingers. Poor Yahiro felt like he was no longer on the same tier as her siblings—he was on Nuemaru's.

“Um... I'm sorry, Yahiro.”

“Sorry for what?”

“I only thought about myself, and not about your stamina. You've been fighting for me this whole time,” Iroha said weakly.

“Oh, that?” He shot her an awkward smile. “I fought Amaha because I wanted to stop her. It's nothing you should worry about.”

“Because you wanted to... Hmm.” Iroha repeated his words before falling strangely quiet. There was a moment of tense silence. “Then, why didn't you accept Amaha's advances?”

“What?”

“She went to your room all alone, didn't she?”

“Wh-why're you asking that all of a sudden?” His voice cracked.

The image of a half-naked Amaha pushing him down on the bed crossed his mind. Nothing had happened between them, but bringing that up still had him feeling terribly awkward.



Iroha did not call him out on it, however. She only kept on combing his hair and said:

“Well, I’m curious. You don’t want to do that with a woman?”

“Uh, I wouldn’t say I do not want to at all, but...so what? Would you be jealous if I did?”

“J-jealous? You think...?” Iroha asked back in surprise.

Yahiro got self-conscious of his own words. “How would I know?”

“I-I’m not sure, but yeah, I think I wouldn’t feel good if you ever did that with another woman!” Iroha spoke louder to contain the chaos brewing inside her.

“R-really?” was the only thing Yahiro could say back to that.

“So if you ever want to do that sort of thing, then please ask me first!”

“...” *Ask for what?* He couldn’t put the question into words. He felt Iroha would panic if he did.

“Got it?” She pressed for confirmation.

Yahiro shrugged, still on her lap. “...Got it.”

“Hee-hee. That’s a promise.” Iroha smiled in relief.

Fine enough, I guess. Yahiro sighed as he heard her happy statement.

6

Yahiro rested on Iroha’s lap for less than ten minutes. Nothing really changed in that time. He still looked terrible due to the constant cycle of injury and healing; his body kept the scars of wear and tear from the battle. He didn’t even feel like his Lazarus power had been boosted.

Yet he could feel the fear of the abrupt death slumber inching away. And that was good enough for the time being.

“Wait, you’re already done fliiirting?!” Nina asked unhappily, when she saw Yahiro sit up.

“Yes, that’s enough. Was there really a point to this, to begin with?”

“There should beee... Well, at least she looks happy. You look a bit frustrated, though.”

“Shut it. We’re close to landing, right? How’s the situation?” The questions were directed at Rosé, in the cockpit.

The door separating the two compartments was open, so she heard him.

“The US Navy at the Yokosuka base is devastated. They managed to get their valuable nuclear-powered aircraft carrier out to the open sea, but other warships and air forces were annihilated. Mercenaries deployed by the Guild are preparing combat vehicles for bombardment.” Rosé, wearing a thick headset, relayed the intel she intercepted from American comms.

Nina shook her head in disbelief.

“They should be running away instead of wasting their time doing thaaat.”

“I don’t think the guys at the Fort are giving up ’til the very end. And they gotta beware looters taking advantage of the chaos,” Josh said with an all-too-convincing tone as he piloted the plane.

The mercenaries living in Fort Yokohama had a reputation to uphold. If rumors spread of them running away as soon as a dragon appeared, they would lose their clients’ trust and would have a hard time getting more jobs. On top of that, other mercenaries could steal the things they left behind if they escaped. No matter how reckless, they knew very well they couldn’t be the first to run away.

“Vanagloria’s body is about three thousand meters long. She moves at a speed of thirty knots. She will reach land in about fifteen minutes, at the southern edge of the Miura Peninsula—Jogashima.”

“The Miura Peninsula... So she’s really going after the US Navy base?” Yahiro’s face stiffened as he thought of what could happen.

Meanwhile... “Over three thousand meters?!” Josh squalled. A reasonable reaction for someone just encountering the mountain dragon for the first time.

“There are only six miles between the expected landing point to the core of the American base. Literally just a hop away for someone that size. And all her

Regalia have an area of effect...”

“You’re worried Fort Yokohama might be inside her range?”

“Yes. Our base might not get by unscathed,” Rosé answered Yahiro’s question stoically.

He felt Iroha’s body stiffen up beside him.

“We should prooobably consider what effects it could have on the tectonic plates, too. Hooopefully it doesn’t activate any volcanoes.” Nina stated a nightmare scenario nonchalantly.

Mount Hakone was on the shore opposite the Miura Peninsula, across Sagami Bay. And just farther inland was Mount Fuji. Those would be the first to be affected if Vanagloria stirred up the Earth’s crust.

“We’ll get ahead to strike back at her as soon as she lands.” Rosé indicated a map on the luggage compartment’s monitor.

She chose the elevated park right at the center of the city of Yokosuka as their landing point. Not a bad choice, in Yahiro’s opinion. Castle sites from the Sengoku period were nearby, so they could react no matter where in the Miura Peninsula Vanagloria landed.

Much to his surprise, though, Hisaki objected.

“Sorry, but you’ll need to amend this plan.”

“...How?” Rosé asked.

Hisaki kept an unfriendly look on his face.

“There’s no point waiting for Vanagloria to arrive. Just take us to her now.”

“Why? Shouldn’t we take you somewhere the US Navy and the Guild could support you, to get an advantage in battle?”

“You’re overlooking something very important. We’re not just fighting Vanagloria. The Moujuu here seems to realize that already.” Hisaki glanced at Nuemaru.

Nuemaru was no longer sitting by Iroha’s side; he was standing, glaring at the surface.

“Wait, you mean...?” Rosé switched to show the outside camera feed. The monitor at the copilot seat showed countless shadows on land.

“Moujuu?!” Yahiro groaned as he looked over Rosé’s shoulder.

Monsters with a crustacean appearance emerged one after the other from the sea, heading farther inland on the Miura Peninsula. No two ways about it: they were after the American base in Yokosuka.

“Chiruka summoned them?!”

“She summoned...all of these...?” Iroha was at a loss for words at the swarms covering the whole surface.

There were well over a thousand of them just within eyeshot. Not even in the quarantined 23 Wards was there ever a group this big. Fort Yokohama could be taken over in just a couple hours, let alone the US Navy base. And behind them was Vanagloria, still approaching.

“Yeah, doesn’t seem like we get the luxury of landing at leeeisure.” Nina grinned.

“Obviously.” Hisaki nodded.

“No choice. Josh, get ready for fast-roping,” Rosé stated the change of plans.

“Roger, Lady. Where are we landing?”

“Vanagloria’s back.”

“What?!” Josh’s voice cracked at the sheer absurdity.

“Let them land on her without her noticing. With how big she is, there must be a blind spot to make it possible.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not *you* piloting this thing!” Josh clicked his tongue in resignation and made a big turn, ascending toward the dragon’s back.

Vanagloria was already near the Miura Peninsula’s south edge—near Miyagawa Bay.

Countless Moujuu swarmed her surroundings, protecting their summoner. Approaching her from land would be suicidal.

“We’re closing in! But we can’t stay nearby for very long! She’s too fast!”

“No problem. That’s why we’re fast-roping,” Rosé said with a straight face.

She unfastened her seatbelt and moved to the luggage compartment.

“Um... Rosé, what’s fast-roping?” Iroha asked, getting a bad feeling.

“First, we get as close as possible to the landing point, and hover over it like this,” Rosé explained while operating the control panel on the luggage compartment.

The tilt-rotor’s engines could twist orientation ninety degrees to hover like a helicopter. Josh lowered the craft, and Rosé opened the rear hatch, letting a loud gust of wind inside the luggage compartment.

Right below the aircraft were the writhing, rockily sharp scales of the dragon. Vanagloria’s amber skin was like a live mountain range.

“Th-then what?”

“Then you grab the rope and go down. Easy.”

“Simple, but not easy! We just climb down?! Are there any other options?!” Iroha screamed.

Even while hovering the lowest they could, it was still over eighteen meters from the aircraft to Vanagloria’s back. Not to mention the mountain dragon kept on advancing at over forty-eight kilometers per hour.

“Just don’t let go of the rope and you’ll be fine. We got nonslip gloves, too.”

“Hold on! Gloves?! That’s it?! No lifeline or something?!”

“Hurry, Yahiro Narusawa. We don’t have time,” Hisaki urged.

“I know. Let’s go, Iroha. Hold on tight!”

Yahiro grabbed her by the waist and picked her up like a bag. She struggled to get loose as he grabbed the rope with one hand.

“Wait, I’m not mentally prepared yet! It’s too high! I’m gonna die! No! I can’t do this! Help me, Nuemaru! NOOO!” Iroha screamed, desperately waving her arms and legs.

Her minor act of resistance was no hindrance for Yahiro; he ignored her pleas and jumped out the aircraft.

Vanagloria's full appearance was vastly different from the rainbow-colored dragon Yahiro had seen before.

Its silhouette resembled that of an apatosaurus. It had a stout torso and a long neck, on top of a tail that seemed to stretch endlessly. That was where the similarities to the dinosaur ended, however. This was an entirely different creature.

