

03

GAKUTO
MIKUMO

Illustration by
MIYUU

HOLLOW REGALIA

ALL HELL BREAKS
LOOSE



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REGALIA

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Breaks
Loose

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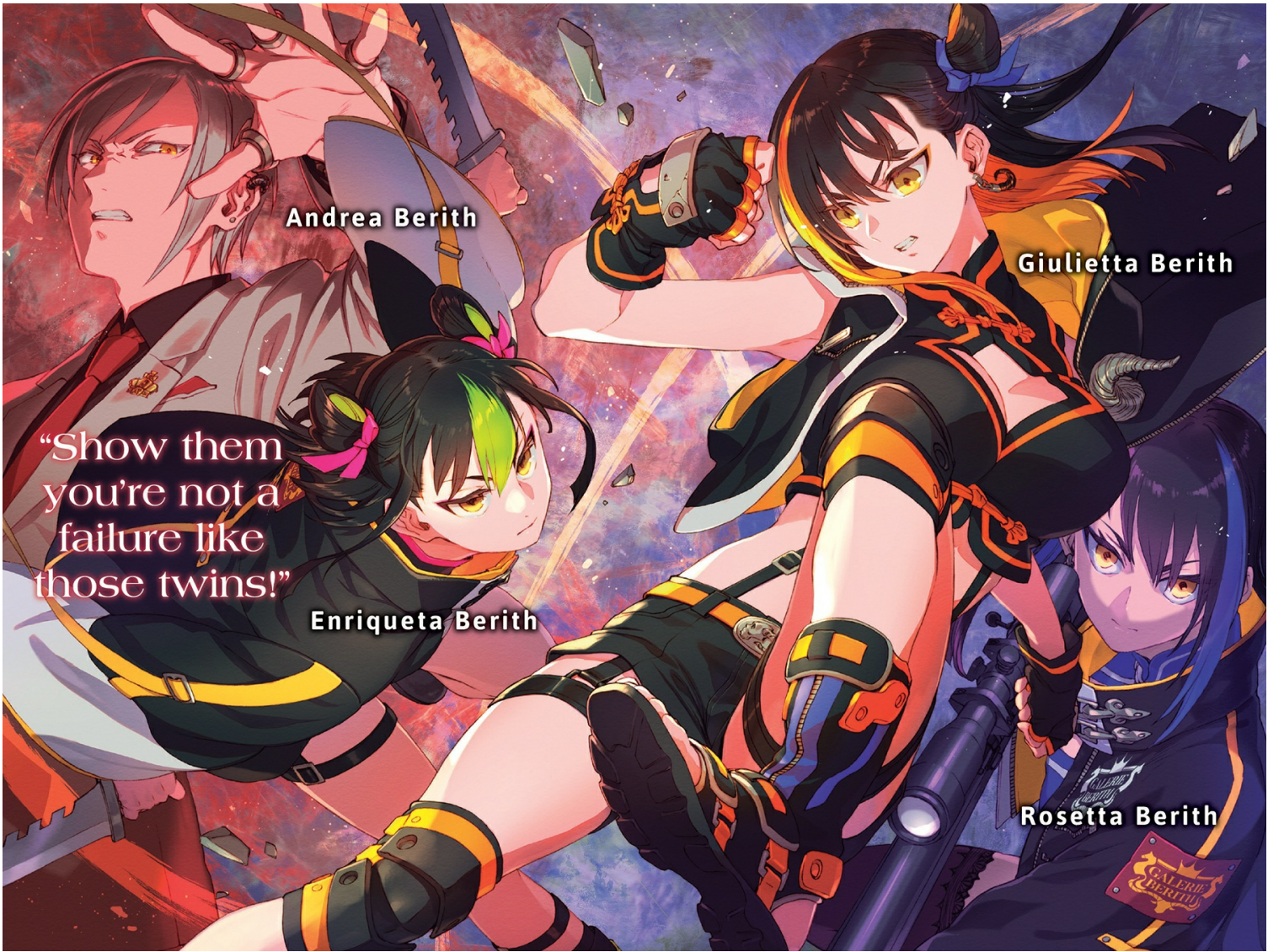
Illustration by
MIYUU



Enriqueta Berith
Andrea Berith







Andrea Berith

Giulietta Berith

"Show them
you're not a
failure like
those twins!"

Enriqueta Berith

Rosetta Berith

Opening Act:	Prologue
Act 1:	Reveal the Secret
Act 2:	Force Charge
Act 3:	Enemy from the Past
Act 4:	Ploutonion
Act 5:	Truth
Final Act:	Epilogue
Afterword	

03

All Hell Breaks Loose

**HOLLOW
REGALIA**

HOLLOW REGALIA

All Hell Breaks Loose

03

Gakuto Mikumo

Illustration by MIYUU

YEN
ON
NEW YORK

Copyright

HOLLOW REGALIA—All Hell Breaks Loose Vol. 3

UTSURONARU REGALIA VOL. 3 All Hell Breaks Loose

Gakuto Mikumo

Translation by Sergio Avila

Cover art by Miyuu

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**The past
comes to
light.**



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



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



Josh Keegan—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 Nurusawa—Earth Dragon Medium

Younger sister of Yahiro Nurusawa. 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

A beautiful cityscape lay on the other side of the dense bamboo thicket.

It was a curious city, unlike the usual modern landscape. The streets divided it up like a game board, and it was adorned with orderly, detailed wooden houses.

At the heart of the city was a building of vermillion lacquer reminiscent of the Daidairi palace in Heian-kyo.

One woman stood on the wide street behind that grand building. A beautiful woman in luxurious Japanese clothing. Her appearance was right out of some folktale.

“So...you’re the Myoujiin princess?” Douji Yamase asked curtly.

He wore dirty cargo pants and a mesh vest. His hound-like appearance fit his cameraman profession superbly.

His stubble made him look old, but in reality, a surprisingly young face was underneath that facial hair and his sunglasses.

In his right hand, he held a digital camera, which was recording the city.

“I’m shocked, really. To think a city like this remained in Japan. Feels like I stepped into a theme park, to be honest.”

Yamase slowly looked around the deserted city before pointing the camera at the woman.

He was not the type to get flustered before such a gorgeous woman. The only fluctuation in his emotions came from the presence of the beast alongside her. A giant monster with the body of a tiger and the head of a monkey.

“And it’s under the Moujuu’s protection. What’s the gimmick here? How is this possible?” he asked her in a criticizing tone.

The Moujuu looked like fantastical beasts from ancient myth, but no one knew what they were. Only that their emergence had driven Japan to its ruin.

And yet, here in this curious city, the Moujuu obeyed this woman and protected the area. This was the only place left undestroyed.

“You’re not allowed to film here,” said the kimono-clad Moujuu tamer in a strange, friendly tone.

“What...?”

Yamase was confused at what had just come out of Karura Myoujiin’s mouth. The comment was so mundane it sounded off coming from a woman accompanied by a dreadful spectral beast.

“You need permission to enter this place. Please put the camera and other equipment down on the ground and leave,” Karura warned in a gentle manner and with a soft smile.

Yamase’s camera creaked in his tight grip. The bizarre way she acted completely normal in this godforsaken city made anger get the better of him.

“Those are nice clothes you’re wearing, princess.” Yamase heard a voice from behind him.

Glaring daggers at Karura was Yamase’s journalism buddy: Miyabi Maisaka.

Miyabi used to be a TV newscaster, and ever since the J-nocide, she had teamed up with Yamase to show the world the current state of Japan.

Miyabi was fuming. Karura’s detached, self-righteous attitude made Miyabi’s blood boil.

“Do you understand what the world is going through? The people of Japan were all killed while you royals were putting your feet up in here!”

“...So?” Karura tilted her head in puzzlement.

“What?”

“What do you want us to do about it?”

Karura looked honestly confused. Miyabi was at a loss for words.

Karura Myoujiin was the daughter of the head clan of Japan, once a symbol

for all Japanese people, and yet she seemed unconcerned that these same people had all been killed off.

“We’re not expecting anything of you. People in power never care about anyone but themselves. No matter the place or time,” Yamase answered in Miyabi’s place.

He steadily continued recording Karura’s cool expression.

“But either way, I will show the world what you really are. That’s my job.”

“Sometimes, it is best not to know the truth.” Karura closed her eyes, forlorn. She touched the crimson jewel adorning her chest. “But I suppose a couple of simpletons drunk on their own sense of justice wouldn’t understand.”

“That’s what I can’t stand about you! That haughty, know-it-all stance of yours makes me sick!”

Yamase growled, glaring at Karura’s pretentious smile.

Miyabi gasped behind him.

“Douji!”

“What is it? Wha...?!”

Yamase looked at Miyabi and realized—new Moujuu were standing on the building’s rooftop.

Not two or three. Well over two hundred. A massive flock of the beasts looked down on them, as if to interfere with his and Miyabi’s opposition against Karura.

“You’re controlling them?! You tamed all of these?!” Miyabi looked at Karura with fear in his eyes.

Karura having one or two Moujuu doing her bidding was understandable, if still incredible. But so many? He had to conclude that she could manipulate any Moujuu around; Karura Myoujiin had the power to control Moujuu.

She had to be related to their original emergence across Japan.

“Interesting... We’ve got a huge scoop!” Yamase shouted with excitement.

Then a flock of Moujuu jumped at him, baring their fangs.

Giant lizards in the shape of apes. No human could escape unharmed after being crushed by these beasts that were bigger than grizzlies.

“Miyabi!”

Yamase, however, did not panic, and tossed the camera to Miyabi. Then he drew a hunting knife from the sheath at his hip. The blade gleamed silver as he slashed the air horizontally.

It was big for a knife, but still under thirty centimeters. Not long enough to reach the Moujuu.

Even so, all the Moujuu within Yamase’s line of sight were slashed apart, cut by an invisible blade. The butchered beasts promptly expired, leaving only miasma behind.

The remaining Moujuu became even more aggressive upon the demise of their brethren. They let out ear-piercing howls and rushed at Yamase from all directions.

The results were the same. The beasts were cut down and turned to dust with every swing of Yamase’s knife. An invisible whirlwind of destruction slaughtered the Moujuu without mercy.

“Miyabi Maisaka... Ira’s...the wind dragon’s medium, correct? Which means you are her Lazarus, Douji Yamase,” Karura said flatly as she stared at the diminishing Moujuu herd.

Her voice lacked any surprise. From the very beginning, she knew only a dragon medium and her Lazarus could enter the city guarded by the Moujuu.

Then Yamase pointed his knife at Karura.

He had no intention of killing the subject he was reporting on, but there was no need to try and capture her unharmed, either. He would hurt her just enough to incapacitate her. And for that, he activated his Regalia.

However, his wind blade dissipated just before it could reach Karura.

The faint glow surrounding her canceled out the attack.

“It can’t be, that magatama...is the Regalia?”

The comma-shaped jewel adorning her chest glowed like fire.

Yamase groaned the moment he noticed it. That treasure could repel even a Lazarus's Regalia. It had to be that rumored, symbolic treasure.

"I will show you why the daughters of the Myoujiin clan are all named Karura generation after generation."

She ignored Yamase's question and touched the Crimson Magatama.

The next moment, crimson flames enveloped her body.

The bright, blinding fire filled Yamase's sight as it spread across the entire street.

It took on the shape of a giant scarlet bird spreading its fiery wings.

"Karura, also known as Garuda, is a birdlike god who shines hot like flames and preys on dragons."

Karura glanced at Yamase with a smile and the jewel held close to her chest.

In that moment, Yamase felt fear take over.

He swung the knife on reflex and released his Regalia at full power.

However, the storm he unleashed immediately vanished, without so much as swaying a strand of Karura's hair. The gale was devoured by the scorching flames.

"You purged...our wind?!"

Cold sweat dampened his back. His instinct yelled at him to leave this place as fast as he could.

But Karura's attack was quicker.

"Burn to ash...Blaze!"

Karura swung her left hand in the air.

The flames enveloping her took the shape of a blade and it charged Yamase and Miyabi.

Yamase tried to fight back with his wind, but the flames could not be stopped.

"Aaaagh!" A shriek escaped Miyabi. Karura's flames had reached her.

Yamase ran over and embraced his companion.

“Miyabi?! Stay with me, Miyabi!” He groaned as the fire spread further and scorched him, too.

He tried desperately to quell the flames, but the fire would not stop clinging to Miyabi. It squirmed like a snake, as though it had its own will to char her skin to the last cell.

“Karura...Myoujiiiiiiiiinnn!” Yamase roared, his face twisted with hatred.

Karura looked down upon the two with pity.

The flaming wings on her back bathed the ghostly city in a red light.

The Crimson Magatama—the Regalia—swayed bewitchingly under the flames’ glow.

+

A gray aircraft made its way through the clouds, inching closer and closer to the ground.

The combat aircraft was equipped with four turboprop engines. It lacked any ornament, as the military vehicle was built with only practicality in mind.

However, there was one strange corner of the plane, behind the cockpit. A luxury seat like that of a deluxe business jet, and gaudy furnishings that had been brought in by order of the craft’s owner.

A young man sat in that exclusive seat. A white man with silver hair.

He wore expensive accessories and a brand-name suit—clearly standing out among the mercenaries on the plane. Only he did not realize the oddness of his appearance or notice his underlings’ weird looks.

“Lord Andrea, please prepare for landing,” the person sitting beside him said flatly.

There was also a short Asian girl, about sixteen or seventeen years old. She had a shapely face, but it lacked emotion or expression—it looked more like a doll’s.

“Finally, Jesus.” The man sighed deeply after putting down his wineglass.

He was used to flying first-class; the swaying and noise of the military craft had him in a terrible mood.

“To think I would have to set foot on this remote, oriental island. I’m sick of it already.” He glanced out the window.

Below, he could see a city in ruins. Even the airport’s runway was in a terrible state; landing would be hard, if not impossible, without a military craft and its reinforced landing gear.

Nothing could be done about it. There were no airport employees to maintain it, after all. Most of this country’s citizens had died four years prior, in the J-nocide.

“Whatever. I suppose it won’t be too bad once I’m king. The Regalia are too valuable a treasure for your doll sisters, don’t you think, Enriqueta?” the man asked the girl with a sardonic smirk.

“Yes, Lord Andrea Berith.” She nodded like a machine, with a blank expression.

Her lustrous black bangs—a tuft of which was dyed green—swayed softly.

The man nodded in satisfaction and gulped down the remaining wine.

He wiped the red away from his lips with a handkerchief embroidered with the emblem of a crown, a horse, and a devil.

The emblem of arms dealer Galerie Berith.

HOLLOW
REGALIA

03 All Hell Breaks Loose

Presented by
GAKUTO MIKUMO

Illustration
MIYUU



Act 1 Reveal the Secret

1

He appeared out of the blue. Into my tiny little world in the ruins of what was once Tokyo—the 23 Wards. He brought with him flames and the smell of blood.

“You okay? Not hurt or anything?” was the first thing he said to me.

He risked his life to save me, a complete stranger, from wild Moujuu. He didn’t use a soldier’s gun, either—he cut down the beasts with only a katana.

I couldn’t say anything back to him at that moment. I couldn’t believe what had just happened.

A Japanese boy—a boy from a race I thought had been wiped out—faced the Moujuu with only a blade in hand just to save me. He was like a superhero in a movie.

Not even my little brothers would come up with that in their wildest dreams.

And yet, there he was. Taking me and my siblings to the outside world.

He has truly become my hero ever since that day. Although it wasn’t in my character to be the princess at the heroic knight’s side...

Now, my hero was defenseless, wearing only a pair of boxers as he stood on a scale.

+

“One hundred and seventy-six centimeters and seven millimeters... And your weight hasn’t changed at all since last time.” Ayaho Sashou awkwardly read out the precise measurement on the machine’s screen.

She wasn’t alone in her discomfort. Yahiro didn’t mind her knowing those numbers, but he sure felt a bit weird that a girl younger than him was taking his measurements.

“Sorry you had to do this,” he said to try and clear the air, as she recorded the data.

They were at the infirmary for operators in the Galerie Berith dormitory. The Lazarus boy had to keep a log of his health, taken once every two months, as per his contract with the Galerie. Executive Rosé had no reservations about making children work, and so she had Ayaho take care of the measurements.

“Oh, no, I’m glad there is something for me to do. We’ve been making Iroha do everything up until now.” Ayaho shook her head vigorously, then looked up at him shyly.

The fourteen-year-old was one of the children who had lived in the ruins of Tokyo with Iroha Mamana—the oldest of her siblings.

The dragon medium’s family was under Galerie Berith’s protection, but as they were all too young, they lacked value as workers. Ayaho understood their position couldn’t do them any favors and took it upon herself to prove they were worth the effort.

Still, Yahiro was confused by her statement.

“You mean she’s reliable enough for that?”

While she had the fantastical powers of a dragon medium, Iroha was quite a clumsy girl when it came to daily life. In fact, Ayaho and the rest seemed far more capable in his eyes.

“Huh? Uh... Yes... I believe.”

Ayaho realized what he meant and couldn’t entirely stand her ground in defending Iroha.

Yahiro laughed out loud in reaction, and it got an awkward smile out of Ayaho, too. At least this helped her relax.

“Hmm... You grew about one centimeter since you first came here, huh. Hmm...,” Giuli muttered in surprise as she peeked at the numbers from over Ayaho’s shoulder.

Galerie Berith’s executive manager and daughter of the House of Berith. It was hard to believe this whimsical kitten had the top seat of the Galerie’s far

eastern branch, but it was true.

“What?” Yahiro stared at her with suspicion. Why was she so impressed by that?

Giuli looked back at him and responded with utmost earnestness, “I was just amazed that even you can grow taller.”

“You thought I’d grow shorter? The last time I checked my height was in middle school, actually, and I’ve grown like six inches since.”

“Interesting. Thanks for the information,” answered another Asian girl with the same face as Giuli’s, albeit with a blank expression. The other executive manager of the Galerie and Giuli’s younger twin sister: Rosé.

“Interesting, how? Isn’t that much normal?”

“No, it’s a very valuable piece of information. It’s proof that the Lazaruses can grow.”

“What this means is, while you may be immortal, you’re not ageless,” Giuli explained.

“Oh... I see...” Yahiro finally understood their reactions.

After bathing in dragon blood and becoming a Lazarus, Yahiro could heal all wounds—even if he lost most of his body, it would regenerate given enough time. However, the mechanics of how it worked remained unknown.

If the Lazarus’s power included both immortality and perennial youth, he would stay the same no matter how many years went by. Growing meant aging. And Yahiro was growing appropriately for his age. Certainly, as Rosé said, this was an interesting discovery.

“However, there’s still the possibility that you might grow up to a certain point, then stop aging. Though the chances of this are slim,” Rosé added cautiously.

Yahiro’s brows knit as he pondered her statement.

“What makes you say that?”

“We haven’t found any surviving Lazaruses, which must have existed in the

past. Only their Regalia were left behind.”

“Oh...” Yahiro understood.

If the Lazaruses were immortal and ageless, then naturally, they would still be alive somewhere. Considering no Lazarus from the past had been found, one could easily conclude they lacked the element of eternal youth.

“Well, honestly, I just shudder at the thought of everyone I know dying while I keep living on forever. So I guess it’s for the best that I get a chance to die of old age eventually.”

“You sure about that? Growing old also means you might go bald one day.”
Giuli sneered.

Yahiro snorted. “Nah, not happening. No one went bald in my family.”

“I wonder about that.”

“It’s not happening, okay?! What’s with that look?! What do you know?!”
Yahiro barked back.

Ayaho couldn’t contain her laughter.

Yahiro crossed the room with an embarrassed look on his face and grabbed the white T-shirt that he’d left in a basket.

He had been measured already; no need to stand around half naked. He did his best to ignore Giuli’s and Rosé’s rude stares and put on the T-shirt quickly.

As he retrieved the T-shirt, something fell out of the basket, making a ringing sound as it hit the ground: a resounding echo like that of a piano key. It was a stone the size of a child’s fist. A shining, crimson gem.

“Um, Yahiro, you dropped this,” Ayaho said as she picked the red stone up.

“Oh, thanks for grabbing that.”

“No problem. It’s a very pretty stone, isn’t it?” she whispered as if enthralled, and then handed it to him.

Yahiro’s expression soured then. Like a child trying to hold back tears.

“Pretty, huh... Yeah, it is.”

“Yahiro?”

“Sorry. I was thinking about the person who left it behind. It’s sort of like a keepsake.”

“It is?” Ayaho’s eyes widened in surprise.

Yahiro smiled and nodded.

The crimson stone was left behind by Vanagloria’s Lazarus—it was Amaha Kamikita’s Regalia. The dragon blood that once flowed inside her body, crystalized.

Yahiro did not know the value of the crystal, but he couldn’t let go of it. Putting it somewhere like a decoration didn’t feel right. He simply kept it inside his pocket, carrying it at all times.

“Would you like me to make you a container for it? That way you could keep it with you,” Ayaho shyly suggested.

Yahiro found the idea a bit surprising.

“You mean like an amulet’s bag? Come to think of it, you’re good at sewing, aren’t you?”

“I wouldn’t say I’m good at it, but I enjoy doing it. I also made Iroha’s outfit.”

Ayaho glanced down bashfully. She was being too humble; the design and quality of the outfit Iroha used for her streams was much better than what you could find in stores.

“Is that so? Then please, take care of it.”

“Yes. I will be careful with it.”

Ayaho accepted the crystal and put it carefully inside her bag.

Yahiro’s eyes stayed glued on her hands as she did so, until he noticed a small plastic container on the desk. It was a blood sample.

“What’s this?”

“Iroha’s blood. Rosé took the sample just now. She said they would analyze it back at the Galerie’s headquarters...,” Ayaho answered.

“Rosé did?” Yahiro turned to glare at the girl in question. “What’re you doing with it? You’re not gonna use it to make Fafnir soldiers like Raimat did, I hope?”

“Not at all.” Rosé shook her head but maintained her usual blank expression. “That is nothing but blood. You can’t make the F-med with that.”

“Is...that so?”

“The F-med is made from Ichor—blood of a dragon medium in an awakened state.”

“Awakened?”

“You’ve seen it before. Back in Yokosuka,” Giuli answered.

The image of a fantastical yet beautiful girl crossed his mind.

“You mean Chiruka?”

Chiruka Misaki, Vanagloria’s medium, lost her human body and turned into a dragon girl. That form she’d taken when she failed to revert to her human body did resemble that of the lizardmen who used the F-med.

“We lack the know-how to obtain the Ichor from a dragon medium before her awakening, and that won’t make a profit. *You* already proved it worthless as a weapon,” Rosé said as she stared at him meaningfully.

Yahiro had annihilated Raimat’s sizeable Fafnir soldier forces all by himself. And with Iroha’s help, he also defeated its chairman, who had overdosed on the F-med.

The budget for its development would be too high. It had the risk of its user losing control, and they couldn’t defeat a single Lazarus even in great numbers. No army would want such a useless weapon. Rosé was right—the Galerie had no need for the F-med.

“Then why do you want Iroha’s blood?”

“We want to check if the dragon mediums’ bodies are the same as regular humans’,” Rosé responded frankly.

Giuli nodded with a grin.

“And the same goes for you, Yahiro. If the dragon mediums and the Lazarus

are no different from normal people, then that means anyone could become either under the right conditions.”

“And Galerie Berith is investigating what these conditions are.”

Yahiro observed Iroha’s blood sample before sighing softly.

The powers of the Regalia and the ability to summon giant dragons. That alone proved the dragon mediums were supernatural beings beyond the rules of physics.

And the key to revealing their secrets lay in their blood.

Yahiro understood that better than anyone else. After all, he had become a Lazarus after bathing in a dragon medium’s blood—Sui Narusawa’s, specifically.

“Where’s Iroha, by the way?” Yahiro asked Ayaho.

Her eyebrows drooped as she frowned a bit. “She’s in the training room.”

“Why?”

“She...said she’d go running in a sauna suit before I weigh her...”

“She think she’s a pro boxer or something?”

Yahiro sighed, and Ayaho chuckled awkwardly.

The next moment, hurried steps echoed from the hallway before the infirmary’s door was thrown open. A girl drenched in sweat, holding her precious smartphone, came rushing into the room.

“Yahiro! Where are you?!”

“...Iroha?” Ayaho muttered in shock at the other girl’s state of dress.

“What’s with that outfit?” Yahiro asked with a frown, then sighed.

Iroha was wearing a white T-shirt and blue shorts, like a middle schooler taking PE. She had taken off the sauna suit halfway through because she was too hot in it.

The sweat made the T-shirt cling to her skin and show the outlines of her underwear. She didn’t care about that, however. She shoved the smartphone in his face and, unable to contain her excitement, said: “Whatever! That’s not

important! Look at this!”

Yahiro’s brow furrowed as he looked at the phone’s screen.

He immediately recognized what he was looking at. It was Iroha Waon’s channel—the page where Iroha posted videos of her internet persona.

“What *about* your channel?” Yahiro asked, tilting his head.

Nothing seemed out of place at first glance; she hadn’t uploaded any new videos, either.



Iroha stuttered as she said, “Mil... Mil... Mi-mi-mill...”

“...Mill?” Yahiro tilted his head to the other side.

Iroha thrust her phone up high and yelled victoriously.

“I got a million views!!!”

2

When Iroha stopped screaming excitedly, it was because fatigue hit her all at once and she collapsed in place.

Ayaho crouched down in front of the fallen girl and wiped away her sweat. She was a very thoughtful girl, unlike her older sister who was devoid of any thought.

“Waon reached a million views?” Yahiro muttered suspiciously as he grabbed Iroha’s phone.

Iroha Waon was not a popular streamer. She had published many videos, but they had never reached even a hundred views. After all, Waon was pretty, but the actual content of her videos was boring at best.

How could her channel possibly reach a million views, then?

Iroha stood up with a bold grin on her face.

“Yes. And it was only a million when I checked it a little while ago, but look! I got one million one hundred thousand now!”

“Oh no... Didn’t anyone ever tell you not to say slurs online? Or did you brag about a crime?”

“Hold the phone! Why’re you assuming I’m getting canceled?!” Iroha protested.

“Why else would you be getting this many views?”

“I’m not! See, the like to dislike ratio is doing fine!”

“Hmm... Maybe it’s a glitch?” Ayaho muttered earnestly.

“That makes sense,” Yahiro agreed. That was the most reasonable

explanation.

“Gotta be some hacker’s prank.”

“Perhaps they took over the whole website.”

Giuli and Rosé added their own theories to the mix.

“Why?! I’m just going viral, and not for any bad reason! It’s not just this video that’s doing well, by the way. All my past videos are raking in the views!”

Iroha scrolled down as she huffed in excitement.

It was true: All of Waon’s videos were gaining a lot of views, very quickly. Yahiro began taking it seriously and looked closely at the screen.

“...No way.”

“Finally, the world understands my genius. And now you can be smug about how you were a fan before I went mainstream, Yahiro. Aren’t you glad?”

Iroha certainly was, but Yahiro still thought there had to be something at work behind this sudden popularity. He clicked his tongue, annoyed by her unprecedented arrogance.

“For you to get this many views all of a sudden... Either a big website or some other streamer must’ve talked about you,” Rosé said.

“So it’s all from their followers.” Yahiro hummed in understanding.

That sounded possible. It would explain how she could’ve gone viral. The question, now, was how exactly she could’ve been presented by this outside entity.

“This comment’s curious,” Giuli said in an unusually serious tone.

“What comment?” It was then that Yahiro remembered the videos had a comment section.

The number of comments was rising just as rapidly as the views. Most of them were commenting on her “cute looks,” her “fluffy tail,” and her “huge chest.”

Among them, however, a couple of strange keywords came up: the J-nocide and the dragons.

“Huh?! Why?! What’s going on?!” Not even Iroha had checked the comments yet; her face paled as he scrolled down. “W-wait, they got my name?!”

“Your real name? You got doxed?” Yahiro’s expression turned grave as well.

Naturally, she had never linked her real name to her Iroha Waon persona. She even wore a fancy dress, color contacts, and a wig, so there was no way for a regular viewer to connect her to the real Iroha. It took even Yahiro, a huge fan of hers, a while to figure out they were the same person.

“This is it... This guy says, *I came here from Yamadou’s video*,” said Giuli as she browsed the website on her own phone.

“Yamadou?”

“That’s the famous sleuth streamer,” Iroha answered immediately.

“...Sleuth?”

“His videos are pretty cool. They’re all about big topics, like revealing the scandals of politicians and corporations.”

“...And why’s such a guy talking about you? No one knows about Waon. Funny cat videos have had a bigger impact on society than you.”

“I’m not ranked lower than funny cats...am I?” Iroha pouted.

The mere fact that she asked for validation showed that even she knew she wasn’t big enough to be targeted by this sleuth streamer.

The fact, however, only applied to her streamer persona. Those who knew the real Iroha’s value knew that she was bigger than most politicians and corporations.

“There it is. I found Yamadou’s channel.” Giuli showed her phone’s screen to them.

The title of the video made Yahiro gasp.

“*The Dragon Medium Who Caused the J-nocide*... What?”

“No way... How...?”

Information about the dragons had been kept secret so far, and now there it was, public for all the world to see.

Yahiro was shaken. The cause of the J-nocide going public meant that Sui's sin...and by extension, his, for not being able to stop her...was as well.

Iroha was equally disturbed. She glared at herself in the video, shaking in anger.

"Why's he showing me in my loungewear without any makeup?! He could've used a better picture!"

"That's what upsets you?!" Yahiro yelled in disbelief as he stared at Iroha's indignant profile.

She was more distressed about being seen barefaced than the fact she had been doxed.

As a further blow to her, Ayaho exclaimed in reaction to Iroha's profile as described in the video: "Iroha, it says you're a mother."

"Why?! Can't people just see and realize you're my siblings?!"

The video showed a picture of Iroha holding the youngest of her sisters, Runa, in her arms. They were just about ten years apart, but just by looking at them, it wouldn't be totally unreasonable to assume she was her daughter.

"This is bad."

"Very much so."

Giuli and Rosé nodded to each other with complete calm, contrasting with Iroha's rage. They had remarkably grave looks on their faces.

"How? Why?" Yahiro asked.

It was a big problem for Iroha's name and face to go public, but it was hard to say the doxing would bring her any real harm. Japan was under the control of the many armies of the world, so no regular person could easily reach her. There was no need to worry about the press nagging her or nasty fans stalking her.

He thought this video couldn't possibly affect Galerie Berith, but the twins looked upset.

"Ganzheit had been keeping intel on the dragon mediums under wraps. Few

people seriously believed the dragons existed, and that was fine and all...,” Rosé said.

“But then that whole thing with Vanagloria happened,” Giuli added.

“So now more people have proof of the dragons’ existence...” Yahiro was now getting an idea of why they looked troubled.

Vanagloria had sunk multiple navy vessels and attacked a US Army base; many soldiers and mercenaries saw her. Naturally, the top brass of each of the armies controlling the Japanese territory would get their hands on such intel.

Only a few politicians and high-ranking officers knew about the dragons—people Ganzheit came in contact with—keeping the spread of information under control.

But now, thousands of people had seen a dragon with their own eyes.

Yahiro had no idea how big Ganzheit was, but they couldn’t possibly keep everyone quiet. And now that there were people who knew about the dragons out there, the sleuth streamer had the public credibility to back up his video’s claims.

“Not many people will believe everything this video says, but some of them might try to capture Iroha to learn the truth. Ganzheit cannot keep them all at bay,” Rosé added in her negative but realistic outlook.

“You mean she’ll be targeted *again*?”

“Yes. And now everyone in the world knows who she is.”

“There’s one other problem. Look at this video. Don’t you notice something?” Giuli showed Yahiro her phone again.

The video showed Iroha in her PE tracksuit, lying down on a bench, snacking. A familiar sight for him. And not only because of Iroha—he recognized the bench, and the bricks in the background, too.

“This... This is the Galerie’s barracks!”

“Yeah. This Yamadou’s got to be around here. Maybe even now.”

“Huh? He’s out there taking sneak photos of me?” Iroha summarized.

The words *sneak photos* usually had another nuance to them, but she wasn't far off. The streamer who doxed her was secretly taking pictures of her, without being noticed even by the Galerie's operators, and showing them to the whole world.

"It's not a good thing that they've got Iroha's location, by any means, but perhaps this is our chance. We could capture the streamer and use him to muddle the information," Rosé said without emotion.

"So we just gotta find the Peeping Tom, right?"

"Right. I'll get some of the guys to help us find the voyeur," Giuli said.

"Okay, then." Yahiro nodded.

It was a pesky job, but they couldn't let this Yamadou guy follow Iroha around. They had to stop the leak of information in order to keep her safe.

In total contrast to the tense mood in the room, Iroha's shoulders slumped in disappointment.

"Ugh... And I thought the world was finally catching on to my genius..."

3

The day after Iroha made a fuss about her channel's views, they got a few off-duty operators to help search for the peeper.

"Can he really take any pictures from all the way over here? We're almost two kilometers from the barracks," Yahiro asked Giuli as they climbed the hill beside the Port of Yokohama.

It was in what used to be the Yamate area. It used to be a famous tourist spot as an old foreign settlement before the J-nocide.

Now, the once-trendy spot was nothing but a shady commercial district full of bars and outdoor stores for mercenaries.