Vanagloria's body was covered in giant scales, hard as rocks. The chain of its pointy dorsal fins looked like a mountain ridge.

Yahiro and the rest descended upon her mountainous back, basically jumping off the hovering aircraft. First it was Yahiro and Iroha, followed by Hisaki holding Nina in his arms. Nuemaru, giant once more, truly only hopped down like a cat, no need for the rope.

"Ow... I thought I was gonna die..." Iroha held on for dear life to the dragon's scales, glaring at Yahiro.

"You've been through worse," he coldly replied to the girl with the teary eyes before looking toward Vanagloria's head.

The mountain dragon felt like a living lava formation, rather than a living creature. Solid lava the color of amber that undulated across the sea.

Vanagloria turned its long neck around. The group on her nearly three-thousand-meter-long body had to seem like tiny ants to her, and yet, she noticed they were there. Her fiery, bright eyes glared at Yahiro with annoyance.

"She spotted us! The Regalia's coming! Nuemaru, guard Iroha!"

Yahiro's yells were drowned out by the giant dragon's roar.

Her surging dragon aura turned her myriad of scales into thorns. Sharp metallic crystal blades covered their area in a thirty-meter radius. Truly a hellish sword forest to chop up sinners.

Yahiro blocked the incoming swarm of swords with his katana enveloped in the purging flames. The shattered blade pieces cut him shallowly all over, but he had no time to lose on the pain. He had to protect Iroha and Nuemaru.

“This is Saber Hills and Blade Grooves? That’s insanely powerful!” Nina sighed in admiration, looking at their surroundings with curiosity.

Vanagloria’s attacks were going against her, too, but all blades that approached her melted down due to Hisaki’s liquifying powers.

“Good thing our marsh Regalia’s effective against her,” Hisaki muttered frankly while drawing the sword on his back.

Nina nodded. “Eeeyup. So, we’ll open up a path. Yahiro, you run up to Vanagloria’s head.”

“We’re chopping her head off?”

“Classic dragon-slaying method! Don’t you thiiink?” Nina grinned at Yahiro’s shocked reaction.

Iroha’s eyes widened as she glared at her. “You want us to kill Chiruka?!”

“What other way is there to stop herrr?”

Iroha couldn’t say anything back; her clenched fists trembled.

Hisaki saw her frustration and said, “Get your priorities straight, Iroha Mamana. We have to stop Vanagloria’s rampage first. We can’t even save the medium when she’s like this.”

“Honestly, there’s no guarantee that she’ll stop even if we chop her head off.” Nina licked her lips while staring at the dragon’s head.

Yahiro shook his head, baffled. “How are we even supposed to do that, to begin with? Her neck’s gotta be the girth of a baseball stadium!”

“Find a way. If you can’t do it, then I will.” Hisaki shot him a derisive glare. This only provoked Yahiro, although it hadn’t been his intention.

“It’s cooming,” Nina warned without a shred of worry.

Vanagloria used Saber Hills and Blade Groves again, with a larger range than last time.

“Chiruka!” Iroha screamed in distress, but the metallic roar of the attack drowned her voice out before it could reach her.

The incoming blades filled Yahiro’s vision. It was no hill or grove—it was a

sword tsunami.

Hisaki stared at the approaching torrent calmly and raised his sword high. The blade emitted a beautiful yet atrocious light-purple glow.

“Kurao-no-Nuboko.”

Hisaki stabbed the tip of his sword into Vanagloria’s back and poured Luxuria’s dragon aura directly into the god. The amber scales began to corrode, melting away like it was a strong acid.

The incoming metallic crystal blades started fading out the moment they came in contact with the light-purple dragon aura. They melted like mercury and fell, unable to resist gravity.

Now Vanagloria’s neck was defenseless.

“Go, Yahiro Narusawa!” Hisaki yelled, swinging his sword up high.

Yahiro covered the Kuyo Masakane in flames and dashed across the path Hisaki had opened. His liquifying Regalia reached all the way to the base of Vanagloria’s neck, and prevented new blades from being created.

Saying Vanagloria was huge was putting it lightly: not a size a regular katana could slice. Yet he did not hesitate.

The body of the dragon Chiruka summoned—Chiruka’s own body now—was something beyond this world’s laws of physics. Rosé said not even a nuclear weapon could harm her. But taken another way, it could mean that the laws of physics preventing her neck from being sliced by a small sword also did not apply.

No matter how big, Vanagloria was a dragon—and there was no escaping a Dragon Slayer’s blade.

Perhaps the Lazarus’s sword could do the job.

Yahiro turned himself into a burst of flames and charged against Vanagloria’s head. His scorching sword slashed into the dragon’s windpipe.

“...What?!” Yahiro was taken aback by the results of his own attack.

The mountainous dragon skull exploded. And it wasn’t only the skull that was

that brittle. Vanagloria's over-183-meter-long neck turned to pebbles, falling down like an avalanche.

"Whooooaaa!"

"Yahiro!"

Iroha and Nuemaru saved him from being caught in the dragon's crumbling. The giant-sized Moujuu jumped from rock to rock and Iroha, riding it, pulled Yahiro away from being crushed by a hair.

"...You did it?" Hisaki asked the guy who was short of breath with a suspicious look on his face. He could still feel the presence of the headless dragon.

"No! This is Vanagloria's Regalia!" Yahiro yelled after turning around.

The section on Vanagloria's shoulders right beside where her neck had connected started swelling up rapidly until it formed a new head.

"It grew back...?!"

"Amaha called it Prominence Capsize. Vanagloria can freely change the terrain. I had no idea this also worked on her own body!" Yahiro explained angrily.

"Oh... Then how about this!"

Hisaki hit Vanagloria's newly restored neck with his sword. His purple marsh corroded the dragon's scales, but only temporarily. The liquified scales fell off, and new ones took their place. Hisaki clicked his tongue at the sight.

"Hisaki?"

"It's no use. Her healing's faster than my Regalia."

"I seeeee... Yet another insane pooower..." Nina nodded, her eyes shining bright instead of getting annoyed at her Regalia being canceled out. "And it looks like the secret to her healing lies on the groound."

"The ground?"

Then, Yahiro remembered they were far above in the sky.

"As expected of the mountain dragon, I suppose. She sucks infinite spiritual power from the earth for her own use. I suppose that is also why her Regalia

have such wide areas of effect.”

“Oh, just like Antaeus?” Hisaki looked at Nina in admiration.

Yahiro’s and Iroha’s brows furrowed in puzzlement.

“Antaeus?”

“A giant from Greek mythology. Son of Mother Earth goddess Gaia, he has the power of immortality so long as his feet are on the ground. Though Heracles killed him in the end,” Hisaki explained while looking at him in disdain for his ignorance.

Yahiro understood the connection. Vanagloria, getting her power from the earth, was similar to his conditions for immortality.

“And how did Heracles kill him?”

“He pulled him up with his superhuman strength and strangled him to death.”

“H-he pulled him up...?” Iroha was at a loss for words.

Yahiro sighed. “Well, thanks for getting my hopes up. How’re we supposed to mimic that?!”

Pulling up the three-thousand-meter-long dragon wasn’t realistic. It was not possible even with Iroha’s or Nina’s Regalia. So they had no way to kill her.

“I never said we should mimic it. You got your hopes up on your own.” Hisaki snorted, but the anxiety on his face was clear.

Vanagloria kept on advancing while they fought on her back. The US Navy base was already damaged by the Moujuu she’d summoned. They were able to keep them from taking it over entirely thanks to the Guild’s support, but no line of defense would stand against Vanagloria once she arrived. The base could be destroyed by dawn at this rate, and they had no way to stop her.

“Yahiro, Iroha, can you hear me?”

“...Rosé?”

Both of them looked up when they heard the voice coming from their collars. They could hear the tilt-rotor’s engines behind Vanagloria. The aircraft had come back after pulling away to a safe distance.

"I'm picking you up. Get on."

"...What?"

"So we're letting Chiruka be?"

Yahiro and Iroha looked at each other in confusion.

They couldn't defeat Vanagloria even after risking so much to land on her back. Getting back on the plane after all that could only mean giving up on killing the dragon and running away.

"Retreat? Yaaaah, that's a fair judgment."

"Nina, you too?!" Iroha glared angrily at her for agreeing with Rosé.

Nina cracked a troubled smile and shook her head.

"Let's be realistic, we can't do aaanything here. We'd be more useful going down to the ground and helping stop the Moujuuuu..."

Iroha gulped. She knew Nina was right.

They couldn't do anything against Vanagloria, but their powers were still effective against Moujuu. Rosé came to the same conclusion—that their time was better used on letting the residents of Fort Yokohama evacuate.

"No, Rosé. We really won't be able to save Chiruka if we don't stop Vanagloria here and now." Yahiro refused.

Chiruka was heading to the US Navy base because she was fixated on what she wanted as a human. And if she made her wish come true, only despair would remain.

Once her revenge was complete, having lost Amaha, she would have no reason to go back to being human. They had to stop Vanagloria before she destroyed the base in order to get her back to normal.

"But the American base will fall either way if we don't stop the Moujuu invasion."

"I—!" Yahiro grunted at her calm response; no counterarguments came to mind. He couldn't even come up with a way to stop Vanagloria.

"Oh dear, you sound positively troubled."

“Huh?!” Yahiro gasped at the voice that intercepted their comms.

It was a young, mischievous voice. One he knew very well. The sound quality was terrible as it forced its way into the encrypted line, but even then, Yahiro could never mistake her voice for any other. How could he when he had spent the last four years looking only to kill her?

“Good evening, dear brother. Everyone. I would like to help out, if you don’t mind,” she continued, ignoring Yahiro’s uneasiness.

Immediately after, an overwhelming, wicked aura emerged in the direction of Vanagloria’s advance.

The land turned black as a giant hole appeared out of nowhere, swallowing the city in ruins. The hollow door to another realm. The Ploutonion.

The Moujuu marching on toward the American base, crustacean-like beasts, lost their footing out of the blue and fell into the emptiness.

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The gate to the underworld vanished as suddenly as it had emerged to block the giant dragon’s progress.

Around 70 percent of the Moujuu swarming across the land fell into the hole, as did the ruins of the city. Only barren land remained, and at the back of this desert stood a couple. A tall, Black man wearing an elegant suit, and a girl as beautiful as a Western doll wearing a luxury gothic dress. No matter how far away she was, Yahiro could never mistake the sight of that girl and her pale hair.

“Sui...!” Yahiro’s face twisted in wrath as he called her name.

“Hop on!” Iroha yelled to him from atop Nuemaru.

Her eyes didn’t reflect fear, more so wariness and caution. Vanagloria was trouble enough, but Sui was far more dangerous, and she knew that.

Yahiro jumped onto Nuemaru’s back with no hesitation.

“My...” Nina raised a hand to her cheek as she watched the two leave them

behind.

Nuemaru ran down Vanagloria's body as Iroha ordered. Few Moujuu got in the way now as the white beast ran a few miles toward the white-haired girl, who observed the whole movement with amusement.

Nuemaru slowed down once they were close enough to read the girl's expression. He raised his guard against the tall man behind her on mere instinct.

Auguste Nathan, agent of Ganzheit. He was capable of creating invisible barriers that deflected even cannonballs; Nuemaru wouldn't escape unscathed if he approached without caution. And he had to be especially careful while carrying Yahiro and Iroha.

"Sui!" Yahiro roared at the girl while jumping off the white beast.

Sui Narusawa, medium of Superbia, the earth dragon. Even now, about a week since they last met, she still had this fantastical, fairylike air about her.

"What the hell are you doing here?! What're you scheming?!"

"My, how intimidating." Sui returned the look with eyes still as a lake, emotionless. Her blank expression was the same as a doll's, but then her red lips curved up in a smirk. "Are you sure about this, dear brother? Sure you aren't directing your hostility toward the wrong target?" She let out a chuckle as she looked up at Vanagloria.

Yahiro gritted his teeth.

Sui was responsible for the J-nocide. She was dangerous. He had to kill her. But Vanagloria took priority at the moment. He had no time to lose arguing with Sui. She knew this; she wouldn't have shown up otherwise.

"Sui," Iroha called out to her in a serious tone of voice after getting off Nuemaru.

Sui looked at her with warmth in her eyes and replied, "Yes, Waon?"

"...Are you really going to help?"

"Iroha?!" Yahiro looked at the girl in shock.

He couldn't possibly ask Sui for help, even to stop Vanagloria. He wouldn't allow it. Besides, there was no way Sui would help out so conveniently.

Yet Sui kept the artificial-looking smile on her face and nodded.

"Yes, I mean it. Whether you believe me is up to you, though."

"...Why?" Iroha asked, looking her straight in the eye.

Sui giggled. "I...do not like Vanagloria."

"Huh?"

"Why would I? Can you imagine how much fun they must've had playing pirate while clinging to their pipe dream of reinstating Japan? They had their excuses, saying they needed to do so to survive, or that they only acted against the villains who stole their motherland, but in truth, they were content trampling over the weak."

Sui's tone was calm and gentle, which only enhanced the spite behind her words. And she did not mince any of them, not to mention...she was right.

Iroha bit her lip, as though the words were directed at her, but even then, she didn't look away. Sui nodded in satisfaction at the sight.

"Amaha Kamikita got her just deserts. She started this war. And now *she's* going on a rampage because that woman died? Oh...what an unsightly display of revenge. Don't you agree, dear brother?"

"Yeah..." Yahiro concurred.

Indeed, Chiruka was weak. She relied entirely on Amaha and pushed all her hopes on her. The *Hikata's* captain and his crew recognized this weakness, but she didn't want to admit it until the end. Which led to her rampage. To her selfish, unsightly quest for vengeance.

"Ganzheit also wishes to get rid of Vanagloria. If you don't want to cooperate, then we will take care of her by ourselves," Nathan said flatly.

Yahiro shook his head. He couldn't let Chiruka get away with the consequences of her weakness, but then again, one could say he was just as guilty for not being capable of stopping her. He had the responsibility to put an end to her retaliation.

“You said you’d help me kill the dragon, didn’t you, Sui?”

“Yes, my dear brother. But first, I need you to show me your good faith,” Sui said, narrowing her eyes impishly.

“Good faith?” Yahiro repeated warily.

Sui nodded and walked toward him. She got close enough to where he could easily kill her, but as defenseless as she was, she looked up at him and said:

“Let’s see. Will you kiss me?”

“You’ve gotta be kidding.” Revulsion burned in his eyes.

Sui’s eyes widened in surprise, and she put her index finger to her lips.

“No, I am not. You should be aware that a dragon only grants the Regalia to the one its medium falls in love with,” she said in an entirely serious tone.

Yahiro heard Iroha gasp behind him. Sui gave her an amused glance.

“It was so, so long ago that we last met. If you want me to lend you Superbia’s powers, then you have to show me your love. In front of her.”

“...Fine.” Yahiro heaved a heavy sigh.

He could hear Iroha panicking, but he pretended not to notice.

Yahiro bent down on one knee before Sui and took her hand.



Then, he courteously kissed his stepsister's right hand, like a knight vowing loyalty to his princess.

"That enough, Sui?"

Yahiro let go of her hand and stood back up.

Sui was clearly displeased, but she accepted it a moment later after glancing at Iroha's shocked face.

"A kiss...on the back of my hand. Very well. I will allow it because of my love for you."

Sui raised her hand, displaying it to Iroha, before shrugging. Then, she directed her emotionless gaze at the approaching mountain dragon.

"Hollow."

The world creaked loudly at the sound of her beautiful voice.

Massive dragon aura gushed out of her, and a black shadow formed below Vanagloria.

Superbia, the earth dragon's Regalia, was the Hollow. The same power that opened a kilometers-wide hole at the heart of Tokyo to connect it to another realm.

The shadow below Vanagloria looked as though someone had poured ink into the sea; it reflected no light. It engulfed the giant dragon's size and even then kept on expanding.

Then, like opening a door, the black shadow turned into a hole. A bottomless pit.

Vanagloria roared. Its amber-colored body tilted as it lost its footing. Its mountainous form sank into the void, and the earth shook at the sudden change in load. The dragon's roars stirred the air all around.

Vanagloria unleashed her powers and changed the shape of her body. She turned into stakes clinging to the walls of the Hollow Regalia's pit. Stopping her fall shook the earth once again.

Cataclysm—there was no better way to describe the struggle between

Regalia.

“This is Sui’s Regalia?!” Iroha muttered, overwhelmed.

The utterance brought Yahiro back to his senses.

Vanagloria’s shape-shifting had prevented her from falling into the pit, but she could hope for no more. Inside the Ploutonion, she was separated from the earth. She could no longer absorb any more power from it.

“Iroha!” Yahiro picked her up in his arms.

“Eep!”

“Let’s go! We’ve got to save Chiruka now!”

“...Yeah!” Iroha looked confused at first, but immediately nodded at the emotion in Yahiro’s eyes.

Nuemaru understood and lay down beside them. Yahiro jumped on the white Raiju’s back and looked up at the giant dragon.

Vanagloria roared in pain, struggling against the Ploutonion, but her eyes still burned with hatred.

Somehow, she looked like a small girl crying for home.

9

Yahiro and Iroha rode the white thunder beast dashing toward the giant dragon that was stuck on the black pit’s walls.

Vanagloria struggled against Sui’s Hollow, but she had no power left to shift her huge shape. Yahiro could tell he could kill her for sure this time, as did she, enhancing her endeavors to escape.

The dragon maneuvered her few remaining Moujuu to try and stop their approach, but Iroha rendered the efforts useless. The Kushinada’s powers exceeded even the summoned dragon’s. Most of the Moujuu opened up a path for them, and Nuemaru struck those who still resisted.

Nuemaru ran across the dragon’s forelimb that stabbed into the pit’s walls. Soon, metallic crystal blades shot like a line of spears at him.