Yahiro and Giuli were visiting Yamate because of important information on the voyeur they had obtained. Rosé had analyzed the pictures he took of Iroha and concluded that the perpetrator had to be around there.

“Sniper rifles with that kind of range aren’t that rare. Rosy could hit her all the way from here while doing a handstand,” Giuli replied.

“No way she can do that and a handstand... Can she?”

Yahiro knew what a good sniper Rosé was, but she couldn’t possibly hit the target from barely within range while striking such a ridiculous pose. Could she? He actually couldn’t imagine her missing her shot.

“And if you can shoot a sniper rifle, you can take a picture.”

“Or *shoot* a video, am I right?”

“Yes, and that means the voyeur could *shoot* Iroha at any time.”

“Wha...?” Yahiro stopped in his tracks.

Sniping and peeping photos had a lot in common. Indeed, if he could film her from that far, he could also shoot her dead from the same distance.

Yahiro had been underestimating the threat because it was a streamer they were talking about, but then he realized how wrong he was.

“H-hold on, so that’s why Rosé stayed back at the barracks?”

“We can’t rule out the possibility of the voyeur being a sniper as well. We gotta be care—”

They heard something breaking before she could finish.

A man standing on the rooftop of a building fell off with a muffled scream. He was holding a camera with a huge telephoto lens in his hands; the lens broke, and the camera cracked in half, too. A sniper bullet had hit the camera with precision.

Yahiro didn’t even need to ask. That was Rosé.

“Countersniper... I guess even paparazzi are putting their lives on the line out here.”

“Taking out the enemy’s scouts is part of the basics,” Giuli said bluntly as she glanced at the photographer shaking in fear on the ground.

Since Rosé’s bullet had hit the camera with precision, the man was unharmed, save for the wounds he got when falling from the rooftop. If he was sane, he

would not dare point a camera at the Galerie's barracks ever again. Rosé could have just as easily shot him, not the camera. And he realized this better than anyone else.

"Is he Yamadou?"

"That'd be great, but I doubt it. The streamer must realize just how important Iroha is. He would've expected the Galerie to strike back to protect her."

"So he wouldn't have tried taking a picture without any protection, like this guy." Yahiro glanced at the guy on the ground and sighed.

"People from all sorts of organizations and companies must be gathering around here for further scoops after watching the video. That's probably one of their guys. Let's just let Rosy take care of 'em." Giuli smiled innocently.

Yahiro heard another sniper shot, backing Giuli up.

Another sound of a lens breaking echoed, and a guy tumbled out from a truck parked on the street. Rosé had taken out the second scout.

"Don't you think that's too many of them?"

"That's how big a deal the dragon medium is," Giuli replied nonchalantly to Yahiro's bewildered question.

He knew Giuli was right, but having these two taken out one after the other would mean Yamadou had to already be in hiding.

"What if the streamer runs for it after hearing Rosé's attacks?"

"That'd be bad. Keep an eye out for anyone running for their lives."

"I don't think we'll find him that easily..." Yahiro sighed.

Then he heard a sudden shriek. He looked up and saw a young woman on the ground. The paparazzi's colleague had run away and pushed an innocent woman down in the process. In a way, it was Yahiro's fault.

She seemed to have been out shopping. Canned food spilled out from her bags. Yahiro crouched down on reflex and picked up the can that came rolling toward him.

"Are you okay? You're not hurt or anything?" he asked the woman.

Giuli looked at them with a huge grin on her face, but he paid her no mind. He couldn't ignore the situation.

"Thank you. I was just startled, that's all." The woman smiled weakly as she looked up at him.

She was Asian; long, black hair; looked about twenty-five. She was thin and good-looking, with a dainty air about her. Her hair covered the right half of her face, but even then, he could tell she was pretty.

Her clothes were those of a civilian; she was far from looking like a member of the army or a PMC operator. Yahiro thought she looked like a celebrity out on the weekend, like from back when there was peace in Japan.

"No need to thank me. I'm glad everything's okay."

Yahiro put the cans back in the bag and helped the woman stand. He also picked up her walking stick and handed it over. Her left leg seemed to be impaired, which was why she used the metallic cane.

"Miyabi, when did you snag such a young man?"

Yahiro heard a voice coming from behind them as he helped the woman grab the cane.

It was an Asian man in his early thirties. He waved briefly at them as he approached.

"Don't be rude, Douji. He was helping me out."

"I see. Excuse me, and thank you for that, young man." Douji grinned.

He wasn't tall, but he made a strong first impression, like a hunting dog. His skin was tanned, and his muscles toned. Even so, he didn't look like a soldier. He was more like an athlete, or perhaps an adventurer.

"I can't believe we're getting gunshots this close to the shopping district. I'd heard the rumors, but this sure is a dangerous town," said Douji, befuddled as he stared at the broken camera.

Yahiro raised his eyebrows.

"You're not from here?"

“Kinda. We just came back here chasing after the dough,” Douji said, appearing amused.

“You came back?”

“Yeah, Miyabi and I are originally from this country,” Douji admitted as he pointed at the black-haired woman.

Yahiro gasped.

“You’re Japanese, too?”

“You mean you, too? I was just gonna ask.” Douji smiled. “I’m amazed you survived.”

“Right back at you.”

Douji didn’t reply right away.

Four years back, the dragon emerged, and with it the Moujuu. Hostility toward the Japanese grew all over the world, and the political and religious leaders, as well as people from all countries, were taken over by the delirium of genocide. They instructed armies to kill all Japanese people.

“Let’s not talk about the details. Yeah, we survived hell. Things happened. I thought I’d known all about the darkest side of humanity by traveling the world as part of my job as a photographer, but I never expected my own country to end up like that. I guess that’s what they call being blinded by peace.”

“You’re a photographer?” Yahiro winced at the word.

A photographer showed himself just as they were searching for one. And he also stated to have come back to Japan looking for a way to make money. It was too much to be a coincidence.

“Hey, kid... Do you know this girl?”

While Yahiro glared at the man warily, Douji produced a picture. A screenshot of a video showing none other than Iroha.

“...Who is she?” Yahiro asked in a low voice.

“She’s the talk of the internet lately. Rumor says she’s here in Yokohama. I was hoping to come across her just walking around but seems like I’m out of

luck.”

“Why ask me...?”

“Hmm? Well, I just figured local boys would know about such a cute girl being around town.” Douji played the fool.

Yahiro scowled in confusion for a moment.

“What do you want with her?”

“People are looking for her. People we work for,” Miyabi answered in Douji’s stead.

Douji nodded in agreement.

“Yup. We’re like private detectives. We were hired to look for her.”

“I see.” Yahiro let out the breath he was holding in.

Some company or organization trying to look into Iroha’s true colors had them investigating. They were Japanese, too, so it made sense to hire them—they probably knew their way around Yokohama.

“And would we get part of your compensation if we helped you find that girl?” Giuli joined the conversation with an innocent look on her face.

Douji nodded right away and took a notepad out from his pocket. He wrote something down and ripped the page off to hand it over to Giuli.

“Of course. I’ll tell our employer. If you notice anything, please message me at this address.”

“Okay! I’m Giuli, by the way. What’s your name, pops?”

“*Pops...?!*” Douji grunted at the unexpected blow. “I’m Douji. Douji Yamase. This young-looking woman over here is Miyabi Maisaka.”

“I don’t just *look* young, I *am* young,” Miyabi said with a straight face, before smiling at Yahiro.

“I’m Yahiro Narusawa.”

He felt conflicted about it but decided to give them his name anyway. He didn’t like that he couldn’t just enjoy meeting other Japanese survivors because

of their line of work.

“Gotcha, Giuli and Yahiro. I’ll be waiting for you to hit me up,” said Douji Yamase with a friendly smile, unaware of Yahiro’s inner conflict.

Yahiro glared as he watched them walk away, biting his lip and keeping quiet.

4

Not five minutes after saying good-bye to Yamase, two light armored vehicles screeched to a stop right beside them. Galerie Berith’s operators kicked open the doors and hurried off the vehicles.

“Are you okay, Princess?!” asked Josh Keegan, armed with an assault rifle and pale in the face.

“Josh...?”

Yahiro stared befuddled at his colleagues.

They were armed to the teeth, equipped with body armor and guns fully loaded. The frenzy made innocent passersby and storekeepers flinch in fright.

“Rosy sure is quick.”

Giuli, on the other hand, didn’t even seem surprised about it; she smiled at the operators. Apparently, Rosé had sent them over, and Giuli knew why.

“I’m fine, we didn’t battle. Nothing happened. I don’t think they expected to meet Yahiro here, either, so they stopped at just greetings,” Giuli explained in a cheery tone.

Josh and the others relaxed upon hearing that.

Yahiro was left out of the loop, though. He glared at Giuli with annoyance.

“What do you mean ‘greetings’?”

“You didn’t realize? Douji Yamase is just like you—a Lazarus,” Giuli said like it was nothing.

Yahiro’s brain couldn’t process what he was just told; he only stared at Giuli with a stupefied expression.

“Douji Yamase is a Lazarus? Then Miyabi...”

“Miyabi Maisaka is Ira’s—the wind dragon’s—medium. I’d heard she was purged after going up against the Heavenly Imperial House. I’m surprised she’s alive.”

“The wind dragon’s medium...” Yahiro felt his hairs stand on end.

If Douji Yamase was a Lazarus, then he could also use the Regalia. He, too, had the power to bring a cataclysm onto the world...

“So if they’d had any intention of attacking us just now...”

“You’d have had no chance of winning. Without Iroha at your side to give you her blessings, you’re just a regular person that’s hard to kill.” Giuli casually stated the bitter truth.

Yahiro couldn’t argue with that.

“Why’re they looking for Iroha? Isn’t she one of them?”

“You didn’t realize after hearing Douji Yamase’s name?”

“Realize what?”

Yahiro searched through his memories, but this was the first time he had met the guy. He knew nothing about him. Or did he? Then it struck him.

“Ah...! Yamase Douji... Yamadou? He just shortened his name?”

“Not unusual when creating a username.” Giuli chuckled.

Yamase wasn’t keeping his identity a secret. Quite the opposite. He realized Yahiro was looking for him and purposely made contact. Just to introduce themselves, like Giuli suggested.

“Which means them telling us they were looking for Iroha was just an excuse to talk to us? Why?! They know where we are!”

“Yeah.” Giuli only shrugged.

Yahiro’s anger rendered him speechless. Those two had revealed Iroha’s secret to the whole world and then showed up before him while pretending they knew nothing. He felt as though they were playing him like a fiddle.

“But why would another dragon medium reveal Iroha’s identity? Don’t they know they could be in danger, too?” Josh asked in confusion.

Yahiro thought the same thing. Miyabi Maisaka was a dragon medium, too. Yamase’s exposé of Iroha could wind up hitting her back like a boomerang.

“We’d have to ask them about it, although I have a couple theories of my own,” Giuli said meaningfully.

Josh nodded, impressed.

“For example?”

“To get more views on his channel.”

“Oh...” Everyone exclaimed in understanding.

More views meant higher earnings for Yamase. It wasn’t unthinkable for him to consider risking getting himself caught in the fire just to make a profit.

“Or maybe somebody else asked him to.”

“Somebody else?” Yahiro parroted with a puzzled expression.

Giuli nodded.

“He said he was hired to do this, remember?”

“You mean they have a sponsor? Now that’s easy for us to understand,” Josh said as he dropped his fist into his palm.

That was understandable enough for Yahiro, too—he didn’t dox Iroha out of his own will, but under his employer’s orders.

It was true that there were organizations out there that could profit from the dragon mediums’ existence being public. In fact, Galerie Berith was already in a difficult position due to Yamase’s video. Their competitors had an advantage right now, in a way.

“What should we do, then? How can we stop him from posting more videos?” Yahiro questioned Giuli.

“Look into their employer’s goal and negotiate. That’s probably why he gave us his email.” Giuli waved around the notepad sheet Yamase had given them.

“Negotiate...” Yahiro grimaced and stepped back.

Dealing with corporations in business was outside his area of expertise, but he couldn't rely on brute force when the other party was also a Lazarus. Better let the twins take care of it.

“So, Josh, you guys can go back to HQ. Rosy will take care of the copycat voyeurs,” Giuli said.

They had been deployed to protect Giuli from Yamase; now that the latter was gone, there was no reason to keep them around.

“What about you, Princess?” Josh asked, still worried.

Most operators of Galerie Berith revered Giuli like royalty, for some reason. Josh didn't call her Princess jokingly. They wouldn't meekly go away just because she told them she didn't need protection.

“Me? Well, it's not every day I get the chance to hang out in town, so I'll be having a date with Yahiro.”

“A DATE?” Josh yelled.

The other men behind him glared daggers at Yahiro as well.

“I never agreed to that.” Yahiro glared at Giuli.

Giuli paid him no mind and grabbed on to his left arm.

“Oh, what's the harm? This might be our last time in Yokohama.”

“We're leaving? Because of Iroha...?”

“The problem is that they know Iroha's location, yes, so leaving would be the quickest solution.”

“I guess that makes sense, but...”

Yahiro couldn't believe how quick she was to make a decision. And she was right.

Galerie Berith's Yáo Guāng Xīng could freely travel across Japan. The average organization couldn't keep up with the armored train, and it would be easier to determine who their real enemy was once the number of pursuers decreased.

Perhaps Rosé was taking out the voyeurs in order to keep the number of witnesses to Iroha's departure low. The Galerie was taking all sorts of action to solve the case while Yahiro was none the wiser.

"So us walking around Yamate is just a distraction?" Yahiro asked the girl clinging to him.

Giuli smiled impishly.

"Yeah. It'll be more convenient if we go around making them think we're still looking for them."

"In that case, fine." Yahiro sighed softly.

He didn't want the operators shooting him envious looks, but he had to go along with Giuli due to the circumstances.

Before the operators could go back home begrudgingly, though, the sound of a new armored vehicle approached. Three vehicles, in fact, all heavily armored, advanced directly toward them.

Josh and the rest all reflexively took defensive stances, but they stopped in confusion after realizing who the vehicles belonged to.

"The Guild? What're they doing bringing armored cars to this shopping district?"

Yahiro looked confused as well.

The Guild was a cooperative organization that rallied dozens of PMCs in Yokohama. Their primary goal was to maintain public order at the invaluable port.

Yahiro's side hadn't caused any big problems yet. Rosé's sniping was an everyday occurrence in Yokohama; that alone shouldn't be reason enough for the Guild to make a move.

And yet, opposite to Yahiro's expectations, the Guild's armored vehicles surrounded them.

Someone he recognized stood before the car at the lead.

"Here you are, Yahiro Narusawa."

“Miss... Akulina Jarova?”

Yahiro was even more confused upon seeing the Guild’s head secretary. It couldn’t be good news if someone that important had come here for him.

“What do you want with our contractor, Akulinyan?” Giuli made it clear she’d stick up for him.

“Enough of the silly nicknames, Giulietta Berith.”

Akulina scowled in annoyance, but soon she pulled herself together.

“Yahiro Narusawa, the Guild calls for you. I’m afraid I must ask you to come with us,” she said firmly.

The Guild’s operators pointed their guns at them. Naturally, Josh and his men did the same. This situation was a powder keg, ready to blow.

“Why do you want me to go with you?” Yahiro asked.

Summoning Giuli or Rosé, as the people in charge of the Galerie, or even Iroha, as the source of the voyeur issue, would make sense. But Yahiro was nothing but one of the Galerie’s operators, at least officially. There should be no reason for the Guild’s top brass to want to talk to him.



Akulina seemed to have expected Yahiro's reaction. She nodded and explained, gravely and shortly: "You are suspected of murder."

5

Douji Yamase's hideout was located in a dilapidated building in the former Yamate area. It was a café before the J-nocide.

Inside the dusty shop, he had his computer for video editing and other tools for livestreaming. This was sleuth streamer Yamadou's studio.

"Quite the cute kid, don't you think?" Miyabi Maisaka muttered as she put the bag full of canned foods on the kitchen counter.

Yamase scowled as he brewed coffee on a camping stove.

"Fuckin' hell. Where does she get off calling me an old guy?"

"Not Giulietta Berith. The Lazarus boy."

"Oh, Yahiro Narusawa?" Yamase snorted before propping his head up with his hand on top of the old counter. "It's true he wasn't what I expected. I thought he would be a nasty, stuck-up brat, knowing he's Sui Narusawa's older brother."

"Perhaps it's because he's just a nice, normal kid that Superbia fell in love with him at first sight."

"Maybe." Yamase replied indifferently to Miyabi's sympathetic soliloquy.

Miyabi nodded before glancing at the computer screen in front of Yamase.

"How is the view count doing?"

"Much better than expected. I think it's because of Avaritia's medium's good looks. We were lucky. The next step will be easier thanks to that."

"What about the intel?"

"That's not doing as well as I hoped." Yamase shook his head after glancing at the messages that he had received through the video website.

Many organizations wanted info on Iroha Mamana. Yamase had announced he would sell the intel they wanted at the right price.

He had received dozens of offers already, but all of them were lacking in digits, quite frankly.

“Nothing we can do about that. Yokohama is under the jurisdiction of the US Army, and being the PMC Guild’s autonomous region, no other armies are getting in. Corporations without their own army can’t approach the dragon medium even if they know she’s here.”

“I hope they’re fine with that.”

“Don’t worry about our clients. We have the bare minimum fighting power, and we’ve also got a pretty interesting visitor.”

“A visitor?” Miyabi gave Yamase a puzzled look.

Right then, they heard someone knock on the front door of the abandoned building.

“Speak of the devil... Come on in, it’s open!” Yamase shouted at the entrance.

The front door opened with a creak, and the visitor made their way inside.

Miyabi’s eyes narrowed; she was surprised.

It was a man and a woman. The girl, wearing a school uniform, came in first.

“Thanks for having us!” she said in Japanese, with a friendly grin on her face.

Her hair was bleached and her uniform was worn improperly. Loose socks and loafers. The spitting image of what used to be called a *gyaru* in the times before the J-nocide.

“Excuse us.”

A tall young man came in behind her. His uniform was in perfect order, and he shouldered a nylon bamboo sword bag. His face looked sharp, adorned by black-rimmed glasses. He gave the impression of a too-diligent kendo club member.

“You two...,” Miyabi muttered, staring at the young pair.

Yamase chuckled at her reaction, then smiled amicably at the visitors.

“Thank you for coming. Welcome, fellow Japanese.”

Act 2

Force Charge

1

“Yahiro was arrested?”

Iroha stopped kneading the flour upon hearing Rosé’s sudden report. She was in the middle of trying to make some noodles since she was being confined to a room without windows because of the voyeur.

“...He wasn’t technically arrested; he went along voluntarily. Although it doesn’t change the fact that he’s in custody,” Rosé corrected her flatly, while scowling at the potent smell of cilantro.

“Wh-why?!”

“Serial murders have taken place near Fort Yokohama. Seven people have died over three days. The first victim was a woman, and there are traces of rape, too... The rest seem to be casual robbery murders.”

“R-rape...? Murder...?” Iroha couldn’t process such strong words.

Contrastingly, the kids helping her out in the kitchen—the nine-year-old trio—all seemed calm and composed.

“What? Yahiro wouldn’t do that.” Tomboy Honoka immediately refuted the accusation.

“Yeah. He’s got self-discipline,” pretty boy Kiri beside her agreed.

“He doesn’t do anything even when approached by Mama and her giant tits.” Kyouta laughed at his precocious statement.

Iroha punched Kyouta in the head. She didn’t forgive sexual harassment even from her kid brothers.

“When did I ever make a move on him?”

“...You asked him to kiss you after Nina left...,” Kyouta argued back weakly, tears welling as he held his head and crouched down.

Iroha clutched her head, buried her face on the table, and screamed after that reminder.

“Aaaagh... No, that wasn’t... I wasn’t... Just forget about it...,” Iroha muttered incoherently with dead eyes.

Honoka gave her eldest sister a repulsed glance before looking back at Rosé.

“So why did they arrest Yahiro?”

“They say there was a witness,” Josh answered in her stead, since he’d been present at the time.

Honoka blinked, but otherwise had a mature look on her face.

“A witness?”

“Yes. Their testimony says a young Asian man armed with a machete-like blade did it. The description of the weapon matches the corpses’ wounds.”

“And that’s everything it takes to assume it was him?” Honoka retorted calmly.

“No, there’s one other piece of conclusive evidence.” Josh seemed impressed with her. “A victim fought back against the culprit. They shot at least twenty bullets, and yet the culprit finished the job like nothing happened.”

“That means...!” Iroha raised her head suddenly. She was pale in the face.

“Yes. The culprit is a Lazarus.” Josh nodded with disgust. “That’s reason enough for the Guild to take Yahiro in as a suspect. A witness’s testimony isn’t enough to hand down judgment, but the Guild does have a duty to keep the peace in Yokohama, so they can’t ignore it.”

“B-but he went along voluntarily, right? So they’ll let him come back home after questioning?” Iroha looked up at Rosé with concern.

Rosé shook her head coldly.

“Giuli is negotiating with the Guild, but I don’t think they’ll let him go that easily. Not until he’s proven innocent.”

“And how...do we do that?”

“A new murder could happen while he’s detained,” Josh said irresponsibly.

“But then there would be more victims.” Iroha scolded him with a glare.

“Well, yeah.” Josh chuckled awkwardly. “But either way, they won’t stop the killer if they’re content with just detaining a guy who didn’t do it.”

“...No, I don’t think any more murders will take place,” Rosé rebuked.

Josh gave her a suspicious look.

“How do you know, Lady?”

“Because the culprit’s aim was to get Yahiro detained.”

“What? So they were killing just to frame him? But why?”

“Because Iroha wouldn’t be able to leave Yokohama so long as Yahiro remains in the Guild’s custody.”

“Huh?” Iroha exclaimed in reaction to Rosé’s explanation. “S-so it’s my fault? Innocent people were killed because of me?”

“You shouldn’t feel guilty about that. It is entirely the culprit’s fault.”

“But...!”

“I see... So everything’s connected...,” Josh said in a low voice while bringing his hand up to his chin. “The guys who exposed her on the internet don’t want her to go back into hiding, so they got the Guild to capture Yahiro in order to keep her in Yokohama.”

“There must be a reason why they can’t let her out of their sight.” Rosé sighed quietly.

Iroha had already heard about Rosé and Giuli planning to take her out of Yokohama to protect her against the voyeur, but the idea couldn’t be put into action now that Yahiro was detained by the Guild.

Yahiro could not use the Regalia without Iroha by his side. And without Yahiro’s Regalia, there was nothing to protect Iroha from another Lazarus’s attack.

“They can’t keep stalling like that for long, can they?” Josh pointed out, frustrated.

The Guild was not stupid. They weren’t so incompetent as to keep Yahiro detained forever while letting the real culprit run free.

“They can’t. Which is why we should expect their next move soon.”

“And what would that be?”

“What do you think someone trying to get their hands on the dragon medium would do upon finding her whereabouts?”

“Negotiate, threaten us, use force...” Josh sounded fed up as he answered Rosé’s question.

They would demand the Galerie hand Iroha over, and try to take her away forcefully if they didn’t accept. The Galerie would do the same in their position.

“We were trying to get away from Yokohama before that happened, but it seems they were one step ahead.”

“...But it all would be solved if we proved Yahiro is innocent, right?” Honoka asked, suggestively.

The Galerie could escape Yokohama with Iroha as soon as the Guild let Yahiro go. The organization going after her would have a much harder time negotiating if they didn’t know where she was to begin with.

“Why don’t we just find the real culprit?”

“H-Honoka...?” Iroha stared at her sister in shock.

The nine-year-old trio consisting of Honoka, Kiri, and Kyouta were a rambunctious bunch. They weren’t afraid the first time they’d met Yahiro; and even now, they were quite friendly with him. Honoka in particular, who acted as the trio’s leader, was smart for her age. That is why Iroha feared what she could suggest.

“That would be great, yes, but can you do it?” Rosé asked with interest.

Honoka slapped her chest and declared:

“Yes, we can!”

“W-wait, Rosé, are you for real? They’re nine, you realize?”

“Giuli and I graduated university at nine.”

“Well, that’s just you two being amazing!” Iroha screamed.

Honoka’s offer was ridiculous, but the twins were already absurd to begin with.

Galerie Berith lost nothing if the kids produced no results. Letting them do as they wished was obviously the right choice from Rosé’s point of view.

“We will appoint you a leader, of course. Josh.”

“I figured as much,” Josh muttered weakly in resignation. Then he lifted his head and called for the kids. “All right, rugrats, let’s go!”

“Let’s go!” The trio responded and followed behind Josh.

Iroha watched, baffled, as her siblings marched away.

2

Meanwhile, Yahiro was facing Akulina Jarova at the interrogation room in the Guild’s HQ. She was telling him about the serial murders he was detained for.

“...The killer’s a Lazarus?”

“That’s the only conclusion we can come to after hearing the witness’s testimony and looking at the scene of the crimes,” Akulina, sitting across him, explained gravely.

Her left wrist and Yahiro’s right wrist were connected by a pair of metal handcuffs. Akulina had put them on when she asked him to come with her to the Guild’s HQ.

“I’m not the only Lazarus in Yokohama.”

Yahiro sighed as he brushed his hair back with his free left hand.

“I know. We haven’t determined you’re the culprit, yet. But we cannot let you run free. You are our main person of interest,” Akulina said bitterly.

She didn’t seem to seriously believe Yahiro was the serial murderer, but as a

representative of the neutral Guild, she had no choice but to detain him. Otherwise, the companies under their wing would protest.

“I deny the charges, but I understand your position, Ms. Akulina.”

Yahiro sighed and leaned back in the cheap folding chair.

Now that he knew Akulina held no ill will toward him, being all alone with her in such a tiny room became awkward. Unaware of it herself or not, she was pretty enough to be a model. And sitting so close to her, he got a whiff of a flowery smell. He fidgeted.

Ignorant of his anxiety, Akulina continued speaking with complete seriousness.

“Speaking of positions, Galerie Berith seems to be in a tough spot.”

“Did you see the video?”

“Everyone in the Guild has been talking about it. Many of the PMCs under our wing were in the battle against Vanagloria, to boot.”

Akulina shook her head slowly.

She was one of the few people who knew about the dragon mediums before the battle, since she was a Guild executive. She naturally understood how big of a deal Iroha’s identity being revealed was.

“The operators have a good impression of Iroha Mamana for the time being, since she protected Fort Yokohama from Vanagloria.”

“I see... Glad to hear that.”

“However, we can’t say the same for their companies. It wouldn’t be surprising for at least some of them to try and take her away from Galerie Berith in order to make a profit.”

“Doesn’t the Guild forbid its affiliated companies from fighting each other?”
Yahiro fought against Akulina’s statement.

The PMCs had autonomy in Yokohama, but the Guild had a tight control over them to avoid conflict. Otherwise, Yokohama itself could become a battlefield, and they would risk the destruction of the invaluable port.

“That’s right, but there might be a way to get around that,” Akulina offered gravely.

Yahiro eyes grew wide.

“How, exactly?”

“I—I don’t know. That’s just what the Head said.”

“And you’re just parroting the old man?”

“Don’t call him that! The point of loopholes is that they weren’t addressed beforehand, so how would I know?!” Akulina rebuked, red in the face.

The Guild’s Head, Evgraf Leskin, had saved Akulina’s life when she was young, and she had viewed him as her own father ever since. *I guess I’ll try not to badmouth the guy, lest she get a bad impression of me.*

“Yeah, I suppose... But you’re letting the murderer go free while you’re keeping me here, you realize?”

“We’ve reinforced security around Fort Yokohama. There will be no more victims,” Akulina replied with utmost serenity, glossing over her irritation just now.

Yahiro shrugged. Either way, he had no choice but to trust her.

“So how long do I have to stay here holding hands with you?” Yahiro glanced down at the handcuff on his right wrist.

Akulina’s eyes wandered awkwardly.

“U-uh, about that... Do you happen to be good at lock-picking?”

“Excuse me?” Yahiro got a bad feeling about the random question. “Did you lose the damn key?”

“K-keep your voice down!” She hurriedly covered his mouth.

Naturally, she wouldn’t want her subordinates to know of her stupid mistake.

“What now? Look at these handcuffs. A wire isn’t gonna do the job.”

“I think... I have a copy in my room,” Akulina responded apologetically to Yahiro’s calm observation.

“Okay. We just gotta go there, then?”

“Y-yes, that would be it, but a single woman inviting a man who’s not her boyfriend over to her room? I can’t have the Head thinking I’m a loose woman...”

“Are you really worrying about that?” Yahiro stared at her in disbelief. “If you’re worried about being all alone with me, then just bring someone to keep watch. Ask one of your subordinates or something.”

“D-don’t be ridiculous! I can’t show that room to my subordinates!”

“...What’s wrong with it?” Yahiro asked, puzzled.

“Nothing. There is nothing wrong with my room itself.” She glossed over it.

“Look, whatever the problem is, it can’t be worse than staying handcuffed to me, can it? What if we gotta use the bathroom?”

“Ugh...” Akulina appeared resigned. She stood up staggeringly like a lifeless ghoul. “Fine... Come with me, Yahiro Narusawa. But you will never speak of what you see in my room, understood?!”

“O-okay...”

Yahiro nodded with confusion as Akulina glared at him with teary eyes.

3

“Oh, this is awful.”

The Guild’s top brass was using the remains of a luxury hotel next to Fort Yokohama as their residence. Akulina’s room was there, too. Just a regular twin bedroom. It was quite spacious, since she was using a room meant for two people all for herself.

However, the moment Yahiro set foot inside it, he gasped at the disaster.

To put it simply and mildly, it was a mess.

There were dirty clothes and shoes lying all over. Unfinished beer cans and empty plastic bottles. Packages of preserved foods that were clearly way past their expiry date. Unsheathed blades and guns, even. There was barely a place

to stand. It was a garbage dump.

“Don’t say anything. I know. I know. I’ve been careless. I prioritize my job too much and haven’t given myself the time to clean up.” Akulina bit her lip and avoided eye contact.

“This is way beyond careless. How can you live like this?”

“E-enough about my room! Let’s just look for the key!”

“How in the world are we gonna find it in this mess? We gotta clean up, if only a little bit.”

“Wait, stop! What are you doing?”

Akulina tried desperately to stop Yahiro from picking up what was at his feet. He sighed in annoyance.

“I told you, cleaning up. I’ll just get everything on the floor over here. You decide what to keep and what to throw away.”

Yahiro suppressed the desire to say it all looked like trash to him anyways.

“O-okay.”

“Here’s a garbage bag. Don’t worry about separating burnables, but please put batteries and spray cans elsewhere. Those do cause trouble.”

“I-is that so? Got it.”

Akulina’s diligent nature kicked in and she began putting away the trash as instructed.

Work was far from efficient, however, as they were still handcuffed to each other. Still, they worked together to clean up the bare minimum.

“What’s this?” Yahiro muttered, puzzled by some books piled on the floor.

It was manga—fan-made comics based on Japanese properties, actually. What they used to call *doujinshi*.

“Whoaaaaa!” Akulina shrieked as she snatched the *doujinshi* out of Yahiro’s hand. She hid the comic behind her back and glared daggers at him. “D-did you see?”

“Yeah, I used to read that manga. How nostalgic. I watched the anime back when I was a kid, too. You like it?”

The *doujinshi* cover showed a character from an old shounen manga. A big, buff man who was the main character’s close supporter. He was a popular character, but *doujinshi* with him as the focus would be considered niche.

“N-no, this is just...for research! Yes! I was researching Japanese culture!” Akulina fretted and turned red as she made excuses.

“Research Japan? But that manga takes place in a fictional Europe-like setting.”

“But it was written by a Japanese author! Which makes it Japanese culture!”

“Yeah, whatever...” Yahiro accepted Akulina’s claim, though with puzzlement.

Come to think of it, that guy on the cover looks somewhat like Leskin...but I think I better not mention it.

“Enough about my research. Let’s just finish cleaning up the room!” Akulina changed the subject after putting the *doujinshi* away on a bookshelf.

“We’re not here to clean up your mess; we’re here to look for the key. But whatever.” Yahiro chuckled awkwardly.

He looked around and found a big pile of clothes in a corner of the room. The mountain of Akulina’s used clothes was getting big enough to be on a topographic map. Yahiro picked up the coat at the summit and revealed the entirety of the pile below it.

“What, this is the bed? Where were you sleeping?”

“I... At the open spot over there...,” Akulina mumbled as she pointed below the table.

“On the floor?! Geez... Oh, God, and look at this... The uniform’s the only thing that’s not all messed up... Hmm?”

Yahiro grabbed on reflex the tiny piece of cloth that fell out as he was putting the wrinkly shirt up on a hanger. It was the size of a handkerchief, crumpled up into a ball. He uncrumpled it nonchalantly and immediately froze the moment he realized what it really was—women’s underwear.

“NOOOOOO!!” Akulina screamed again.

It was a pair of dull boxer briefs, designed only for practicality, but no matter the appearance, naturally, she wouldn't like him looking at her underwear.

“N-no, you see, I was going to wash everything at once!”

“H-hey, don't pull!”

Akulina tried desperately snatching the underwear away from Yahiro's hands, but she forgot all about the handcuffs in the process.

“Wh-whoaaa!”

Akulina's sudden movement pulled Yahiro's right hand through the handcuffs, and they ended up back-to-back. The centrifugal force spun them around, making them lose balance, until they fell atop each other on the bed.