“Nuemaru?!”

“Dammit!”

Yahiro unleashed his sword’s flames against the Saber Hills and Blade Groves, but some of them managed to slash Nuemaru’s body before his counter. Miasma, the Moujuu’s blood, gushed out his body, leaving a black stain on his pure-white fur.

Still, Nuemaru didn’t slow down. Quite the opposite: he accelerated, leaving Vanagloria’s attacks in the dust.

“I’m sorry... I’m so sorry, Nuemaru! Please keep it up just a bit more!” Iroha shouted in prayer, clinging to the Raiju’s neck.

Nuemaru howled in response.

He had lost most of his body mass after suffering great injury a few days back, and was only able to keep his giant form now thanks to Iroha sharing her power. He was already past his limits before the mountain dragon’s attack. And yet, he pushed forward to fulfill his mission.

Vanagloria’s towering, defenseless neck was already within reach.

“—!”

The dragon squeezed out the last of her strength to create countless crystal swords with her Regalia, blocking their approach.

Yahiro’s purging flames weren’t enough to penetrate the sword armor, but Vanagloria was forgetting something. He wasn’t the only Lazarus attacking her.

“I’ll take that off. Look for the right timing, Yahiro Narusawa!”

Yahiro heard a voice above their heads.

A tilt-rotor flew behind Nuemaru, and from it extended a rope. Holding on to it was Hisaki, gripping a sword on the other hand.

“Got it. Don’t mess it up, Hisaki Minato!”

“Right back at you!” Hisaki was obviously irritated by Yahiro’s cheap provocation.

He did not, in fact, mess it up. He let go of the rope as soon as the aircraft

rose, and slammed the sword enveloped in dragon aura against Vanagloria's back.

"Down to the dark abyss with you, mountain dragon!"

Hisaki's Regalia activated and her armor lost its shape. Vanagloria immediately tried to form a new one, but Yahiro was faster.

"Hyaaaaa!"

A scorching flash filled Yahiro's vision as a flaming blade born from the void slashed toward Vanagloria's neck.

Luxuria had ripped off her armor and Superbia had taken away her power to regenerate it. Now it was Iroha's turn to slice it off with her purging fire.

The dragon's death cries were drowned out by the explosion.

"Burn to ash... Blaze!" Yahiro swung his katana as Iroha's massive power coursed through his body.

With a loud cracking noise like rocks smashing together, Vanagloria's giant neck split off.

Deep fissures ran through the dragon's torso and tail before its gigantic, amber-colored form quaked and crumbled into a rain of stones.

The tilt-rotor flew away from the cloud of dust—thick like a volcano's fumes.

Yahiro looked out from the open hatch in the luggage compartment. The aircraft had picked them up right before Vanagloria collapsed.

Nina and Hisaki were there, too, as well as worn-out, dog-sized Nuemaru resting in Iroha's arms.

"We...did it?" Yahiro muttered while staring at the crumbling dragon.

The dust didn't let him get a clear view of Vanagloria, but the trembling caused by its steps and the strong pressure in the air around it were gone.

Meanwhile, Sui's giant pit remained. The bottomless Ploutonion wouldn't be filled even after swallowing the gigantic mountain dragon.

"What about Chiruka?!" Iroha asked him.

Yahiro shook his head ambiguously.

Slicing her head off made Vanagloria crumble, but Chiruka didn't appear from within the corpse. Still, he didn't get the sensation that he'd ended Chiruka's life, like he felt when he killed Count Raimat. Chiruka's soul was still out there somewhere. If the Ploutonion hadn't devoured it, that is.

"Rosé, let us down on the ground. I must stop Sui. Otherwise, this place'll get infested with Moujuu like the 23 Wards!" Yahiro said toward the cockpit.

Sui's pit wasn't just that. The Ploutonion's true purpose was to act as a gate to summon the Moujuu to this world. Vanagloria's carcass was blocking their path now, but there was no guarantee this would last forever.

"I know. Josh."

"Roger, Lady. But we've been hovering too much and got little fuel left. It's gonna get rocky, so hold o—Uwoh?!" The pilot let out a short scream.

The descending aircraft shook hard, throwing everyone in the luggage compartment off-balance. An exploding shock from the ground had reached all the way to them.

"What happened?!" Yahiro asked.

"This... This is Vanagloriaaa," Nina answered.

"Vanagloria...? Chiruka?!" Iroha exclaimed.

However, the turbulence was too strong to even try to peek outside. One of the plane's two engines was stalling from the shock.

"We're going down! Everyone just hold on to whatever you can!" Josh yelled from the cockpit.

Not ten seconds went by before another shock wave hit them as the aircraft touched land. It was strong enough to be considered a crash landing, but thanks to them flying low already, and one engine still being in operation, the plane suffered no major damage. The passengers' injuries were also only some bruises and sprains. Something easily ignored for a Lazarus.

"Chiruka...?!" Iroha jumped off the plane.

The dust cloud was still thick, but beyond it, on the desert Sui had opened up, there was a girl standing. Iroha was speechless at the sight of her.

Vanagloria's head had fallen off outside the bottomless pit. Her last-ditch effort succeeded, and she escaped from falling into the Ploutonion.

Now, from that dragon's head, the girl had regenerated her body.

However, this was not Chiruka Misaki.

She couldn't even be called human any longer.

Her injured body was covered in fractured, amber-colored scales. Claws came out of her fingers, and the long tail extending from her back just barely kept her standing.

It was a dragon that failed to go back to human form. Or perhaps a human that failed to transform into dragon form.

Yet, despite her aberrant form, Chiruka was still beautiful. Vestiges of her humanity remained in the dragon girl.

"Not looking good. She still has her Regalia," Hisaki said stiffly as he got off the plane.

Yahiro looked at him, puzzled. "What?"

"You don't feel the shaking?"

"This earthquake...? This is Vanagloria's Regalia?" Yahiro clenched his jaw at the intermittent quaking at his feet.

Vanagloria's power affected the Earth's crust—the nightmare scenario was becoming reality.

"Her Regalia's area of effect is too wide. Mount Fuji could erupt if she stirs the Earth's crust with this much power."

"Althooough, south Kanto would be torn to pieces by the earthquake before any of that happens," Nina added to Hisaki's explanation.

Their tone lacked gravity because they had nothing left to protect in this country.

Still, Yahiro didn't have the time to lose by arguing with them. Sui and Nathan

took notice of Chiruka before anyone else and were already approaching.

“It would be no problem if we kill her before that happens, don’t you think?”

Sui stretched her hand out to Chiruka, pouring her dragon aura across the earth until the shadow reached the dragon girl’s feet. She was intent on hurling her into the gate to the otherworld as she’d done to Vanagloria.

“Your quest for revenge ends here. So long and good night.”

A hole opened up at Chiruka’s feet as soon as Sui finished her line. Her body was thrown in the air to be swallowed into the pitch-black darkness, but then, a flash blinded Yahiro and the rest on his side.

A heatless fire vortex swirled. Iroha’s purging flames burned away the hollow opening at her feet.

“I’m not letting you...do that!” Iroha shot Sui a powerful glare.

“My.” Sui grinned.

“Stop, Chiruka! Please!”

Iroha ran toward her, but metallic crystal blades emerged from the ground to block her path.

Sui laughed aloud at the sight.

“What shall we do, dear brother? Will we stand and watch as Vanagloria destroys the country? Or shall we throw her to the pits of hell?”

“Umm... I don’t mind the killing, but uhh, would you mind waiting for a liiittle bit?” the other dragon medium, Nina Himekawa, asked in a carefree tone.

Iroha, a desperate look on her face, and Sui, a murderous look on hers, turned around. Nina stretched herself and looked up at the sky.

A small aircraft flew through the skies, which were starting to lighten due to daybreak. It was a Galerie Berith tilt-rotor, just like the one Josh piloted.

“Seems like we made it in time.”

A voice very similar to Rosé’s, but with an entirely different air about it, came through the comms.

“Giuli...?” Yahiro called her name in confusion.

The twin had stayed back at the *Hikata*, saying she had something left to do. Why was she arriving now?

“Man, it was just such a hard time taking her out of there. I thought we’d be too late.”

Giuli answered an unasked question as the aircraft tilted its rotors to land. The movement was careful but not slow; had to be Paola at the yoke.

“Chiruka Misaki...stopped?” Nathan said, standing behind Sui, his brow deeply furrowed.

He was right: The earthquake had finally paused. Chiruka had stopped her Regalia.

The half-human, half-dragon girl opened her nictitating-membraned eyes wide, staring at the aircraft that just landed. Her claws reached for the person showing from the back hatch.

“A-aaah...!” A sob left her throat.

Then, Yahiro felt a strong heat. He reached for his uniform’s pocket, to the source of it: the crimson stone. The crystal Amaha had left behind.

“A-a...ma...ha...!” Chiruka’s lips, far from human shape, forced themselves into position to pronounce the word.