“Gwooooh...”

“Ouch...”

Yahiro and Akulina groaned in pain, complexly entangled with each other.

At first glance, it looked like Yahiro was holding Akulina from behind after she fell down on her back, but the complexity came from how the handcuffs' chain wrapped around their arms. Not even they understood how it happened. They were unharmed only because they fell on the bed.

“Ugh... I'm sorry. I can't believe I let myself lose control over such a tiny thing...” Akulina regained her composure after realizing that Yahiro had grabbed a pair of new, unused underwear.

Yahiro sighed uncomfortably from under her.

“Could you just get off? You're crushing me here...”

“I—I know... H-huh? What's going on here?” Akulina grunted and squirmed as she tried to get up.

Her left hand was still behind her; she tried pulling hard to break free, but Yahiro squealed immediately.

“Ow, ow, ow! Stop that! You're gonna break my arm!”

“But I can’t get my left hand free like this! H-hmm?!”

“Try the other way!” Yahiro shrieked while trying to keep his twisted right arm in place.

Both of their handcuffed hands appeared to be under them, and Akulina’s coat was also entangled there somehow. Both of their bodies were weighing down on the cuffs. They could have likely solved it by rolling over on the bed, but the mountain of clothing wouldn’t allow it.

“Hey?! Wh-where are you touch... Eep!”

“Stop moaning!”

“Stop touching me! M-moron... Anywhere but there!”

They wriggled while glued to each other, trying to right themselves, but one’s movements interfered with the other’s, and the situation simply worsened.

They looked extremely ridiculous from an outsider’s perspective, but they were both making serious efforts to escape.

About two or three minutes later and without any resolution, they heard giggling from the doorway.

“Huh... You seem to be having fun. Were you two always this close?”

“Giuli?”

“Giu-Giulietta Berith?! What are you doing here?!”

Yahiro and Akulina turned their heads—the only thing they could move freely—to see Giuli standing outside the room. They hadn’t shut the door all the way when they started cleaning.

“I was just negotiating with Leskin and got permission to bring Yahiro some stuff. A change of clothes and a toothbrush. I asked a guide, and they said you were in Akulina’s room, so...”

After explaining all that in one breath, Giuli tilted her head upon seeing them holding each other on the bed.

“Should I have brought some condoms, too?”

““No!”” Yahiro and Akulina exclaimed in unison.

Right after their harmonized yell, a beast's low growl replaced it.

"Yaaahiirooo!!"

"I-Iroha?" Yahiro looked bewildered at the Japanese girl emanating hostility from behind Giuli.

She was disguised in a hat and glasses, but he recognized her.

"What's she doing in Fort Yokohama?"

"I'm here because I was worried about you! Why else?! But all the while, here you were, in Ms. Akulina's room...fondling each other!"

"Wait! Iroha Mamana, this is a misunderstanding!" Akulina's voice cracked, feeling she was in danger. "There is very good reason why I couldn't avoid bringing Yahiro Narusawa to my room."

"Would you mind getting away from him before speaking?" Iroha shot her an icy glare.

Akulina gulped.

"I would have already if I could!"

"So you have no intention of getting away from him..."

"That's not what I said!"

"...Yahiro, did you consent to this?" Iroha asked calmly.

What's with that question?

"This isn't about consent. We simply can't get away from each other."

"Oh... Is that so. I see how it is. So you simply can't let go of her underwear."

"Hah? O-oh, wait, no..."

"I've heard enough! Let's go, Giuli!"

Iroha huffed hard and turned around. She stomped away.

Giuli, amused, observed her reaction while taking out her phone.

"Hold on. I'm taking a photo as evidence."

""Don't!"" Yahiro and Akulina harmonized again.

Giuli wore a full-face grin while taking a record of the couple lying atop each other.

4

“Yahiro...are you okay?” Ayaho Sashou asked timidly after Giuli and Iroha left Akulina’s room.

She was holding a bag to her chest; its contents were likely the supplies Giuli had mentioned.

“Oh... You were here, too?”

“Yes, I was, um, worried about you,” she said earnestly, looking straight at him.

Yahiro was perplexed by how strong her gaze was, but he immediately reconsidered—having her care that much for him was something to be thankful for.

“What a disaster. Although it doesn’t take much more than a glance to tell what really happened here.”

“Wei...!”

Galerie Berith’s operator Yang Wei came in after Ayaho. He must’ve come as Ayaho’s bodyguard, rather than out of his own concern for Yahiro.

“It’s a disgrace. All because I couldn’t find the key for the handcuffs...”

Wei smiled softly as Akulina apologized. She also seemed to be at ease now that a reasonable person had arrived.

“It’s not looking good, for sure. And I thought for sure it would be better to keep Iroha near Yahiro...”

Embarrassed, Wei scratched his head. Strangely enough, his tall figure and chill, pretty face doing the gesture made for quite the charming picture.

“Now she’s gone back outraged...” Ayaho bowed to apologize for her sister.

“Giuli is with her, though, so she will be fine.” Wei looked concerned even then, thinking about the voyeur targeting her.

All that said, Yokohama—being under the Guild’s jurisdiction—was the safest place in Japan as it was now. Wei was right: Giuli could take care of almost any trouble.

“Excuse me, so you two were looking for the key, right? Would you like us to help you?” Ayaho kindly offered as she helped them get up from the bed.

That was a godsend to the handcuffed duo.

“But I couldn’t possibly trouble you two like that...” Akulina sighed with relief once on her feet again, but then grimaced at the girl’s offer.

Wei grunted. “Are you sure? I believe it’ll be hard for you two to clean up this place all by yourselves.”

“Aww...” Akulina’s shoulders drooped. She only now realized they had witnessed her mess of a room.

“Just think of it as hiring onetime housekeepers. You don’t have to pay us, but do at least give Ayaho something for her time. Money, an item, whatever you want,” said Yahiro, trying to ease her into accepting.

Akulina raised her head.

“I—I see. I would like to request your help officially, then.”

“I’ll do my best!” Ayaho spoke in her usual formal tone, but she nodded firmly.

Thanks to the power of Ayaho’s great domestic skills, it only took two hours to clean up Akulina’s room.

And yet, the handcuffs’ key remained lost.

5

“Whoa! What is it with this car?! It’s so cool!” Kyouta exclaimed while staring at the dashboard of the armored vehicle from the rear seat.

Galerie Berith used the most common armored utility vehicles out there, but the mere idea of traveling by car was still fresh for the kids. Kyouta had been hyped ever since they left the barracks.

“The sunlight’s stronger than I expected. It’s gonna ruin my skin.”

Meanwhile, the other nine-year-old, Kiri, looked gloomy. He was as pretty as a girl and couldn’t bring himself to be excited for the drive due to the abundance of sunlight and dirt.

“I can’t believe I gotta babysit some kids who think they’re detectives at this stage in my life.” Josh’s eyes looked empty as he gripped the wheel.

The Irish-American man used to be a police officer in New York. He was the most fitting option among the Galerie’s operators to investigate the serial murders and prove Yahiro’s innocence.

And yet his Watsons were a bunch of barely tweens. *What’s this, a B-tier comedy?*

“We’re no simple detectives, my dear Watson. We are *master* detectives,” Honoka, sitting on the passenger seat, boasted as though she had read Josh’s mind.

This whole ordeal was her idea to begin with.

“I’m no Watson, you knockoff Sherlock. Don’t call me that again.”

“Whatever. See, I don’t know how they do things overseas, but in this country, it’s always been us kids doing the detective work. So no need to worry.” Honoka showed no remorse.

She had a lisp appropriate for her age, but her thoughts were coherent and logical in a way you wouldn’t expect from a child. Josh thought she sounded even more mature than Iroha.

“Do you actually believe you can find the real culprit?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t have offered to otherwise.” Honoka nodded.

“We gotta show them what we’re made of,” Kyouta said casually.

Kiri replied plainly, “If we don’t show our value, the Galerie could kick us out at any moment. As it stands, we’re only here as Iroha’s tagalongs.”

“You three are pretty mature, huh?”

Josh was astonished by how realistic the kids were. They acted all innocent,

but they understood their situation more than the adults gave them credit for. Rosé must've accepted this idea because she saw they were ready to commit to it.

“Even so, was there really a need to bring the little one?” Josh glanced at the rear seats in the mirror.



The youngest of the siblings, Runa, was sitting in the corner, holding the dog-sized white Moujuu in her arms.

“We had no choice. Runa’s the only one besides Iroha that can speak with Nuemaru,” Honoka said with frustration. She didn’t want to bring her little sister into danger, either.

“Nuemaru? You mean that white Moujuu?”

“Yup. He’s our secret weapon.”

“Okay... You’re gonna make him do like a police dog?”

“Not a bad guess, my dear Watson.”

“My name is Josh!” He sighed before stopping the car by the side of the road.

The other car behind them stopped a moment later. Josh had told them not to come, but his four subordinates had followed them anyway. They said they were there to guard them, but he was sure that, in reality, they just wanted to poke fun at their boss being dragged around by a bunch of kids.

“We’re here,” Josh said before exiting the vehicle.

They were west of the Fort Yokohama Tower, in the outskirts of the red-light district, where a bunch of brothels and pubs for mercenaries were located.

It was still bright outside, so there were no people around. The desolation gave the place a gloomy, unwelcoming feel.

“This is the latest scene of the crime?” Honoka got out of the car and looked around gleefully.

The first thing she took notice of were the bullet holes in the wall of an abandoned building, and the black stain left around it.

“Whoa, oof... This is all from shooting?” Kyouta shrieked.

“I’ll take pictures.” Kiri started taking selfies.

“I dunno what you hope to accomplish here; the Guild already investigated the scene, so I doubt there’s any evidence left,” Josh muttered to himself.

Honoka, however, looked intently at the ground as she shook her head with

gravitas.

“No, dear Watson. We have knowledge the Guild lacks. We might be able to find something they overlooked.”

“What knowledge?”

“For example, Yahiro’s way of fighting and how it may differ from the culprit’s.”

“You mean like the difference in their weapons?” Josh asked with a bit more interest.

Yahiro’s weapon was a national treasure—tier katana—the Kuyou Masakane. No other blades could withstand the Lazaruses’ power.

So, if they examined the victim’s wounds and compared them to Yahiro’s sword, they could very well prove it wasn’t his weapon. Although that wouldn’t be enough to prove Yahiro’s innocence.

Honoka’s idea was not what Josh expected, though.

“No, something more basic. Yahiro doesn’t get naked when fighting, does he?”

“No? What kind of sick pervert would do that?”

“And yet the culprit of these murders takes away the victim’s clothes every time. Well, only when they were men. This happened three times out of three.”

“Really? Who told you that?”

“Here. Rosé gave me this report from the Guild.” Honoka showed Josh her phone’s screen.

Iroha’s siblings had learned to read English thanks to the Galerie’s operators taking turns teaching them.

But who makes a child read a report on serial murders? Josh frowned.

“It couldn’t be that he was looking for a change of clothes after getting his own dirtied with blood. The victim’s would be even bloodier.”

“I suppose,” Josh replied.

“So, for whatever reason, the culprit had to fight naked.”

“Well, that’s a pretty out-there deduction, but I don’t think it holds any water, kid. You’re saying the culprit’s a degenerate that likes to fight in the nude? There’s no way.” Josh laughed it off.

Honoka kept a straight face.

“Watson, dear, you should be able to solve this. You were also in the 23 Wards that day.”

“The 23 Wards...?” Josh looked at her sternly.

Before Honoka could explain any further, a small voice called her name.

“Honoka.” Runa, who had been standing in silence up until then, pointed at the ground.

The white Moujuu was walking around a pile of rubble and garbage on the side of the road.

“Nuemaru found this.” Runa was pointing at a small metallic container.

It was a thin tube the size of a tiny supplement drink. One side of it had a thinner needle on it, tip cut diagonally like a straw.

“Hey, don’t touch that, Nuemaru. Kiri, take a picture!”

“Hmmm, the lighting conditions are not optimal here.”

Kyouta and Kiri ran up to the tube and made a record of it. They were acting like Honoka had already told them what it was.

“What’s that? A syringe?” Josh scowled as he looked down at the object.

It wasn’t unusual to find drugs lying on the battlefield, not before the J-nocide, and certainly not now. The Guild had a tight leash on what it allowed in Yokohama, but it couldn’t stop all operators from getting their hands on drugs. So no one thought it particularly suspicious to find a used syringe at the scene of a homicide.

“What? You mean this will help us find the culprit?”

“At the very least it should prove Yahiro’s innocence,” Honoka answered. “The culprit could move even after being shot. This made the Guild assume it

was a Lazarus, but we know of something else that could do that.”

“Right, the Fafnir soldiers! This is an F-med vial?!” Josh shouted.

Raimat International had created enhanced troops known as Fafnir soldiers using the F-med drug. Their bodies became stronger than low-Grade Moujuu and they obtained regenerative abilities on par with the Lazaruses’. The account of the culprit taking dozens of bullets and showing no damage would make sense if it was a Fafnir soldier’s doing.

Another characteristic of the Fafnir soldiers was that their muscles swelled up and their skin turned hard—they transformed into lizardmen.

Unless they wore special elastic clothing when using the F-med, their human clothes could not endure their bodies’ growth, and would end up torn to shreds. This meant the culprit would need to steal the victim’s clothes after the murder.

“I think you hit the nail on the head, Honoka. You’re smart.”

“Y-yeah... Thanks, Kiri.” She glanced down bashfully, in striking contrast to her previous haughty conduct.

“I always believed in you, just so you know.” Kyouta hurriedly joined the conversation.

Josh held his laughter in as he watched the kids. He was beginning to understand the chemistry among the three.

Then someone pulled the sleeve of his bulletproof jacket.

“Hmm? What’s up, kid?” Josh turned to look at little Runa looking up at him.

She said flatly: “We’re surrounded.”

“What?”

Josh didn’t take her word for it, but he grabbed his rifle and looked around on reflex.

Something was off, but ever so slightly that he would not have noticed if it weren’t for Runa’s comment. Still, he was sure that there were eyes around observing them. The hairs on the nape of his neck stood on end at the hostility.

“Captain!” His subordinates stopped just rubbernecking and hurried from their vehicle upon seeing Josh with his weapon at the ready.

In response to that, armed men appeared from the shadows all around. Josh could see four of them. They weren’t outnumbered, but they were weighed down by the children.

“They were watching us?! Fuck! Chris! Brady! Get the kids in the car and go! The rest of you stay here with me to take care of these bastards!” Josh instructed.

At the same time, gunshots echoed.

Josh took Runa and hid behind the wall of the crumbled building, and bullets rained down on it.

The trio were already hiding behind the armored car. They hadn’t survived in the 23 Wards for nothing; they knew how to handle extreme situations. Even so, they might not have made it if it weren’t for Runa and Nuemaru taking notice of the enemy.

“Captain! It’s them! The lizards!”

His subordinate’s stressed voice echoed in his head through the earpiece.

The enemy operators knew guns wouldn’t do the trick and took the F-med.

“The kid was right? I’ll be damned, Sherlock!” Josh scowled as he reloaded his rifle.

The culprits behind Yahiro’s framing were observing the Galerie, wary that they would uncover the trick. The moment they saw them get close to the truth, they opened fire to get rid of the evidence and witnesses. It was entirely Josh’s failing for not anticipating this.

“Dammit, we don’t have enough firepower!”

Josh had already sunk about a dozen rifle bullets into them, but that wasn’t enough to stop the Fafnir soldiers.

Antipersonnel bullets of small caliber were barely enough to keep them at bay, and did no damage. If the battle dragged on, they couldn’t hope to keep the children—or themselves—safe.

And yet, Runa, hugging Nuemaru and crouching down by Josh's feet, did not look the least bit afraid.

"It's okay. Get down."

"Ah?" Josh grunted at Runa's bizarre comment. *Can she see the future or what?*

Then, at that same moment, thunder echoed from within the ruins.

A gunshot. One far more destructive than Josh's assault rifle.

"A minigun? That the Guild's public order forces?" Josh groaned as he came to the realization.

The electric six-barrel Gatling gun could shoot two thousand bullets per minute. An armored car equipped with that great anti-Moujuu weapon rushed in, covering Josh's side. The Guild's mark was printed on the side of the vehicle.

The armored car's interruption made the Fafnir soldiers freeze in place, and the machine gun rained seemingly infinite bullets on them. The lizardmen could not resist these like they did the rifle's—they were blown away like dirty rags in an instant.

Not even their healing powers could help them as half their bodies were blown off. Not thirty seconds passed from the armored car coming in to the Fafnir soldiers being annihilated. Josh stood with mouth agape as the battle came to a sudden end.

"Good job, Josh. Honoka, you kids did even better than we expected," said the girl with the blue highlights nonchalantly as she got out of the Guild's armored vehicle.

"Lady...? What are you doing here?" Josh asked weakly, jaw still hanging.

Rosé wasn't able to answer before another person asked a different question.

"This is what you wanted to show us, Rosetta Berith?"

A buff old man exited the armored car behind Rosé. Evgraf Leskin. The Head of the PMC Guild ruling over Yokohama.

"Yes. Quite an amusing find, don't you think?" Rosé smiled as she glanced at

the deceased lizardmen.

“Raimat’s Fafnir soldiers... Yes, this is a big catch.” Leskin nodded inexpressively.

The staff they brought with them began collecting the lizardmen’s corpses, as well as the F-med container the kids had found.

This wouldn’t clear Yahiro of all suspicion, but at least it should take him down a few notches on the suspect list. Enough for the Guild to set him free.

“Did you use us as bait to smoke out those bastards?” Josh accused and glared at Rosé.

He should’ve realized something was wrong the moment Rosé decided to go along with the kids’ detective quest. She knew it would turn out like this from the very beginning.

“They only showed themselves because you got conclusive evidence. Good job, all four of you. Or should I say five, Nuemaru?” Rosé praised them like nothing was amiss.

The kids were elated to hear that.

“The one remaining problem is finding out who exactly tried to frame us...” Rosé crouched beside one of the Fafnir soldiers’ bodies and touched their clothes.

Their garb was already shredded terribly when they turned into lizardmen, and only got worse after the rain of bullets. However, it was enough to deduce their affiliation even then. The logo on their bulletproof jacket was still recognizable.

“Lady... This emblem...”

Josh’s eyes widened in shock and he gasped upon glancing at Rosé’s hands.

Josh knew well the crown, horse, and demon.

“I see how it is... Andrea!” Rosé spit out that man’s name with uncharacteristic irritation on her face.

The troop insignia on the attackers’ uniforms was the very same as the one

Josh and his men wore—Galerie Berith's.

6

"Whaaa...? Iroha got mad because of that?"

Rinka spoke from the other end of the phone line Ayaho was borrowing. They were on their way back from Fort Yokohama, after meeting Yahiro. Rinka had called them to ask what had happened to make Iroha go back in anger.

"Yeah, it was all a misunderstanding," answered Ayaho in a low voice from the armored vehicle's passenger seat, careful not to disturb Wei as he was driving.

Ayaho, too, was shocked when she saw Yahiro and Akulina hugging on the bed, so she understood how Iroha felt.

After all, Akulina was top brass at the Guild, a mature, beautiful woman with long legs. Ayaho would stand no chance against her if she were to legitimately try to seduce Yahiro.

However, upon actually speaking with her, one realized she was far from the perfect woman she seemed—in fact, she was quite the disgrace.

"I see... Anyways, things are getting fun, huh?"

Rinka cackled gleefully.

"How?"

"I mean, she got mad because she thought Yahiro was cheating on her, right? So at the very least, this means she's looking at him that way."

"Yeah... I guess so."

"Which means it's your chance, Ayaho."

"My chance? For what?"

"You still have a chance at winning. You do like him, right?"

"Bweah?!" Ayaho shrieked shrilly at the comment.

Rinka was two years younger: only twelve. She was very particular about

beauty and fashion and read any and all teen magazines they found leftover in the 23 Wards; among the siblings, she was the most knowledgeable about romance. Naturally, she took notice when things of this ilk happened.

“R-Rinka?! Wh-what are you saying...?”

“Don’t try playing dumb. It’s too obvious. Isn’t it, Ren?”

“R-Rinka... you can’t...”

Ren didn’t know how to answer that. He was the eldest of the brothers, and too polite for the age of eleven, which meant he was always at Rinka’s whim.

Ayaho wasn’t in the headspace to feel bad for him, though.

“Ren, you too?! How...?!”

“Don’t worry. Iroha’s too dense to realize. I don’t think she even realizes her own feelings. Which means, it’s your chance to make a move!”

Rinka recklessly cheered her on. She had a point, though.

“But...I can’t do it... Compared to Iroha, I’m...,” she mumbled weakly.

Iroha was quite an attractive girl, even from Ayaho’s point of view.

She had a pretty face that made her hard to approach—so long as she kept quiet—and she was very kind and thoughtful of her family.

She was also a dragon medium, to boot.

Ayaho couldn’t hope to reach her level. She didn’t feel like she was good enough for Yahiro.

“You need more self-esteem, Ayaho. I mean, sure, Iroha’s boobs are a pair of fierce enemies, but surely we can live up to the challenge once we grow up. Don’t you think, Ren?”

“Huhhh...?! Don’t ask me!”

Rinka ignored Ren’s confused cries and kept going: *“Love is war. Don’t show mercy, not even to your sister. And I’m not on either side.”*

“Rinka, you should stop already...”

Ren desperately tried to put an end to it; it had been a while since she got

really into love talk.

Ayaho saw the window to escape and hung up. She understood Rinka was trying to show her support...but then again, maybe she was just having fun at her expense.

"I-I'm sorry for all the fuss. Don't mind the crazy things Rinka said..." Ayaho apologized to Wei while returning her phone to her bag.

Wei smiled coolly as he gripped the wheel and shook his head.

"No, don't worry. Although I do agree that, given the circumstances of the world in this day and age, it's better to express your feelings whenever possible. In any case, just do whatever you won't end up regretting."

"Not you, too...!"

Ayaho hung her head, red in the face knowing that he'd heard their conversation.

Still, it didn't sound like he was toying with her. Actually, it even sounded like he had some personal experience regarding his own advice.

"Do you have some, Mr. Wei? Regrets, I mean."

"Yeah, I'm full of them. I think the same goes for everyone working as an operator in this country. Even Giuli and Rosé."

"Is that so? That's surprising to hear," Ayaho said sincerely.

Simpleminded, whimsical Giuli and coolheaded, intellectual Rosé were both powerful and independent. They looked the farthest from the kind of people with doubts and regrets weighing on them.

"I imagine. But, despite their looks, back at the House of Berith, they're..." He cut himself short, his eyes sharpening.

In the middle of the road, which was in a terrible state from the lack of maintenance, stood a figure.

"Mr. Wei?"

"Hold on to something."

"Huh? But look! There's someone there!"

“I can’t believe they’d attack us right under the Guild’s nose. Who could it be? Why?”

Wei stomped on the accelerator.

The word *attack* paralyzed Ayaho.

The man in the road slowly turned toward them. He smirked at the sight of the car rapidly approaching him.

Standing right in their path, the man took out a silver syringe and stabbed himself in the neck. Dark-red veins popped to the surface of his skin.

“Get down!” Wei shouted at Ayaho.

Trying to get around him by decelerating would risk causing them to get hit on the side. Their best choice was to keep the speed up and continue on their path, even if that meant running over the man. This was the basic theory for getting through conflict zones, and Wei did the right thing by accelerating. But it only worked if the attacker was a regular human.

“What?!” Wei scowled at the fierce shock that hit the armored vehicle.

The attacker had stopped the five-ton armored vehicle that had been running at over ninety-six kilometers per hour head-on. Then he forcefully twisted its trajectory.

The armored car trembled from the shock and broke through the guardrails of the road, crossing onto the sidewalk. It didn’t stop until it crashed into the wall, tilted diagonally.

“What in the...? Don’t tell me he’s...!”

Wei’s face contorted in pain after he crashed into the wheel. He pulled his gun from his waist and kicked open the car’s door, shooting without warning at the attacker on the ground.

Wei’s bullet, however, bounced off the man’s body with a clang.

The skin peeking from under his tattered clothes was covered in hard reptilian scales. These protected him from Wei’s handgun bullets.

The man, unharmed even after being run over and shot, slowly stood up with

a smug look on his face.

He was no longer human. He was a reptile on two feet. A lizardman.

“A Fafnir soldier?!”

Wei emptied his magazine on the attacker, but none of the bullets worked. The lizardmen could resist even direct rifle hits—9mm rounds were useless.

The moment Wei realized he was out of bullets, the attacker jumped at him. The lizardman’s kick blew him away along with the armored door he used as cover.

“Nooo!” Ayaho screamed as she saw Wei fly over nine meters and crash into a wall.

The Fafnir soldier reacted to the voice and looked over at her. His mouth, torn grotesquely all the way across his cheeks, let out a hoarse, barely intelligible voice.

“Galerie Berith’s Japanese...woman... To think I’d...meet you here.”

“N-no... Get away from me...!”

Ayaho’s face filled with fear upon realizing the lizardman was after her.

He must’ve mistaken her for Iroha, but knowing that didn’t help her. It was more likely she’d meet a worse fate if he were to realize he’d gotten the wrong target.

She had to run, but her body wouldn’t listen. All she could do was move farther inside the armored car in a desperate attempt to get away from the lizardman.

“Help...me...”

Yahiro’s face crossed her mind as she closed her eyes.

If only he was there, he could easily defeat the lizardman, just like he did the day they met in the 23 Wards.

But he was not there. He was detained at the Guild.

The thought made her heart sink in despair.

Then she heard the bizarrely calm voice of a young woman.

“Whoa! What’s this? Gross!”

Ayaho opened her eyes in shock and there she saw a girl wearing a high-school uniform.

The new girl seemed slightly older than her, maybe around Iroha’s age. She wore a white shirt and short skirt. Her ear piercings shone from under bleached hair.

“Ugh, it looked at me! Zen, please! I can’t stand reptiles.” The uniformed girl shrieked at the sight of the Fafnir soldier.

A young man, also in a high-school uniform, came forward.

“I told you not to move around on your own.”

His uniform was neat, and black-rimmed glasses decorated his face. He warned the girl seriously, and she apologized insincerely while slapping his back.

“Who...are you...?”

The lizardman looked at them with confusion.

“Sorry, but we’re not giving our names to you, monster.”

The boy, Zen, drew a bamboo kendo sword—a *shinai*—from a case he carried on his back.

It was small and slender, of Western design. The hilt was crude and the blade thick. It was clear at a glance that it was used for battle, not ceremony.

“That antique...won’t work...!” The lizardman howled derisively as he jumped at Zen.

The man was sure that harming his Fafnir-soldier skin, capable of deflecting bullets, with a sword wasn’t possible. He closed in on Zen without so much as a shred of wariness.

In that moment, the lizardman stopped due to a terrible surge of pain running across his whole body.

“What the...?! What did you...?”

“Stop speaking human words, monster,” Zen spat.

The lizardman’s mouth was paralyzed, as though obeying his orders.

His breath froze white, his fangs wet with saliva covered in frost. Glacial cold emanated from the tip of Zen’s sword. It froze over the lizardman’s whole body, putting a stop to his movement.

“You’re an eyesore. Begone.”

Zen’s sword flashed.

A thin crack ran through the entire body of the lizardman as the shrill ring of a crystal sounded. The Fafnir soldier’s hard, scaly body shattered like an ice sculpture.

Paralyzed, Ayaho simply watched the terrible events unfold.

The Fafnir soldier’s healing ability served no purpose once his body was frozen over. The same logic had to apply to the Lazaruses.

The boy before her eyes could incapacitate a Lazarus. He could defeat Yahiro.

The idea gave Ayaho chills.

“You’re one of the Japanese guarded by Galerie Berith, huh? Douji Yamase’s intel was spot-on,” Zen said as he glanced quietly at Ayaho, after sheathing his sword.

“You’re...the same as Yahiro...?” Ayaho asked with a trembling voice.

The eyes of the girl beside Zen lit up.

“You just said Yahiro, didn’t you? So you know Yahiro Narusawa?”

“Y-yes.” Ayaho nodded in confusion, then looked up again. She just realized they had been talking in Japanese. “You two...are Japanese, too?”

“Yeah. I’m Sumika Kiyotaki. This grumpy guy over here is Zen Sagara. Nice to meet you.”

The girl introduced herself with a smile and held up peace signs beside her face.

Ayaho relaxed a bit.

Sumika was friendly, and Zen, although grumpy as described, didn't look aggressive. The fact they were Japanese also made her feel they likely weren't enemies.

"U-um... Thank you... I'm Ayaho Sashou."

"Ayaho! Could it be you're one of Iroha Mamana's kids?" Sumika asked as she took out her phone, indicating she had seen the video.

"Uh, er, we're not her kids. I'm her sister, basically."

"Ah-ha-ha. Right... They say Japanese people look younger, but I knew there was no way she was a mother looking like that. Acting like that." Sumika held her hands up to her head and mimicked Iroha's "*Waooon!*"



Ayaho smiled awkwardly. Having someone she barely knew talk about Iroha's behavior was embarrassing.

"You know her?"

"We watched the video. She's supercute, huh? Does she look like that in real life, too? It's not a filter?"

"Yes, she looks just like that."

"Wow... Well, I'm jelly."

"Oh, no need."

Sumika was also beautiful, even if in a different way from Iroha. Actually, her mature way of speaking and carrying herself made her look even more attractive in Ayaho's eyes.

"Enough chitchat, Sumika." Zen admonished her for not helping out while he carried an unconscious Wei over.

"Gee, we were just getting started. How come you're always like this, Zen?" Sumika shrugged.

Zen threw Wei over to the armored car's rear seats. His wounds weren't light, but he didn't look to be in immediate danger. Ayaho was relieved by the news.

"Sorry, but would you mind coming with us?" he asked her.

"Just...me? Why?" she asked back in confusion.

Zen gave her a serious look.

"We need you as hostage. Cooperate, and we won't do anything harsh. I promise."

"Are you also after Iroha?" Ayaho tensed up on reflex.

She knew Iroha was attracting attention from various factions after the video went public; many companies and organizations were after her.

Yet Zen shook his head.

"No, we're not interested in Iroha Mamana. Only in Yahiro Narusawa."

"Yahiro? Why...?" Ayaho's eyes widened.

“He’s gotta pay,” Zen grumbled angrily. “I’ll have him pay for his crimes.”

7

“Hellooo... Are you open?”

A small girl with black hair and orange highlights called from the entrance to the abandoned building.

“Oh, hello.”

A beautiful woman sitting at the counter of the once-café replied with a giggle. She found it funny that the visitor acted as though she was a potential client for the café.

“Hey, we meet again, Giuli. How did you find this place?”

Douji Yamase raised his head up from the computer to look at Giuli.

He had given her only an email address, so it was surprising to see her visiting their hideout.

“You’re not the only ones making a living out of selling information.”

“Eduardo? Can’t trust that old man.” Yamase smiled wryly at the revelation.

Eduardo Valenzuela was the biggest informant in south Kanto. Although he was the manager of a small imports shop, he had a surprisingly wide network, and dealt with a variety of people. He was a strange old man; it wouldn’t be a surprise if he knew where Yamase was hiding.

“So, you came here looking for this?” Yamase asked Giuli while pointing at the cardboard boxes piled up by the wall.

Small metallic tubes peeked out from the boxes. Vials used for syringes. The same containers for the F-meds that Josh and the kids found at the scene of the crime.

“You said you were looking for ways to make money, but I didn’t expect the source to be the F-med instead of Iroha. You got me there.” Giuli chuckled.

Ganzheit had made part of the F-med’s production method publicly available, but one needed a dragon medium’s Ichor to make it. The Fafnir soldiers were

deemed useless for the cost of obtaining the crucial material, which wasn't worth the results.

However, if one were to obtain the help of a dragon medium and sell the F-med, they could easily make a profit. Yamase had Ira's medium, Miyabi Maisaka, and thus was able to capitalize on it.

"To be specific, the F-med is only half of our business," Yamase replied with no remorse.

Giuli glared at Yamase and smirked.

"The other half being intel on the Galerie's Japanese branch?"

"I'm shocked. You figured out that much already?" Yamase looked genuinely impressed.

It was already clear from the framing of Yahiro to keep Iroha in Yokohama that Galerie Berith had opposing forces. In which case, investigating Iroha wouldn't be the only thing Yamase and Miyabi, as informants, would want. What they really wanted was a detailed analysis of Galerie Berith's Japanese branch's power: a head count of their members and intel on their security, as well as their weaknesses. Yamase made it look as though Iroha was their object of surveillance so they could research all of the above.

"I knew your sponsor was looking for a fight with the Galerie, but you sure have taken the roundabout way about this. If you wanted to sell intel, then what was the need to publish that exposé on Iroha?" Giuli's canines showed from behind her lips as she smiled. "Or was that also only half the story?"

"Pfft... Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha, ha-hah!" Yamase couldn't contain himself.

Giuli pointed out that, while they were selling intel on the Galerie, they had a different, real employer.

"I see, so you aren't here for the F-med. You're here to check that out. I see. I'd heard the rumors, but you're really something, Giuli. No wonder that bastard hates you so much."

"Bastard? You've met Andrea?"

"Yes, actually..."

He tried answering as he laughed, but Miyabi cut him off.

“Douji!”

In reaction to her desperate shout, Douji stood quickly and kicked the table before him.

Then all the glass in the building shattered.

A booming roar enveloped the café. Multiple machine guns fired at once. Bullets rained and turned the antique chairs and tables into rubble in the blink of an eye.

Three pickup trucks were parked just outside, each of them armed with a military-grade machine gun.

“Fuck off!” Yamase roared as he drew the knife on his side.

A sudden shock wave and blast flew from where he stood, smashing down all the bullets and breaking the walls of the building further into rubble. Wood and plaster walls slammed against the trucks, crushing the gunners.

The blast of air became a raging tornado, which vanished as suddenly as it appeared.

The rubble in the air rained down, and mist formed due to the sudden change in air pressure.

Their hideout was gone without a trace, as well as the buildings surrounding it.

Nothing within a nine-meter radius of Yamase and Miyabi retained its original form.

Only those two, as well as Giuli, who had escaped to a safe range, were unharmed.

The pickup trucks were turned over and buried under the rubble.

Clapping came from beyond the trucks.

A silver-haired white man showed himself, his hair unruly in the wind.

Everything he wore was obviously high quality, to a pretentious extent—and his face made him look pretentious, too.

Operators holding bulletproof shields surrounded him.

The man was observing safely from behind his subordinates as they attacked Yamase.

“So this is Ira’s Regalia. Not bad, wind dragon,” the man praised insincerely.

Yamase clicked his tongue and glared daggers at the man.

“What is the meaning of this, Andrea Berith? Weren’t you going to take all the remaining F-med? You just leveled all the product.”

“Don’t worry, I will pay for it. I will also pay for all your things that got blown up. No complaints now, are there?”

“Add some compensation for the psychological damage of being shot full of lead.”

“You got it. I will arrange for the payments as soon as I’m done with the minor business I’m here for,” Andrea said before looking at a spot beside Douji.

Miyabi looked down in concern, and by her feet was Giuli, on her knees.

“My...dear brother, Andrea.” Giuli called the man’s name with her usual insolent tone.

She stood, and bullets fell from her jacket.

The machine-gun barrage on Yamase’s hideout had been fired with the intention of taking her out. The bullets, weakened after flying through the obstacles in the way, got stopped just barely by her anti-bullet jacket.

It couldn’t stop the full impact, however, so Giuli’s small body was damaged. Still, she shot the guy a grin and provocative glare.

“What’s the head of the Oceania branch of the Galerie doing all the way out here? Did they fire you for poor sales, brother?”

“Shut your mouth, doll! Don’t call me brother, Giuletta!” He exploded in anger.

His impulsive reaction basically proved Giuli right.

Andrea Berith was a member of the House of Berith. He was one of Giuli’s many non-blood-related older brothers.

His role as member of the House was executive to the Oceania branch of Galerie Berith, but it was in the red after many business failures.

Giuli, as a fellow executive manager, knew this.

“I could help you out if you’re having money trouble, brother. Just get on your knees and beg your pretty dollface of a sister.”

“Silence, Giulietta. You know why I’m here,” Andrea replied. His shoulders were shaking but he put up a strong front.

Then a small figure appeared from behind him. A black-haired girl wearing the uniform of Galerie Berith. She had big combat knives in her hands.

“I’ll give you credit for surviving that attack just now, but you can’t defeat *her* like that. Go,” Andrea ordered the girl at his side.

The girl ran toward Giuli, the single green tuft of hair in her bangs swaying with the wind.

“That face...?! Is that you, Enrica?!” Giuli’s eyes widened when she noticed the girl had the same face as her.

The girl swung down a knife, and Giuli blocked the strike with the knuckle guards on her glove, but due to the damage she’d taken from the machine guns, she couldn’t stop the blow entirely and lost her balance.

Enrica wasted no time and countered.

“Yes. She’s the latest in the Marionetta series! The peak of the homunculus field, built on House Berith’s centuries of alchemical expertise!”

Andrea howled in victory as he saw Enrica overpower Giuli.

“Do it, Enriqueta! Show them you’re not a failure like those twins!”

“Wasn’t it Enrica who got disposed of as a failure?” Giuli replied with annoyance as she warded off Enrica’s attacks.

Andrea scowled furiously upon hearing that.

“That was a mistake. Damn Berith geezers. I can’t believe they would give human education to some dolls, and even receive them as part of the House!”

Enrica attacked even faster, responding to Andrea’s anger.

Giuli could barely counter the knives coming in from both sides. Enrica kicked her right in the stomach and sent her flying.

“You’re combat dolls, so just be weapons! Look! Enriqueta far surpasses your specs because she’s committed to being a tool! No superfluous emotions or intelligence!”

Andrea smiled contently as he saw Giuli fall facedown on the ground.

The reaction revealed the depth of his inferiority complex.

The alchemist House of Berith had created superior descendants in the form of homunculi through repeated genetic manipulation and careful breeding.

Although even Andrea himself had received the blessings of this project (while being of different lineage), his competence was far below that of Giuli and Rosé.



He was trying to prove his superiority by using another of their series, Enrica, as a tool.

“Ouch... You’re lacking some love for your sister, little miss.” Giuli held her side as she got to her feet.

Enrica’s roundhouse kick had enough power to burst the organs of any regular person. Giuli had avoided most of the blow, but her movements were sluggish.

“It’s over, sister Giuli. You can’t defeat me.” Enrica raised her knives again.

Enrica had been discarded due to issues with her emotions and intelligence, but her combat skills overwhelmed Giuli’s. The lack of emotion only made her a more focused fighter.

Still, Giuli looked sure of herself as she glanced back at her sister.

“You think?”

Enrica openly approached Giuli, the latter still not giving up.

Giuli could not react as Enrica’s knife swiftly approached her neck, and just as it was about to sink into flesh, she stopped.

“Huh?!”

Enrica stopped in midair, like a marionette held up by strings. And in fact, slim wires, invisible in plain sight, wrapped all around her body. A net meant for capturing a Lazarus. Giuli had been planting the wires like a spiderweb all over the surrounding rubble as she guarded herself against Enrica’s blows.

“Bye-bye, Enrica. Don’t show your face to me anymore, if possible. I’d rather not kill a sister.”

Giuli smiled at her paralyzed little sister and took a smoke grenade out from her pocket. She escaped among the smoke cover and disappeared into the ruins of the building.

“I’m sorry, master. I’ve let our target escape,” Enrica reported to Andrea as she cut away the wires with her knife and regained her footing.

Andrea said nothing, but violently kicked her abdomen. The small girl was

sent helplessly flying, her body bent in pain. Not content with that, Andrea fiercely stomped on her face.

“Too bad, bro. You’re not gonna follow her, though?” Yamase asked sarcastically as he calmly watched the man vent his anger on the girl.

“She can run for now; it won’t change anything. It’s too late already.” Andrea combed his hair back with a hand, regaining his composure. “All the wealth those dolls took will be in my hands, as the legitimate heir of House Berith. And this includes Avaritia’s medium.”

“...Okay. Good luck, man. Just don’t forget to pay me for damages and compensation.” Yamase shrugged.

Miyabi Maisaka listened to their conversation from a short distance away. Her long, black hair swayed in the fume-tainted wind. Her right eye, hidden behind her bangs, glowed coldly, silently reflecting the city of Yokohama, which was soon to become a battlefield.

Act 3 Enemy from the Past

1

““The serial murderer was a Fafnir soldier?””

Yahiro and Akulina exclaimed in unison after hearing the news from Rosé, who had shown up suddenly at the meeting room in Fort Yokohama.

“That’s Raimat International’s enhanced soldiers, right? The ones who boosted their strength and agility by taking a special drug.”

Akulina looked entirely serious. Her left hand was still connected to Yahiro’s through the handcuffs.

“I guess those guys could take on a dozen or two gunshots, but Raimat’s over, isn’t it? I heard the Moujuu wrecked their F-med lab, too.”

“No, the F-med’s production method is out. It appears Ganzheit leaked it on purpose. Considering the adverse effects it has on its user, it simply isn’t realistic to adopt it for military use,” Rosé answered Yahiro’s question.

The F-med turned people into lizardmen, made them more aggressive, and deprived them of composed thought, as well as put too big of a burden on their bodies. It shortened the soldiers’ life spans.

“So they decided it’d be less dangerous to have it out in the open than try to hide it,” Akulina surmised, nodding in understanding.

“Yes. However, this also means the F-med is the perfect item for organizations that do not care about treating their operators as disposable.”

“And they used that dangerous drug to kill innocent people just to frame me?” The disgust in Yahiro’s voice was clear as day.

Rosé exhaled expressionlessly.

“Andrea Berith must be behind all this. His goal is to stall Iroha here. We can’t

leave Yokohama so long as the Guild has you captured here.”

“Andrea...Berith?”

“Executive manager of the Oceania branch of Galerie Berith. Giuli’s and my older brother. Although we only share a shred of DNA.”

Yahiro gasped in reaction to Rosé’s confession.

“Why would someone from Galerie Berith want to sabotage you?”

“Because we’re in the same company. House Berith only cares about results. So long as we achieve enough, even a couple of young girls like us can secure high positions...”

“And without them, even those with seniority like him could get fired?”
Yahiro finished.

Rosé nodded.

“Andrea came here in fear of such an outcome, trying to take the Japanese branch’s achievements and make them his own.”

“How?”

“It wouldn’t benefit him much to take our regular assets, but now, we have a dragon medium.”

“He’s here for Iroha?” Yahiro grimaced.

The dragon mediums’ usefulness was made public after the battle with Vanagloria. It made sense Andrea Berith would try to take one for himself to make up for his lack of results, even if it meant going up against another branch of his own organization.

“You think the employer Yamadou was talking about is your brother?”

“At the very least, there’s no doubt Andrea is receiving intel from Douji Yamase. And if the two of them are connected, then we know where he got the F-med from, too.”

“Right... Maisaka, the woman who was with Yamadou, is also a dragon medium...”

One needed dragon medium blood to make F-med. Raimat used Sui

Narusawa's, and Andrea Berith likely received Miyabi Maisaka's. Either that, or they sold him the completed product.

"That's all for our statement. Could you grant Yahiro his freedom, Akulina Jarova? I've already spoken to Leskin." Rosé turned to look at the woman after concluding the explanation.

Yahiro was detained because the murderer was thought to be a Lazarus, and for no other reason. Now that Fafnir soldiers were also suspects, and they had the physical evidence of the F-med container, there was no grounds for Yahiro to stay at the Guild any longer.

"R-right. I wouldn't mind letting him go after hearing all that, but..." Akulina looked down at her left hand, then gazed into the void.

"What's the issue?" Rosé glared coldly at her. Her face asked why they were even sitting so close to each other to begin with.

Akulina, overwhelmed by her glare, gave up and opened her mouth to confess to losing the keys, but before her voice could come out, they heard a hurried knock on the door. It opened right away.

"Excuse me, Chief Jarova. I heard a Galerie Berith manager is visiting?" a uniformed Guild staff member asked with a bit of confusion.

"Rosetta Berith is right here. Why?" Akulina asked back with an imposing tone, hiding her handcuffed hand.

The staff member quickly saluted, then: "Come in," he said to the other side of the door. "This man says he has an urgent report to ma—"

"Wei?!" Yahiro shouted upon seeing the man enter the room while assisted by another member of the staff.

Yang Wei, who was supposed to be back at the Galerie's HQ, was covered in blood.

"What happened to you?!"

"Sorry, Yahiro. They took Ayaho," he replied between sharp gasps, holding his ribs.

"Ayaho...?" Yahiro parroted, stunned.

He would expect Iroha to get kidnapped, but Ayaho wasn't even an operator, let alone a dragon medium. What reason would they have to battle Wei in order to take her away?

"A Fafnir soldier attacked you?"

"...Yes, Rosé. It was a lizardman, same as RMS's mercenaries." Wei nodded before taking a sealed letter out from his breast pocket. A scroll, reminiscent of an old-fashioned challenge notice. "But then another group killed the Fafnir soldier and took Ayaho away. They left this behind while I was knocked out."

"A letter...? Is this Japanese?" Yahiro groaned upon receiving the letter. He never imagined the day he held something like this would come now that Japan had fallen.

"From Zen Sagara, huh? Interesting." Rosé slightly raised a brow as she saw the name at the end of the letter.

"You know the name, Rosé? Who is it?" Yahiro asked.

"The Lazarus blessed by Acedia's medium, Sumika Kiyotaki."

"A Lazarus... Should've guessed..." Yahiro was as unsurprised as he was worried.

A Japanese survivor capable of killing a Fafnir soldier. It would've been more surprising if it *wasn't* a Lazarus.

"What does the letter say?" Akulina asked, peeking at the scroll's immaculate brush handwriting.

"We've taken Ayaho with us, so if you want her back, come see us." Yahiro summarized it plainly.

There was no time limit. No warning for him to come alone. They were waiting at the track-and-field Mitsuzawa Stadium, located about two kilometers from Fort Yokohama.

"They're not asking for ransom? What do they want?" Akulina asked, confused.

"It doesn't say to come with a bag of money. They just want me to go. Maybe they got a grudge against me or something."

It was the first time Yahiro had heard of Zen Sagara. He had no way of knowing why the guy hated him, if that was the case.

“Is Acedia’s medium also involved with Andrea?” Yahiro asked Rosé.

Just as they had framed him for serial murder, perhaps this new couple wanted to stall him by kidnapping Ayaho.

And yet, Rosé shook her head.

“No. It’s the maritime corporation Noah Transtech behind Sumika Kiyotaki. They’re neutral; I don’t believe they would get involved in conflict among PMCs.”

“So Sagara’s just doing this of his own accord? Why now, though?”

“This might as well be the best time. Knowing Iroha is in Yokohama also means they know her contractor—you—is here as well.”

“So they came here after watching Yamadou’s video?” Yahiro looked up at the ceiling in annoyance.

Andrea Berith coming after the Galerie’s Japanese branch, Acedia’s medium and Lazarus kidnapping Ayaho: It was all thanks to Yamase’s video exposing Iroha. It was nasty, as though Yamase had plotted this whole thing.

Whatever the reason, though, what mattered was the fact that Ayaho had been put in harm’s way. Yahiro could never choose to abandon her, no matter what Sagara and his medium had in mind.

“Wei, would you mind lending me a knife?” Yahiro asked, serious.

Wei nodded and handed him one. It was a black sheath knife, property of the Galerie. Yahiro unsheathed it right away and regulated his breathing in preparation for the pain to come.

“What do you have in mind, Yahiro Narusawa?” Akulina scowled.

Yahiro lifted his left hand and said, “Sorry, Akulina. Your clothes might get dirty.”

“W-wait?!”

Akulina’s eyes went wide as saucers when Yahiro brought the knife down on

his own right wrist. He sliced through to the other end and freed his arm from the handcuffs.

“Argh! Fuck, that hurts!”

Yahiro ground his teeth to withstand the pain, then picked his bloody right hand up from the floor and pressed it against his wrist. The wound let off a misty, crimson steam as it healed, and within seconds, Yahiro’s hand was back in place. Akulina observed the whole thing with bated breath.

“The Lazaruses...sure are something...”

Akulina looked down at her own handcuffed left hand and sighed.

Cutting off your own hand was no easy feat, even if you knew it could heal right away. Yet Yahiro hadn’t hesitated for even a second in order to go save Ayaho.

Akulina instinctively understood he’d had to make similar choices many times in the past.

In this demented world crawling with Moujuu, even the Lazarus had to make sacrifices in order to survive.

“You’re going alone?” Rosé asked flatly.

“Only I was called. I can’t bring Iroha into this.” Yahiro waved the letter in his hand.

“I see no reason to throw yourself in danger just to save Ayaho Sashou.”

“...Are you being serious right now, Rosé? Can you even picture how Iroha would react if she found out I didn’t try to save Ayaho?”

Yahiro replied to Rosé’s cold question with a baffled expression. Naturally, Rosé wasn’t thinking about leaving Ayaho to her doom. And he realized this.

“Isn’t that all the more reason to take Iroha with you?” Wei pointed out feebly while leaning against the wall.

Rosé objected. “I’m afraid I can’t allow that.”

“Figures. It’d be one thing to meet with Sagara only, but we’ve got Yamase and your brother going after her. They might be in cahoots with Sagara.” Yahiro

agreed easily.

First of all, there was no reason to believe they could easily defeat him even if they took Iroha, considering he was a Lazarus, too. Which is why Yahiro preferred going alone; at least that way, they could keep the losses to a minimum in the worst-case scenario.

“Also, I’m not sure Sagara wants to fight me, just going off this letter. Maybe he just wants to be friends,” Yahiro said jokingly.

He knew that couldn’t be the case. Zen couldn’t be friendly after kidnapping Ayaho. Most likely, blood would be spilled.

“I understand. Then I shall go negotiate with you,” Akulina said gravely as she gripped the handcuff on her left wrist.

Yahiro gave her a weird look.

“You? Why?”

“Maintaining public order in Yokohama is the Guild’s responsibility. We can’t let kidnappers go scot-free, even if they are Lazarus. I-it’s not due to any personal feelings, that’s for sure.”

“I didn’t say anything...”

Rosé glared coldly as Akulina made up excuses in a hurry. “What happened between you two, though, Akulina Jarova?”

“I said no personal feelings are involved!”

“If you say so... Very well, the Galerie will send backup, too. So long as we take back the hostage, we could flee if victory isn’t po—”

Something vibrated in her chest, cutting her off. A call from encrypted comms.

Rosé glanced at the screen of the smartphone-like device and her eyes rounded ever so slightly—the maximum expression of surprise she ever showed.

“Rosé...?” Yahiro asked with worry.

She shook her head with a shockingly angry look on her face.

“It seems Andrea’s made his move to attack the Galerie’s Japanese branch.”

““He what?”” Yahiro and Akulina asked back in unison.

Even if they were rivals, they were still the same company. Not to mention siblings. No one expected him to choose violence right beneath the Guild’s nose.

“It seems he’s hired local PMCs and rallied troops. He has over a hundred armored vehicles, and at least a thousand operators. This is not just any attack... This is war.” Rosé spoke matter-of-factly.

The device in her hand kept on vibrating as it announced the state of emergency.

2

“Do you drink coffee?”

Sumika asked Ayaho in a leisurely tone, metal mug in hand.

“Yes. Um, thank you.”

“Don’t worry. Oh, and here’s some sugar and milk. Use as much as you like.”

Sumika placed the mug down before Ayaho and grabbed the camping percolator to deftly pour coffee into it. The fragrance spread throughout the room.

They were at the ruins of a big sports stadium, inside the rest area facing the running track.

Yokohama was relatively safe under the Guild’s wing, but Moujuu were a common occurrence this far away from HQ. Even mercenaries rarely approached this area. Sumika and Zen were using the desolate ruins as their own hideout.

“It’s great,” Ayaho whispered after having a piece of cake.

It was pound cake like any other, but so soft and tender. Like nothing they’d made for themselves back in the 23 Wards.

“I’m glad to hear that. Zen may not look like it, but he’s a really good cook.”

Sumika's face melted into a smile.

"What's my looks have to do with my cooking skills?" Zen glared at her while putting away the cooking utensils.

He sounded grumpy, but not scary. Both of them were completely different from when they'd killed the Fafnir soldier, so warm and friendly now.

"I'm sorry we scared you. We'll send you back to...Galerie Berith, was it? Right after we're done with what we came to do," Sumika said after noticing Ayaho's silence.

Ayaho nodded quietly. Showing gratitude to her kidnappers would be weird, so instead, she asked: "U-um... Why do you want Yahiro to come see you?"

She knew Zen had left a letter summoning Yahiro. She saw him write it.

"What sort of person is Yahiro Narusawa, from your point of view?" Zen answered with another question, keeping away from her so as to not frighten her.

"He's kind. He's given his all to help us so many times..." Ayaho was confused, but she responded, nonetheless.

The idea of a Lazarus was terrifying, but in stark contrast to that, Yahiro was a very normal boy. He seemed to prefer not getting involved with other people, but in reality, he always went along with Iroha's whims, and cared for her siblings. He was a good person. Anyone could tell after spending some time with him.

However, the look on Zen's face as he listened to her reply was far from warm.

"Is that so. Weird."

"How is it weird?"

"We can only think of him as some sort of demon."

"Demon?" Ayaho looked taken aback.

The word was incompatible with her idea of Yahiro; she even thought Zen might've been joking.

Zen, however, looked down at the ground and spoke with a voice trembling with anger: “*Monster* wouldn’t cut it. He can’t be allowed to exist in this world. And if he can’t die, then we should put him in ice and bury him forever. Imprison him like Lucifer in the Cocytus.”

“But... Why...?” Ayaho asked back without thinking.

She had no idea why he would hate Yahiro that much, but his hatred was too great, too raw to assume it was unfounded. He knew something. Some truth that Ayaho was unaware of.

“You’re fourteen, right?” Sumika asked as cheerfully as she could in order to appease her confusion. “Which means you were ten when the J-nocide happened. And you’ve been with Iroha ever since?”

“...Yes. I lived in the 23 Wards up until recently. I’ve been with my siblings ever since the adults all left us.”

“The 23 Wards... The quarantine zone?” Zen’s eyes widened in surprise.

What was once known as Tokyo had been deemed a danger zone due to the large amount of Moujuu emerging from the Ploutonion at the heart of the city. It was hard to believe the kids were living smack-dab in the middle of those ruins that had even been abandoned by the armies of the world.

“Iroha and Nuemaru...the Moujuu, protected us the whole time.”

“The Moujuu...protected you?”

“Y-yes.”

There was an ugly expression on Zen’s face as he exchanged glances with Sumika.

Ayaho was a bit worried about their disturbed reactions. So even Sumika, another dragon medium, found Iroha’s ability to communicate with Moujuu strange?

“Excuse me, how have you been getting by up to now?” Ayaho asked to change the subject. She felt she shouldn’t keep talking about Iroha.

Thankfully, Sumika didn’t try to return to the previous topic; she answered her question right away.

“It took some time for me to awaken as a dragon medium.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

Sumika softly raised her hand before Ayaho. A white mist appeared on top of her palm, until shiny, translucent particles emerged. Big snowflakes in the shape of flowers.

“I realized I had this power about two years after the J-nocide ended. It was also around then that I met Zen.”

“You were all alone up to then?”

“No, not at all. I was in the brothel.”

“A...brothel...?”

“Yeah. I used to work giving relief to the old guys tired from all the Moujuu hunting.” Sumika smiled mischievously.

Ayaho stared at her, speechless.

Sumika was eighteen. Which meant she was fourteen, just like Ayaho now, around the time of the J-nocide.

The difference between them was that Sumika hadn't had Iroha to protect her. She'd had to survive by selling her own body. Ayaho felt her blood curdling just imagining the fear and despair she must've experienced.

“Oh, sorry. Don't look like that. The owner who took me in was a nice person, and I didn't go through anything truly horrifying. Unlike Zen over there.”

“...Don't bring that up, Sumika. She doesn't need to know,” Zen responded with utmost calm, which in turn painted a bleak picture of the tragedy he'd experienced.

“I'm sorry... I didn't know...,” Ayaho said, her head hanging. She couldn't stop the tears from flowing, even though she knew she had no right to cry.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Zen said and looked away.

Sumika grinned at him.

“...You both...hate Yahiro?” Ayaho asked between sobs.

Zen softly shook his head.

“I don’t hate him. I just cannot allow him to exist further, that’s all.”

“Please, no. You’re wrong.” Ayaho wiped her tears away and shook her head hard.

Zen shot her a suspicious glance.

“Wrong about what?”

“It was his sister who caused the J-nocide. Yahiro’s been looking for her this whole time to atone for his—”

“Pfft.” Zen made an odd sound, interrupting Ayaho. He was looking down and his shoulders shook. The shaking soon spread throughout his whole body, and he laughed out loud.

“Zen...?”

“Bah-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You... Pfft... You really believe that, Yahiro Narusawa? You’re kidding me!”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t mind me... Thank you, Ayaho Sashou.” Zen softly shook his head and tried to quell his laughter. Then his bloodlust took palpable form all around him as he calmly continued: “Thank you for the fun conversation. And if he’s truly caught in such a convenient dream, then I shall give him the gift of killing him in his sleep.”

3

Akulina drove the armored car into the stadium ruins right before sundown. The only passenger was Yahiro; Rosé and Wei had gone back to the Galerie HQ to prepare for Andrea Berith’s attack.

It wasn’t hard to figure out where Zen Sagara was. There was only one building with lights on among the ruins. It was too obvious, but a trap was unlikely. The man they were up against was a Lazarus; surprise attacks and

sniping were of no use—he had no need for high-alert security.

The same went for Yahiro, however.

The car stopped in front of the shed and Yahiro confidently showed himself.

At the same time, three people emerged from the shed: a guy and a girl wearing high-school uniforms, and sailor-uniform-clad Ayaho.

“Ayaho! Are you okay?!” Yahiro shouted, trying hard not to show desperation.

Ayaho didn’t seem harmed from afar, and she wasn’t tied up, either.

“Yahiro! You—!”

Ayaho appeared worried and tried to tell him something, but the guy interrupted her: “So you’re Yahiro Narusawa?”

“I did as you told me. I’m here. You sent the letter, right?” Yahiro asked as he held up the folded letter.

The guy, Zen, nodded quietly.

“I apologize for the kidnapping. Ayaho Sashou is free to go.”

“Huh?” Yahiro was perplexed by the integrity shown. He had been ready to negotiate, but now all the pent-up indignation had nowhere to go. “She is? Seriously?”

“That was the deal from the very beginning,” Zen replied.

The girl behind him, Sumika Kiyotaki, backed up his claims by softly pushing Ayaho forward.

“Bye-bye, Ayaho. Take care.” Sumika waved with a smile.

Ayaho walked over to Yahiro’s side, looking back at Sumika many times on the way. The lack of fear in her face let Yahiro know they had treated her well.

“Ms. Akulina. Please keep her safe.” Yahiro left Ayaho in the woman’s hands before turning back to Zen and Sumika.

Even though the hostage was free now, they weren’t done with him. On the contrary, Yahiro took this as a declaration of war. Zen was implying that what was to come next wasn’t talking, but killing.

“Wait, Yahiro. They’re not bad peop—” Ayaho tried to stop him as hostility took over his whole body, but then her footing turned to white ice.

Zen pointed his Western sword at Ayaho, halting her in place. His ice Regalia was too powerful for mere intimidation—he was saying he’d show no mercy if she got in the way of his fight with Yahiro.

“I’ll wait until you two get somewhere safe. Take her away already if you don’t want a stray blow to hit you,” Zen warned Akulina.

“You’d make an enemy of the Guild, Lazarus?” Akulina replied firmly as she stared at the frozen ground.

Zen laughed it off.

“I don’t care about you lot. If you want to stay, then go ahead. I’m just saying I can’t guarantee your safety.”

“Please go, Ms. Akulina,” Yahiro urged her.

Akulina bit her lip, but soon nodded. She pushed Ayaho, who was displeased, into the car and they sped away.

Once the armored vehicle was far away enough, Yahiro walked up to Zen. Close enough to talk without shouting—close enough for their blades to touch each other.

“Thank you for letting Ayaho go, and for saving her from the Fafnir soldier.”

“Don’t think I did it for you,” he answered coldly to Yahiro’s gratitude.

Not a friendly guy, huh? Yahiro smiled wryly. *Better this way if he wants to fight, I guess.*

“So, I gather you wanna kill me?”

“How sharp, Yahiro Narusawa.” Zen showed a grim smile.

“Mind telling me why?”

Sumika Kiyotaki was also glaring coldly at him, despite how friendly she had been with Ayaho. Yahiro was frankly disconcerted by the intensity of the wrath and hatred.

“I should be asking you that. You still can’t remember your sin?”

“My...sin?” A crooked smile escaped him. There were too many of them to count.

Stealing and flipping artwork and antiques. Killing Fafnir soldiers in the 23 Wards—perhaps done in self-defense, but they were too many to count on both hands. And he also drove Vanagloria’s medium, Chiruka Misaki, to death.

He realized, though, they meant none of the above.

“You really don’t remember what happened four years ago?” Sumika raised her voice, mistaking the meaning of his expression.

“You mean when Sui summoned the dragon?” Yahiro asked calmly.

“...When Sui Narusawa summoned the dragon? You make it sound like it had nothing to do with you.” Zen glared daggers at him.

“It’s true I wasn’t able to stop her. I won’t make excuses for my part in what happened. Resent me if you want.” Yahiro shrugged with self-deprecation, then glared right back at Zen. “But I’m not letting you kill me. I have to stop Sui. She hates this world even now, and the same thing will happen again if I let her be.”

“And despite knowing all this, you still made a contract with Iroha Mamana? You *want* the same thing to happen again?” Zen pressed on.

The accusation confused Yahiro.

“Iroha? What’s she have to do with this? She doesn’t want the world to end.”

“I imagine. It’s you who wants to end it.”

“What’re you talking about?” Yahiro asked back, baffled.

Something was wrong. Zen’s accusations made no sense from Yahiro’s perspective. It was Sui who summoned the dragon and caused the J-nocide. There was no way Yahiro would get that wrong. He saw it happen with his own eyes.

“That’s enough, Zen. He really doesn’t get it,” Sumika uttered with disgust.

“Yeah. Let’s not waste any more time.”

Zen held his sword in a praying posture. The blade frosted and ice crystals hovered around him.

Yahiro unsheathed his knife. He didn't have the Kuyou Masakane on hand after being held up at the Guild, but even if he did, it'd be a waste of the treasure without the Regalia.

He wasn't sure he could parry Zen's attacks with the knife. But at least it was better than nothing. It should be enough to keep Zen on his toes, at the very least. The knife was more than enough to kill Sumika, after all.

"You're wrong about Sui Narusawa causing the J-nocide. The dragon from four years ago was none other than you, Yahiro Narusawa!"

Zen pointed his sword forward.

Yahiro was too far away for the small sword to reach him, but still he jumped back as chills ran down his spine. Then the place he had been standing on froze over.

The humidity in the air crystalized, and sharp frozen pillars covered the ground. Yahiro would've been frozen had the attack landed.

Still, he wasn't disturbed by Zen's power. What really shook him were the words he uttered just before his attack.

"What in the...? What are you...talking about...?"

Zen's Regalia had a narrow area of effect. Only about six to seven meters in range. There was also a time lag before it had any effect, so dodging was relatively easy.

And yet Yahiro moved slowly.

Head-splitting pain assaulted him without pause. Flashes of the events four years ago came back to him from the pit of his lost memories.

"Thank goodness... You're alive, my dear brother."

The city in ruins. Blood-crimson rain.

The white-haired girl among the toppled buildings.

A joyful smile on her lips. Bliss on her face as she saw the world crumble.

"Or was it that you just could not die?"

A question for Yahiro.

A dragon behind the girl he used to call his sister.

The rainbow monster looking down at the ground as it swam among the sea of clouds.

The dreadful, fantastical scene brought back to mind long-forgotten doubts.

The white-haired girl was not the dragon. She merely summoned it. It wasn't like when Vanagloria incarnated in Chiruka Misaki's body. Sui did not lose her human form. She did not transform into a dragon.

"A-aaahh..."

Anguished sounds escaped Yahiro's throat.

The seal on his memories was coming undone. Memories of his sin, memories better off hidden.

Sui Narusawa was not the dragon. So whose body did the summoned beast take over?

The Lazarus: someone who obtained immortality by bathing in dragon blood.

Why did the Lazarus use the same power as the dragon of the medium who blessed them?

How could they regenerate even after losing their entire body?

How was Yahiro able to produce the Goreclad? The armor of blood reminiscent of dragon scales?

"Good-bye, Brother. I'm glad I met you..."

Sui's last words on that day rang in his ears.

Where did the rainbow-colored dragon Sui summoned go?

No, it never went away.

It was inside him. It possessed him.

"UWAAAAAAH!"

Yahiro screamed and clutched his head.

Uncontrollable dragon aura raged from every pore of his body.

He remembered. That day, Sui turned Yahiro into a dragon.

He had used the dragon's powers as she'd wished.



He had opened the Ploutonion at the heart of Tokyo and called forth the Moujuu.

His image had spread throughout the media, polluting the minds of all who saw it and plunging them into insanity, driving them to massacre. *He* triggered the J-nocide.

“Zen!”

“I know!”

Sumika screamed as she realized that Yahiro was about to go berserk, and Zen gripped his sword tight.

Zen’s body was covered in an armor of bluish-white scales, and his blade became even colder.

“Don’t worry, it’ll all be over in a single strike! Icefall!”

Zen rushed at Yahiro, thrusting his sword forward with tremendous force.

The cold shooting from its tip froze the air around it as it flew toward Yahiro.

The brutal Regalia froze not only the warmth in the air, but the nitrogen and oxygen themselves. The glacial ice spear would swallow Yahiro and freeze him in the blink of an eye...but the strike did not reach him.

A shock wave came crashing from the side, blowing Zen’s attack away and saving Yahiro.

“How...?!” Sumika wondered in shock.

The gale born from the shock wave had stopped Zen’s following strike, like a wall protecting Yahiro.

The shimmering silhouette of a person appeared on the other side of the barrier. It approached Yahiro unnoticed, hidden by the refraction of the air.