From the plane’s luggage compartment came a barefooted girl, wearing only a white shirt. Long, black hair, tied up in a ponytail, swayed behind her tall, elegant back.

“Amaha Kamikita?” Hisaki muttered in confusion.

“No.” Yahiro shook his head. “No... That’s her clone...”

“A clone born from Lazarus cells? Didn’t she lose her powers?” Hisaki grunted in shock.

Yahiro kept quiet as he stared at the girl in the white shirt.

Yes, Amaha had lost her Lazarus powers, and the clone was a failure. She couldn’t live outside the tank filled with Chiruka’s Ichor, and hadn’t inherited

Amaha's memories.

As proof of this, with every step she took, her cultivated body crumbled bit by bit into ashes. And still, she walked straight toward Chiruka, as though certain that this was her duty.

"That must be Amaha's last bit of strength... Or rather..." *Her true wish*, Yahiro thought.

Not reinstating Japan. Not revenge. Just spending life with Chiruka.

"Ama...ha...!"

"Chiruka..."

The half-human/half-dragon and the incomplete clone dragged their wounded bodies closer and closer to each other, until they met in a strong embrace.

Then, all strength left their bodies and they both fell to the ground. Their bodies crumbled away like glass shattering into sparkling fragments.

Once they vanished, the only thing that remained of the two was the crimson crystal in Yahiro's hand.

"Chiruka..." Iroha whispered her friend's name.

But no one was there to answer her call.



Epilogue

Giulietta and Rosetta visited Fort Yokohama Tower four days after Vanagloria's rampage. The Guild had summoned them to talk about the incident.

The drawing room hardly deserved its title for how drab it was. The Head of the Guild, Evgraf Leskin, was there with the other three members of the top brass, staring down at the Berith twins from a higher level. It looked like a trial.

Vanagloria's attack was stopped before it happened, but the Moujuu she summoned wiped out the majority of the US Navy forces that controlled the Kanagawa area, and the Guild had also suffered material damages, though at a lesser scale. The leaders were, naturally, upset.

The twins' expressions as they were interrogated, however, were not uneasy. They looked the same as always.

"Let me see if I understand your argument," Leskin, seated at the center of the room, said with a stern face. "Galerie Berith was only selling weapons to the Council for Japanese Independence, and had nothing to do with the dragon's rampage, correct?"

"Couldn't be more correct. What do we have to gain, instigating all that?" Giuli waved her hand with a friendly smile.

Rosé had the usual blank look on her face as she looked up at them with a bit of scorn.

"In fact, we helped stop the rampage. Didn't your scouts report that to you?"

"S-still...there's no denying the fact that the weapons you sold to the Council were part of the reason they antagonized the US Navy," Akulina Jarova, standing behind Leskin, counterargued in irritation.

The Guild already knew that the Council for Japanese Independence tried

forcing negotiations with the US Navy by implying they had cluster munition cruise missiles. And the truth of the matter was that it was Galerie Berith who sold them those missiles.

The twins, however, raised a brow, wondering what the issue was with that.

“We’re merchants. We sell the goods, but we’ve got no responsibility over what our client does with them.”

“Even if we weren’t to sell the weapons, the Council would simply obtain them from elsewhere. As you may know, they started negotiations with the US Navy before we even delivered the goods.”

“...It’s fine, at the end of the day. Fort Yokohama suffered no loses. And it also seems that your dragon medium closed the new Ploutonion Superbia opened.” Leskin let out a heavy sigh.

The statement relaxed the tense mood in the room, if only a little. And so the Guild decided not to hold Galerie Berith responsible for what happened.

“Yup. And if it wasn’t for her, this area would’ve ended up just like the 23 Wards. Probably,” Giuli added, looking to get some gratitude out of them.

“Likely.” Leskin nodded.

After Vanagloria—Chiruka Misaki—vanished, Sui Narusawa and Auguste Nathan were taken back by Ganzheit escorts.

Iroha had to purge the Ploutonion Sui left behind, so in the end Yahiro let Sui go. Not that he had any energy left to fight Nathan in the first place; it would be more accurate to say that Yahiro was the one being let off the hook.

“What will you do with the Regalia?” Leskin asked them nonchalantly.

“What do you mean?” Rosé tilted her head.

Leskin snorted in annoyance. “Don’t play dumb. You obtained Vanagloria’s Regalia, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but, well, we didn’t really obtain it, but rather...”

“Toru Natazuka gave it to you, huh?” Leskin muttered sarcastically.

Rosé nodded.

Akulina shivered in fear.

Kaname Kashima let Yahiro keep Amaha's crystalized blood. For now. Tristitia's medium would surely come back for it one day, alongside the strongest Lazarus.

"You can take it if you want, if Yahiro and Iroha allow it."

"No, thanks. That rock's nothing more than a curse." Leskin grimaced at Giuli's irresponsible suggestion. Then, he looked at the twins seriously. "Tell me, Galerie Berith. Can we trust Avaritia's medium to be on the side of humanity?"

Their moods changed entirely upon hearing that. All emotion left Giuli's eyes, and her lips curved into a thin grin.

"Interesting question, Leskin. Didn't expect to hear that from you."

"All dragons have to be killed by a human hand, sooner or later. Be it a wicked dragon, or a holy dragon," Rosé responded calmly, the murderous intent in her emotionless eyes not completely hidden.



The boat was docked at the small pier right beside the Galerie Berith barracks. It was about eight meters long, a vessel meant for coastal pleasure trips.

Hisaki was loading water and spare fuel, preparing for departure. Nina was sitting on the bench at broadside, her curly hair swaying with the afternoon sea breeze.

"You're really leaving?" Iroha asked from the pier, a sad look on her face.

She and Yahiro were there to say good-bye to Nina, who had finished what they'd come there to do.

"I know it sounds surprising, but I reeeally am a researcher at CERG." Nina puffed out her chest proudly.

It sure didn't feel like it because of her peculiar way of speaking, but she was a genius who had skipped grades to graduate university and worked for the European Organization for Graviton Research.

She refused to the very end to talk about how she became a dragon medium and made a vow with Hisaki.

“There’s this observatory in the former Tsukuba city that the French army coonfiscated, and that’s where I should be working. Aren’t you curious about what sort of effects Vanagloria’s emergence and disappearance had on the world?” Nina said excitedly, as always.

Knowing that, Iroha and Yahiro couldn’t ask them to stay any longer. A dragon, a being powerful enough to reshape the world, had disappeared. They couldn’t ignore the possibility of obtaining data on what this meant for the world.

“Take this, Hisaki Minato.” Yahiro shoved a big box wrapped in cloth to him.

Hisaki, standing on the boat, took it with a puzzled expression.

“What is this?”

“*Korokke*. I think it turned out pretty good,” Iroha replied with confidence.

Yahiro sighed subconsciously. Iroha had made him help her prepare the parting gift, and he had peeled potatoes from early in the morning.

“Thank you.” Hisaki kept a straight face even as he nodded, though surely not out of consideration for Yahiro’s efforts.

Meanwhile, Nina cheered and clapped, chanting “*korokke, korokke*” like a small child.

“The kids will miss you... And I will, too...” Iroha sniffled; she had been holding back the tears for a while now.

Having to say good-bye to a fellow Japanese survivor was part of it, but Iroha’s siblings were especially attached to Nina. She had decided to leave right now, while they were in “class,” so they wouldn’t cry.

“I’m sure we’ll meet again. I’ve got my promise with Yahiro, toooo,” Nina said cheerily, while Iroha wailed out loud.

Yahiro furrowed his brow, and Iroha looked up all of a sudden, tears gone.

“...Promise?”

“Uh... Yeah, I shouldn’t have said that. Forget about it.” Nina laughed and waved to try and gloss over it.

Hisaki took off the mooring rope and navigated the boat away from the pier.

Iroha's cheeks remained puffed in a pout as they watched them go.

"...So, what's this about a promise with Nina?" Iroha glared at Yahiro the moment the boat disappeared on the horizon.

Yahiro shrugged. Making something up wouldn't be too hard, but he could easily imagine how mad she would get when the cat was out of the bag. So he decided to tell the truth.

"Nothing big. She said she'd help me kill Sui."

"You promised that?! And you didn't tell me?!" Iroha's eyes went wide and she raised her brows.

Yahiro sighed. "You'd say no if I did."

"That's because...killing your sister isn't okay..."

"My sister, eh? Doesn't seem like she thought of me as her brother, though." A self-derisive grin escaped him.

Only *he* treated her like a sister. She'd never seen him as family, and because of this, their feelings each veered off into different directions, and ultimately the J-nocide happened. All because he couldn't accept her feelings.

Which was why he had to kill her. Before she committed the same mistake twice.

"Really...?" Iroha stared at him uneasily, but her impressions were different from what he imagined. For some reason, she narrowed her eyes grumpily and said, "That's why you kissed her?"

"Hah?" Yahiro grunted. "I kissed...her hand."

"That's still a kiss. I'll tell you now, I didn't like the sight of that, not a bit." Iroha placed her hands on her hips.

Yahiro pursed his lips. "Well, what'd you want me to do? What other choice was there?"

"I know... You did that because I didn't have the power to stop Chiruka, right?" Iroha's smile crumbled and she looked down with a trembling sob.

“That’s why you had to kneel before her... I’m sorry... I’m so sorry...”

“It’s nothing you should apologize for.” Yahiro patted her head roughly.

He’d bent the knee like a subject for his queen and kissed the hand of the girl he had to kill. Sui was satisfied with that because she knew how humiliating it was for him, and Iroha wasn’t dense enough to not realize it.

“Still... I’m sorry,” Iroha said between sobs.

“Geez.” Yahiro then drew his face near her ear. “Fine. Want me to do the same to you?”

“No.”

“Wha—?”

Yahiro was taken aback by her immediate refusal.

She wiped her tears away and raised her head.

“Not the same. Do something more special.”

“Special how?”

“Figure it out yourself!” she exclaimed like a sulky child.

Oh, bother. Yahiro shook his head, then casually asked, “Would a kiss on the cheek be all right?”

Iroha’s eyes lost focus for a moment, but she soon nodded firmly.

“W-well, if you really want to do that, then I might as well allow it.”

“Uh-huh...” Yahiro cracked a smile.

He grabbed her chin, and she shut her eyes and winced. She was fine letting him rest on her lap, but apparently, a peck on the cheek was too much. Her reaction made him burst out in laughter.

“Nah, forget it.”

“Why?!”

“There’s no reason to do it. That thing with Sui is over, in the past.”

“Awww...” Iroha pouted and puffed out her blushing cheeks. She felt like he

was toying with her.

Yahiro ignored her and walked toward the Galerie barracks.

“Gosh!” Iroha huffed in outrage and ran after him. “Th-that’s not fair! You have to kiss me, too!”

“Wh-whaaat?!”

It wasn’t Yahiro who exclaimed in response; it was a small shadow coming around the corner of the building. A serious-looking girl wearing a sailor uniform. Iroha’s sister, Ayaho Sashou.

The rest of her siblings appeared from behind Ayaho, one after the other.

“A-Ayaho? And all of you... Weren’t you in class with your Galerie teachers?” Iroha asked stiffly.

“We just finished, and we came here to say good-bye to Nina...,” Ren, the sibling who was truly a person of character, explained awkwardly.

Kyota paid no heed to his elder brother’s consideration and his eyes lit up as he asked, “You two are kissing?”

Rinka and Honoka squealed, and the nine-year-old trio started chanting, “““Kiss, kiss!”””

“N-no, we were just, uh, um... Yahiro, explain!”

“Go, Nuemaru. Catch.”

Yahiro played with the white beast Runa’d brought, ignoring all the fuss.

“Heartless bastard!”

Iroha’s yell echoed through the city of mercenaries.

A fleeting memory of peace for the survivors of the ruined country.

The clear, blue summer sky spread above the ruins.

And over in the faraway horizon flew pure-white cumulonimbus clouds.

They stood like a tombstone for the lost dragon.

Afterword

How did you like Volume 2 of *Hollow Regalia*?

I took the subtitle for this volume from the idiom “between the devil and the deep blue sea,” which I’ve wanted to use for this series for a long time. It means to be in a dilemma, having two choices that are equally unpleasant, and I think it fits the contents of the book.

The story took place out in the sea this time around, and we got many more new dragon mediums, as well as their Lazaruses. And none of them are decent people. Makes you feel like Nathan was one of the better ones. It was also revealed that the dragons in this series are modeled after the Eight Trigrams. Usually, the one for *dui* is taken as *lake*, but here, I translated it as *marsh*. The Chinese characters for these two are very close in meaning, and put together, they mean *swamp* in Japanese. I preferred the latter because I felt like *the lake dragon* would sound a bit too cute.

Yahiro and Iroha finally go outside the ruins of the 23 Wards and into inhabited land, but having lost its native population, Japan is far from the same place. They will meet many new people in this changed world and get to know their desires and the fates that await them because of it.

I hope you keep on enjoying their journey.

Gakuto Mikumo

I reached a
million views!

I would
never leave
you.

Welcome, Kushinada. Queen
of the Underworld. Don't look...

03

Not now...

You're going
against your
master?!

All Hell

Breaks Loose

Why do
you think the
Lazarus exists?

Know your
place, doll!

Rejoice, Yahiro
Narusawa. This
is the world you
wished for.

Good-bye, dear
brother. I'm glad
I got to say it...

You still

Can't let
injustice
slide!

can't remember

**HOLLOW
REGALIA**

I know this place.

The killer is
a Lazarus?!

It's time for
revenge!

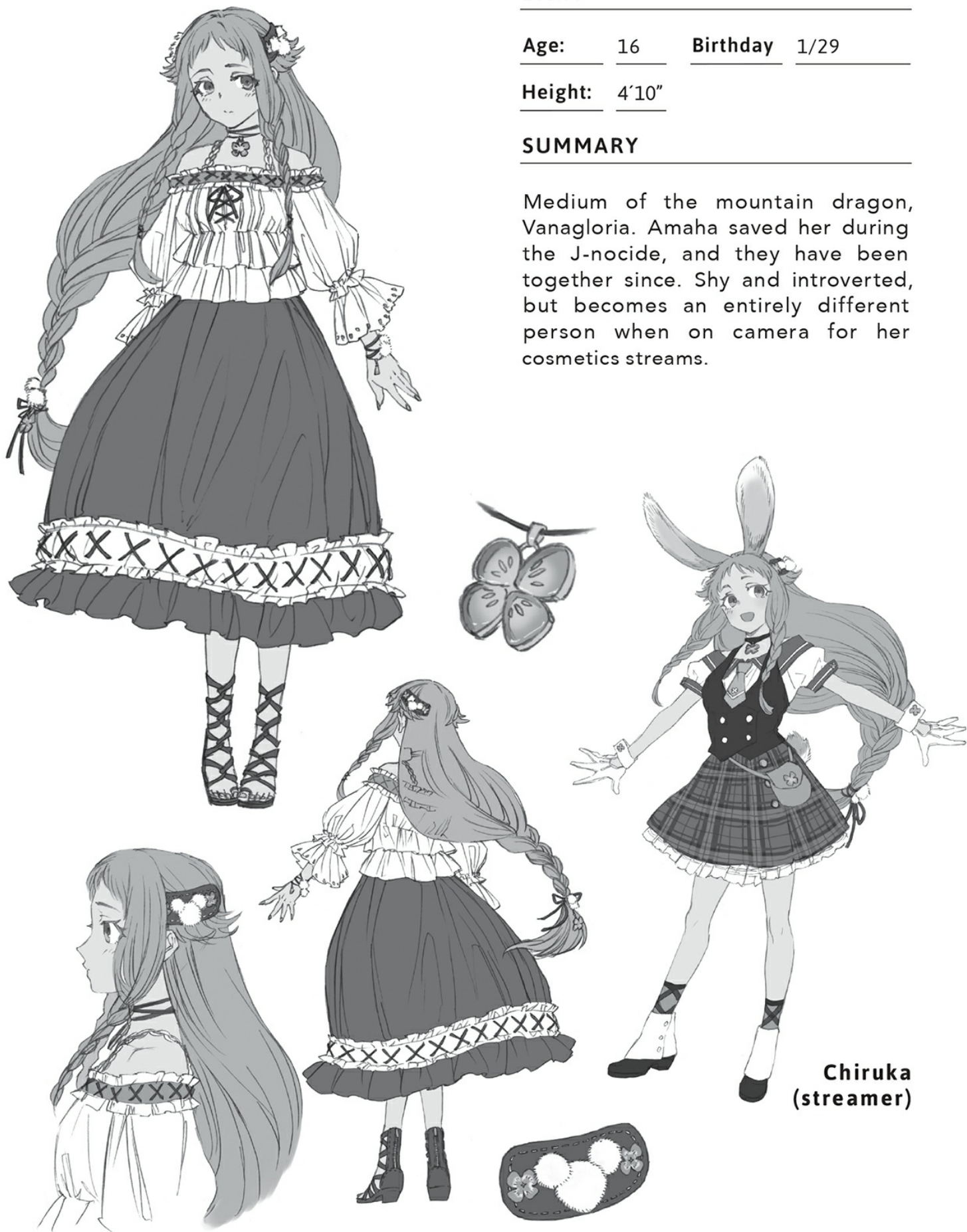
Chiruka Misaki—Mountain Dragon Medium

DATA

Age:	16	Birthday	1/29
Height:	4'10"		

SUMMARY

Medium of the mountain dragon, Vanagloria. Amaha saved her during the J-nocide, and they have been together since. Shy and introverted, but becomes an entirely different person when on camera for her cosmetics streams.