Soon, the figure became clear, and a couple revealed themselves: a hound-like young man and a woman holding a silver cane. The latter’s long, black hair swayed with the whirlwind.

“Douji Yamase...” Zen called the man’s name sullenly as he held his sword up.

Yamase chuckled sardonically.

“Sorry, Sagara. I’ve got business with this guy. I can’t afford to have you ice him.”

“You think I’ll back out now?” Zen glared back at Yamase, who stood defensively over Yahiro.

Yamase was a Lazarus under Ira’s blessing. His air-controlling Regalia had the advantage over Zen’s, which utilized the humidity in the air. He would rather not have to fight him head-on.

Yamase raised his hands above his head, as if to say he had no intention to fight—though he was still holding his knives.

“I get how you two feel, but we’re running a business over here. I thank you for taking him away from Avaritia’s medium, though. Saved us a lot of trouble.”

“What...?”

Zen was distracted for only an instant after Yamase’s roundabout comment, and because of it, he didn’t notice *her* right away.

A small girl in a black dress was standing right beside Yahiro. Her hair, illuminated by the moonlight, looked like falling snow—pure white.

“Welcome back, my Dear Brother... Now remember. Remember your true self,” she whispered into Yahiro’s ear. Her eyes glowed red like jewels in the darkness.

“Sui Narusawa...!”

Zen unleashed his Regalia the moment he yelled the girl’s name.

The frozen air flowed like a cascade of death onto her, but in that moment, Yahiro raised his head.

Then a roar erupted, the earth cracked, and darkness enveloped Zen and Sumika.

Iroha rushed to the infirmary upon hearing that Giuli had returned wounded.

Giuli was super popular among the operators of the Galerie's Japanese branch, and as proof of that, the area outside the infirmary was full of restless men.

Iroha made her way through the crowds and into the infirmary where she saw Giuli sitting on the bed, wrapping a bandage around her chest.

"Giuli?!" Iroha's voice cracked upon seeing the compresses all over her body. "What happened to you?!"

"Oh, this? Just a few machine-gun shots."

"M-machine gun...?!"

"Yeah, I'm doing fine. This is nothing," Giuli said while raising her arm, which was a swollen mix of red and purple.

She had bruises everywhere—perhaps some of her bones were broken—and yet, her movements were sharp, and her expression calm.

"I'm just built different. I won't be healing in a second like Yahiro, though."

"Well, duh! You gotta rest! Here, let me help you wrap those bandages! You gotta ask for help when you're hurting!"

Iroha snatched the bandage out of Giuli's hand and clumsily dressed the girl's wounds.

Giuli had a rare, confused look on her face. It was as though she'd heard that sort of thing for the first time in her life. She giggled.

"You're like my mom, Iroha."

"Can't you say I'm like a nurse, instead?! An angel in white, or something!"

"Anyways, I wish I had the time to rest. But I don't think that's happening."

"Huh?"

Someone entered the infirmary as Giuli raised her head. In walked a tall operator with brown skin—lieutenant Paola Resente.

"Giuli... They wrecked the bridges. East and west," Paola reported without preface.

“Who what...?” Iroha mumbled in shock.

The Galerie barracks and HQ were on reclaimed land near the Port of Yokohama. The zone used to be for bonded warehouses, surrounded by the sea and canals; one had to cross a bridge to go anywhere. The bridges being lost meant they were isolated.

“So we only got the south left? Geez. They wanna surround us?” Giuli replied blithely.

Iroha looked at her with a strained expression. “Is that...my fault?”

“They’re after you, but I wouldn’t say it’s your fault. Andrea’s got a grudge against Rosy and me.”

“...Andrea?” Iroha furrowed her brow at the unfamiliar name.

“Yup. Andrea Berith. Executive of the Oceania branch of the Galerie. We’re barely blood related, but he is technically our older brother.”

“Your brother wants to surround the Galerie? Why?”

“Typical succession struggles. Or envy, maybe. His branch isn’t doing well. I think he’s looking to flip his luck by getting his hands on a dragon medium.”

“Just for that...?”

Iroha felt apathy before any indignation. She couldn’t comprehend the reason why he wanted a dragon medium, much less that he would hate his sisters because of that.

“Problem is, since Andrea’s involved, this is internal strife. So we can’t hope for help from the Guild.” Giuli shook her head listlessly as she put her uniform shirt on top of the bandages. “And to top it all off, if the PMCs going after you were hired by Andrea, then they can go all out on their attacks.”

“The more time goes on...the more we’ll be at a disadvantage,” Paola added composedly.

“Yeah.” Giuli nodded without worry. “So where’re Iroha’s kids?”

“They’ve evacuated to the shelter, along with the noncombat personnel.”

“Gotcha. That’s one less thing to worry about.”

“Wait! Ayaho... Ayaho hasn’t come back from Fort Yokohama. Wei was with her,” Iroha interjected in a hurry.

Ayaho and her escort, Wei, had stayed behind at Fort Yokohama to talk with Yahiro even after Iroha left in a huff. But now over five hours had passed, and they weren’t back in the barracks. Moreover, she couldn’t get in touch with them.

“Don’t worry about Ayaho.”

“Huh? Rosé?” Iroha turned around, surprised by the new voice.

Rosé appeared out of the blue at the infirmary, after going out all by herself, saying she’d solve the serial murders issue. Her face remained impassive even upon seeing her sister covered in bandages.

“You know where she is?”

“She got kidnapped by the water dragon Acedia’s medium and her Lazarus.”

“She got...kidnapped?! By the w-water dragon’s medium?!” Iroha’s eyes darted all around at the sound of the ominous news.

“The kidnappers requested a meeting with Yahiro alone. He went there to bring Ayaho back.”

“You let him go all alone?! B-but I gotta be with him or...”

“Or he can’t use the Regalia, true.”

“If you knew that, then why...?!” Iroha raised her voice and drew closer to Rosé.

Rosé, however, tilted her head as though the answer was obvious.

“I couldn’t let you leave the base in the current situation.”

“Yeah, not while the bridges are down and we’re surrounded,” Giuli added in her usual casual tone.

“M-maybe so...but still!”

“Yahiro will be all right, if my hunch is correct. Maybe.” Giuli finished dressing and jumped off the bed.

“How do you know?” Iroha stared at her with suspicion.

Giuli smiled pleasantly as she said:

“I’m sure of it after speaking with Douji. Those two are following Ganzheit’s orders. Big bro Andrea’s just dancing in the palm of Ganzheit’s hand. Acedia’s medium, too, most likely.”

“Ganzheit’s...? But Douji’s the guy who published that video about me, right? Wouldn’t Ganzheit want to keep the dragon mediums under wraps?”

“Maybe they just don’t need to anymore,” Giuli answered Iroha’s question.

Yamase’s worldwide leak of the dragon medium’s existence was against Ganzheit’s interests; no one would believe the two were connected. Which was why Andrea Berith accepted Yamase’s intel without suspicion.

But if Yamase was acting under Ganzheit’s orders, then Andrea was being used by the organization. And if that was the case, then it was likely that Ayaho’s kidnapping taking place right now was all according to Ganzheit’s script.

“That’s why I can tell Yahiro will be fine. If Ganzheit’s behind this, then *she* has to be involved.”

“Who...?”

“Remember, you’re not the only dragon medium giving her blessing to Yahiro.”

“You mean Sui?!” Iroha’s eyes widened.

Superbia—the earth dragon’s medium: Sui Narusawa. Iroha had heard that the girl who caused the J-nocide four years before was under Ganzheit’s protection.

If brother-obsessed Sui Narusawa was behind this, then it made sense why Yahiro would be summoned to show up by himself. Even if Acedia’s medium and her Lazarus harmed him, Sui would protect him.

“No... I can’t let...,” Iroha mumbled subconsciously as pain twinged in her chest.

The image of Yahiro kneeling before Sui and kissing the girl's hand crossed her mind; that alone was enough to make all of her unpleasant memories overflow.

Giuli and Rosé stared at Iroha's confused expression in silence.

Then a muffled explosion sounded in the distance. Cannon fire.

"So it begins," Giuli said soberly.

The next moment, the earth trembled as though a heavy mass had struck it, shaking the barracks.

Multiple armored combat vehicles shot at once. The allied forces of the PMCs led by Andrea Berith commenced their attack against the Japanese branch of the Galerie.

5

"You okay, Sumika?!" Zen shouted as he shattered the ice covering his field of vision.

"I'm fine... But what in the world is going on?!" Sumika angrily brushed off the frost clinging to her whole body as she stood behind Zen.

Zen's frozen left arm shattered and let off steam as it regenerated.

A torrent of subzero liquid nitrogen and oxygen assaulted them. Acedia's own water powers. The attack Zen unleashed against Sui Narusawa had bounced off an invisible wall and backfired against them.

Superbia's Regalia: Chibiki-no-Iwa. The power of the rock—the repelling barrier—that was said to have blocked the Yomotsu Hirasaka—the entrance to the underworld.

"What are you thinking, Douji Yamase?! What is Sui Narusawa doing here?!" Zen, having finished healing, glared at Yamase, who was looking on from afar.

Yahiro had deployed the repellant barrier in order to protect Sui Narusawa. Avaritia's Lazarus used Superbia's Regalia.

Yahiro leaned forward like a wild beast. He had lost himself; it was Sui Narusawa controlling him like a pet.

“That’s just what my employer wants. Don’t take it personally.” Yamase shot Zen a glance of pity.

Zen was sure of it now. This was all planned beforehand. Getting Yahiro away from Iroha Mamana. Getting Zen to approach him and unlock his memories. Getting Sui to capitalize on the confusion to take over the young man’s mind. It was all according to Yamase’s plan.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

“Oop...”

Zen pointed his sword at Yamase, but his foe nimbly dodged the ice spears shot at him. The wind he wrapped around his body gave him superhuman agility.

“What do you want, Miyabi?! Who’s this employer of yours?!” Sumika yelled.

Miyabi held her long, black hair down as she smiled faintly and answered: “Ganzheit.”

“...Who?”

“The descendants of those who’ve used the powers of the dragons since ancient times. Noah Transtech told you nothing?”

“I don’t get it, but it sounds like they’re a bunch of no-goods!” Sumika’s expression was filled with emotion as she shouted in a strained voice.

Zen’s dragon aura grew in reaction to her anger.

“Back off, Douji Yamase. I’ll freeze you, too.”

“Sagara, kid, aren’t you Japanese? Didn’t they teach you to speak respectfully to your elders?”

“Shut the hell up!”

Zen stabbed his sword into the ground. The humidity in the earth froze over in an instant, turning the area in a nine-meter radius into ice.

“Gee. Kids these days just can’t take a joke.”

Yamase shot a gust to the ground just before the ice overtook his footing, escaping into the air with the blast.

Zen smiled fiercely as he looked up at Yamase in midair. No matter how deftly he controlled the wind, no man without wings could fly. He raised his sword again, aiming for the spot where Yamase would land.

Yamase, though, continued to smile as he provocatively asked: “You sure you should be focusing on me?”

“What...?” Zen looked around in reaction to his warning.

This ended up saving him. The white-haired girl standing beside Yahiro was pointing her finger at Zen and Sumika.

“Get away, Sumika!”

“Zen...?!”

Zen gathered Sumika in his arms and jumped to the side, rolling on the ground.

Still, it was too late. Superbia’s dragon aura had already rewritten the world and changed the ground beneath their feet.

“Hollow...”

“Icefall!”

Zen’s roar overlapped with Sui’s whisper.

The ground within a nine-meter radius from where they stood caved in without a sound.

Superbia’s Regalia—the power that had turned the 23 Wards of Tokyo into a danger zone unfit for human life—bore a hole in the ground. The Hollow Regalia opened a Ploutonion at their feet.

“What’s with this power?! You monster!” Zen’s voice trembled as he peered into the bottomless pit.

The giant hole had swallowed the building they had been using as a hideout, along with the running track, leaving no trace behind.

Zen and Sumika had escaped the fall by creating an ice bridge atop the pit. Had he been even a millisecond late in activating his Regalia, both of them would’ve met the same fate as the shed.

Sumika was pale and she trembled in Zen's arms. Still, she glared firmly at Sui. She hadn't lost the will to fight.

"Give up. You can't take on the Narusawa siblings now; they've achieved the Eight Trigrams. You're flies to them," Yamase stated coldly as he landed safely.

"The Eight...Trigrams?"

"You thought all Lazaruses were on the same level? You're talking about the monster who caused the J-nocide four years ago here, you realize?"

Yamase glanced at the siblings as he answered Zen's question, unconcealable fear in his eyes above his thin smile.

Thunder assaulted Zen's ears before he could process the information.

The thunder—the bellow came from Yahiro. He had transformed at Sui's side. Jet-black scales covered his whole body like armor; his once-lean figure had doubled in size.

No trace of humanity remained in his appearance. He had sharp claws at the ends of his four limbs, and a gaping maw decorated with sharp fangs. His silhouette was far more reminiscent of a dragon than the Fafnir soldiers had ever managed. His tail—double the length of his body—wiggled like it had a life of its own.

"You getting all this, Miyabi?" Yamase asked, unable to conceal his excitement.

"Yes," Miyabi answered as she pointed a high-grade digital camera at the scene.

"This is the scoop of the century. Half of it is staged, but whatever," Yamase whispered in satisfaction.

The footage Miyabi took was to be sent to Ganzheit's servers to be edited and published for all the world to see. This was their real goal—the mission Ganzheit gave them.

"Douji Yamase... What do you...? What does Ganzheit want? What do you mean to accomplish, making Yahiro Narusawa do this?!" Zen asked in confusion.

Yamase stared at the guy ten years his junior with a vacant smile on his face.

“Don’t you hate inequality?”

“What?”

“Don’t you, Zen Sagara? There are myths and legends of dragons all around the world, and yet the eight dragon mediums all appeared in Japan, and only the Japanese were massacred. Why do you think something so unfair could happen?”

“...” Zen’s gaze wandered, his thoughts in turmoil.

Yamase laughed coldly at the sight of his earnest reaction.

“The answer is: it was just coincidence. The first dragon appeared in Japan by mere chance. The other seven mediums awoke due to its influence. After bearing witness to the dragon.”

“You mean...” Sumika gasped in fright. The small hint was enough for her to reach the truth.

“Yes.” Yamase nodded dramatically. “Ganzheit wants to broadcast this video of the dragon in order to birth new mediums around the world. Miyabi and I sold them our name and viewer base as sleuth streamers to them.”

“Wait! But if you create new dragon mediums, then...”

“Yes. That means more genocide! More fun!” Yahiro extended his arms with a theatrical motion. “Massacre regardless of race or nationality. The world will go insane. Ganzheit has been preparing for generations, for hundreds of years, for this day. For the chaos to reset the world, so they could reign over the new world.”

“I... We can’t let you get away with that!” Zen thrust his sword angrily.

Yamase easily dodged it, then fired a shock wave from point-blank range. The bullet of compressed air crushed Zen’s internal organs as he was launched high up in the air. His body made a sickening noise as it crashed back to the ground. Damage that would’ve killed a regular person.

“I don’t get it. What’re you so mad about? Don’t you love genocide? We’re champions! We survived the madness four years ago! Why not get on

Ganzheit's bandwagon and rule alongside them?"

"Shut up!"

Zen ground his teeth as he stood up, drenched in blood. His body wasn't fully healed yet, but his mind was as strong as ever.

Yamase, however, did not try attacking him further.

"Anyways, it's a waste of time grumbling at us."

"Wha...?"

"It's starting," Yamase whispered with the face of a kid awaiting the fireworks show to begin.

The next moment, dragonman Yahiro roared once again, and immense darkness took over the land of Yokohama.



Act 4

Ploutonion

1

He could still vividly remember the day he met her.

It was nine years back. He was eight years old, and it was Christmas Eve.

“This is your new sister.”

That night, his father, a researcher, brought in a girl one year younger than him.

She had pale, almost translucent skin, and red eyes. Later, he found out they called her condition *albinism*. She was awfully short and thin, which gave her the ephemeral air of a fairy.

“What’s your name?” Yahiro asked directly, his voice cracking a bit from wariness.

He had heard about getting a sister a few days back, and he only thought it was bothersome. Back then, he had nothing in mind but learning kendo from his grandfather, and anything that took time away from that was an annoyance.

“Sui,” the girl said with a feeble voice; her tone was flat from a mix of fear and resignation.

She kept her eyes down, and then the hair she had been hiding inside her hat fell out.

The moment he saw her pure-white hair, Yahiro lost himself to shock and reached out for it. He gave his opinion of it frankly and innocently, as only a child could: “Your hair is so pretty... It looks like wings,” he said, his eyes lighting up.

The girl gasped, and tears welled up in her eyes. Her delicate, doll-like face scrunched up.

Yahiro panicked once he heard her sobbing.

“Wha?! Why’re you crying?! I’m... I’m sorry...”

He apologized desperately, but she only shook her head, still crying.

Then she grabbed Yahiro’s sleeve and didn’t let go of him until she’d cried herself to sleep.

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“Gu...oh...!”

Yahiro groaned in pain as the torrent of memories crashed on him.

Fear. Confusion. Yearning. Obsession. Bare, raw thoughts from someone else. Memories of Sui’s childhood.

And it wasn’t only memories from the past.

Her hatred, her envy and jealousy. All her fierce, negative emotions stained Yahiro’s mind.

A hole opened in the bottom of his heart, darkness like a bottomless dry well. Vehement power gushed forth from the hollowness. It was too late by the time he realized it was the dragon’s power, which had lain dormant at the bottom of the earth. The dragon’s massive body engulfed him as visions of the past kept hold of him.

A massive phantom that enveloped the whole world. The vast dragon aura that birthed it poured into Yahiro’s body all at once.

A tiny human body could not possibly withstand such a load. In normal circumstances, it would’ve burned and blown away Yahiro’s body in the blink of an eye. But he was a Lazarus. All the cells in his body creaked as his body underwent a cycle of death and rebirth, as it transmuted into something else, as it took in the power of the dragon.

“GUUUOOOHH!”

Everything around him turned red. He couldn’t maintain human thought. The contour of his sense of self blurred as the boundary between Yahiro’s and the dragon’s memories vanished.

“Dear Brother.”

A nostalgic voice sounded in his ear. Was he hearing it now? Or was it a memory of the past?

“Oh, Dear Brother... I love you so.”

Sui’s voice echoed in the back of his mind.

The voice dragged Yahiro’s consciousness into the darkness.



Sui adapted to the Narusawa family quite easily, but only thanks to Yahiro. It was only him she truly opened her heart to, and it was only through him that she forged relationships with anyone else.

Sui had no memories of her life before she was seven.

She was found wandering the city, unaware of who she was, and went through various institutions before Yahiro’s father took her in. Due to her history, the adults around her didn’t find it problematic that she would keep her distance from everyone else. Actually, they even found it adorable that she’d follow Yahiro around everywhere.

Other kids didn’t ostracize her, either. Her looks might’ve been strange, but considering she was sickly and feeble, they accepted her as someone to pity.

Because of this, it took some time for Yahiro to realize. Notice that, in part, it was Sui’s own desire to stay away from anyone else. Unwitting that this would bring about the worst.

“Sui... What did you do to her?”

The first occurrence took place right after Yahiro entered his second year of middle school.

A girl in the kendo club he was close friends with got gravely injured and was hospitalized.

She refused to say what led to her injury, but ever since that day, she became terrified of the sound of rain and of Sui. She firmly refused to let Yahiro visit her in the hospital, and the moment she got discharged, she changed schools.

“Nothing. I did nothing.”

It was raining the night his friend was injured. Sui was drenched when she got home, and she answered Yahiro’s questioning with a puzzled shake of her head.

“Are you telling the truth?”

“You think I could hurt her?”

“Uh... Right. Yeah.” Yahiro couldn’t argue against Sui’s simple response.

Yahiro’s friend was his senior in kendo, and held a rank in the sport. Sui was weak and small; how could she possibly put up a fight?

“You’re terrible, Brother. How could you ever doubt me? Still...I forgive you.”

Sui took off her soaked clothes and drew her half-bare body closer to Yahiro’s. Her middle-schooler body lacked any curves, and yet there was a chilling charm about her.

“Back off, Sui.” Yahiro shoved his little sister away.

Sui’s red eyes moistened as she looked up at him with a faint smile on her face.

“Why? You can do anything you want to me, my Dear Brother.”

“Put on your clothes. You’ll catch a cold.”

“Do you dislike me?”

“This is a different issue entirely. You’re my sister.”

Yahiro responded curtly to Sui’s pleas.

Why didn’t he hear her out more seriously back then?

If only he knew how much he would regret it later.

†

Black, obsidian-like scales enveloped Yahiro’s whole body.

Filling the gaps of the scales were muscles tough as bundles of steel.

Yahiro’s body was already far from its original form. All his cells multiplied to endure the dragon aura endlessly flowing into him, rebuilding him into a new shape. A monster was being born from within him, the way a seed grows into a

tree.

Yahiro howled from the pain of his body's transformation. A howl so monstrous it shook the land.

His half-man, half-dragon skeleton contorted and grew three times its size, all thanks to the giant tail growing from his hip.

His muscles also grew twice their original size. And the transformation was not yet over.

The more his body approached a dragon's, the more his human consciousness wore away, his thoughts overwritten by wrath and the thirst for destruction.

His senses underwent changes, too. He began seeing things he could not before; he understood the composition of the world now. He could control the Regalia as easily as he breathed.

He emitted dragon aura as though merely stretching his fingers, spreading ever so slightly the gap between worlds. The simple action gouged the air and opened a giant crack in the land.

It didn't even feel like using any special power. He simply wielded his might to brush away the weeds blocking his sight.

Yet that was enough to overwrite the world at his whim.

Yahiro could also feel Sui's joy.

Their thoughts melted together, their memories becoming one.

"Why...? Why did you kill Dad?"

He couldn't even remember if it was him or Sui who heard those words.

The lab was tainted crimson. A man with a lab coat lay in a puddle of blood. His whole body bitten to shreds like he'd been attacked by a giant beast.

A girl with white hair, drenched in his blood, stood beside the corpse. A smile on her pretty face.

"He deserved to die. He tried to keep us apart. Don't you realize? You're the only one for me, Dear Brother."

The girl held a thin knife with a dull shine in her left hand. The same knife she

used to cut open her left wrist, blood flowing from it even now.

“Oh, Dear Brother... I love you so.”

Yahiro stood still, aghast, as the girl walked up to him.

She fell on his chest, and in that moment, shock struck his body.

The knife she was holding sunk into the pit of his stomach.

“This whole world should perish for not allowing us to be together.”

The sheer look of bliss on her face as she looked up to him and said that...

2

A battalion of armored vehicles headed for Galerie Berith's HQ.

The first bombardment destroyed most of the defensive barrier around the base. The metal barricades buried in the ground were barely stopping the enemy's approach.

The grounds of the Galerie base were wide since they were once used as Japan's bonded warehouses. Cannons and machine guns were placed all around it for self-defense. And yet it all seemed so feeble when surrounded by over a hundred armored combat vehicles.

They had no hope of escape, either, now that the bridges were destroyed.

“What's the damage?” Rosé asked her subordinates at the command room in the Galerie barracks.

“All watchtowers are down. The main building is unharmed so far, but the barriers and fences are done for. What should we do? We can't defend ourselves against this,” Josh replied with resignation.

Despite the hopeless situation, neither he nor any other operator in the room appeared dejected. They were calm and collected, as if asserting they were used to this level of predicament.

“We'll abandon the barracks and the warehouses. Get everyone to retreat to the administrative building.”

“Roger. We’re at the edge of the cliff here, huh?” Josh nodded before taking his subordinates and exiting the command room.

Only Rosé, Giuli, and Iroha, who had followed them there from the infirmary, remained in the room.

“Um, so your brother’s looking for me, right? Why don’t you just hand me over?” Iroha timidly raised her hand to suggest the idea.

Rosé and Giuli looked at each other for a moment, then heaved heavy sighs.

“You think Andrea would be satisfied just by getting his hands on you?”

“If we could negotiate with that guy, he would’ve asked us to surrender to begin with.”

“Whaaa?”

Iroha wasn’t sure how to feel about them discarding the idea so curtly.

It wouldn’t have felt nice had they decided to throw her to the wolves, but she felt even worse about letting everyone get harmed because of her.

“Don’t get the wrong idea. The situation isn’t as bad as it looks for us.” Rosé sighed upon seeing Iroha’s worried expression and tried to reassure her.

“B-but...you said they had forces ten times ours...”

“That’s only numbers. You could take this to mean Andrea can’t stand a chance against us without that many people on his side.”

“What are you implying?”

“They have to capture you alive, but it makes no difference for us if Andrea ends up dead. We don’t need to hold back.”

“Oh... So that’s why...”

The enemy hadn’t attacked further after the first bombardment and surrounding the Galerie base. They feared they could harm Iroha if they shot at everything all willy-nilly.

But even if they only had regular human mercenaries on their side, the difference in number was too great.

The Galerie's operators were resisting the best they could as they slowly retreated, but a considerable number of mercenaries had already stepped into their territory. And yet the twins looked unfazed.

"We're not under siege—we're letting them in. We gotta make sure the Guild knows we fought in self-defense when we strike back," Giuli said with a boastful grin.

Rosé nodded while watching the surveillance camera feed of the situation.

"And I think we've got enough of an alibi now."

"Yeah. Everyone, you can open fire!" Giuli spoke into the mic placed on the wall of the command room, her voice as cheery as if she were emceeding an inaugural event.

The moment Giuli finished talking, a thunderous roar and shock wave stirred the base.

Cannonade. It wasn't one or two shots. It was a storm. The incessant booming made Iroha scream.

The next moment, flashes dyed the outside of the windows white.

Explosions on a far bigger scale than the previous bombardment rocked the land.

"Wh-what's happening?!"

"Precision-guided mortar munition."

"Wha...?" Iroha stared dumbfounded at the twins.

Rosé glanced back at the camera feed. The monitor showed the carcasses of the armored vehicles: the resulting destruction of the projectile rain. Most of the near-hundred combat vehicles surrounding them were annihilated in the blink of an eye.

"Mortar... Wait, is that what they were putting together at the warehouse?"

"We are arms dealers. It's only natural we have more than enough in stock, don't you think?"

Iroha couldn't argue Rosé's point.

Mortars were light artillery with simple construction. They had short range and low accuracy, but they could be carried by hand and placed anywhere easily.

The Galerie had mortars stocked in great numbers, as they were merchandise.

They had taken some in secret to put together behind the headquarters building. Under Giuli's orders, the operators shot the shells in a curve across the building and all the way to the enemy troops.

"It doesn't matter how inaccurate mortars may be. The enemy was just standing there; how could we miss?" Giuli stated simply, with no conceit.

Andrea Berith's troops thought they had the Galerie surrounded, but in truth, they were merely leaving themselves open to attacks.

Now that they had lost their armored vehicles and were getting ready to flee, it was time for the Galerie operators to counterattack. Not live, human operators, though.

"We've got smart land mines, unmanned turrets, drones... It's the time to shine for all the state-of-the-art equipment with bad cost performance," Giuli said before sticking her tongue out.

As she said so, the Galerie sent out a vast number of unmanned fighters. Combat drones controlled by AI weren't uncommon nowadays, but they were particularly effective for this battle. Most PMCs in Japan were specialized for combat against Moujuu, so their equipment lacked weaponry to fight against drones.

The operators couldn't put up resistance against the drones and took their wounded comrades with them as they retreated.

Iroha felt relieved at the sight, but at the same time, she felt her conscience lashing out at her. There was no doubt that many operators were harmed in this fight, even if they were the ones to attack. And Iroha was the root cause. She couldn't help but feel indignation. Why did this have to happen?

"Hopefully they'll just go home now," Giuli said languidly.

Rosé sighed and shook her head. "That man is not so smart."

“Yeah. It’s probably only gonna make it worse.”

“Indeed. We reduced their forces considerably, but they still have the numbers advantage. I expect they’ll try to attack again the moment we try refueling the drones.”

“Man, Andrea’s such an idiot,” Giuli muttered scornfully.

Rosé also showed a rare instance of anger.

“He is. He thinks he’s got time on his side as he continues to attack us.”

“Time? What do you mean?” Iroha stared at the twins.

The next moment, vertigo struck Iroha.

She felt sick like when looking at an optical illusion. It was though the earth itself was twisting and bending out of its own, wicked will. And she recognized the feeling.

“This... This is Sui’s Regalia?!”

Iroha exhaled weakly as she was forced to her knees.

There was no doubt about it: the tremor in space was an aftereffect of Sui’s Regalia. But its power this time was far stronger than before. As though it wasn’t Sui borrowing the dragon’s power, but Superbia itself wielding it...

“No... This is the same as four years ago...” Iroha’s voice trembled, her head down as she expected the worst.

A couple minutes later, Andrea Berith led a second attack against the Galerie.

3

The jet-black monster that took over Yahiro Narusawa stabbed its sharp claws into the ground.

Crimson light like throbbing blood spread in all directions around him.

The beams got brighter as the earth creaked ominously.

Then the earth split.

Cracks ran across the ground like a spider’s web, spurting darkness that

enveloped the world.

The Ploutonion.

The ground of the Mitsuzawa Stadium caved in, giving way to a giant bottomless pit. Superbia's power was unleashed on a scale never seen before.

"So this is Superbia's Hollow Regalia... I can see how one of these opening up in the capital would destroy a country. What do you think, Miyabi?" Yamase asked, half-rhetorically, as he filmed what was happening.

Miyabi kept on filming, too, but her expression was stiff.

"...Was this really the right thing to do?"

"Excuse me, what?"

"Yahiro did nothing wrong, and we used him to bring about the same hell from that day. Is this really what you wanted?"

Miyabi shot him a condemning glare. Yamase only chuckled.

"You're getting all soft on me now? Didn't you agree to take on this job?"

"...Yeah." Miyabi nodded as she looked down at the camera. "I wanted to show the truth to the world, because I'm a journalist. I wanted to know why the Japanese died out. What happened on that day. Who was behind all of that... And this job was the perfect chance."

"And I also want everyone to know the truth," Yamase said exasperatedly. "But don't forget it was *her* who got in the way. Karura Myoujiin. It was also her who messed up your face."

"I know. I haven't forgotten." Miyabi put a hand to her right cheek, hidden behind her bangs. "But this is not the truth. It's fake. We orchestrated it all."

"No, it is the truth." Yamase lifted a corner of his mouth, wearing a dark smile. "My camera shows only the truth. No matter what lies are at work behind the scenes."

"Douji..." Miyabi sighed in resignation.

After seeing her go back to filming, Yamase turned around in satisfaction and took the wrecked scenery in.

The monster once named Yahiro Narusawa had already created over twenty Ploutonions, as far as he could see. The biggest one was well over ninety meters in diameter, and the smallest about nine.

Eerie miasma and Moujuu rose from the pits and into the ruins of the city. Battle between Guild watchmen and Moujuu had already broken out in the outskirts of Fort Yokohama.

The Guild was only prepared for a few beasts a day, however. They lacked the power to respond to a sudden mass emergence.

The Moujuu soon broke through the Guild's defensive line and plunged the city of mercenaries into chaos. A deluge of gunshots illuminated the darkness as flames spread through the city.

"Rejoice, Yahiro Narusawa. This is the world you wanted, earth dragon!" Yamase exclaimed from high ground as he watched the city burn.

He cackled as howls and explosions echoed behind him.

Meanwhile, Zen and Sumika took the only action they could think of: attack Yahiro and put a stop to the black dragon.



"Zen! The Moujuu!" Sumika's face wrinkled as she helplessly watched the Moujuu emerge from the many Ploutonion openings.

The Moujuu didn't attack mediums. Sumika knew this from experience. But not getting attacked was different from controlling them. She had no way to stop the beasts from entering Fort Yokohama and wreaking havoc.

"I know. I wish I could've killed Yahiro Narusawa before it came to this, but it's too late for that now." Zen pursed his lips in regret.

Yahiro Narusawa was a dragon vessel. The J-nocide that took place four years in the past also happened after Sui Narusawa summoned Superbia, the earth dragon, into him.

Zen found out about it about half a year ago. A Black man named Auguste Nathan showed up before Zen and Sumika to tell them about the dragons and the Regalia—the symbolic treasure.

They didn't trust Nathan entirely, but they couldn't ignore what he said, as he called himself an agent of Ganzheit. He also happened to have custody of Superbia's dragon medium, Sui Narusawa.

Zen and Sumika saw Sui Narusawa in a mysterious coma, being used as research material, and under Ganzheit's strict surveillance. It wasn't easy to think of killing her.

It was also only natural, in a way, that their anger would be directed at Yahiro, the dragon vessel. Sui was a prisoner, but Yahiro still lived free somewhere in the ruins of Japan.

Since then, Zen and Sumika had searched everywhere for him. They sought revenge, yes, but more than anything, it was a sense of duty that drove them. So long as the dragon vessel lived, he could transform once again and bring about a new disaster. Zen felt it was his obligation as a fellow Lazarus to put a stop to this.

So it was a pleasant surprise when he saw Yahiro on Douji Yamase's video exposé. The two also felt wrath burn within them at the thought of Superbia's vessel receiving a new blessing from Avaritia.

Yahiro turning dragon again was highly likely if they didn't do something. They had to kill him before anything happened. And if killing the immortal was impossible, then they had to seal him away somehow. It was their responsibility.