Chiruka
(streamer)

CONFIDENTIAL

Amaha Kamikita—Lazarus

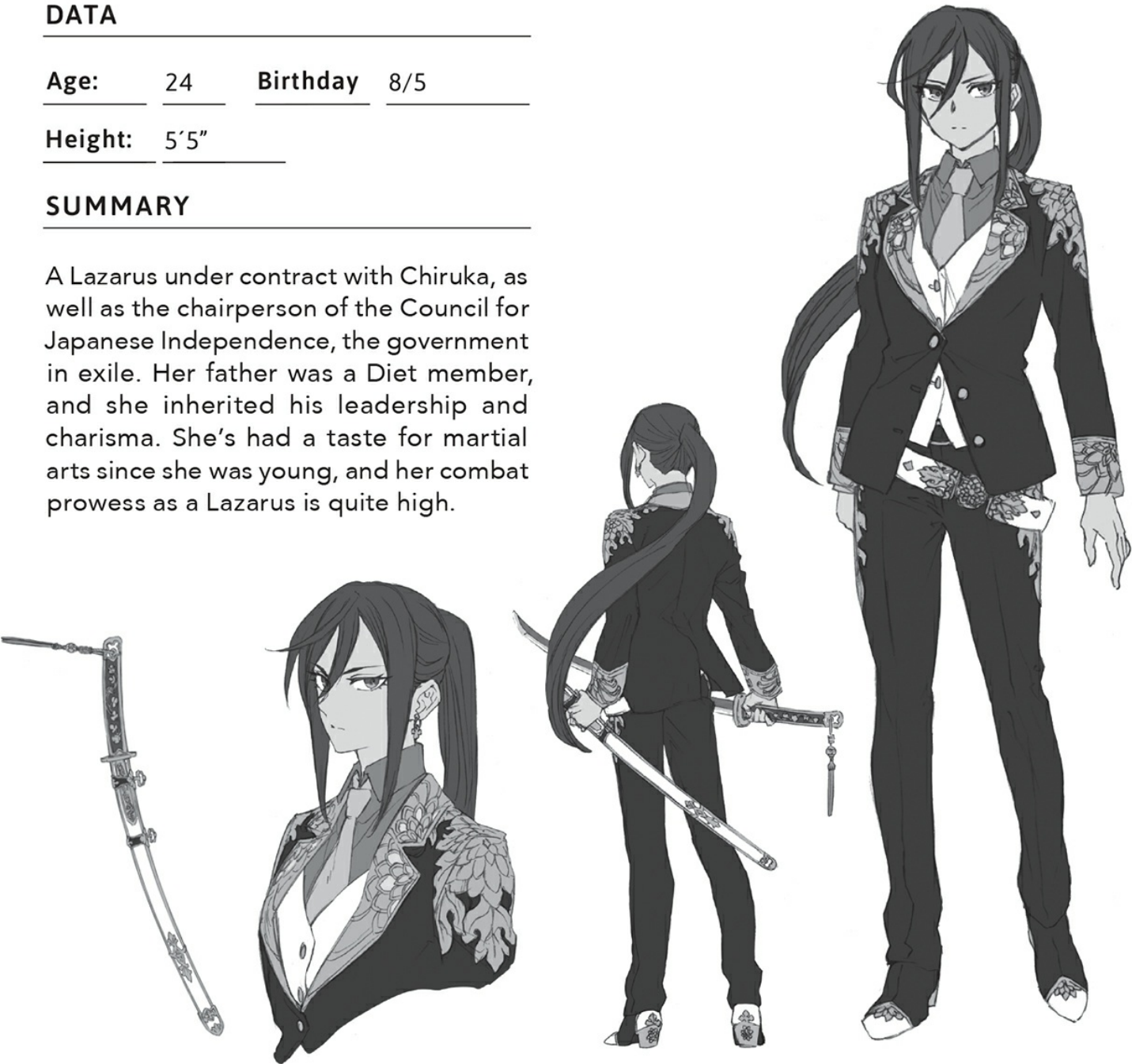
DATA

Age: 24 Birthday 8/5

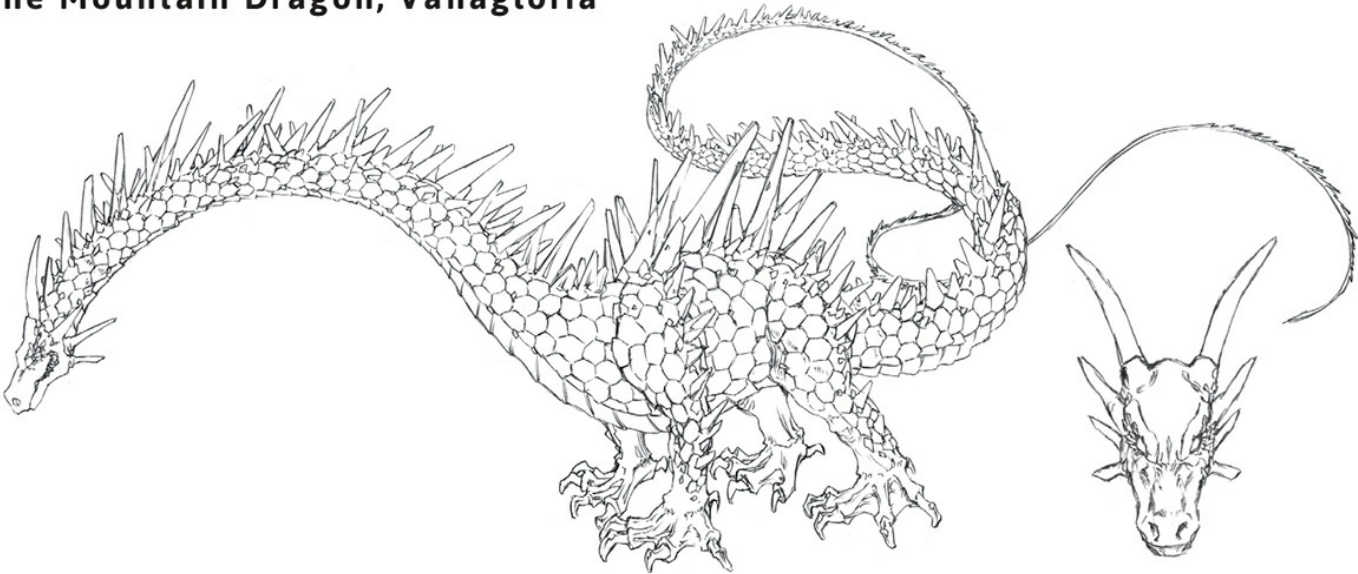
Height: 5'5"

SUMMARY

A Lazarus under contract with Chiruka, as well as the chairperson of the Council for Japanese Independence, the government in exile. Her father was a Diet member, and she inherited his leadership and charisma. She's had a taste for martial arts since she was young, and her combat prowess as a Lazarus is quite high.



The Mountain Dragon, Vanagloria



Nina Himekawa—Marsh Dragon Medium

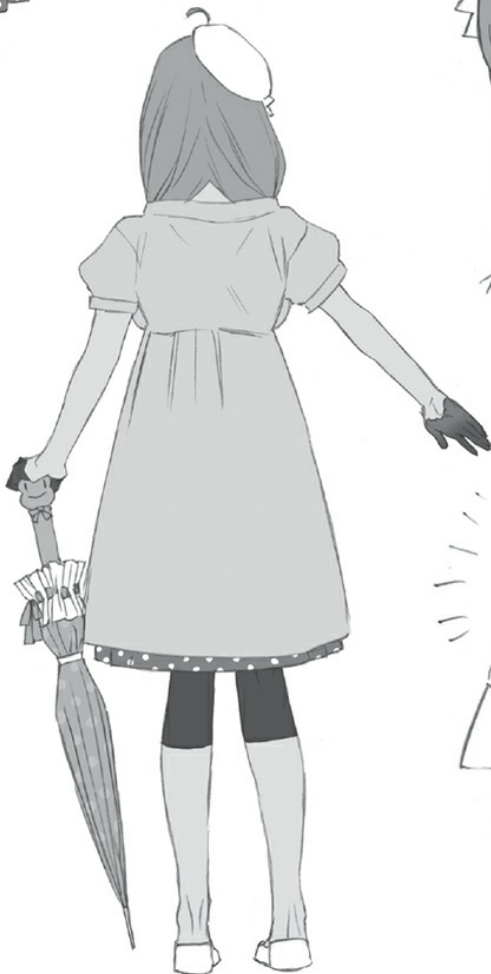
DATA

Age: 22 Birthday 2/14

Height: 4'9"

SUMMARY

Lab member of the European Organization for Graviton Research (CERG). A genius who skipped grades to graduate from university. She is the medium of the marsh dragon, Luxuria, and is investigating the powers of the dragons through the lens of physics.



CONFIDENTIAL

Hisaki Minato—Lazarus

DATA

Age: 18 Birthday 4/11

Height: 5'8"

SUMMARY

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



Akulina Jarova

Age: 24 Birthday 12/9
Height: 5'4"

Secretary of the head of the Guild, Leskin. Wise and at times too serious. Born into a wealthy family, but their fortune was lost in a civil war, and she was rescued by Leskin at the last moment. This is why she thinks of him as her own father.