So great was their need to confront Yahiro that they stooped to taking hostages. But in the end, they were too late. Sui, who was supposed to be imprisoned by Ganzheit, turned Yahiro into a dragon.

"There's no end to them!" Sumika screamed as she noticed new Ploutonions popping up one after the other, while putting up ice barriers to stop the Moujuu.

"We've no choice but to defeat the dragon... Sumika, help me out!"

"S-sure!"

Zen held his Western sword in his right hand, and lifted Sumika up with his left.

Sumika placed her hand on Zen's and poured all the dragon aura she could muster into it. The aura flowed into the blade, and Zen thrust it forward. The cold shot froze the air and blasted liquid nitrogen and oxygen in a pure-white torrent against the transformed Yahiro.

His jet-black, scaled body turned white as the ice covered it, but that did not stop him. Yahiro bellowed in pain as he destroyed the ice with an invisible barrier. Zen ground his teeth at the sheer resilience and vitality of the dragon.

"That's not enough?! How about this!" Zen raised his sword once again.

Although his appearance was far from human, the foundation of the half dragon was still Yahiro's Lazarus body. And his organic body couldn't avoid all the damage that came from the chill of Zen's Regalia. The fact that he used a repelling barrier to fend off the cold was proof.

He was up against a ridiculous monster, for sure, but it was not invincible. If he attacked faster than the Lazarus powers could heal, he could wear the beast down enough to reverse the transformation.

Certain of what he had to do, Zen unleashed his Regalia once again.

But right before the torrent of cold was fired, his right arm was blown off at the shoulder.

It was a bullet of compressed air—Ira's Regalia. Yamase had seen the split-second opening and attacked him before Zen shot.

"Douji...Yamase...!" Zen glared at the man furiously as he picked his sword back up with his regenerated right arm.

Yamase, camera in hand, pointed the knife in his left hand at Zen.

"Please, kid, stay still. Your job here is over, Sagara," Yamase insisted forcefully. His usual carefree attitude was gone now, revealing his aggressive nature.

Yamase's silhouette wavered hazily beneath the moonlight. The wind around him whirled as he tried to compress a new bullet to shoot.

"Ira's Regalia is too simple. It's an ordeal trying to kill a Lazarus with it! Don't think I'm playing with you here, kid!"

“...?!”

Yamase unleashed his Regalia alongside the thunder.

Zen immediately pushed Sumika away and deployed an ice armor around him. His Regalia couldn't completely stop the shock wave Yamase shot, but just as the latter said, the wind dragon's powers weren't fit to defeat a Lazarus. Zen thought, once the Goreclad intercepted the first hit, he could defeat Yamase before he attacked again.

But the shock wave did not hit Zen. Instead, he felt himself floating.

Yamase's shock wave wasn't a destructive one, but rather a gust of directed wind. A gale like a tornado threw Zen's body into the air.

“Dammit!”

“Zen!” Sumika screamed from below.

Yamase's wind threw Zen up barely fifteen meters. Not a height worth worrying about. The Lazarus powers could have him back up in no time even if he dropped to the ground.

But there was no ground where he was falling.

It was the Ploutonion. He was floating above one of the bottomless pits created by Superbia.

“I'm sorry, Sagara. This is the end of the line.”

Yamase's voice faded away, and yet, Zen heard it right in his ear.

The next moment, a barrage of shock wave bullets hit him from above.

“Zen! Noooooo!” Sumika shrieked, down on the ground.

Before her voice could reach him, the invisible bullets plunged Zen into the endless pit of the Ploutonion.

4

Iroha's phone started ringing right after Andrea Berith's troops launched their second attack.

It was a tough situation in which to have a phone call, but she rushed to answer. She couldn't ignore it after seeing her kidnapped sister's name on the screen.

"Iroha!"

"Ayaho?! You're okay?! Where are you?!"

"Iroha, please help us! Yahiro's... Yahiro is..."

"Huh? Yahiro? Yahiro's what?"

Ayaho pleaded, cutting off Iroha's questions about her well-being, but she was too confused to properly explain the situation. There was also too much noise on the other side: ceaseless explosions, the ground rumbling, the howls of the Moujuu. The only thing Iroha got was that Ayaho was in danger.

"Akulina, can you hear me?" Rosé began her own phone call, while Iroha stood dumbfounded beside her.

She phoned Guild executive Akulina Jarova, who had gone with Yahiro to rescue Ayaho. Rosé thought she might be near the two.

"Rosetta Berith? Sorry, but things are not looking good on my end."

Her voice came through intermittently, drowned out by the wind. Rosé heard Ayaho's voice right nearby, too.

"Ayaho Sashou is with you, right? What happened?"

"I don't know. Yahiro Narusawa was fighting the kidnappers, when all of a sudden he crumpled over in pain and then transformed into a monster."

"Can you get me a video feed of the situation, Akulina?"

"Yes. Give me a second."

Akulina switched to video call. The first thing on camera was the inside of the armored car she and Ayaho were taking refuge in. Then she switched camera views to show outside the window.

Packs of Moujuu emerged from the slits in the ground, and a monster writhed in pain. It was hard to see any detail due to the lack of light, but it was obvious what the monster was: a dragonman.

“Is that Yahiro?” Iroha asked with a hoarse voice.

Ayaho replied feebly:

“Yes... Yahiro was fighting Sagara, when a white-haired girl showed up and said something to him... Then this happened!”

“A white-haired girl...? You mean Sui?” Iroha gasped.

She was shocked, not by the fact that Rosé and Giuli were right, but that their expectations had become reality in the worst way possible.

Another side of her, though, understood. No one other than Sui Narusawa could possibly turn Yahiro into a monster.

“I see Moujuu,” Rosé said plainly.

“Yes, they’re coming from right there. Sui opened Ploutonions. Big ones.”

“And they’re not attacking you?”

“R-right. Doesn’t look like it. Maybe because we’re hiding in the car...?”

Akulina didn’t sound so sure. Not even she understood why they were fine while surrounded by Moujuu.

“...I see,” Rosé whispered, her thoughts indecipherable.

“Wait for me, Ayaho! Your big sis’ll be there to save you right away!” Iroha stated confidently.

The Moujuu presented no risk to her. Not only did they not attack her, but she could also communicate with them and command them. Considering they were surrounded by the beasts, she thought it was only natural for her to go help them.

“Th-thanks...but...”

“Aren’t you under attack, too?”

Ayaho and Akulina answered worriedly.

They could hear the gunshots in the background from the other side of the phone.

“Yes. Andrea Berith’s PMCs are attacking, and now Moujuu are coming for us,

too,” Rosé confessed right away.

Akulina was at a loss for words for a while.

“Do you really have the time to come help us?”

“There’s no better time than now, actually.”

“What? What do you mea—”

Akulina’s confused voice was cut off by a piercing sound. Iroha and Ayaho’s call also got cut off at the same time. Radio interference, likely due to Superbia’s Regalia.

“Ayaho?! Ayaho, are you there?!” Iroha yelled into her phone.

Then an explosion erupted right beside them, drowning out her voice. Andrea Berith’s mercenaries. A stray howitzer shot aiming for the Galerie’s turrets had hit the building they were in instead.

5

“Eeep!”

A shriek rang out as soon as the glass in the hallway shattered. It wasn’t Iroha. Her face stiffened upon recognizing that voice.

“Rinka?!” Iroha jumped out of the room without thinking.

Glass shards covered the dark corridor, and smoke came in from the windows. Some of the lights on the ceiling were broken, too. The exposed wires were sparking, and the faint light from these sparks illuminated the figure of a girl crouching.

One of Iroha’s sisters: Rinka Takio, eleven years old. She was usually strong and adaptable, but she was pushed to tears now that a cannon shell had gone off so close to her.

“Rinka?! What’re you doing here?! You gotta go to the shelter!”

“I’m sorry, Iroha, but Runa...”

“Runa?”

Then she noticed Rinka was protecting a girl even younger than her. Runa, the youngest of her siblings, looked up at Iroha calmly from within Rinka's shivering embrace.

Runa was holding a white Moujuu, the size of a dog. She silently lifted it up, handing it over to Iroha.

"...You're bringing me Nuemaru?"

"Mm-hmm." Runa nodded.

Iroha, though confused, picked Nuemaru up. Runa always acted for a reason at times like this, and she knew that.

"Thank you, Runa. I got him now, so you two go back to the shelter, quick," she said as she helped them up.

Violent gunfire continued outside. The HQ building was solid, but it wasn't made to withstand all-out combat. Iroha had to get the girls out of there ASAP.

Then a high-pitched whistle echoed, as though mocking her.

It was too late by the time she realized it was the sound of cannon fire flying at them.

The outside was dyed white by a flash, and the blast blew away all the shattered glass.

"Iroha!" Rinka shrieked hoarsely.

The brick wall collapsed and the bricks hurtled toward them.

But then the bricks stopped right before reaching them. They fell silently to the ground, as though blocked by an invisible wall.

"The Regalia...? But why...?" Iroha muttered as she fell on her behind and looked up at the pile of bricks.

Iroha recognized the power: an invisible repelling barrier. The Ganzheit agent, Auguste Nathan, had used it in his fight against Yahiro. It was Superbia's Regalia.

"Don't worry about the children, Iroha Mamana. I will protect them, if only for now."

A low, firm voice came from the end of the hallway. A tall Black man in a luxury suit showed himself.

“You... You’re the guy that was with Sui! Nathan!” Iroha exclaimed, pointing at him.

She had no idea why he, Sui’s accomplice, would show up in the Galerie’s base out of nowhere. Or why he would offer to protect her siblings. Iroha was speechless.

“Breaking and entering is a crime, Auguste Nathan.” Giuli approached after hearing the explosion, and spoke in Iroha’s stead.

“Well, from my perspective, it is you who are breaking and entering into Japanese territory,” Nathan rebuked coldly.

The building Galerie Berith was using for its headquarters was originally a bonded warehouse established by the Meiji government. The twins took over the deserted building of their own accord. Nathan was merely pointing out the hypocrisy.

“In any case, get your subordinates to change their weapons. You need at least 30 calibers. Preferably 50.”

“Fifty calibers? That’s for anti-materiel rifles... We’re not hunting Moujuu here, so why?” Giuli asked in puzzlement.

Fifty calibers—12.7mm bullets were ammo used for heavy machine guns and sniper rifles. They were multiple times more powerful than regular rifle bullets, but the recoil was strong and hard to control. It was overkill for combat against personnel.

Still, the PMCs active in Japan always had the ammo in stock for fighting Moujuu. High-Grade Moujuu needed at least 50-caliber firepower to be defeated.

“What makes you think you’re not hunting Moujuu?” Nathan retorted coolly.

Giuli raised her eyebrows in amusement.

“Uhh... Because they’ll be attacking Andrea before they reach us?”

“Right, Andrea Berith’s mercenaries have the base surrounded. But do you

think they'll stay human for long?"

"Wow... You have a wild imagination, Auguste Nathan." Giuli smiled, but the expression didn't reach her eyes.

In that moment, Nuemaru's ears twitched. He began growling in reaction to the echo of the distant howl of a beast.

"Moujuu," Runa said.

With that as a trigger, the mercenaries surrounding the Galerie's HQ changed their course of action. They began shooting more rapidly, and screams resounded all around.

The Moujuu had closed in from behind and were attacking the mercenaries indiscriminately.

"Why're there so many of them? I think that's more than were in the 23 Wards..." Rinka's voice trembled as she peeked out from the gaps in the crumbled wall.

There were over thirty Moujuu within sight, and the number was growing at an unbelievable rate.

There were some who looked like birds of prey. Some beasts similar to Nuemaru. Some bipedal with monkey-like appearances. But most were types Iroha and her siblings had never seen before.

"Just...how many of them did Sui summon...?" Iroha groaned as she felt a chill run down her spine.

It was this bad within Fort Yokohama's line of defense—not to mention the Galerie base was right by the sea. She couldn't begin to imagine how many hundreds of Moujuu must've been crawling around the Ploutonions. Yokohama was about to become flooded with Moujuu.

"No. She didn't summon them here of her own will. Sui Narusawa only opened the gates."

"The gates?"

"Yes, the Ploutonion. The gates that tear open the boundary between worlds," Nathan answered Iroha's question.

Iroha narrowed her eyes in confusion. She didn't understand Nathan's explanation, but she was sure he wouldn't use such dramatic words without a good reason. If he said the boundary between worlds was torn open, then most certainly, that was literally what happened.

"Iroha! Look!" Rinka pointed outside, her expression stiff.

She was looking at Andrea Berith's mercenaries. They were wounded, but had somehow driven away the Moujuu. But then their bodies underwent a change. Their muscles swelled and their bones warped. They became inhuman. Monsters like a mix between a tiger and an eagle. Moujuu.

"What... What in the...? Why're they turning into Moujuu?!" Iroha's body froze in fright. Her muscles tensed and she stuttered, barely getting the question out.

The change began with one mercenary, but it soon spread to more and more of the wounded men. The mercenaries wounded by the Moujuu turned each other into monsters, like vampires making more vampires.

"Didn't you find it strange, living in the 23 Wards? Why were there no human bodies in the ruins of that city?" Nathan asked Iroha bluntly.

Iroha's face turned pale as she looked at him.

She'd tried not to think about it. But the question was always there in the back of her head. She had barely seen any human bodies in the four years she lived in the 23 Wards. Not even the corpses of the people who died in the J-nocide remained.

"This isn't just about the 23 Wards. Over a hundred twenty million people died in the span of a few months, and yet there's an unnatural lack of bodies throughout Japan. Why are there no bones, not even a hair left, of the people the Moujuu killed? That's your answer right there," Nathan stated as he observed the nightmare taking place: the mercenaries turned into Moujuu.

The Japanese hadn't been devoured by the Moujuu. They turned into Moujuu.

"No..." Iroha feebly shook her head.

People attacked by Moujuu turned into Moujuu. In a way, that was a fate worse than death. After all, if the Moujuu really were people, then that meant the Japanese were killed off by fellow Japanese people.

And now, the armies of the world kept killing the Moujuu. And Galerie Berith was one of the dealers providing them with weapons and ammunition for that purpose.

“The Moujuu are specters of the Japanese people. The dragon venom turns people into monsters. This is why the Moujuu don’t appear in the ocean. They can’t emerge in places people don’t live in.”

“B-but when Chiruka attacked Yokosuka...”

“Vanagloria... Chiruka Misaki sank a number of American ships before she landed in Yokosuka. The Moujuu that emerged from the sea then were the crew of the ships the mountain dragon destroyed.”

Iroha could not argue against Nathan’s merciless explanation. She knew he was right.

“The Japanese living abroad were massacred because Ganzheit leaked intel to the governments of the world—they said transforming into Moujuu was contagious. That it was some sort of new virus, or bioweapon.”

“No...way...!” Iroha shook her head hard. Her emotions were in too much disarray to think straight.

The Moujuu attacked people, then the injured people turned into Moujuu themselves. One couldn’t let the Moujuu live—but they were people, too.

“Then what is the Ploutonion? Why do the Moujuu crawl up from the bottom of the earth?”

“The Ploutonion is just a gate, nothing more,” Nathan said calmly. “A gate to the underworld. I don’t know exactly what kind of place this is, but consider it a space separate from our world. There is someone who isolated the Moujuu that flowed here in the day of the J-nocide over in the underworld, in order to protect them, the Japanese, from genocide.”

“Who...?”

Nathan looked back at Iroha in silence. His eyes asked if there was really any need to answer that.

Iroha choked back her words. A world separate from ours to isolate the millions of Moujuu. Only the dragon medium could do something so outlandish.

“Superbia’s Regalia, the Hollow, can open a rift in the wall to the underworld. That’s how the Moujuu emerge. A tiny percentage of the Moujuu isolated in the underworld, that is,” Nathan continued, brushing aside Iroha’s silence.

Iroha bit her lip. She understood. It all made sense now.

Sui had only summoned the Moujuu up to now; she didn’t control them. And summoning was only a side effect of her powers.

“I see. So that’s how it is.” Rosé showed up in the hallway and joined the conversation. “I found it strange that Ganzheit would approve a plan that would put Iroha in danger, but they knew it would turn out like this from the very beginning.”

“They knew...what?” Iroha looked up at Rosé.

It wasn’t Rosé who answered her question, but Nathan.

“If Superbia is summoned, then Yokohama will crawl with Moujuu. Then, no matter how big Andrea Berith’s troops may be, they could never harm you.”

“...Because I’m a dragon medium?”

“No. Because you’re a *special* dragon medium, Kushinada.”

“What’s that mean...?”

“Ganzheit never intended to put a hand on you. What they needed was Yahiro Narusawa. You needed only to stay put, protected by the Galerie. So they used the exposé and the Guild to get him away from you.” Nathan delivered the final blow.

Iroha stood up, filled with fury, and glared at him.

“What do you want to do with Yahiro?”

“Let me ask you, instead. Why do you think the Lazaruses exist?”

“Huh?”

“The Lazaruses are vessels. Vessels for summoning the dragons. You need the body of a Lazarus to withstand the great power of a dragon.”

“A dragon...vessel...,” Iroha muttered hoarsely.

The first thing that came to mind was Chiruka Misaki when she turned dragonwoman. She summoned Vanagloria and shifted away from her human shape, went berserk, and finally, vanished.

On the other hand, Sui Narusawa, who once summoned Superbia, retained her human form even now.

The difference between them was their Lazarus.

Sui had Yahiro back then, but the Lazarus Chiruka gave her blessings to, Amaha Kamikita, had already been lost by then. So Chiruka had no choice but to give her own body as a vessel for the dragon.

“A great enough power affects its surroundings merely by existing. Four years ago, when Superbia emerged, its effect was awakening seven new dragon mediums, including you.”

Iroha shivered.

She had no awareness of being a dragon medium. But she had a memory. A fading memory, like a dream, of a faraway world, an extinct world. And wasn't it the day of the J-nocide, the moment she saw the dragon, that she remembered?

“Ganzheit's goal is to awaken the latent dragon mediums all around the world and to bring about a global genocide. A true massacre. They want to reset civilization and rebuild a new world.”

“And they're using Yahiro for that?! And Sui?! That's... That's awful...” Iroha's shoulders drooped, and she appeared to be sobbing.

“Iroha...”

“...”

“Aw, Iroha...”

Giuli, Rosé, and Rinka stared at her with concern. They thought she was

crying, but in reality...

“...God! What the heck?! I’m pissed now!” Iroha lifted her head suddenly and screamed her lungs out.

Rinka was floored by the sight of Iroha not only far from depressed, but furious.

Iroha had no headspace for worrying about their reactions, though. She picked Nuemaru up from the floor and swung her leg over to outside the wall.

“Where do you think you’re going, Iroha Mamana?”

“Where else? I’m taking Yahiro back and stopping Sui!” Iroha answered Nathan’s question rambunctiously.

She had been angry this whole time.

The exposé had her locked up at the Galerie barracks, she couldn’t go rescue Ayaho, and now Sui had taken Yahiro away from her because of that. And to top it all off, the Galerie base was under attack because of her, and now there were swarms of Moujuu everywhere.

Iroha had been kept out of the loop during all this.

The stress had reached its limits and exploded.

Then Nathan threw something at Iroha. She caught it reflexively with one hand and her brow furrowed at what she saw. It was a machine the size of a smartphone.

“What’s this?”

“A GPS map. Take it. It shows Sui Narusawa’s location.”

“...Why are you helping me?” Iroha gave Nathan a suspicious look.

Getting Sui’s location was of great help, considering how everything was chaos now with the emergence of the Moujuu. But Nathan was on Sui’s side; he should have no reason to help Iroha.

“I’ll explain if you manage to get Yahiro Narusawa back,” he said defiantly.

She didn’t like the ostentation, but she felt she could trust him to explain if she met her side of the promise. Iroha gripped the GPS map tight.

“All right, let’s go,” Giuli said cheerfully.

“Yes. We have a score to settle ourselves,” Rosé agreed while checking that her favorite handgun was loaded.

The mercenaries no longer had them surrounded thanks to the Moujuu attack. There was no need to keep playing siege. The twins had better make use of the chaos to counter Andrea Berith.

“Wait just a bit, girls,” Iroha said, holding in her desire to go running after Yahiro ASAP.

Then she turned to look at Rinka, who was still pale in the face and holding Runa up in her arms.

If Sui had turned Yahiro dragonman, Iroha wouldn’t be able to take him back by going in without a plan. She needed weaponry. A weapon strong enough to shake him and make him look her way.

“Help me out, Rinka. We’re taking Yahiro back!” Iroha told her precious sister, who had absolute faith in her.

Rinka looked up in surprise and then, slightly but firmly, nodded.

6

“For fuck’s sake, what’s happening?! They’re still fighting the Moujuu?!” Andrea Berith yelled furiously from his military officer chair in the rustic tent.

He was at the station plaza of the ruins of Sakuragi, at the camp from which he led the mercenaries.

There were nearly a thousand operators in his PMC alliance, and already half of them had been taken out. They hadn’t expected the counterattack from the Japanese branch, much less the Moujuu emergence.

“They’re turning into Moujuu?! That’s ridiculous!” Andrea growled as he pulled at his hair.

Andrea had just arrived in Japan; it was his first time encountering Moujuu. He wasn’t unprepared, but he did underestimate the beasts for their lack of

intellect. He was having a hard time accepting the fact that his troops were in the process of getting wiped out.

The mercenaries attacked by the Moujuu were turning into spectral beasts themselves. By the time a Moujuu was defeated, multiple new ones were created.

How could a ragtag bunch of troops keep morale up among the disaster?

“Branch Chief, Sublieutenant Randel reports the Gal Corp troops have begun retreating,” one of Andrea’s subordinates looked up from his comms and relayed bitterly.

Andrea raised his eyebrows on reflex and yelled at him: “They’re backing off?! Are they stupid?! I’ve given no such order!”

“They claim the contract recognizes withdrawal in case Moujuu emerge during the operation.”

“What?!”

“I-it’s true. We’ve also lost contact with the other groups, so it’s likely they’ve retreated for the same reason!”

“Stupid fucks!” Andrea punched the desk before him.

Andrea’s troops mostly relied on local PMCs, as he didn’t have a base in Japan. If he let them all go, never mind crushing the Galerie’s Japanese branch: His chances to fend off the Moujuu would be slim.

“Perhaps we should think about the worst-case scenario and reconsider,” his aide suggested with a pained expression.

Andrea had brought this man along with him from the Oceania branch; he was a veteran mercenary who had served House Berith for a long time. Nonetheless, Andrea shot him a glare full of wrath.

“You want me to go with my tail between my legs? The Japanese branch doesn’t even have a hundred operators!”

“However, they are experienced in combat against Moujuu, unlike us. Not to mention their strong loyalty to the twins.”

“Are you implying I’m not as good as them?!” Andrea yelled hysterically.

His aide gave him a pained glance.

It was well known that the operators of the Galerie’s Japanese branch idolized Giulietta Berith. And proving that was the fact that not one of them tried running away even after getting surrounded by Andrea’s troops—seemingly an overwhelming disadvantage.

Meanwhile, it was obvious how little charisma Andrea had in comparison. Even some of the men directly under him he had brought from Oceania were beginning to leave their posts. Andrea’s unpopularity really showed in situations like this.

“Lord Andrea,” Enrica called his name from behind as he quivered in humiliation.

“What?” He turned back with annoyance, then gasped upon seeing the monitor.

A white Moujuu was departing from the Japanese branch’s barracks. A big, high-Grade Moujuu superior to the rest around it. And someone rode atop its back. She concealed her face with a hood, but he recognized her. Andrea knew of only one girl who would ride a Moujuu.

“Iroha Mamana!” Andrea stood, eyes lit up. “She’s shown herself! What are you fools doing?! Go get her!”

“B-but the Moujuu are protecting her!”

“What?!” Andrea’s expression stiffened in shock.

The Moujuu weren’t only attacking Andrea’s mercenaries. They were striking indiscriminately, including operators of the Japanese branch. And yet, the moment Iroha appeared on the back of the white Moujuu, it all changed. Some Moujuu stopped attacking and began following her instead, in an orderly line.

“This... This is the Kushinada!” Andrea uttered in awe of Iroha’s godly aspect.

That he saw her control the Moujuu just after he realized how big of a threat they were only made him more keenly aware of her value.

He didn’t care whether dragons really existed any longer. Iroha Mamana

leading a flock of Moujuu was enough of a weapon to dominate any battlefield.

Andrea's position would be guaranteed if only he could get his hands on her.

"Go, Enriqueta! Get me that woman!" Andrea commanded Enrica.

Iroha Mamana rode the white Moujuu straight toward their location. She had nowhere else to go, for they had destroyed all the other bridges.

Regular mercenaries could not catch up to the tremendous speed of the Moujuu, but Enrica was different—she was genetically enhanced. Her explosive power allowed her to keep up with the beasts' speed.

However, Enrica gave him a rare, confused look.

"But the Moujuu are coming. I can't leave your side..."

"You disobey your master, doll?!" Andrea's temper flared and he punched her in the face.

The Moujuu ran too fast. Iroha could get away while Enrica hesitated. The impatience made him emotional.

"Know your place! Remember that you can be replaced at any—?!"

Out of control, Andrea punched a defenseless Enrica again and again, but then, all of a sudden, he lost his balance.

His right fist burst in a spurt of blood before he could punch her again.

He heard the gunshot a moment later. A short girl wearing the Galerie's uniform pointed a gun at him from the tent's entrance.

"Gwooogh! My hand... My hand...!"

"Rosé...!"

Enrica unsheathed her knives.

Rosé had entered the mercenary alliance camp without anyone noticing—while they were distracted by Iroha.

"Rosettaaa! You bastaaard!" Andrea yelled, his eyes bloodshot. "Kill her, Enriqueta! Get rid of her! Rosetta's close-combat rating is an A+. Giulietta may be an S+, but you're an SS! It's an easy job! What are you waiting for?"

“I don’t want to hear how easy it is from a C-guy... You’re below the ordinary average,” Rosé said flatly.

“Shut the fuck up!” Andrea roared with a hateful glare. “You’re here to kill me now that Giulietta’s too hurt to do anything?! Know your place, Rosetta. You cannot defeat Enriqueta! She was made for combat!”

“—!”

Enrica struck out at Rosé before Andrea even finished talking.

Her speed was superhuman. Rosé shot both handguns, but she couldn’t keep up with Enrica’s swiftness. Even when she fired at point-blank range, Enrica knocked down the bullets with her knives.

Rosé jumped backward, just barely avoiding Enrica’s slash.

They shared the same face, but the difference in combat ability was clear as day.

In only a couple seconds, they exchanged blows over fifteen times. This did not tire Enrica out, but it made Rosé run out of ammo. While the latter could no longer defend herself, the former attacked head-on.

Enrica’s assault was too fast for Rosé to reload or change weapons. And she did not try to dodge.

“Made for combat... Right. And that’s how she falls for such a simple move all the time!”

“...?!” Enrica’s eyes widened as she saw her elder sister smile regrettably.

The green-haired girl stopped suddenly, as though someone had paused a video. She had been entangled in a web of wires before she’d even realized.

The ensnared girl’s brow wrinkled in confusion.

The next moment, Enrica was blown away. Blood and brains rained before she could make a sound.

“...It’s such a shame, Enrica. How could you not tell me and Rosy apart?”

The girl with the handguns took off her hood, revealing the bright orange color of a tuft of her hair.

“Wires... And sniping... It can’t be! You’re...?!”

“You thought I was Rosy, as well? Too bad, Brother.”

Giuli shook her head coldly as she threw the handguns away. She was an expert in close combat, not guns—so she used them to pretend to be Rosé. The trick was executed in the hope that she could defeat Enrica, her superior in combat, while still injured. This way, Enrica wouldn’t think there was a sniper. She just had to catch her in the wires to keep her still for even a moment, enough for Rosé to take the shot.

“By the way, you can’t grade Rosy’s long-range skills. She’s never missed a shot, after all.”

Giuli walked up to Andrea, who had been hiding behind Enrica up to that point.

Most of his underlings had escaped the moment Enrica got killed. And Rosé had already taken care of the few who remained. It was only Andrea now.

“This is why Enrica was a flop. Real combat isn’t like simulations. She lost the moment she couldn’t tell I wasn’t Rosy.”

“W-wait, Rose... I mean, Giulietta! I admit my defeat!” Andrea fell pathetically to his butt and pleaded for dear life. “I’ll leave the Japanese branch alone. I’ll even hand you over the Oceania branch. Just let me go this time, please, Sister!”

“I’m sorry, Brother...” Giuli sighed with pity. She was no longer looking at Andrea, but at the darkness beyond. “You’re not getting away, even if I forgive you now.”

“Giulietta... What the hell do you mean...?”

Andrea noticed something was off and turned to follow her line of sight. Then from the darkness appeared a two-headed dog the size of a bull—a Moujuu commonly called the Orthrus.

“N-NOOO!” Andrea shrieked like an animal.

Giuli caught the Orthrus in her wires and cut off its heads; as it still squirmed, Rosé finished it off with a couple sniper shots.

Still, Andrea wouldn't stop screaming. The Moujuu's claws had scratched his back as he groveled on the ground. Fresh blood flowed from the tears in his suit.

His screams were not out of pain, however. He felt no pain despite having bone-deep wounds. That was why he screamed.

"What the hell?! What in the world is happening?!" Andrea muttered, dumbfounded as he stared at his own arm, which was beginning to grow fur.



His larynx also appeared to be changing—his voice was becoming distorted, hard to hear.

“You’re turning into a Moujuu. People injured by them do that. You’re becoming an otherworldly monster,” Giuli stated plainly as she glanced down at her brother losing human form. “But don’t worry, Brother. I’ll give you relief before that happens.”

“D-don’t... Giuletta... Please... I...”

A cold wire wrapped itself around Andrea’s neck as his transformation progressed.

His face was twisted in fear and desperation, hoping for a way to convince Giuli for mercy, but his Moujuu mouth no longer produced words with any meaning.

“This is what you get for making us kill our sister. Sayonara.”

Giuli swung her arm grandly after the short farewell.

Andrea’s body fell to the ground with a damp thud, and Giuli did not look back.

Act 5 Truth

1

It felt like meeting an angel. Her existence was just that strange and unreal.

She stood among the flames of the crumbling laboratory. A girl in a thin hospital gown, about twelve or thirteen years old. Her hair was cut short like a boy's, and she had bandages wrapped all over her body. Scrawny arms and legs. Pale, sickly skin. And yet, she was beautiful. So much so, one understood she was superhuman at first sight.

"Do you want to live?" the girl asked Yahiro where he lay on the floor. Her voice was cold, emotionless.

"Who...are you?" Yahiro asked back as he looked up at her.

In reality, he did not speak; only a hoarse breath came out.

That was no surprise, however. Yahiro was dying, stabbed in the heart by his little sister. The real surprise was that he could still breathe, considering how much he had bled out already.

"I have no name. I don't remember." Still, the girl responded.

She crouched on the bloodstained floor, unconcerned about getting dirty, and touched Yahiro's chest wound.

The label on her gown said / followed by six numbers. Just a code for distinguishing test subjects. The / came from the first letter of an ancient poem, the origin for the order of the Japanese syllabary—the Iroha. She didn't recognize it as her name.

"Someone stabbed you, right? You're bleeding. He found you dying here. He told me," the girl said as she caressed the animal on her shoulder. A creature Yahiro had never seen before, white and the size of a guinea pig.

“Run...away...,” Yahiro croaked.

The lab was burning. White smoke and heat were beginning to fill the room they were in. The girl would also die if she stayed there.

“Did...Sui...do this?”

Fire and leaking of toxic substances.

Explosions erupted continuously in the distance, likely the gas leaks and chemicals combusting.

The direct cause of the fire was a large-scale earthquake. The building shook from time to time even now due to the aftershocks.

It sounded like it could only be a natural disaster, but Yahiro was sure of it. This was Sui’s doing.

“I don’t know. I was in my room the whole time. I only got out after the building crumbled,” the girl said flatly.

It was then that Yahiro knew she was locked up in this facility. In his father’s lab.

“I want you to answer my question already. You will die.”

“Question...?” Yahiro asked, looking back at the girl.

She nodded and repeated her first words: “Do you want to live?”

Yahiro’s lips quivered, unable to take the burning pain.

The answer was obvious. He knew he wouldn’t survive. The wound was too deep, and the bleeding too great.

Still, there was a reason why he had to live. It was his fault Sui had lost her mind.

“I...can’t die yet... I have to stop her...”

“Okay.” The girl breathed out, staring at him without blinking. “Just promise me one thing, and I’ll help you out.”

“Promise...what?”

“Kill me,” she stated flatly.

Yahiro stared at her dumbfounded.

“Wha...?”

“I’m tired of being alone because I can’t die.”

She picked up a scalpel from among the medical instruments scattered all over the floor. The blade on it was small, but sharp enough to slash open a vein and take a human life.

“If you can kill me, then I’ll do it. I’ll grant your wish.”

The girl pushed the scalpel to her neck, and a sleek drop of fresh blood trickled down from the blade.

Yahiro wanted to stop her. He didn’t know why, but he didn’t want to let the girl die. Perhaps he felt too bad about a girl so lonely she wished for death.

“I...”

So instead, Yahiro proposed a new promise, to stop her.

The girl’s eyes widened in surprise, and a smile escaped her as tears welled up.

Then the girl slashed her throat open, and fresh blood rained down on Yahiro.

+

His whole body burned. It was like every single cell in his body was aflame.

He screamed ceaselessly, but the voice was not his own. It was the roar of a beast. Bellows of a dragon.

Still, he knew that was his voice. Or rather, he remembered.

A dazzling flame illuminated the darkness in his mind with bluish-white light. The flame of blood. The dragon blood she gave him that day.

The darkness came back in force. Grim, endless darkness welling up from the bottom of the earth. Pure destructive impulse, beyond mere hatred or resentment.

It split the land, ruined civilization, and slashed the border between worlds.

It was the wish of the medium who summoned the jet-black earth dragon.

Her prayer turned into dragon aura, flowing into the immortal body of its vessel.

The black dragonman stabbed the earth with his massive claws as the impulse commanded.

Yet it opened no new gates to the underworld.

The dragon's thoughts came to a halt from the internal conflict.

The angry face of a girl accompanied by a white beast crossed his mind. An expression of ire so unlike the one she showed that day.

That was why he couldn't remember.

"Hah..." The dragonman exhaled.

His blind destructive impulse kept his consciousness tainted black. But a flame had lit up in the depths of his mind. A flame that spread through his veins and his entire body.

"Hah... Ha-hah... Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-hah!" The dragonman laughed heartily. His breath escaped him from between his gnashing fangs.

The dragon instincts elevated to suppress his human soul. His consciousness screeched and groaned. And still that wasn't enough to erase it.

The more the dragon aura summoned by Sui Narusawa amplified, the more the flame fighting against it burned.

The flame wasn't born from within his dragonman body. It came from her call. Just like that day four years ago.

He remembered. Why the J-nocide stopped at just destroying the capital; why it cut off incomplete; why Superbia vanished; why Yahiro Narusawa came back to human form after becoming a complete dragon.

Because he had met her before it all happened.

Before Yahiro bathed in Sui's blood and became a dragon, he had already made a promise with *her*.

That gave him the power. The power to fend off death. The power of Lazarus.

"GWOOOOOOOOOH!"

He heard a beast howl in the distance.

A thunderbolt slashed through the dark of the night.

The moment he saw that, he understood.

She was coming.

2

Miyabi stopped pointing the camera at the rampaging dragonman.

Yamase gave her a puzzled look.

“What’s wrong, Miyabi?”

“I don’t know. I think the Moujuu are acting differently.”

“What?” Yamase’s brow furrowed and he glanced toward the city.

The black dragonman had opened over twenty Ploutonions. More than six hundred Moujuu were crawling out from the holes. They all attacked the city at once. It was too much for the Yokohama mercenaries to handle.

Whether a human turned Moujuu after being attacked actually depended on the density of miasma around. The probability of the transformation happening under normal circumstances was not that high. But these chances shot up after a certain point of miasma concentration. This was why the emergence ratio in the 23 Wards was so high, due to the giant Ploutonion.

In that sense, Yokohama was currently a breeding ground for Moujuu. And Fort Yokohama held over a hundred thousand mercenaries. At the very least, twenty percent of them would turn if attacked. Which meant twenty thousand Moujuu would emerge over a single night.

Then the new Moujuu pack would go on to the US Army base in Yokosuka, and spread all over Japan. And Yamase and Miyabi’s channel would broadcast the whole thing to the world. Millions—billions of people would witness the Moujuu-spawning dragon. More than enough to awaken new dragon mediums.

This was all Ganzheit’s plan, and they were hired to carry it out. But now, small flaws were appearing.

“Why? There’s still people left in Fort Yokohama, right?”

“Yes...but I hear fewer gunshots. And the Moujuu aren’t multiplying.” Miyabi brushed back her hair as she spoke.

Ira’s wind-controlling powers allowed her to search her surroundings. She could hear sounds miles away, like the sonar of a submarine. Her judgment on the situation couldn’t be wrong.

Yamase clicked his tongue and glanced briefly at the white-haired girl behind him.

“Hey, what’s going on? This wasn’t the deal, Sui Narusawa. This can’t be the full extent of Superbia’s power.”

“My brother is resisting,” Sui replied, seemingly unbothered.

“Resisting? He’s still got his mind? Is that why he didn’t turn into a complete dragon?”

“Yes. He’s such a difficult man. I think he’s in need of some punishment.”

Sui raised her hand toward the transformed Yahiro. In that moment, the five-meter-tall dragonman fell with a loud thud. Colossal pressure pushed him into the ground.

It was Sui using Superbia’s power to slam the black dragonman down. He struggled in pain from the impact, as though crushed by a giant boulder.

Sui could only do this as the medium in full control of the dragonman’s body.

“Oof,” Yamase exclaimed with disgust.

He was a Lazarus, too—another dragon vessel. Getting to control the dragon’s powers of his own will might’ve been interesting, but seeing how the medium pulled the dragonman’s strings like a puppet left a bad taste in his mouth.

“Don’t worry. No matter how unseemly you turn, I will never abandon you.”

Sui paid no heed to Yamase’s reaction and walked up to the dragonman on the ground. Then she picked up a piece of glass and slashed her own wrist. She placed her blood-dripping hand above the supine dragonman’s mouth and let it trickle down.

“Be a good boy and I’ll give you something nice, Dear Brother. Here, drink up,” Sui ordered as she looked down at the struggling dragonman.

Then her fake smile suddenly disappeared.

The frozen air became a spray that shot at her; she barely managed to put up a barrier to block it. But as she jumped away, the blood dripping from her left wrist froze over.

Acedia’s Regalia: Icefall.

“Tsk. Didn’t go deep enough.”

A young man in a school uniform wielding a Western sword appeared from the shadows of the collapsed dragonman.

Zen had escaped from the pit of the Ploutonion and launched a surprise attack on Sui.

“Zen!”

“...This is surprising. How did you escape?”

Sumika had been sitting on the ground listlessly, but his return made her stand, and her expression brightened. Meanwhile, it made Yamase grimace and unsheathe his knife; he hadn’t expected that.

“Don’t think you’re the only one who can fly!”

Zen pointed his sword at Yamase as the latter stood before Sui to protect her.

Yamase was shocked at the speed of Zen’s assault. He was at least as fast as him when bolstered by the wind—as though he was truly flying.

“Douji!”

“Tsk...!”

Yamase clicked his tongue as Miyabi screamed.

Yamase’s right arm rolled on the ground, torn to shreds and letting off steam. The smell of burned meat wafted around before the pain finally hit him.

“Steam-blast eruption? I see, so Acedia can not only freeze, but heat, too.”

“It makes for gruesome deaths, so I’d rather not use it. But I hope you’ll

understand!”

Zen held his sword high again and flew.

The steam behind him exploded and he closed the several-foot distance in a blink with the blast.

Yamase tried to counter by shooting shock-wave bullets, but Zen offset it with another blast. The super-high-temperature vapor cloud enveloped Yamase.

“Gargh...!” Yamase exhaled in pain as his lungs burned.

Zen set off explosions incessantly around Yamase; he could take no more and jumped back.

Yamase’s body was already worn out; his regeneration couldn’t keep up with the constant damage. He would’ve died long ago if he weren’t a Lazarus.

“Now this is nasty! But don’t forget, Sagara! It’s not me you should be fighting!”

“What...?”

Just as he was about to launch a further strike against Yamase, Zen stumbled, as though pushed down by something heavy. Something many times his own weight. His bones creaked.

“Superbia...!”

From where he lay on the ground, Zen saw the jet-black monster looking down on him. The dragonman under Sui’s control used the power of Chibiki-no-Iwa to crush him.

Zen groaned at the weight of the invisible boulder. He realized this was the way Superbia’s power was meant to be used—not to create barriers for self-defense, but to crush its opponents.

Still, he could do nothing against it. The gap in power between human Zen and near-complete-dragon Yahiro was too great.

His ribs were crushed, and without support for his lungs, he could no longer breathe. His skull would burst at any moment.

And yet he remained conscious. The dragonman was holding back.

Yahiro was resisting as hard as he could against Sui Narusawa's command to crush Zen. He had no grounds to believe it, but he felt this was the case. But even then, the dragonman's power was too great; Zen's healing could not keep up with the damage.

"Stop it!"

A white mist attacked the dragonman. A surge of subzero, liquified air. It came not from Zen, but Sumika.

Acedia's medium could naturally use the dragon's Regalia, but her power was far below Zen's. Her mortal body could not withstand the recoil.

"Don't... Sumika...!" Zen yelled desperately even as his throat was crushed.

Sumika, though, kept attacking the dragonman to save Zen.

A thin layer of white ice covered his black scales, but he paid it no mind.

Sumika wouldn't be able to take a hit from the dragonman. Zen knew this, but he couldn't do anything about it. All his bones were crushed and unhealed.

The black dragonman raised his arm and swung it against Sumika, but right before an invisible weight crushed her, he stopped, in shock.

Zen heard the distant howl of a Moujuu.

A white Moujuu, seven to eight meters in size, ran across the Ploutonion-ridden land. On his back rode a girl hiding her face with a hood.

She showed no fear despite riding a Moujuu running at twenty-four kilometers an hour. She had complete trust in it, as though it was family, a sibling.

Soon, the Moujuu made it through the Ploutonions and stopped in front of the black dragonman.

The pure-white Moujuu was huge but looked so small before the dragonman. His black, obsidian-like scales were stronger than steel, and his Lazarus-born body was, naturally, immortal. He was as close as he could be to the monsters of myth and legend, perhaps even to gods.

And yet the girl on the Moujuu's back smiled without fear before the

dragonman.

The white Moujuu howled at the night sky, and then the girl imitated it. She let out a clear, high-pitched howl with her human voice.

“Waoooooon!”

In that very moment, the black dragonman stopped completely.

3

Two girls glared at each other from either side of half-dragon Yahiro.

On one side, a girl in luxurious gothic dress—Sui Narusawa.

On the other, a Moujuu tamer in Galerie Berith’s uniform—Iroha Mamana.

The heavily wounded Zen and Sumika, as well as Yamase and Miyabi, watched from a distance. No one dared get between the two.

Zen was still not fully healed, but not even Yamase, who was on Sui’s side, could get in and attack Iroha.

Why? Because the pure-white quadruped she rode was not the only Moujuu following Iroha. Dozens—nay, hundreds of Moujuu kept gathering behind her.

Big ones. Small ones. Some similar to known animals. Some that were difficult to describe. From clearly high-Grade behemoths to small fry no stronger than humans. Moujuu of all shapes and sizes gathered to protect her.

Even the battle-hardened Lazaruses were rendered speechless by the sight.

“What the...? That’s crazy!” Sumika exclaimed, stunned.

“That’s Iroha Mamana...?” Zen stared at her with confusion; he wasn’t sure whether she was an ally or enemy.

“The same Regalia as Karura Myoujiin...,” Yamase groaned lowly as he gripped his knife tight.

Three years ago, when the post-J-nocide chaos was at its peak and Yamase met Miyabi and obtained the power of the Lazarus, they sneaked into Heavenly Emperor territory in the mountains of Kyoto to try and get an interview. To

uncover the truth behind the J-nocide and what role the Heavenly Imperial House had in it.

Then, the next in line to the throne, Karura Myoujiin, got in their way. She used the Heavenly Imperial House's treasure—the Regalia—to drive them away. The power she used then was the same Iroha was using now: the power to control the Moujuu.

“Miyabi... Can you do the same?” Yamase asked in a small voice.

Miyabi shook her head without hesitation.

“No. I don't think even Karura Myoujiin can control that many Moujuu at a time.”

“Is that so.” Yamase accepted the answer right away.

The Moujuu did not commonly attack the dragon mediums, but that was it; commanding them was an entirely different matter. Perhaps they could tame one or two with enough time, but taking control of hundreds of the beasts just by looking at them was only possible with the use of a special power.

Sui, however, seemed unfazed. She had already seen Iroha control the Moujuu before.

“What do you want, Waon? I don't remember asking for a collab.” Sui referred to Iroha's streamer persona.

Iroha ignored it and smiled fearlessly.

“Don't worry. I'll be out of your hair as soon as I'm done here.”

“Done doing what?”

“Taking Yahiro back, what else?”

“...?!” Sui's eye twitched upon hearing Iroha's declaration. She gave in to her emotions and yelled: “My brother is not your property!”

“He's not. But he is part of our family now.”

“Family? Did you say family?” Sui's eyes went wide, dumbstruck.

Iroha glared back at her and nodded defiantly.

“Yup. And I’m taking him back home with us.”

“...Shut your mouth, Iroha Mamana.”

“Do you wanna come, too? We’ll receive you with open arms.”

“I said shut your mouth!” Sui yelled her lungs out in an explosion of emotion.

Then she threw an invisible boulder at Iroha.

“Oof, that’s heavy...!”

“I’ll squash you like a bug, you horrid home-wrecker!”

Iroha panted as the rapidly increasing gravity pushed her off the white Moujuu.

However, Sui’s power couldn’t finish crushing her. Iroha’s Moujuu attacked Sui all at once.

“What?! What are they doing?!”

Sui stopped attacking Iroha to protect herself against the Moujuu assault, creating a barrier around her. That did not stop the Moujuu, though; they kept pushing incessantly against her.



“Brother, help me! Save me!” Sui called desperately for Yahiro.

The jet-black dragon aura emanating from her body flowed into the dragonman, and he twisted and turned in pain as he raised his giant claws against Iroha.

Iroha, however, did not run away. On the contrary, she stepped forward and waited for the strike to come. She stared into the rampaging dragonman’s crimson eyes and took off her Galerie hoodie.

Under the uniform she wore a traditional Japanese shrine maiden’s outfit—although designed to show a little more skin. Her streamer costume.

Her long, silver hair flowed down, glowing under the moonlight. The animal ears atop her wig twitched like they were real.

A streamer in cosplay barged onto the bloody battlefield.

Yamase was at such a loss for words he forgot to film it; Zen simply furrowed his brow in confusion. Miyabi’s eyes widened in disbelief while Sumika cheered her on with a laugh.

Iroha ignored their reactions and posed with her hands up like claws, then yelled her catchphrase confidently: “Waooon!”

Iroha’s voice somehow echoed clearly amid the Moujuu’s growls.

The dragonman’s arm stopped just as it was about to crush her.

Sui’s face contorted in shock. This couldn’t be happening. He was incomplete, but Superbia was summoned; how could the dragon obey the call of another medium?

The dragonman’s black scales glowed bloodred. Scorching flames like lava seeped from the gaps in the scales. The flames accelerated until they covered his whole body. The dragonman was set ablaze.

The black scales fell one after the other, showing Yahiro’s face on the other side. His eyes, once filled with wrath and hatred, now showed reasoning.

Iroha’s silly costume and behavior were the final trigger to awaken him from Sui’s mad control.

“Good boy. We finally meet again, Yahiro.”

Yahiro fell to his knees, and Iroha enveloped his face in her hands. He looked up drowsily at her face.

“Iro...ha...?”

“It’s me. You thought it was an angel or something? Hee-hee,” she replied with a smirk.

Yahiro nodded frankly before realizing what he just admitted to.

“As shameless as ever... But anyways, thank you...”

“How about that, eh? You’re welcome.”

Iroha hugged him, still not fully back from his dragonman form. Blood-crimson flames still leaked from the gaps in his jet-black scales. But the flames did not burn Iroha. Soon, they moved on to her, too, and burned even harder, enveloping the both of them.

The scales covering Yahiro’s body rained loudly down on to the ground. His back cracked, and a new body came forth, like a molting lizard. A body covered in crimson, flaming armor—the Goreclad.

“Superbia’s summoning wore off...?!” Yamase gasped as he observed Yahiro emerge from the flames.

“This can’t be... Brother...,” Sui muttered in delirium, falling to her posterior. All the blood left her already pale face, making her look like an actual doll.

Yahiro looked down at Sui expressionlessly, then turned to look at Yamase behind her.

“Yahiro...!”

“I know.”

Iroha handed him the sword she brought with her. The katana fit perfectly in his hand as he received it. He smiled at the two other Lazaruses.

“It’s time for revenge!” he whispered, baring his canines.

Flames enveloped the *uchigatana*’s blade with a gleam.

Yahiro placed a hand on the katana's hilt. The *uchigatana*, a type of Japanese sword—called the Kuyou Masakane. A mystical sword said to have been forged with Mizuchi blood by a swordsmith who lived nearly eight hundred years, from the Heian to the Sengoku period.

Yahiro did not know whether the legend was true, nor did he care. What mattered was the fact that this katana could withstand his Lazarus power.

He unsheathed the sword as his glare remained on Yamase and Zen, both of whom were on guard. He had heard them talk while he was a dragonman. He could say nothing as he had lost himself, but he remembered all their words.

So he knew already. He knew why Zen tried to kill him. What Yamase's endgame was.

However, the first to approach Yahiro and Iroha was neither of those men.

"What the hell're you thinking?!" Sumika Kiyotaki raised her voice as she glared at Iroha.

"Wha?! Who?!" Iroha stepped back, overwhelmed at the unknown girl yelling at her.

"I don't care what your dragon medium powers are, but what were you thinking walking up to that berserker Lazarus like it's nothing?! What if Yahiro Narusawa didn't come back to his senses?! You'd be dead!"

"O-oh, no, there's nothing to worry about."

"Why?!"

"He's my biggest fan."

"What?!"

Sumika stared dumbfounded at Iroha's prideful stance as she replied.

Iroha felt glad to know Sumika worried about her.

Sumika's expression softened at the sight of her reaction, then she smiled innocently back at her.

“Ah-ha-ha... What the heck? That’s no reason...!”

“Huh? You think?” Iroha tilted her head, frankly surprised.

Sumika shook with laughter even more.

Zen watched the whole thing with a sour look on his face, and then he thrust his sword forward.

“Back off, Yahiro Narusawa!”

“Sagara...?!”

The air froze over from the rush of dragon aura. Yahiro turned around reflexively, trying to protect Iroha. But Zen wasn’t aiming for them.

A thick ice wall rose before Iroha and Sumika, and the next moment, invisible bullets shattered it. Ira’s shock waves. Douji Yamase’s Regalia.

“...You’re not making this easy, are you?” Yamase shook his head in vexation; the camera once in his hand was now exchanged for a knife.

All calm and composure had vanished from his face; he was now wearing a shrewd expression. His true face. The face of someone who had survived war, an intense expression impossible for Yahiro or Zen.

“Whatever. So Iroha Mamana got in the way of Superbia’s summoning. We just gotta get rid of her, and everything’s back on track!”

Yamase swung his knife, raining a barrage of shock waves on them.

Zen fended off the attack. He manipulated the water remaining in the underground pipes and evaporated it in a burst to deflect the shock waves.

“Douji Yamase! Why do you side with Ganzheit?!”

“I told you. I hate inequality,” Yamase answered Zen’s question.

They fought as they spoke, with Zen at an overwhelming disadvantage. He was worn out from the fight against the transformed Yahiro, while Yamase was basically unharmed. Not to mention Zen had to fight while defending Iroha.

Seeing Zen covered in blood again, just moments after he had finally healed, Yamase attacked more ferociously.

“The truth isn’t just lying around somewhere! There’s always someone working to make it look a certain way! So what’s wrong with me doing the directing?”

“You’re going to kill billions for that stupid reason?!”

Zen’s yell rang out within the incessant whirlwind.

Yamase sneered at his reaction.

“Hah! You’re such a Goody Two-shoes, kiddo. Do you really believe justice is real?”

“What?”

“There’s no such thing. You don’t realize even after living through the J-nocide? What do I care how many people die, you dumbass? They’re all materialistic pieces of shit who only see what they wanna see up until the very moment the truth turns its fangs against them!”

“—!”

Suddenly, Zen threw up blood. His Goreclad skin was torn apart, letting fresh blood spurt out. He opened his mouth in a desperate search for air and clawed at his throat as he suffocated.

The atmospheric pressure around him dropped dramatically. This ruptured the alveoli in his lungs and his blood began to boil at body temperature. He couldn’t breathe, naturally. No matter how impressive the Lazarus’s healing power was, he couldn’t fight in a vacuum.

“Ira’s Regalia: Radio Valve. It makes for a gruesome death, so I’d rather not use it... But hey, surely you’ll understand, right, Sagara?” Yamase stated sardonically.

Suddenly, Yamase’s expression became strained.

The whirlwind around Zen that produced the vacuum suddenly burst into bright flames. The purifying fire nullified the Regalia, whisking away Yamase’s power. Air rushed violently into the once-low-pressure surroundings, and Zen went into a rough coughing fit.

Zen looked up with bloodshot eyes at Yahiro’s katana, which was enveloped

in flames. He had used Avaritia's Regalia to burn away Yamase's and save Zen.

"Wait, why are you helping him out, Yahiro Narusawa? Did you forget he came here to kill you?" Yamase openly glared at him.

"You're the one forgetting something, Douji Yamase." Yahiro sighed languidly and walked up to him.

Yamase raised his eyebrows. "What?"

"I owe him my thanks, actually. He made me remember those lost memories."

Yahiro stepped forward casually. He was about seven meters from Yamase. Too far for either Yamase's knife or Yahiro's katana to reach each other. Yet close enough to launch an attack. Well aware of this, he quietly stated: "I feel refreshed. Now I can kill Sui without regrets. And if you're getting in my way, then I gotta take care of you, too."

"Good to make things clear. I like you, Yahiro Narusawa. Then I'll say I'm on your sister's side!"

Yamase shot a compressed air bullet. The invisible projectile swelled and became a shock wave.

Yahiro received the shock wave with his own explosive flames. But by the time he canceled out the other man's attack, Yamase was already behind him. He moved just as fast as the shock wave: at the speed of sound.

"Gagh...?!"

Yahiro's body was sent flying upward as a second shock wave hit from point-blank range. And Yamase's assault did not stop there. He enveloped his fist and knife in a whirlwind, then shot shock wave after shock wave at Yahiro's body. The latter's Goreclad armor broke, and blood gushed out from his crushed lungs.

"You... How are you...?"

"Oh, you mean this?" Yamase replied in a voice that was hard to hear amid the wind.

His armor was unlike Yahiro's or Zen's Goreclad. His muscles had grown

nearly twice their original size, and thick scales densely covered the surface. And that wasn't it—his frame was beginning to change, too.

He was transforming just as Yahiro had moments ago. The difference was that Yamase retained his senses as he transformed into a dragonman.

“You lost yourself because you rejected the dragon aura. If you let it in, if you approach the dragon willingly, the Lazarus can obtain great power. Just watch!”

Yamase disappeared yet again. He literally ran like the wind; there was no way to keep track of him. By the time Yahiro noticed a shock wave coming in from a blind spot, he had already crashed to the ground.

Yahiro groaned. He couldn't get up. Had that burst his semicircular canals?

Yamase looked down on him with a sneer.

“You're still conscious? You're a sturdy guy... Let's see how you take this.”

“Kah...gh...!”

Yahiro clawed at his chest as he felt the alien sensation of having the air pulled out of his lungs. His vision blurred, and his consciousness wavered. And yet, all the blood vessels in his body boiled.

“Did you know? Just half the normal atmospheric pressure makes people die from hypoxemia or altitude sickness. And the same applies for the Lazarus. Stay down there dying for a while, will ya?”

Yamase's scornful voice sounded too far away.

His goal was to get rid of Iroha. Once she was gone, Yahiro would go back to being under Sui's control. There would be nobody left to stop his draconization. All the man had to do was kill Avaritia's medium.

Iroha was a dragon medium, but she was no foe against the draconized Yamase. Even if she sent hundreds of Moujuu against him, they could not harm him.

Even though she realized this, there was no fear in Iroha's eyes.

“Yahiro.” She called his name with a strong smile on her face.

At her beckoning, Yahiro slowly got up.

The dragonman Yamase was strong. But for some reason, it wasn't scary. Yahiro knew of an opponent far more frightening. Toru Natazuka. Tristitia's Lazarus—the strongest of them all, so they said. And he certainly was stronger than Yamase. Which meant they could defeat him if they used the same power as Natazuka had used.

Can we pull it off? Yahiro asked himself. Could they actually manage that power, even if for an instant?

"We can do it," Iroha responded to Yahiro's thoughts. She sounded just as mysteriously confident as always.

Dragonman Yamase noticed that Yahiro had stood and turned to face the young man. His atmospheric pressure drop was still active, so it was surprising that Yahiro could manage to get up under the circumstances, but he didn't see the boy as a true threat.

Yamase was certain that, draconized, he could defeat Yahiro. And he was right. For a moment. He would have won if only Yahiro hadn't seen Toru Natazuka's power.

Yamase moved far more slowly than Natazuka. He couldn't reach his lightning speed. So...

"Burn...to ash...!"

He activated his Regalia. Faster than Yamase's wind. His whole body became a scorching flash as he ran.

"What?" Yamase uttered in awe.

Yahiro vanished from his sight and popped up behind him.

Yamase's right arm fell to the ground, and his inhuman face scrunched up in pain.

Had he even realized Yahiro had chopped it off as he passed by him?

"What just happened?! How did you move like that?!" Yamase turned around and attacked him.

A shock wave far more explosive than any other before burst against Yahiro and Iroha.

However, Yamase's Regalia vanished before it could touch them. It evaporated into thin air.

"A dragon... What? What...is this...?"

The inhuman Yamase stepped back, driven by his primal fear.

A dense dragon aura enveloped Yahiro's whole body like a haze, and it painted a bizarre phantom in the night sky. The illusion of a giant dragon behind him. A scarlet dragon well over fifteen meters in height guarding him and Iroha.

"No... Stop it, Brother...!" Sui, still on the ground, shook her head feebly like a powerless child.

Zen and Sumika gasped as they stared flabbergasted at the dragon in the air.

"Let's do this, Yahiro," Iroha whispered at him.

In that moment, the gears set into place, and something clicked within Yahiro. He felt himself become one with the overwhelming power of the dragon. And the moment he felt it, he shouted: "Burn it all down, Avaritia!"

The phantom of the dragon in the air breathed fire. Scorching, purifying flames like the sun. They spread in the blink of an eye, their blinding light covering a radius of several kilometers. The explosion's impact shook the earth, illuminating the night sky like noon.

Once the flames scattered, the dragon vanished into thin air as easily as it appeared.

By then, the land had changed. The countless Ploutonions Superbia had opened were gone without a trace. Only the hideously scorched earth remained. The ground was still glowing red like lava, and the rocks gleamed like stars after being turned to glass.

"This...can't be...," Yamase uttered hoarsely, smack-dab in the middle of the melted land.

Half his draconized body was blown off; he was already healed, but back in human form. His tattered clothes clung to his lower body as his muscles emitted steam from the regeneration.

"Miyabi! What're you doing?! Give me more power!" he yelled behind him.

His knife had melted away; he was unarmed. Still, if he draconized again, he could fight using his mighty claws. He could also use the Regalia to control the air. He believed he wasn't defeated yet.

However, Miyabi did not answer his call. She only pointed the camera at him in silence.

"What the hell are you filming?" Yamase shot her a glare.

Miyabi finally lifted her head and then shook it.

"It's your loss, Douji. Give up."

"What?! You think I'd lose against these kids?"

"No, that's not it. We lost a long time ago. Ever since you ran away from Karura Myoujiin that day despite being so eager to uncover the truth."

She brushed back the hair covering her face, revealing her right eye. A nonhuman eye. A narrow slit of a pupil and vertical eyelids like a snake's—a dragon's.

"Miyabi...you..."

Yahiro sighed. He had noticed from the moment he saw she could walk normally without her cane—the moment he saw she could dodge his flames with superhuman agility. She was the same as Chiruka Misaki.

She was draconized. It happened when a dragon medium, without the healing power of a Lazarus, went beyond her limits to use the Regalia. Her draconized body could no longer return to normal.

In the fight against Karura Myoujiin she mentioned, she must have draconized in order to save Yamase after his defeat. And so she had lost her human right eye and left leg.

However, Miyabi was not ashamed of her appearance. She revealed it with a confident smile.

"Let's stop, Douji. You lost your credibility as a journalist the moment you used Japanese children to try and bend the truth."

"Miyabi... What are you...?" Yamase looked at her fearfully.

Yahiro could feel something leaving the man's body.

The same thing that happened when Amaha Kamikita died. What killed the Dragon Slayer, the Lazarus, was the oath—when the oath was broken, it turned into a curse.

When a Lazarus betrayed their vow to their dragon medium, they lost their immortality.

“If you want to film a dragon so much, then put yourself on display. I'll help you out with that. Although, now that you've lost your qualifications as a Lazarus, I wonder if you'll be able to use the dragon's power.”

“Stop, Miyabi! Don't! DON'T DO IT!” Yamase screamed in fright.

He tried to run for his life, but only a few steps away he tripped and fell. The dragon aura flowing from Miyabi took control of his body.

As he crawled on all fours, his back split. Then a new body emerged from within it.

It was unlike Yahiro's draconization.

A new monster was about to be born as it devoured the body of its vessel. That was Yamase no longer. The dragon stole his body for its incarnation.

The wind blew. Gales coming in from all four cardinal directions flowed into the dragon's mouth. It devoured the wind as it grew.

The dragon born from Yamase's body swelled up to the size of a calf. And it kept going. It looked as though it would continue growing forever. Would it stop at thirty feet? Three hundred? Three thousand? Would it reach the size of the dragon from four years prior, and cover the whole city in its shadow?

The only sure thing was that if it kept growing, it would soon reach a point beyond human reach. The dragon had to be dealt with before that point—destroyed entirely.

“Yahiro.” Iroha calmly called his name just as his jaw clenched in desperation.

He turned around, and then his whole body was enveloped in a sweet aroma.

“Iroha? What are you doing?”

Yahiro asked in confusion as he felt a soft sensation on his cheek. Iroha was hugging him tight and rubbing her cheek against his.

“Can’t you tell? I’m hugging you.”

“Why?”

“Don’t you remember what the twins said? You get more powerful the more we flirt. So here’s your reward for being such a good boy.” Iroha patted his head like he was a kid.

Yahiro sighed at the unending whimsy of the girl, no matter how dire the situation.

The tension in his muscles eased, and the fear and desperation began to fade away.

He felt as though every nerve in his body, from his core to his fingertips, awoke.

“Pfft... Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha. What the heck, Iroha? They told you that?” Sumika burst out laughing out of pure astonishment.

“Yeah? That’s why I let Sui kiss him the other day,” Iroha replied with a pout.

You’re still mad about that? Yahiro winced.

“Wow, they kissed? Brother and sister? Oh, but they’re not blood-related, are they?”

Sumika looked at Yahiro in shock, but Yahiro felt no animosity from her smile.

“I see. Maybe I’ll try kissing Zen, then.”

“Don’t. Not in public.”

Zen pushed her away as she approached with a naughty smile on her face.

“Oh, so it’s okay if I do it in private?” Sumika opened her eyes wide.

Zen looked away in silence, but didn’t say no.

“Would you mind flirting somewhere else?” Yahiro said.

“You’ve no right to say that, Yahiro Narusawa!” Zen replied.

Sumika laughed out loud.

Then the earth before their eyes burst. The monster that once was Douji Yamase—Ira—attacked. It shot shock-wave bullets from its dragon jaw toward Iroha.

“Avaritiaaaa... You have the same power as her...!”

It roared with the hoarse growl of a beast.

Ira was already fifteen meters tall. The massive dragon flew up with a gale of wind.

Then an explosion went off above its head. Acedia’s power—steam-blast eruption. Zen’s Regalia.

The blast brought Ira to the ground, and as it tried to stand back up, the frozen ground gobbled up its legs, like ice chains.

“Zen Sagara...! Why do you side with Yahiro Narusawa...?!”

Yamase growled with bare hatred.

He could no longer think logically. He could only shout curses emotionally from the little shreds of intellect remaining.

“Well, wasn’t it you who said I was an ally of justice?” Zen responded coldly.

“Why... Why do you always get in my way...?!”

Ira sent a gust flying along with its roar.

Its medium, Miyabi, pointed the camera at the monster writhing in the ground. Her draconized right eye showed pity and contempt for Yamase.

“Don’t...! Don’t film meee!”

Yamase twisted his body, trying to get away from the camera.

Miyabi stared at him and smiled coldly.

“If you’re trying to make a job out of exposing people’s secrets, then you should be prepared to have your own exposed as well. That’s equality!”

“Sileeence!”

Ira opened its mouth again to shoot another shock wave, but no attack came. Yahiro’s flames blew off its jaw first.

The dragon's destroyed body did not regenerate, as the dragon vessel was no longer a Lazarus.

Yamase was only a human-turned-monster now. And the core of such a monster was the Regalia, the symbolic treasure still within him—crystallized dragon medium blood.

Ira's still-growing body began to crumble under the flames.

Ira tried to take in as much dragon aura as it could to defend itself. Yet in an ironic turn of fate, this exposed the location of its Regalia.

It was the same as when Count Raimat turned into a wyrm. But there was one difference.

The dragon core was located where Ira's dragon aura was densest.

Yahiro could see it.

"Burn to ash... Blaze!"

Yahiro swung his sword with a scorching flash.

The slash was too thin compared to the dragon's giant body, but it contained dramatic destructive power.

A crack ran across the dragon's body, and fresh blood dense with dragon aura spilled out.

The fifteen-meter giant fell to the ground and shivered violently. Death throes.