Evgraf Leskin

Age: 64 Birthday 3/20
Height: 6'1"

Head of the Guild of Private Military Companies in Fort Yokohama. Known as a legendary mercenary, he holds strong influence over many big PMCs even today.

Marius Gibeah

Age: 34 Birthday 11/12
Height: 6'

World-famous filmmaker. Son of the chairman of Gibeah Environment, a huge corporation dealing with cosmetics and water resources. He supports the Council for Japanese Independence for his own ambitions and to boost his company's profits.



CONFIDENTIAL

GIBEAH ENVIRONMENT

Karura Myoujiin

Age: 20 Birthday 7/5

Height: 5'3"

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



Kaname Kashima

Age: 17 Birthday 1/17

Height: 5'1"

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

Toru Natazuka

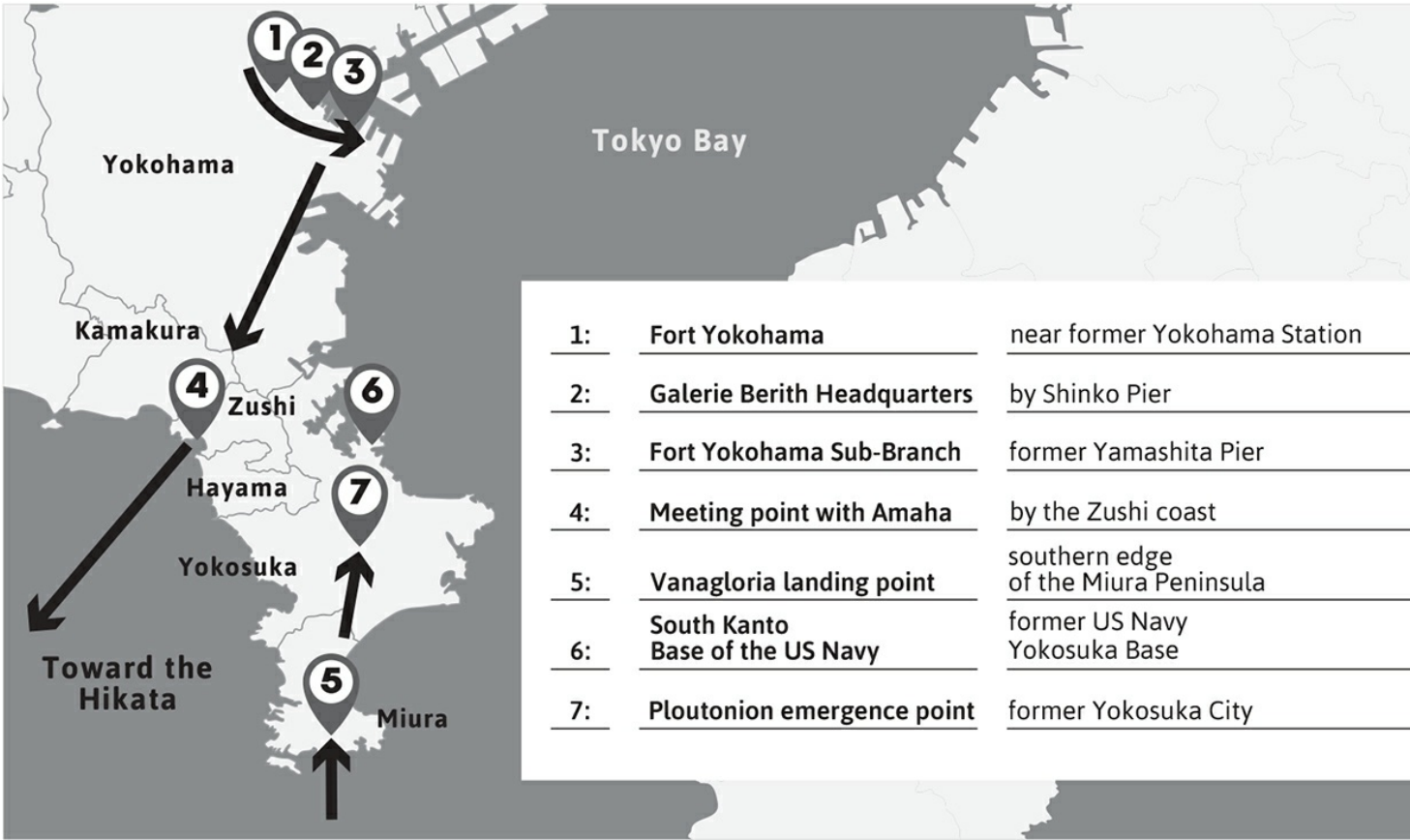
Age: 19 Birthday 9/8

Height: 5'5"

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



Area of Operations Map



The Guild

Mutual-aid organization for private military companies based in South Kanto. Its main objective is to manage the ports' facilities; it acts as a middleman for jobs and mediates conflict between companies.

The Council for Japanese Independence

A government in exile founded by Japanese survivors. They aim to reestablish Japan as a sovereign nation. However, in reality, they are little more than pirates.

Fort Yokohama

The Guild's base, fortifying what used to be Yokohama Station. Maintenance spots for the trains and power generation facilities have been serviced. Reportedly, about 100,000 mercenaries live there.

Hikata

An amphibious assault ship of the former JMSDF. It is the only territory the Council for Japanese Independence currently owns. Its main weaponry are two 20mm autocannons, one VLS device, and torpedo tubes.

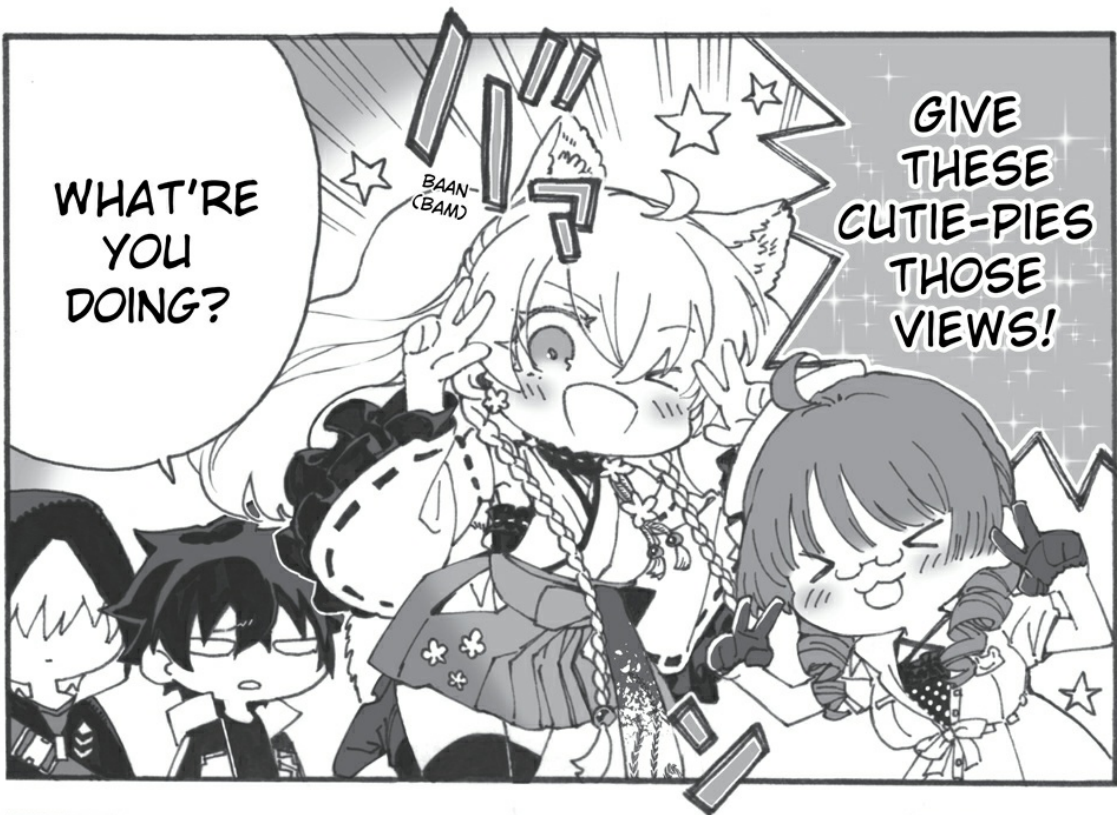
European Organization for Graviton Research (CERG)

A laboratory for the investigation of particle physics in Europe. After the J-nocide, they took over high energy accelerator facilities in Japan. Nina Himekawa belongs to this organization.

The Heavenly Imperial House

A family of rulers with a long history in Japan. They have relinquished political power in the nation. They have their own imperial guard called the Holy Court. It is also said their ancestors were dragon slayers, and that the treasure from that time has been passed down from generation to generation.

Celebratory Illustration



I HAD A LOT OF FUN COMING UP WITH THE DESIGN FOR SO MANY NEW CHARACTERS. I HOPE I GET THE CHANCE TO DRAW MORE OF THOSE WHO DIDN'T GET TO HAVE INSERT ILLUSTRATIONS!

深游
MIYUU

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