Soon, the dragon began to collapse under its own weight. Its cells, having lost the dragon aura, dried out and blew away with the wind like ashes.

The chain of decay did not stop even then. Within the ashes, transparent like glass, Yamase remained—his body shriveled like an old man's.

"This...is too unfair..., " Yamase groaned, his voice dry like a dying tree.

"I know," Yahiro replied with pity.

Yamase cracked a self-derisive smile and, the next moment, he was turned to ash.

“Douji Yamase is dead,” Zen muttered, holding his damaged sword in hand.

They had been used. They had to fight alongside Yahiro, their enemy. And now Yamase, a fellow Lazarus, was dead. Zen’s voice was quiet as he couldn’t yet process everything.

“What now, Zen Sagara? You’re killing me next?” Yahiro glared at him.

Honestly, Yahiro had no grudge against Zen or Sumika. Now that he had his memory back, he understood their grudge against him was only natural. But he didn’t want to fight. He even considered letting them kill him.

However, Iroha’s lighthearted voice interrupted his sentimentality.

“Sagara?! Wait! That’s the guy who kidnapped Ayaho!” Iroha glared at them with obvious animosity.

Yahiro just realized Iroha hadn’t been introduced to them. She had just fought alongside them without knowing who they were.

Zen and Sumika also realized this. The former pursed his lips and looked away awkwardly, while Sumika put her hands together in apology.

“Uh...sorry! But we had our reasons!”

“What?! You think any reason excuses kidnapping?!” Iroha’s eyebrows rose as she took a step toward Sumika.

She was about to explode in anger. Not only had they put her sister in danger, but they also tried to kill Yahiro; her mood couldn’t be worse.

And yet, she didn’t take it out on them. She couldn’t once she saw Yahiro stagger in exhaustion.

“Whoa... Yahiro?!” Iroha hurriedly held him up.

Her body felt oddly hot. This meant Yahiro’s was cold as a corpse.

He had draconized, used the Regalia liberally, and shed too much blood. He was on the verge of falling into the death slumber.

Even so, he had something to do before he gave in to it.

“...I’m fine. Where’s Sui?” Yahiro looked around the distorted ruins of the stadium.

Sui still wanted to bring about a second genocide. He couldn’t let her go now that he knew that. Not while she could use him to summon Superbia again at any moment.

“She’s here,” answered the calm voice of a long-, dark-haired beauty.

The white-haired girl was collapsed at the feet of Miyabi, who was still holding her camera.

Sui looked unharmed. She was only asleep. A sleep similar to the Lazaruses’ death slumber. Her stamina was depleted.

“Miyabi...” Yahiro glared menacingly at the woman standing as though defending Sui.

“Please...don’t look so intently at me, not with this...,” Miyabi said jokingly.

Her draconized right eye was still exposed. This didn’t actually make her any less beautiful, but Yahiro lacked the wit to tell her so.

“I know, you can’t look away... Sorry, I’m pulling your leg.” Miyabi giggled upon seeing his confusion.

Her expression was clear, as though a weight was lifted from her shoulders. It also looked like she had lost the will to go on living, however. As though she was about to suggest he kill her alongside Sui.

“Will you hand her over?” Yahiro asked her stiffly.

The answer to that question came from an unexpected direction.

“That won’t happen.”

“—?!”

Yahiro took a fighting stance reflexively upon hearing the man’s grave and dignified voice.

Zen gripped his sword tightly as well.

A tall Black man in a suit stepped forward from the shadows, unarmed.

“Auguste Nathan...!” Yahiro called his name.

Nathan was an agent of Ganzheit, and Sui’s bodyguard. Killing Sui would not be so simple now that he was here. Worst-case scenario, they’d have to fight. Not to mention Nathan’s powers. He had no reason to believe he could defeat the man in his current, exhausted condition.

“You killed Douji Yamase? So you’ve reached the Eight Trigrams,” Nathan said faintly, in stark contrast to Yahiro’s hostility.

“The Eight Trigrams?” Zen reacted to the phrase. “Yamase said the same thing. What is that?”

“In the Limitless there is the Supreme Absolute. This generates the Two Modes, which produce the Four Symbols, which in turn give birth to the Eight Trigrams. All the Regalia, when mastered, can control the world itself. This is the first step toward that end,” Nathan answered as though reciting a poem.

Zen fell silent with a befuddled expression. He didn’t appear to comprehend all of Nathan’s words, but he seemed to have an idea of what he was talking about. And it likely had something to do with the phantom of the dragon Yahiro created.

“Hand her over, Nathan.” Yahiro glared at the Ganzheit agent.

Nathan stood before Sui to guard her and shook his head.

“Sorry, but I cannot let you kill her yet. There are things left for Superbia’s Regalia to do.”

“Then...”

“So we will surrender to Galerie Berith,” Nathan said, interrupting Yahiro as he was getting ready to attack.

Yahiro froze, unable to understand for a moment what he just heard.

“Surrender...? You’re surrendering?” Iroha tilted her head.

Nathan nodded. “Yes. And I request humane treatment for Sui Narusawa as a prisoner.”

“What the...?” Yahiro’s voice trembled in ire.

Yahiro knew how dangerous Sui was; he knew how unreasonable Nathan's request was. He couldn't accept.

And yet Iroha easily did.

"All right. Promise."

"Iroha!"

"Hey, he's saying they won't run. I've got lots of questions for them, so that's best, I think. Or are you fighting him? Now? Can you win?"

Setting aside Yahiro's issues emotionally, Nathan's proposal had its merits. They could get their hands on Sui without having to fight the mysterious man. Actually, it was too convenient, and one had to wonder if it wasn't a trap.

"Wait, Iroha. Sui Narusawa is too dangerous to be left alive," Zen opposed Iroha's decision in a hurry.

"Yeah. Why do you get to decide? We're not gonna let her go," Sumika backed him up.

They feared Sui causing another genocide more than anything. Letting her live, and stay close to Yahiro to boot, was something they could never allow.

"...What do you want, Nathan? What're you plotting, agent of Ganzheit?" Yahiro glared at him.

It was Ganzheit who used Yamase and Zen to get Yahiro in contact with Sui to begin with. Why would their agent hand her over so easily?

They never could have expected the answer they got.

"Saving Sui Narusawa has nothing to do with Ganzheit. It is the will of the Heavenly Imperial House."

"What?"

"The Heavenly...Imperial House?" Iroha parroted, dumbfounded.

Why would he bring them up out of the blue? After a moment of thinking it through, Yahiro realized it made sense. It was they who sent Toru Natazuka to kill Amaha Kamikita, the leader of the Council for Japanese Independence. They knew of the Lazarus.

“Yes, Iroha Mamana... Or should I say, Kushinada. Queen of the Underworld,” Nathan said as she stared at her.

“E-excuse me?”

“I act under the command of the Heavenly Imperial House. They are members of Ganzheit, but the goal of their next head candidate, Karura Myoujiin, differs. She finds Sui Narusawa’s powers necessary.”

“...And what is Ms. Karura’s goal?” Iroha asked back in confusion.

Nathan narrowed his eyes in amusement.

“Revenge. Or rather, retaliation?”

“Huh?”

“She wants to turn all the Japanese from Moujuu back to human and take back our stolen country. She’s looking for revenge against Ganzheit and the whole world.”

Nathan’s words were so ridiculous they conversely sounded realistic.

Attacking Nathan was no longer in Yahiro’s mind. He stood still, speechless and dumbfounded.

Epilogue

The gray steel train was undergoing its last checkup at the Fort Yokohama underground railyard. Galerie Berith's armored train—the Yáo Guāng Xīng.

Most of its sixteen cars were armed with heavy anti-Moujuu weaponry, and it was loaded with numerous drones and armored fighting vehicles (AFVs). It could run for two weeks carrying one platoon and without refueling. It was a mobile fortress.

The armored train was getting ready for departure. Its destination: the city once known as Kyoto.

The Heavenly Imperial House had lands in the mountains north of Kyoto. This was the only place not invaded by foreign armies: the only place in which Japan's independence was recognized, as it was guarded by Moujuu and Regalia.

From that location, a candidate for next head of the House, Karura Myoujiin, plotted the restoration of Japan. Outmaneuvering even its Ganzheit ally.

Auguste Nathan brought them that intel, and the twins decided to depart for Kyoto the moment they heard that, in order to check its veracity.

If Karura truly could return the Moujuufied Japanese people back to human, then Yahiro and Iroha had no choice but to help them. As for the Galerie—arms dealers—the possibility of connecting with the Heavenly Imperial House was naturally intriguing. After all, the Heavenly Imperial House would need as many weapons as possible if they wanted to take the Japanese land back from the armies of the world.

There was also the issue of Douji Yamase exposing Iroha. It was highly likely the Galerie would not be able to protect her from another attack if they remained at the now-damaged base. It was better for them to take her out of Yokohama while the base was under repairs. The trip to Kyoto came at an

opportune time.

“Hey, why don’t you come, too?” Iroha invited Zen and Sumika at the platform.

Three days had gone by since the Moujuu emergence in Yokohama. Since the battle between Yahiro and Zen.

Zen and Sumika had stayed with Galerie Berith in the meanwhile, to interrogate Nathan. They needed to be informed of Karura Myoujiin’s plans, as they, too, were Japanese.

However, they did not accept Iroha’s invitation to join them on their trip to Kyoto.

“A train trip... I’d love to try it out, actually,” Sumika said as she stared longingly at the gray armored train.

“We’re grateful for the offer, but no, thank you. We’re concerned about Miyabi Maisaka,” Zen replied with his usual serious tone.

Ira’s medium, Miyabi Maisaka, had escaped while they were watching over Sui and Nathan, who’d turned themselves in. They had let their guards down, thinking she posed no danger now that her Lazarus, Douji Yamase, was lost.

And she had footage of draconized Yahiro opening the Ploutonion and summoning the Moujuu.

It didn’t seem as though the videos had been posted online, but they couldn’t let her go free either way. So, Zen and Sumika were intent on catching her before making their way to Kyoto.

“I see, I see... In the end, I couldn’t thank you for rescuing Ayaho.” Iroha sighed in regret.

They had kidnapped her, but they’d also saved her from a Fafnir soldier. Iroha’s impression of them changed entirely after Ayaho told her so. Now she was happy to know fellow Japanese people around her age, and she was particularly fond of Sumika.

Meanwhile, things were still awkward between Yahiro and Zen.

“You really don’t wanna kill me?” Yahiro asked him, completely serious.

Zen had his Western sword on his back. Yahiro, on the other hand, was unarmed. Still, Zen showed no animosity.

“It’s just a matter of priorities,” he flatly offered as a pretext. “I haven’t forgiven you, but first I must find out whether what that man says is true.”

“I’m guessing you mean Nathan...,” Yahiro sighed.

Sui Narusawa hadn’t woken up ever since the Galerie took custody of her. According to Nathan, these periodic cycles of coma were nothing rare. Sometimes they were as short as a few days, and sometimes they lasted months. Nathan was able to reveal Karura’s plan to them because Sui went into hibernation.

The man was to be given a room in the armored train to accompany them to Kyoto. He would be under supervision, but not under restriction. Keeping him in a cage was pointless when he could use Superbia’s powers.

“Even if we know the Moujuu were once Japanese people, do you think we can really turn them back?” Zen asked Yahiro, staring intently at him.

Yahiro shrugged.

It wouldn’t be strange for there to be a way to turn Moujuu human if the opposite was true. But there was no evidence to back it up.

“Either way, I guess we can’t kill Sui until we find out whether Nathan’s telling the truth.”

“...Right.” Zen agreed reluctantly.

The Moujuufied Japanese people were trapped in an isolated space called the underworld. And only Superbia’s medium could open a path there. Sui was indispensable for Karura Myoujiin’s plan.

“So, we’ll let you live until then. You and Sui Narusawa. But if you ever change into a dragon once again, then this time for sure, I will—”

“Hee-hee-hee. Stop worrying. I’ll take care of him!” Iroha interrupted Zen and puffed out her chest confidently.

Zen appeared worried for the first time, at the sight of Iroha’s incomprehensible certainty.

“...Can I really trust her?” Zen whispered.

“Don’t ask me,” Yahiro replied as he looked away awkwardly.

Iroha’s eyebrows lifted in indignation.

“Whaaa? Why do you doubt me? I took care of everything this time around!”

“Ah-ha-ha. True.” Sumika laughed out loud. Then she got close to Yahiro and started grinding her elbow into his side.

Iroha’s expression stiffened at the sight of that, just as Sumika expected.

“She risked herself to save you, man. You’re blessed with a wonderful girlfriend. Take care of her, okay?”

“She’s not my girlfriend.” Frowning, Yahiro corrected the girl.

“Whaaa? Wait, hold on. Could it be you think you’ve no right to fall in love because you were involved in the J-nocide or some dumb crap like that?”

“What?! Really?! You think that?” Iroha looked shocked. She looked a little angry, too, exasperated at the thought of Yahiro’s self-flagellation.

Yahiro, however, sighed in annoyance.

“Well, isn’t that the truth? Isn’t that why you wanted to kill me?”

“Hey, don’t drag us into your pity party,” Sumika replied harshly.

“You brought it up...,” was the only thing Yahiro could say in his confusion.

Even if Zen and Sumika forgave him, Yahiro could not forgive himself.

Millions of people died that day because he couldn’t kill Sui. Even if a percentage of them had survived as Moujuu, it didn’t absolve him of his sins. So he thought.

Iroha, though, stared at him and said:

“I forgive you.”

“Huh?”

“Even if you can’t forgive yourself, I forgive you. We promised.” She smiled as she raised her right pinky finger.

Her face reminded him of that girl's, bony and covered in bandages.

Iroha said she had no memories of her childhood. She didn't know her family, and lived in some institution until the J-nocide happened.

Now Yahiro knew that institution was likely that lab. The lab Sui went to. Where she stabbed him. Where he met her.

"You don't remember...?"

"Hmm? What?" Iroha tilted her head, her face truly ignorant of what he meant.

"No, nothing. Forget it." Yahiro shook his head with an awkward smile.

It didn't matter whether Iroha remembered or not.

After all, that day, and when they met again, they'd made the same promise.

I won't kill you. And if you don't want to be alone, then I'll be by your side.

"Heeey, if it isn't Akulina! What's up?"

Yahiro was brought back from the sea of memories by the sound of Giuli's voice behind him.

Akulina Jarova, wearing the Guild's uniform, was standing in the shadow of a pillar of the platform. Giuli's keen eye found her, and she called out to her.

"You came all the way here to say good-bye? How well-mannered," Giuli said sarcastically.

"As an executive of the Guild, it is my duty to observe the arrival and departure of the companies under our wing. I'm not giving you any special treatment," she said in a defensive tone.

Then she cleared her throat and, blushing, turned to look at Iroha.

"But I do want to say thanks. The Moujuu attack wasn't as big as it could have been thanks to you, Iroha Mamana. You have our gratitude."

"Oh, it's nothing. You should thank the little guys for listening to reason," Iroha said in a rare display of humility.

Iroha sent the hundreds of Moujuu attacking Yokohama back inside the

Ploutonion, since there were still some gates left even after Yahiro's dragon flames burned the earth. Consequently, Iroha herself had saved Yokohama.

"The little guys, eh...," Akulina muttered with a conflicted expression.

Iroha had no self-awareness of the oddness of her referring to the beasts feared by veteran mercenaries like they were pets. And Akulina realized how dangerous this was.

"However, now people know that the Moujuu were once human. And that there is someone capable of leading them. Keep that in mind."

"Ah... Yeah. I'll be fine. I'm prepared to go undercover. Look."

Iroha took out a pair of nonprescription glasses from her jacket pocket. Then she puffed out her chest in triumph. The camouflage was too obvious, but for some reason, Iroha legitimately believed it would work.

Akulina grimaced outright this time before turning to look at Yahiro. Her face showed pity for what the future would bring for the guy.

Then he realized Zen had the same look on his face. Only Sumika didn't—because she was laughing her butt off.

"Looks like we're ready to go," Rosé said after seeing the cargo hatch close.

"Ciao, Akulina. Thanks for coming to say good-bye."

"I told you that's not it!" Akulina objected to Giuli's friendly farewell.

Then Yahiro realized Zen and Sumika had vanished.

They would be going to Kyoto later on, so they would meet up again eventually.

The question was, would it be as allies? Or enemies?

"Let's go, Yahiro." Iroha entwined her arm in his.

"Yeah." He let her drag him onto the train.

Walking like that was hard, but for some reason, he didn't feel like letting go of her until the end.

The gray armored train took off with a loud and heavy clatter.

Iroha's siblings watched the landscape out the narrow windows, standing shoulder to shoulder. They were coming along to Kyoto as well.

Ayaho was on her narrow bed, listening to her siblings' giggling. She had told Iroha she was tired and would go to bed already, but even when she closed her eyes, she didn't feel like sleeping.

Memories ran through her mind from the night the Moujuu attacked Yokohama.

Even when Yahiro, who had gone there to save her from her kidnapping, underwent that painful draconization, she could do nothing. She spent the whole time shivering inside the armored car with Akulina.

And it all changed the moment Iroha showed up. After she arrived on Nuemaru's back, she turned Yahiro back into a human, and argued head-to-head with Sui Narusawa. In the end, she even sent the emerging Moujuu back to the underworld and closed the Ploutonions.

Meanwhile, Ayaho could do nothing. Nothing but stare from afar as Yahiro and Iroha hugged each other after the battle.

Even though Yahiro had come to save her.

It should've been her by his side.

Would things have turned out differently if she had a power like Iroha's? If she, too, was a dragon medium?

"...Huh?" Ayaho opened her eyes when she felt a sudden throb.

She sat up in shock and looked at the source. A crimson gem.

The one Yahiro had given her when she promised to make it a container.

The small rock was vibrating. Throbbing like a living heart.



“What...is this...?” Ayaho muttered, aghast.

She found it frightful and eerie. But more than that, her attention was on how beautiful it looked.

Something deep within her, like the core of her whole existence, resonated with that crimson lump.

Ayaho did not yet know the gem was known as the Regalia.

She was merely hypnotized by its crimson glow, and she gripped it tightly and held it to her chest.

She felt like she heard a giant beast roar in the distance.

And so the gray armored vehicle carrying Ayaho and the Regalia crossed the ruined cityscape as it accelerated westward.

Afterword

I believe that Volume 2's preview said Volume 3 would be out by spring, but it ended up releasing in June... June is technically spring, right?

Outside circumstances, such as the concurrent handling of another series, influenced the delay, but either way, I am truly sorry I've made you wait, my dear readers.

Well, the sixth-month gap between volumes happened before, so I guess that's the problem first and foremost. When you're an adult, you end up feeling like six months just fly by, but in reality, it's a considerable amount of time. I've been on the other side of the issue many times before, excitedly waiting for the continuation of my favorite series, so I want to release my own books as fast as I can. I've realized I've much to improve on that front. I'll try harder!

Anyways, here is *Hollow Regalia*, Vol. 3!

The subtitle, *All Hell Breaks Loose*, means to fall into chaos. I believe those of you who have already read the book understand I also chose the phrase for its literal meaning.

The book this time around gave a lot of answers: Ganzheit's goal, Karura Myoujiin and the Heavenly Imperial House's position in all of this, as well as Yahiro and Sui's past.

Because of that, it ended up lacking in the slice-of-life department. I feel remorse for not writing many scenes with Yahiro and Iroha interacting. Other girls get a starring role in compensation but, well, that doesn't feel great, either, does it?

In truth, the number of pages for every *Hollow Regalia* book seems to grow endlessly, and I have to work hard to figure out how to keep the size in check. There are still many, many characters I want to get into, and many scenes I want to write.

I'll do my best to figure the above out, as well as improve the publishing pace. For starters, since I'm in dire need of a good dose of romcom, maybe I'll try to compensate with a side story.

I want to thank Miyuu for the wonderful illustrations. I am so thankful for how the world and characters come to life. The character designs are all fantastic!

I also want to thank everyone involved in the creation of this book, truly.

And of course, all my thanks to you, for reading it!

Let's meet again in the next volume!

Gakuto Mikumo

It's the oath that will kill the Lazarus! They told me I was allowed to kill you. You are sentenced as

a descendant of the Kashima. The end of the world goes by so quick, huh? Crush them, Superbia!

04

Where Angels
Fear to Tread

Waooon!

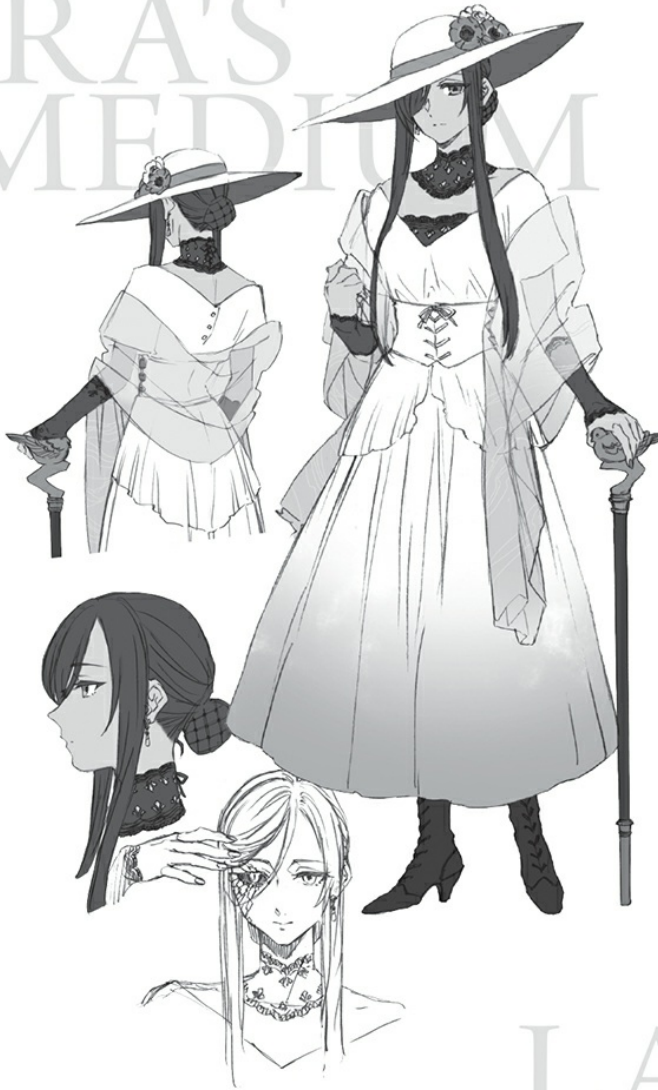
I know you're disappointed, but this is the real me. I've got a huge announcement, everyone.

We've finally arrived at the truth... I fulfilled my promise.

Look, Iroha. I understand everything now. **HOLLOW REGALIA** It's time for revenge!

Yahiro, this isn't what we promised. This is what Ganzheit wants...?

IRA'S MEDIUM



Miyabi Maisaka

Age: 26 Birthday 10/15

Height: 5'4"

Medium of the wind dragon, Ira. An aspiring journalist who worked as a newscaster before the J-nocide. She was blessed with not only wit, but looks, too: she won a beauty contest in university. She uses a cane and keeps her right eye covered ever since she was injured.

IRA'S LAZARUS

Douji Yamase

Age: 28 Birthday 6/2

Height: 5'5"

A Lazarus under contract with Miyabi. He is known as Yamadou online, as someone who exposes issues in various corporations and organizations. Professional news cameraman. He believes the truth must always be revealed, no matter what it takes, and this philosophy eventually leads him to bending the truth itself.

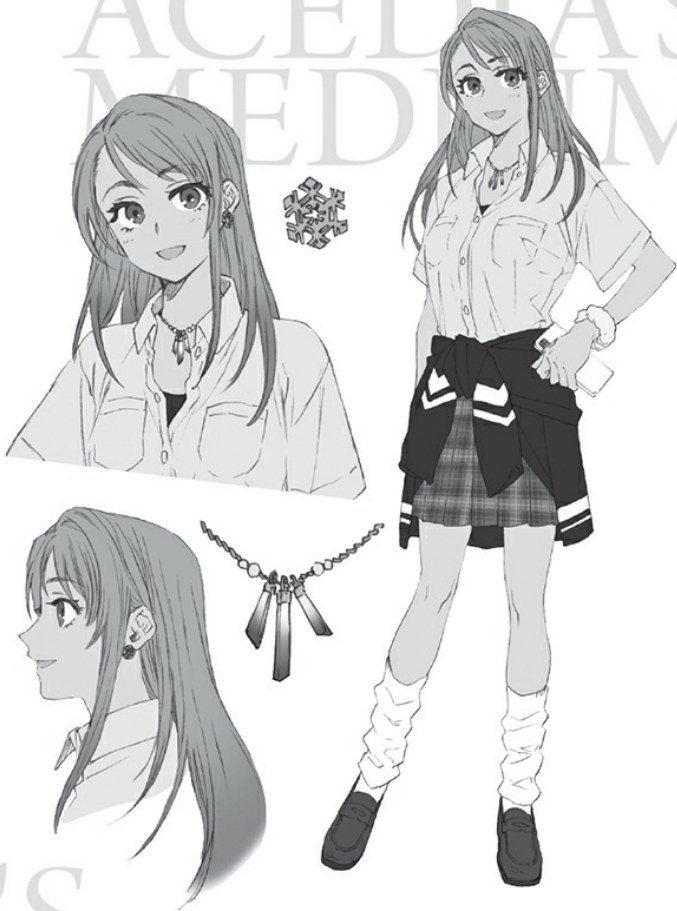


CONFIDENTIAL

Sumika Kiyotaki

Age: 18 Birthday 5/9
Height: 5'2"

Medium of the water dragon, Acedia. She is cheerful and a positive thinker, but also a realist. It took a long time for her powers as a dragon medium to awaken, and she lived in a brothel as a regular survivor for two years after the J-nocide. She witnessed the emergence of the earth dragon four years ago and bears a grudge against the Narusawa siblings.



Zen Sagara

Age: 17 Birthday 11/21
Height: 5'9"

Sumika's Lazarus. He is straightforward and has a strong sense of justice, but is also stubborn and obstinate. He attended a prestigious international boarding school before the J-nocide, and went through hell when coming back to Japan. He practiced fencing since childhood and was once expected to become a Japanese representative in the field.



Andrea Berith

Age: 29 Birthday 4/28

Height: 5'9"

Executive of Galerie Berith's Oceania branch. Giuli and Rosé's elder brother on paper. He is an enhanced human of the commander class, but he's emotionally unstable. Proudful and a white supremacist, he resents the twins for their superior physical skills despite being Asian women.

Enriqueta Berith

Age: 16 Birthday 6/13

Height: 5'2"

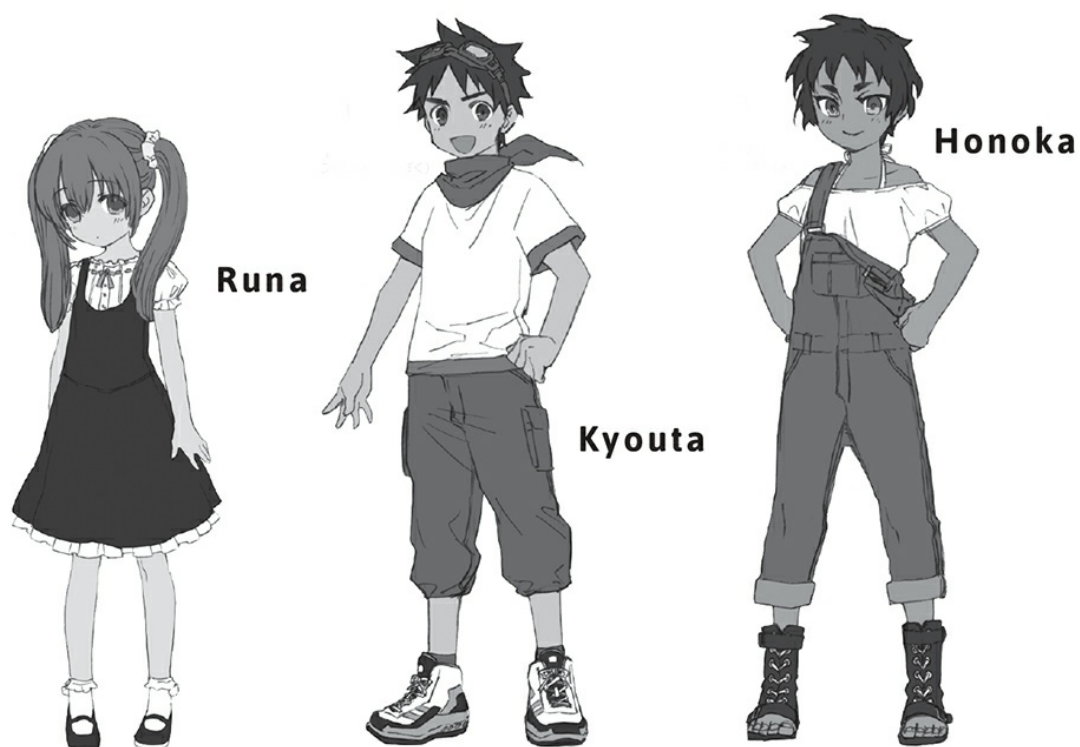
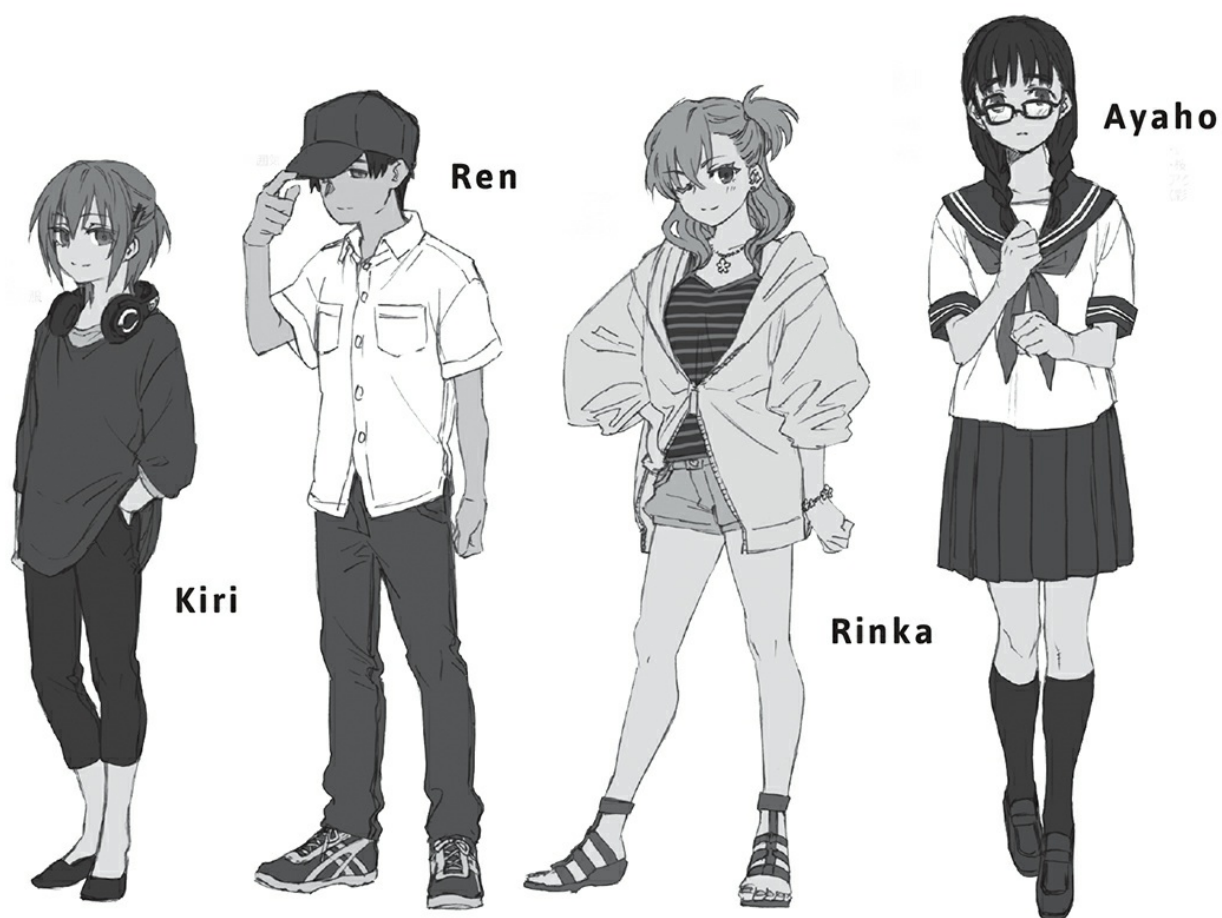
An enhanced human born from the same clone embryo as Giuli and Rosé. She is referred to as their younger sister for convenience's sake. She specializes in combat, with close-combat skills that surpass the twins'. On the other hand, she lacks intellect and good judgment, and was deemed a failed experiment because of this, then was handed over to Andrea.



GALERIE
BERITH

THE CHILDREN

The kids whom Iroha lived with at the Koishikawa Korakuen metropolitan garden next to the Tokyo Dome in the Moujuu-infested 23 Wards. Currently under Galerie Berith's protection.



Bonus Illustration



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